

**FLUCTUATIONS OF FANTASY :  
POSTMODERNIST CONTAMINATION IN  
ANGELA CARTER`S FICTION**

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**SUMMARY**

What I am offering in this thesis is a kind "contaminated" reading, that is a reading deeply involved in the stylistic and ideological dissonances of Carter's fiction, to the point that they are assimilated within different and, in some cases, contrastive interpretative paths. But the contamination works also on another level: to read Carter is to tackle some very complex questions, including the possible articulations of Marxism and deconstruction/postmodernism or, more generally, the role played by ideology with reference to the tendencies and movements deriving from poststructuralism; my argument is that Carter's writing itself is heavily "contaminated" by postmodernist aesthetics despite her implicit denial and negative attitude towards it.

In the thesis I have discussed three collections of short-stories (The Bloody Chamber in Chapter I, Black Venus and Fireworks in Chapter II) and four novels (The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman, The Passion of New Eve, Nights at Circus and Wise Children from Chapter III to VI). I have also quoted extensively from the numerous interviews given by Carter in different stages of her career and from her critical works, in particular from The Sadeian Woman, a sort of aesthetic manifesto for a literary corpus in which the worlds of Eros and sexuality play a crucial role in transgressing and subverting the habitual dichotomies of gender. In the final Chapter (VII) Carter's work is located in the framework of the debate between feminist and postmodernist thought.

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## Preface

Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.

(Walter Benjamin)

The first and also the last time I saw Angela Carter was in April 1987 in Nice at a conference organized by the local university and whose topic was "E.A. Poe et la Raison Visionnaire". On that occasion the English writer read, or rather performed, her rewriting of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", entitled "The Resurrection of the House of Usher".

The reason for my starting on such a personal note is that the memory of those few days in Nice has accompanied me throughout this thesis, not so much in the sense that the fact of actually seeing the writer was going to have any repercussion on my subsequent work - at the time my critical interests did not lie in contemporary fiction - but rather because I still keep very clear in my mind the image of her. A tall woman who looked older than she really was - mainly due to her loose grey hair - she was also wearing a denim shirt and a long denim skirt, low heels; in sum the style of the Sixties, a decade of intense ideological struggles whose echoes clearly survive in many of her writings. Carter's stylistic anachronism recalls her own characters: the twin sisters Chance, the gay old protagonists of Wise Children, who go on using the garments and make-up of their younger years,

tenaciously maintaining their self-image. Wise Children is the last novel written by Carter before her untimely death in 1992, and its melancholy gaiety represents a perfect ending to a literary career which has been always stimulating, notwithstanding the ideological dissonances and stylistic disharmonies one can detect in it.

Throughout my thesis I have taken a particular care in highlighting such dissonances whenever they occurred, seeking to avoid the propensity towards apology of the monograph. Neither do I wish to offer the comfortable illusion of offering a definitive and "objective" reading of the author's writings, since an "objective" reading would presuppose a necessary distance between literary and critical discourses. Such a distance often transforms itself in contiguity, as Carter herself seems to acknowledge in an interview. What I am offering here is a kind "contaminated" reading, that is a reading deeply involved in those dissonances and disharmonies, to the point that they are assimilated within different and, in some cases, contrasting interpretative paths. Such an approach seems necessary with a writer like Carter whose work is based on Marxist epistemological assumptions, while adopting on the fictional level techniques and strategies typical of contemporary postmodernist aesthetics. To read Carter is to tackle some very complex questions, including the possible articulations of Marxism and deconstruction/postmodernism or, more generally, the role played by ideology with reference to the tendencies stemming from the epistemic

spring of poststructuralism. In this sense Carter's writing itself appears to be "contaminated" by postmodernist aesthetics in a way that contradicts her somewhat prejudicial and implicit denials. If to all this one adds Carter's declared feminist aims and consequently the necessity of evaluating her texts in the light of contemporary feminist thought, then the difficulties of providing a suitable context for an attentive analysis of her work increase. (A concise but I hope incisive assessment of such questions is provided in the final chapter "Feminism/Postmodernism: A Critical Intersection").

I have decided to anchor my work by quoting extensively from the numerous interviews given by Carter at different stages of her career. Such interviews offer an immediacy of insight and useful suggestions on the aims and motivations of her texts. Undoubtedly, any critic will approach the above sketched perspective (quoting the author's interviews in order to evaluate her intentions) in a cautious manner: the notion of intentionality has long since come under suspicion. The attempt to resuscitate it here should be viewed in the light of some functional considerations: it is my belief that any hermeneutic reading can only hope to be carried out effectively if one establishes with the author who actually put his/her signature to the text a relationship as complete and as articulated as possible. My writing in this thesis aims to do that, also adding to the author's disharmonies its own dissonances of tone and

style. In some cases my writing is abstract and essayistic, like in the opening pages of the section "Reflections", elsewhere a little indefinite or too much "involved" in Carter's prose thus risking paraphrasing her words. As I write at the outset of chapter VI one should be constantly aware of the double danger of being trapped in the discourse of the text while trying to clarify its meaning.

Besides the various interviews mentioned above, I have also decided to give a particular preeminence to Carter's critical works and, above all, to The Sadeian Woman, a sort of aesthetic manifesto for a literary corpus in which sexuality plays a crucial role in transgressing and subverting the habitual dichotomies of gender. Carter's interest in Sade goes well beyond the mere analogy of themes and images and places her among a group of admirers which include, to cite only a few, Hauberk, Baudelaire, Wilde, Dostoevsky, Apollinaire and Camus. Such writers, although very different from one another, have in common a fervid appreciation for the Divine Marquis, "one of the most amazing men ever existed", as Apollinaire defined him, or "the rebel hero", according to Camus. Adorno stressed Sade's role as researcher of the extreme in the field of knowledge, arguing that his work led Illuminism towards final and unacceptable conclusions, exploring a cruel syllogism according to which life consists in the researching of pleasure, pleasure conducts man to his own destruction, ergo life is based on the desperