



## Two-Time Diasporic Zones in Wendy Wasserstein's *Third* as The University Land of the Jews: a Micro Literary Image of the Macro Universal Picture

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### Abstract

*Third* (2005) like most, if not all, of Wendy Wasserstein's plays are different dramatic tableaux of the American women who are striving with the aspiration of "having it all". Critics who are content with this level of analysis categorize Wasserstein to be a feminist and claim her *Third* to be the bittersweet end of this abiding theme. This paper aims at wrestling like Woodson Bull or Third (the protagonist the play is named after) with the mainstream academic opinion, not for proving the faulty classification (being feminist), but for the philosophical, ontological and psychological probation of the deep hidden motivation of this apparent liberal feminism. The study seeks to reveal how literature, particularly when analyzed within an academic university setting, serves as a dynamic microcosm that vividly reflects universal human experiences and societal truths. This paper argues that Wasserstein's characteristic feminist focus manifests across two irreconcilable, extreme temporal zones. These zones, rather than reaching reconciliation, are ontologically predetermined as strategies for sustainable living. Specifically, they offer a substitutive homeland for a diasporic female, who symbolize the Jewish people. This research applies Lacanian psychology and Žižekian ideological philosophy to analyze how the protagonist, Laurie Jameson, embodies two conflicting life stages: her established worldview and a disruptive "Real" challenged by Woodson Bull III. This framework will uncover how these phases act as coping mechanisms, creating a symbolic "homeland" for a diasporic female figure representing the Jewish people, thereby illuminating the profound connections between individual psyche and broader societal ideologies in the play.

**Keywords:** feminism, finitude, little object "a", parallax, *Third*, Wendy Wasserstein.

نطاقا الشتات الزمنى فى عالم الجامعة لليهود فى ثالث للكاتبة المسرحية ويندى ويسرستين: لوحة أدبية مصغرة  
لصورة عالمية مكبرة

### ملخص

تمثل *ثالث* مثلها فى هذا الشأن مثل معظم إن لم يكن كل مسرحيات ويندى ويسرستين لوحة درامية معبرة عن صراع المرأة الأمريكية ذات الأصول اليهودية للاستحواذ على كل شىء. دفعت هذه الرؤية النقاد الذين تبناها الى تصنيف الكاتبة ووضعها داخل اطار الحركة النسوية معلنيين أن *ثالث* هى آخر مسرحياتها الملزمة بالحركة بشقيها الإيجابى والسلبى. يهدف هذا البحث الى مصارعة هذا الاتجاه ليس من أجل دحضه ولكن من أجل سبر الأغوار الوجودية والفلسفية والنفسية التى تكون الطبقات التحتية لهذه الطبقة النسوية السطحية. جدير بالذكر أن هذا المنحى النقدى يساهم فى كشف هوية الواقع وما هو واقعى وهو ما استحوذ على تفكير لورى بطله المسرحية. هذا التحليل هو خطوة إستباقية للبحث فى طريقة للكشف عن تمكن الادب فى إطار الجدران الأكاديمية للجامعة كما توضح المسرحية من تقديم صورة نابضة للواقع ككل. كما يوضح البحث أن استحواد هذه الحركة النسوية على الكاتبة يمر بمرحلتين إختار البحث تصنيفها على انهما نطاقين زمنيين لا يتقابلا كخطوط الطول التى تمكن من حياة انسانية مستدامة وليست دائمة على المستوى الوجودى للعالم وكأرض بديلة للمرأة المشتتة رمز لليهودى التائه.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** النسوية، المحدودية، الموضوع (أ) الصغير، اختلاف المنظر، ويندى واسرشتاين، مسرحية

ثالث

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In her play *Third*, American playwright Wendy Wasserstein, a figure of Jewish heritage, distills a complex array of ontological, philosophical, psychoanalytical, and historical themes into a rich, demanding experience for the postmodern audience. She skillfully interweaves these weighty subjects, creating a dense network of interconnected ideas that, while intellectually challenging, offer significant aesthetic merit. The play's intricate structure, which resists easy consumption, suggests Wasserstein's deliberate choice to emphasize a sustained engagement with profound concepts—a "long intricate world of drive"—over immediate gratification. This approach, while perhaps unexpected for a conventional feminist, aligns well with a sensibility that seeks to encompass a multitude of perspectives and achieve a comprehensive understanding, reflecting a desire "to have it all." (Sommers, 2014, p. 1).

This paper is intended to prove that Wasserstein's *Third* (2005) is her theatrical attempt to try the impossible, to tackle the Lacanian world of the real Lamella in its relation to the symbolic world and how the drama between the two constitutes the theatre of the parallax view, the university world of professors and the initiated students that performs like the Greek twenty-four-hour Aristotelian drama. This leads to a micro world of our modern macro one with its various aspects and perspectives surrounding in a manner of numbers and the two hands of time that remain different except when on the dead but everlasting land of the real. This approach might be judged as overburdening an apparently simple play with the ontological drama of existence, dressing it in oversize robes, but truth is this approach hits the right different cords in the play that makes it a harmonized symphony.

This midway world of the university is apparently seething for collective, personal, and biological reasons: since it is a productive two-open sided world, fueled by people in the form of students and staff members and subjected to general policy related to another ideological one- here it is Bush's administration which is rejected by the heroine but before which she is helpless. On the personal level, Laurie, Wasserstein's spokesperson, is presented as a fifty-four-year menopausal female who is occasionally visited by such hot flashes reminding her as well as the audience of her approaching biological non productivity. In light of Walter Benjamin's philosophy<sup>1</sup>, Wasserstein has just set the stage for a fantastic world at a stand-still desperate for a Christ, a religious faith to perform the magical leap between the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic worlds to fill the ontological parallax gap of its real boiling world; the world of 'third' or the university in general. It should be noted that this third world of the university is a measuring stick between nothing and everything, between the imaginary nothing world and the "symbolic everything one" which needs both to make visible its various graded invisible but controlling real identity.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a leading German-Jewish philosopher, critic, and essayist of the early 20th century. His work, which blended German idealism, Jewish mysticism, Western Marxism, and post-Kantianism, significantly influenced fields like aesthetics, literary theory, media studies, and the philosophy of history.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **I. Lacanian Psychoanalytic Theory**

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory centers on three interconnected "registers": the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. The **Imaginary** register concerns images, perception, and the ego, shaping our sense of self through identification, like in the "mirror stage." It is characterized by dual relationships and illusions of completeness, deeply influencing our conscious experience and how we perceive others. Bruce Fink (1997) points out, "the Imaginary register is built on identifications, whether with an image of oneself, an image of another, or an image of an ideal. It is the realm of likeness and similarity, which includes the illusion of wholeness and mastery. It is also the realm of dual relationships, in which one's very existence depends on the other's gaze or recognition." (p. 23)

The **Symbolic** register is crucial to Lacan's theory of subjectivity, encompassing language, social laws, and the unconscious. It is where meaning is formed, introducing concepts of absence and difference inherent in language. This order determines an individual's place within society, imposing rules and roles, and represents the "big Other"—the collective system of signs and laws that shape us. Most psychoanalytic work engages with this register, addressing the subject's desire and unconscious as structured by language. For Jacques Lacan, the Symbolic register is arguably "the most fundamental of his three registers, serving as the primary domain where meaning is established and human subjects are profoundly shaped by language, social frameworks, and governing laws. This realm is essentially that of language and discourse, through which we enter the human world, articulate desires, and comprehend concepts; it introduces difference and absence, making meaning relational and dynamic" (Fink, 1997, p. 55). According to Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language, meaning the unconscious operates through Symbolic mechanisms like metaphor and metonymy. At the core of the Symbolic register is the "big Other" (Autre), which serves as the fundamental source of language and discourse, embodying the shared societal norms and rules that guide our self-perception. Consequently, the Symbolic is vital for developing identity and subjectivity, as it is through being named and assigned social roles that individuals emerge as speaking, desiring subjects capable of recognition. This makes the Symbolic an unavoidable framework of meaning and structure that profoundly shapes our experience, even while hinting at aspects of reality—the Real—that remain beyond its reach (Fink, 1997, pp. 56-68).

Finally, the **Real** register defies both imagination and symbolization. It is the unrepresentable, traumatic element that resists articulation through language or images. Not merely objective reality, the Real punctures our constructed reality, exposing its limits. It manifests as a fundamental void or a disruptive, traumatic event, constantly impacting our psychic life as anxiety, symptoms, or raw existence that eludes understanding. (Fink. 1997, pp. 74-76)

### **The Little Object *a*: Lacan's Object-Cause of Desire**

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the little object *a* (*objet petit a*) is a fundamental concept representing what instigates desire, distinct from what might ultimately fulfill it. This is not a tangible entity, but rather an unrepresentable remnant or excess that arises

when a person enters the Symbolic order of language. This inherent emptiness originates from a foundational loss experienced during the subject's development, situating *objet a* within the Real register, inaccessible to both language and imagination. Despite its elusive nature, *objet a* fuels and guides desire, manifesting through various "partial objects" like the breast, faces, and particularly the gaze and the voice. These subtle appearances signify a profound absence, propelling the individual's continuous pursuit of an unreachable satisfaction. (Fink. 1997, pp. 81-83)

### Real Lamella

Lacan's concept of the Lamella represents a highly abstract and somewhat elusive component of his Real register. He developed it to understand a specific facet of the libido and the drives. Envisioned as a mythical, non-anatomical "organ," meaning it lacks any physical mass or substance, Lacan introduced the Lamella to account for an irrepressible, immortal life-substance. This substance is conceptually detached from the living organism during sexual reproduction, functioning more at the level of the species than the individual. This idea allows Lacan to theorize the excess of life that escapes the grasp of both the Symbolic and Imaginary registers, thereby providing a foundational element for understanding the Real. (Fink. 1997, p. 93)

## II. Žižekian Ideological Philosophy

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek presents a unique ideological philosophy, diverging considerably from conventional Marxist views that narrowly define ideology as "false consciousness." By integrating Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics, Žižek posits that ideology is far more than a set of incorrect ideas obscuring reality. Rather, he asserts it is a fundamental structure that actively molds our perception of the world and, in fact, constructs our very reality. This ideological sway primarily functions unconsciously, deeply influencing our desires, our experience of enjoyment (jouissance), and our core fantasies. (Kay. 2003, pp. 14-16)

A core aspect of Žižek's philosophy is the idea that individuals often engage in ideological behaviors even when they consciously reject or rationalize them. This directly contradicts the traditional Marxist perspective, which suggests people are unknowingly misled by ideology. Žižek notes that in modern society, people often express skepticism toward overt ideological statements, yet their conduct and decisions continue to uphold the very systems they might intellectually criticize. This phenomenon, which he calls "cynical reason," reveals an unconscious commitment to ideological fantasies, where people essentially act in accordance with beliefs they claim to disbelieve (Kay. 2003, p. 24).

From Žižek's perspective, ideology serves to establish the "symbolic coordinates" that shape our individual realities, creating an illusion of wholeness and consistency. This superficial layer effectively hides the deep-seated social conflicts and the inherent absence (represented by *objet a*) that fundamentally drives human desire. Consequently, Žižek argues that ideology does more than just propagate false notions; it actually creates the very conditions through which we experience reality, even encompassing aspects we might wrongly consider "non-ideological" or simply natural. (Kay. 2003, p. 37).

### Theatre of the Parallax

The concept of the "theatre of the parallax" is a central idea developed by Žižek. It forms a crucial part of his extensive examination of ideology, perception, and the fundamental essence of reality, heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics. Fundamentally, "parallax" describes the observed displacement of an object when viewed from varying positions. Žižek expands this optical phenomenon into a philosophical principle, contending that seemingly conflicting viewpoints on an object or situation are not merely subjective interpretations. Instead, these distinct perspectives inherently unveil something about the object's own nature—specifically, that its very existence is shaped by these unresolved antagonisms or internal divisions. Thus, truth, in this context, isn't achieved by combining these views into a singular, objective understanding, but by recognizing the intrinsic tension brought forth by these differing standpoints. (Žižek. *The Parallax View*)

When Žižek refers to the "theatre of the parallax," he is referring to how this concept plays out in the specific contexts of social reality, politics, and ideology. This involves the active presentation of conflicting viewpoints on a given social or political matter, which are shown not just as different opinions, but as expressions of deeper, fundamental societal antagonisms. In this framework, taking on a particular subjective perspective actually exposes an objective structural limitation or inconsistency within the situation being observed. The "theatre" aspect emphasizes the performative nature of this process: our ideological viewpoints and the ways we construct reality are key to how these parallax shifts unfold. Ultimately, there is no unbiased position from which to reconcile these contradictions. The "truth" itself arises directly from the tension and irresolvability of these diverging perspectives, underscoring that our interaction with reality is always from a specific, limited, and ideologically influenced standpoint, which in turn reveals reality's inherent gaps. (Žižek. *The Parallax View*)

### Third

According to Lacan, the imaginary order is always associated with illusion, fascination and seduction. The basis of the imaginary order is the mirror-stage which takes place early in the life of the infant between his ٦ and 1٨ months. The mirror stage is a process of identification between the ego and its counterpart image in the mirror. The ego is formed in the imaginary image of the self before the constitution of the subject. The subject from Lacan's point of view is the network of relations with the other which is formed through identification, and which is responsible for the revelation of the unconscious. (Hendrix. 2019, p. 1) This identification process is narcissistic in essence. Lacan lets the concept of 'narcissism' fuse with that of identification (Bowie. 1991, 34), and accompanied by both aggression and alienation, the origin of which is to be located in the real which will be dissected in the following lines. It has its linguistic dimension, and since Lacan defines each order in relation to the others, if the symbolic order includes the signifier, the imaginary embraces the signified and signification (Evans. 1996, p. 1). It is an order related mainly to the body, and it is responsible for imprisoning it into a series of static fixations. One last essential point mentioned by Lacan in relation to the imaginary order which proves to be relevant to the play is its unreliability as a cognitive tool, hence Lacan's accusation of psychoanalysts' reduction of analysis to the dual relation of the imaginary; a point Laurie refers when lying on the analyst's couch

You're really not helping me! . . . And actually, what I really wanted to say is maybe we should talk about terminating analysis. I should not be wasting my time, or even my health insurance, crying about some privileged Groton preppy. My goal in seeing you was to eliminate these feelings, not to wallow in them. Don't you agree? You should say something. You don't have to be such a strict Freudian. I can't really say if I'll be here next week (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 14).

The analyst's fault which Laurie complains of is due to what Lacan calls the reduction of analysis to the dual relation of the imaginary reconstituted between the analyst and the analyzed; a betrayal leading to more alienation on the part of the latter (Evans. 1996, p. 3). The right course of treatment should consider the third order of the symbolic as the key to deciphering the imaginary identification. This leads us to the real identity of the symbolic order. Contrary to the general understanding, the symbolic is not identical with language, though it shares its distinctive feature; an order built on differential codified relations. It is responsible for transforming the dual relation of the imaginary into a triadic structure. always mediated by the third, the "Big Other", the whole line of traditions, laws, customs and codes organizing the series of the symbolic, transforming its world into a universal one and destabilizing the fixed relations between the signifier and the signified (Evans. 1996, p. 6). Jonathan Lee (1990) clarifies what is at stake here: "Here the moi becomes a je: the essentially individual identity constructed through the child's image-constituted relations to others is transcended by a universal identity created by and sustained within that broad range of cultural forces that goes by the name of language" (Evans. 1996, p. 20).

The opening scene shows Laurie in a classroom in one of those liberal colleges of art advocating the idea of a limitless and "hegemonic-free zone" in which her students should be grappling with whatever ideas that come to their mind, even those that are contradictory to her own. Her goal, as she states, is to eliminate any heterosexist, racist or classical barriers. In a nutshell, the dominating tone of her class is a modernist eliminating all that has been considered a limit. This is what Kōjin Karatani<sup>2</sup> considers as the distinguishing mark of the parallax gap— it is a world of pure antagonism, an impossible difference that precedes its terms (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 20). Related to this pure difference and antagonism is the limitless desire for expansion characteristic of the real. In Kantian philosophy, what we are presented to is an image of the transcendental subject; a thing-in-itself which contrary to Kant's belief in its transcendental identity, Karatani considers it to be discernible only through the antinomic character of our experience of reality, that is to say this invisible in-itself identity could be read once it is involved in enmity with a separate character. Meyerson defines the real as 'an ontological absolute, a true being-in-itself' (Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p. 79). In fact, this is exactly what happens once the encounter with Woodson Bull nicknamed Third takes place on the symbolic level. Before proceeding with this ambiguous zone of the real, we should reveal the secret behind Karatani's view that the Kantian thing-in-itself is not transcendental as the latter assumes. Kant's system is built on the existence of two separate worlds— same way Plato envisions the worlds of ideals and shadows-which he

<sup>2</sup> Kōjin Karatani (b. 1941) is a highly influential Japanese philosopher, literary critic, and theorist, renowned for his rigorous engagement with diverse intellectual traditions including Marxism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis (especially Lacan), and various strands of Western philosophy.

terms as the noumenal and the phenomenal. While the phenomenal is sensible and material, the noumenal is invisible and cannot be reached, since it is just like a seed inhabited with the thing-in-itself. Contrary to Kant, Lacan invokes Hegel's view that whatever is real is rational and vice versa (Lacan, 2006, p. 226). Moreover, it is related to matter, biology and the body. This specific description makes the real a prey to ambiguity (Lacan. 2006, p. 75) since it announces its belonging as well as its separation from the two main worlds. This brings to light the fact that the real does not have an original land. It is just a threshold between two worlds, a hidden super productive realm whose land is always glued to its heal (Lacan. 2006, p. 25). This nonstable home of the real endows it with the typical robes of the wandering Jew who is, as Kant describes, always homeless and always split (Žižek , *The Parallax View*, p. 9).

The aforementioned description of the real is not sufficient for deciphering its enigmatic identity. Consequently, Žižek proceeds to clarify this Kantian-split identity between the two surrounding worlds of symbols and images by revealing what might be temporally classified as its male and female faces: the transcendental object and the transcendental subject. While the former denotes a void beyond appearance, the latter is the void itself (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, p. 21). Here, Laurie with her introductory imperative for abolishing all barriers and historical tradition is playing Europe or Modern America described by Žižek as adopting the non-All policy, uniting itself by erasing the traces of historical memory (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, p. 253); a point which will be further elaborated upon in the symbolic world of characters, in her father's dementia. To elaborate the environment of the real, let us imagine the surrounding void of the transcendental object as the space lying beyond our earth, unknown nothingness, the transcendental subject is similar to the black holes<sup>3</sup> devouring and negating the surrounding negation, thus an image of excess. The beauty and the significance of the previous image is that it is a perfect translation of the Lacanian concept of the gaze that registers a photographic image of the surrounding view, its identity is included without being visible to itself except in the form of a stain. This line of thought directs the reader immediately to the first encounter with the imaginary field in the play, to *King Lear* and Laurie's shocking commentary on it, "Here is the thing about King Lear: Goneril and Regan were right! Lear was an old, foolish, narcissistic man whose personal tragedy is overrated. And the good daughter Cordelia, was a masochistic simp...King Lear's expectations are the expectations of the ultimate privileged paternal white man" (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 1).

In an implicit cynical touch set within a Lacanian mirror image of Lear's attitude, Wasserstein has chosen to create an indirect identification between Lear and Laurie, even though her view reflects a despising attitude of his narcissism and aggression, thus marking the Lacanian mirror stage. If Lear's problem lies in narcissism, in his desire for a reflected image of love permeating his world, dismantling his daughters' identities into mere colorful liquids portraying self-love, Laurie's hegemonic free zone, like a hurricane, plucking out seeds of future identities implanted in different historical traditions is another image of excessive self-destructive love. Poor Cordelia is anticipating Third, the blocking stone on the way of the annihilating torrent of the transcendental female

<sup>3</sup> A black hole is a region in spacetime where gravity is so incredibly strong that nothing—not even light or other electromagnetic waves—can escape from it. This extreme gravitational pull is the result of a vast amount of matter being squeezed into an incredibly small space.



subjectivity, which despite of the obstruction, deeply desires it for a graded formation of the feminine subjectivity. Recalling the Lacanian gaze, Third or Cordelia is the stain in the mirror image, the invisible mark of the eye in the image itself.

With the second scene, Wasserstein provides the spectator with another image of the imaginary order Laurie is imprisoned in, but with the new touch of its relation to the symbolic interlocking circuit. For the second time, Laurie is caught in the tangles of a dual- TV- virtual relation, with George W. Bush who is recorded declaring: "The history, the logic and the facts lead to the conclusion. Saddam Hussein Regime is a grave and gathering danger" (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 4). With the entrance of her daughter Emily who has just come on a leave from college, the spectator is directed to the inherent unconscious imaginary identification; Emily says, "I can see nothing has changed here. You're still watching the news 24/7". (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 5) A few lines later, and after the justification offered by Laurie that she should be like a hawk, because these people may be doing strange things in the middle of the night, Emily finds no way but to state it: "Mother, you're obsessed" (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 5). In her confrontation with her mother after her accidental encounter with Third, Emily reveals the fixed imaginary identification Laurie is involved in, "You decided he plagiarizes because you needed that to be true. Just like they decided there were weapons of mass destruction because they needed that to be true" (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 28).

These parallel lines of imaginary identifications constitute the underlying itching layer beneath the well-preserved skin of consciousness. On the real's level, Laurie is going through a deadly war or fight or a wrestling like Third between the original loss of immortality and the abjection and disgust felt once the internal void is filled with any material substitute. What doubles the severity of the fight is that she is not after a settlement or ceasefire, simply because as long as the war is going on, she is assured that she belongs to the real world which will never be satisfied with the symbolic substitute. It is a sort of insistence on pure difference. Consequently, it is a never-ending war of identity preservation fought at the expense of a double playing the role of the non-original or the plagiarizing because the hero, whether America, Lear or Laurie, is a non-All policy.<sup>4</sup> This is the real cause of both her anxiety and hallucinations which Evans sees as symptomatic of the real's workings (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 7).

To trace the various simultaneous steps of the transcendental subject embodied in Laurie along the psychoanalytic Lacanian phases, the Lacanian Lamella proves itself essential, if not the core of intersubjective phases. The profound drive for expansion can be elucidated by considering that the Real, according to Evans (2016), underwent "a loss of immortality before birth and gender-division" (p. 4). This primordial deficit establishes the Real's inherent nature as a void, perpetually poised to absorb any material in an attempt to satisfy its expansive emptiness. The core paradox emerges when this substitute material occupies the void— acting as an invasion or colonization— eliciting feelings of abjection and revulsion. It is at this juncture that something new appears, such as residual elements of the transcendental subject or the lingering traces of libido, often manifesting ambiguously as the Lamella. Žižek vividly describes the Lamella as a substance that is "damp, 'unwholesome' and permeated with the decay of death" (Žižek, 1995, p. 206). He

<sup>4</sup> a "non-All policy," according to Lacan, means that no rule or system can ever cover absolutely everything, especially when talking about how people experience things, like **feminine enjoyment**, which cannot be fully explained by simple rules.

further characterizes it as the "disgusting substance of enjoyment, the crawling and twinkling of indestructible life" and, more commonly, as the "flayed, skinned body, the palpitation of raw, skinless red flesh" (Žižek, 1995, p. 208). Žižek links this understanding to Lacan's myth of the Lamella, which explains a loss of immortality. He quotes Lacan's elaboration: "Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the fetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man..." (Žižek. 1995, p. 1). He adds that this "libido – the primordial, pre-phallic abstraction represented by the unreal organ of lamella – is another manifestation of the agency of the lost object -objet petit a" (Žižek. 1995, p. 222). The Lamella that flies off at birth attaches itself to the subject and becomes his agalma- that is what is in him more than him (Evans. 2016, p. 5). In Wendy Wasserstein's play *Third*, the character Laurie exemplifies a transcendental subject that, in Žižek's interpretation, is reduced to a Lamella. This Lamella functions as both a lingering memory of lost immortality and a persistent reminder of something within the subject that exceeds its own self. In a movement contrary to the Real's resistance to symbolization, this reduced subject "sticks itself and solidifies into a signifier" (Žižek, 1995, p. 205). This process ultimately constitutes what Lacan, in his unique neologism, termed the *hommelette*. From Lacan's point of view, the *hommelette* situates the initiated phallic subject (man) and the primordial pre-phallic life substance or the shapeless mass of the ego on a plane of equivalence, hence the *hommelette* is the impossible collision of the symbolic and the real (Evans. 2016, p. 6).

The above scenario is the one that takes place once Laurie encounters *Third*. This prepared confrontation between the two marks or designates a moment of transmutation for both. It is made clear that Laurie is not aware of what is happening. Consequently, she keeps asking herself as well as her analyst why

I have no idea why I can't exorcise this kid from my psyche. It's like he was freeze-dried at the Gorton School in 1956. I mean, how do you explain- of course you don't explain anything. I have to explain it- but how does to draw the parallels between the concurrent streams of Woodson Bull, this administration and the New York Times publishing in their marriage announcements the commitment ceremonies of gay men and women. I am truly not able to put together these advances with the dangerously regressive climate (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 13).

These different simultaneous but contradictory streams prevailing the stage of the American society are the two diasporic time zones the Jewish Lamella or the transcendental subject personified in Laurie has chosen to make up for the lost immortality and the subsequent lethal and eternal feeling of internal and external void. They could be condensed into two sustainable lifestyles that guarantee the Lamella a sort of what could be termed a historical life in the symbolic world. The interplay between modern and postmodern lifestyles in the play establishes a parallax view, symbolized by a clock, which reflects both the consequences of these attitudes and Laurie's evolving relationships. In the provided quote, Laurie expresses frustration over her inability to expel "Third" from her mind. This directly alludes to the Lamella and its persistence within her psyche, akin to a stain in an image or a trace of the observing eye visible within the picture itself. Third is the Lacanian little object "a", a mini-image of the 'Big Other'.

The play depicts him as a young republican and conservative who is psychologically adapted to the big world of America

Third: You have a problem with me because I'm happy.

Laurie: What does that mean?

Third: I'm straight. I'm white. I'm male. And I happen to like America.

Laurie: And you're Republican. Don't leave that out.

Third: So was Abraham fuckin' Lincoln.

Laurie: That's different. He might have been gay. (Wasserstein, 2005, p. 19)

### **The relation between Laurie and Third**

Wasserstein's depiction of Laurie and Third forces them into what Karatani terms a parallax view: a fierce conflict between two elements rooted in the symbolic realm. These elements, represented by mathematical equations and language, are inherently mutually untranslatable, as Žižek argues. (Žižek. 2006) Despite this, their fundamental essence lies within the real world, manifesting as a transcendental subject and object, or their remnants in the form of Lamella and the little object "a". While Laurie is liberal, dominant, creative, submersed in excessive desire to be a pioneer and repellent of her surrounding world, Third is a republican and neoconservative seeing himself as unnoticed modest young man, whose utmost ambition is to become a sports agent. In their initial meeting, Third's declaration of his elite lineage from the college's former all-male era, his choice of socioeconomics as a major, and his overly deferential manner towards Laurie—consistently responding with "yes mam"—prompt Laurie to immediately categorize and condemn him, even before the plagiarism incident occurs. Her pointed question, "and how does Shakespeare fit into this?", highlights her immediate dismissal of his presumed intellectual or cultural depth. The statement is one of repulsion from her world simply because her world is utterly modernist driven by a desire to move beyond laws, by excessive, creative and distinctive inclination to superiority. Despite Laurie's consistent sarcasm regarding Third's interest in wrestling, his manner of speaking, and his commitment, Wasserstein deliberately portrays him as resilient and insistent on being treated as an equal. Simultaneously, she subtly weaves in the underlying similarities between the two characters. On meeting him at the bookshop, the reader is presented to the idea that they enjoy similar interests in the field of politics, middle-east politics in particular, but while she reads for Edward Said, he chooses Franz Fanon and psychology. Sport and gaiety are the two things that both unite and separate them. She is fascinated by a native lesbian, and he is into Reggie Jackson, the famous black basketball player on whom he plans to do his senior thesis. In what appears as a peer treatment, Laurie mocks the fact that he may be the first person to come out of the store with *The Wretched of The*

*Earth*<sup>5</sup> and Reggie Jackson story<sup>6</sup> and he in, a similar fashion, bets that she is the only one to walk out with the native lesbian Pinky and Edward Said. They gather in the field of politics, but they apparently diverge when it comes to sports and gaiety. "Apparently" is the adequate adverb for the right description of their difference for it is not precisely difference as much as it is two versions of one essence termed excess, an excess differently directed. Whereas Laurie's excessive desire is heading for breaking ontological barriers, Third's is put to the service of adaptation to the diversified postmodern society. On telling her of his interest in wrestling, she advises him of reading Lacan's *Mythology* as it has a chapter on wrestling. Wasserstein is indirectly leading the reader to find out what exactly she is referring to. The first Lacanian statement about wrestling in *Mythology* is that it is an organized excess. Third's decision to choose a book about Reggie Jackson over one related to his future career carries a twofold significance within the play. First, it suggests a transformation from an "excessive dual sport"—likely a personal or internal conflict—into a more multifaceted, "team" dynamic. This shift provides an example of the "standardized multiplicities" that characterize the postmodern world, where simple binaries evolve into complex yet often patterned arrays of elements. Second, the choice subtly alludes to the concepts of large, powerful systemic structures through a less common nickname associated with Reggie Jackson: "Big Government." This connection implies an engagement with, or critique of, overwhelming political or societal systems.

With this last point Wasserstein leads the reader back to Laurie's husband who enjoys a virtual existence in the play, but we touch upon his invisible identity through Laurie's conversations with her daughter Emily, her father and even to her class. More than Laurie and Third, Stephen's major is political science; he is a professor in political science. From Laurie's words, he is well known for getting what he wants, but this is evidently not the superiority Laurie aspires to for her argument with Emily unveils the fact that Laurie does not consider him a success, avoiding appearing in parties with him. Lately, he is interested in lifting weight, thus sharing Third a general interest in sport but his is individual, not dual or even team sport. Added to this is the idea of plagiarizing Laurie recalls in their first meeting and how he made a proposal after attending a movie theatre with her. So, her personal life started with plagiarism in the hands of Stephen; another focal point uniting the three. Moreover, Laurie herself is quoting all the time, in her conversations with her friend Nancy, even in the College Standard Committee, she ends the hearing with Lear's "nothing comes out of nothing". All these hidden threads uniting the three prove a substratum of a connection of similarity between Laurie and Third, whose symptomatic causeway is her husband. Laurie and Third are just two faces of one coin belonging to the real world, but on a more specific and progressive level, their transcendental identities are dressed in Lacanian Lamella and Little object 'a' caught between the two worlds of imaginary and symbolic, but while Laurie is all along facing the real, having nostalgic feelings for lost immortality, Third is adapting himself to the lower symbolic one. The threat of menopause leads Laurie to stick to Third, same way

<sup>5</sup> *The Wretched of the Earth* (French: *Les Damnés de la Terre*), published in 1961, is a seminal work by Frantz Fanon. Written during the Algerian War of Independence, the book serves as a powerful and enduring analysis of the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and the complex, often violent, process of decolonization.

<sup>6</sup> Reggie Jackson, born in 1946, stands as a legendary figure in American baseball. His extensive 21-season career in Major League Baseball solidified his place in the sport's annals.

the Lamella sticks to a signifier and lives like a parasite on consuming the host. Third will be the boat she rides while her face is turned towards the lost paradise of immortality, another image of Walter Benjamin's angel of history<sup>7</sup>.

Lear's quoted line with which Laurie ends the trial, and which Third insistently repeats and to which he adds "see it feelingly" is not a decision on their part of the end, but rather the expression of their identity, a real transcendental one of excessive void. They are both embodiments of Žižek's conception of the Jew as a troubling excess. It is this troubling excess which dresses Laurie and behind her mask is her creator Wasserstein in the tight label of a feminist, just because their readers see them with the short-sighted eye of gender. Third has fallen in the same trap of misidentifying and classifying Laurie as a feminist aspiring to cross gender boundaries:

Third: Oh sure. You make professor McNealy look like Walt Disney. I mean, you `re the gender-bender. You`re the man.

Laurie: I`m the woman.

Third: Aren`t you categorizing yourself?

Laurie: I hope what I am teaching is a little more complicated than that. I`m not interested in shock value or spoof. (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 87)

Following a detailed examination of the true nature of the Lamella and little object 'a' as embodied by Laurie and Third, and an anthropological exploration of their origins within Lacan's realm of the real, we must now undertake the more complex task of identifying the real's ontological function. This function proves detrimental to our existential reality, given its roots in the boundless expanse of the void. This problematic excess, inherent to the real, essentially acts as a colonizer, invading a symbolic territory that does not belong to it. In other words, the real in the form of Lamella or little object 'a' is not a concrete entity or a human body that can verify its belonging to a piece of land, but it is a temporal part of the journey the body passes through, a phase of its history, so it must have a hand in its time scheme. Laurie reflects her confusion about all the surrounding events that are either related to her personal life or at least triggering her anger, and for which she finds no magnetic clue. In the analyst's coach, she wonders, "How does one draw parallels between the concurrent streams of Woodson Bull, this administration, and the New York Times publishing in their marriage announcements the commitment ceremonies of gay men and women. I am truly not able to put together these advances with the dangerously regressive climate" (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 13). Later in the analyst coach, she proceeds, "If there was something really wrong, then I'd understand where all my free-floating anxiety coming from. I mean I hate the possibility of war, but it isn't close enough to keep me up and sweating all night" (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 14).

Laurie is incapable of understanding what is taking place because she is inherently responsible for creating this regressive climate with her rejection of the symbolic world as a whole, but Wasserstein is carefully leading the reader to see the truth. Like Bush she

<sup>7</sup> In his work, particularly "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), Walter Benjamin features the "angel of history" as one of his most recognized and evocative images. This powerful metaphor, central to his critique of a straight, continuous view of progress and his understanding of historical events, originated from Paul Klee's 1920 monotype, *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin owned.

wages an academic war on Woodson with no concrete evidence, and if she is shocked with the Times' announcement of gay marriage, the reader is no less surprised with her admiration, encouragement and even pride of her homosexual daughter zooey. Perhaps it is Third with his aspiration to work as a sports agent is the one whom Wasserstein uses to make clear the basic mission of the real. The troubling excessive identity of the Jew is here on the symbolic world to perform the job of the sports agent. Laurie is led to the same conclusion. Speaking of Third, she explains

He wants to be a sports agent for Christ's sake. But basically he is interested in transacting deals, which is exactly why frankly, I believe this country is interested in the Middle East. Do you follow me? What we want ultimately is to make their transactions, to metaphorically be their sports agent. We'll take ten percent of their gross and their oil. We want peace so we can sell more sporting events on international cable television and Woodson Bull the Third, the graduate of this elite American college, can be our agent (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 13)

In the characters of Laurie and Third, the lingering echoes of the Real's lost world interact with our symbolic reality like a theatrical performance. Their primary function on this stage is to compel other characters towards one of two paths: either to seek novelty, embracing the destruction of existing boundaries and proclaiming themselves pioneers of a new Real world, or to passively accept the current situation, make the best of it, and ignore any potential falsehood or bad faith. These fundamental modern and postmodern approaches to life are merely strategies employed by the Real to dissolve its freeze-dried essence into two substitute temporal zones— narratives of human life that paradoxically assume the shape of death. Ultimately, these two styles will forever remain the opposing tides governing the flow of humanity's pseudo-existence.

Now it is time to have a close look at the new stage of Laurie's and Third's personal drama played on the parallax clock of modernism and postmodernism.

#### Little object a

Postmodernism  
modernism

Lamella



If Wasserstein is keen on opening Laurie's eyes to the truth by the end of the play with her confession to Third that it takes her the death of her father to realize that Goneril and Regan are not the real heroines, she is not oblivious to the consequences of adopting her modern flooding attitude to life. With the help of the parallax view, once more we will have a new dimension of her philosophy in the three surrounding characters of her father, her daughter Zooey and her friend Nancy. Ret Olivier (2004) says the life story of the psychoanalytically actualized subject is equally to be understood as being transindividual, in so far as the 'third term' or unconscious, as manifested in all the telling 'signs' with which his or her discourse is peppered, enable the analyst to fill in the 'gaps', in this way facilitating a 'coherent' narrative (p. 10)

Starting with her daughter Zooey who enjoys a special virtual appearance in the play, it is blatant that she reflects the sexual extreme of Laurie's attitude. With Zooey, the reader is introduced to a world of possibilities, of what ifs, thus providing Laurie with diverse profiles if her dominating identity did not experience a break at the hands of people like Third. The first virtual encounter with Zooey takes place in Laurie's conversation with her second daughter Emile, comparing the two and proclaiming Zooey to the real world because she has gone out and protested against Bush's administration. Against such pride she finds in Zooey, the reader is introduced to the sarcastic attitude and ironic tone of Emily: "My sister Zooey is not going to stop this war from happening because she and her girlfriend went to a candlelight holding up a piece of oak tag that they wrote on magic markers" (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 5). They proceed with the argument till Emily apologizes sarcastically that she is not a homosexual like her sister. Disparity between political and ethical standards in Laurie's case is shocking to the reader. How it comes that the one who rejects the American invasion of the human rights finds no warrant to cancel the biological human rights of pursuing its natural course. The problem with Zooey is not the simple moral one of a sexually perverted female, but the grave catastrophe she represents is that her deviant behavior is basically and biologically non-productive— another living symbol of approaching death, another image of the menopausal condition not only Laurie suffers from— but the whole play is involved in.

It is a world of a standstill whose every movement takes the false shape of life, but underneath it is a stark death. It is a false life which gains its authenticity and validity from temporal prizes, evidencing fake temporal success. In satirizing Zooey's job as merely making cheese, Laurie confidently answers that it is not mere cheese, it is organic. This simple hint to the natural organic world has echoes for the reader who has been earlier introduced to the aggressive nature of the real for the different no matter what it is. Laurie keeps defending Zooey's girlfriend as a Guggenheim poet<sup>8</sup> and a Rhodes scholar<sup>9</sup> who has got so many prizes. So, it is a life whose evidence is the prize that testifies that a human being was there, but no real offspring that extends it and claims it for eternity. In this respect, Laurie's standard, criteria and proof of real life is what could be termed a success that should be considered in terms of playful byproduct.

This last point of the play delivers the reader directly to the second possible version of Laurie's identity in the character of her father; the previous owner of a big toy store. Jack Jackson the father is given two appearances in the play, which even though very short and concise, they are of utmost significance, a sign of Wasserstein's artistic ability to imply and to condense too much in too limited a space. Immediately following Emily's discussion with Laurie about Zooey, the character (implied to be Laurie's father) makes his first appearance, through which Wasserstein establishes three key characteristics: his dementia, his stubbornness—reminiscent of Lear, especially regarding his insistence on writing a will that already exists and his repeated phrase "I know what I know" (a line Laurie herself echoes before the committee)—and his profession as a toy store owner, which funded his daughters' college education. With Jackson, the reader's eyes are open to another consequence of fixing one's sight on the lost immortality; the real he has previously enjoyed. Death is again the landmark but this time it is not biological. It is rather a mental death because the eye is hunting after the new, hoping to find the lost. Consequently, it does not store irrelevant memories of the symbolic world. It is just playing with chances, but her main direction is a backward one, reflected in Jackson's ability to count numbers backwards. The image recalls once more the Benjaminian picture of the angel of history with his eyes turned into the lost paradise, while catastrophes are accumulating before his feet. Jackson's eyes are blind to the facts of the present and his mind's eye is focused on the past and every step backwards is to be judged as a progress he is so proud of. The second appearance for Jackson intensifies the same point. In a scene that echoes Lear's loss in a storm, Jackson is lost in a storm in the middle of the night and the faithful Cordelia dressed as Laurie is out seeking her father. The scene is seen as the tipping point as Thomas Campell (2015) explains, provoking Laurie to change (p. 1). It is depicted for two main purposes. First, it is to trigger the similarity lurking behind apparently different contexts of Lear's and Jackson's, hence illuminating the distinctive featuring characteristic of play dominating life, transforming its characters into toys. The second goal is what critics call the philosophy of apology which Jackson reminds Laurie of. The scene is set just before Laurie's unexpected visit to Third to apologize for the troubles she caused. So, in a sense her father's apology is an

<sup>8</sup> This is a prestigious award granted by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to individuals who have demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts.

<sup>9</sup> A Rhodes Scholar is an elite postgraduate student awarded a prestigious scholarship to study at Oxford University. The program seeks academically exceptional individuals with strong leadership potential and a commitment to serving others.



anticipation of hers, and behind both Wasserstein is motivating the reader to connect the two incidents.

The third outcome of embracing the modern lifestyle is exemplified by Laurie's friend and colleague, Nancy, whose battle with cancer symbolizes death. This illness serves as yet another representation of the independent, self-replicating scheme that Laurie embodies. With the idea of a menacing death, Nancy is capable of realizing the different grades, details and relativities Laurie's flood crushes away unnoticed. She sets things in their proper places, stressing Laurie's pioneering academic and feminist efforts, but alert to her exaggerated overestimation of Third's plagiarism, declaring that Third like most of the students plagiarizes but clearing him before the committee. The approaching death pushes her eyes to appreciate even the faults, because the latter has more than one face in different contexts, some are valuable, and others are condemned but most important is that all these enjoy a sort of a precious life in one of these contexts:

Look Woodson, there is no need to discuss your paper. Let's say you did plagiarize. You lifted something verbatim. You literally stole intellectual property from the internet. Given the world we're living in, if you cultivate this art, you could become the CEO of a major American corporation. You could endow a chair in King Lear studies in Laurie Jameson's honor (Wasserstein. 2005, p. 17).

Nancy ends her meeting with Woodson with a very subtle remark "Frankly if I were professor Jameson, I wouldn't have bothered to bring you up on charges. But Laurie Jameson is still holding the torch" (p. 17). Her statement drives the reader back to two basic questions: the first is what does characterize Laurie as a subject? And is she the intend heroine of the play or is it Third which the play carries his name? The two questions are inherently related, so do their answers. From an Aristotelian perspective, aligning Laurie with the Lamella conceptually renders her universal, as the Real she embodies constitutes an inherent stage in every individual's development. This unconscious aspect, intertwined with forgotten notions of immortality, remains unaware of its own nature. Consequently, its reality repels the "other" and fails to recognize that this "other" is merely an extension of itself, comprising its inherent possibilities and unacknowledged primordial decisions predating physical experience. Kant and Schilling postulate this idea of atemporal act of choice (Žižek, *The Parallax*, p. 246). The three sexually, mentally and biologically perverted characters of Zooey, the father, and Nancy are inherent parts of Laurie's unconscious Lamella which gain existential life with the appearance of the mediating little object 'a' in Third who enables her to gain self-consciousness. This advantage is won at the expense of their disappearance, so acquiring the powerfulness of the unconscious and the same time working as dominant signifiers, thus transforming Laurie to a servant of their demands. For the first time she leaves the ontological level of troubling excess, of the big picture and descends to the ontic one of details. She becomes obedient to the father's advice of apologizing, she intends to attend Nancy's wedding even though she does not accept the bridegroom, and finally with the last scene we see, feel and witness her offers to help Third.

Wasserstein's *Third* delivers a deep and intricate examination of thematic issues, reaching well beyond a straightforward portrayal of modern American existence. The

play skillfully creates a "theatre of the parallax," depicting seemingly incompatible modern and postmodern ways of life not merely as different options, but as core approaches to navigating reality. The play masterfully stages a "theatre of the parallax," presenting the seemingly irreconcilable modern and postmodern lifestyles not merely as contrasting choices, but as fundamental, ontologically predetermined strategies for navigating existence, which are often embodied by Laurie and Third. In its entirety, *Third* delivers a compelling thematic statement that truth and reality are not found in neat resolutions but emerge from the very tension and irresolvability of conflicting perspectives, arguing that the apparent differences between characters are, in essence, "two versions of one essence termed excess." This ultimately portrays humanity's "pseudo life" caught between "two basic tides" of existence, offering a rich tapestry that moves beyond simple social commentary to provide profound psychological and philosophical insights into the contemporary human struggle.

The university setting in *Third* is symbolically reframed as a "homeland" for those undergoing displacement, particularly for a diasporic female figure who is implicitly linked to Jewish identity, suggesting it functions as a place for intellectual refuge and identity formation amidst alienation. Ultimately, the play's specific literary details and character interactions serve as a "micro literary image" that vividly reflects and illuminates much larger, universal experiences of displacement, the search for belonging, and the clash of ideologies that characterize the "macro universal picture" of the human condition.

This paper is thus an attempt to contribute to the existing literary scholarship on Wendy Wasserstein's *Third* by moving beyond conventional feminist interpretations to offer a multi-layered, theoretically robust analysis grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis and Žižekian ideological philosophy. While previous studies have often focused on the play's social commentary on women "having it all," this research meticulously uncovers the deeper philosophical, ontological, and psychological motivations underpinning Wasserstein's play. By applying concepts such as the "theatre of the parallax view," the Lamella, *objet petit a*, and the "non-All policy," this paper illuminates how *Third* stages a complex interplay between opposing modern and postmodern strategies for existence, revealing the inherent antagonisms that constitute reality itself. This approach transforms the understanding of *Third* from a straightforward thematic drama into a sophisticated exploration of subjectivity, the non-totalizable nature of human desire, and the intricate relationship between individual identity and broader societal structures. Consequently, this research enriches the critical discourse surrounding Wasserstein's work, establishing *Third* as a profound literary engagement with fundamental philosophical questions that resonate far beyond its initial social or gender-focused readings, thereby positioning it as a significant text within contemporary literary and critical theory.

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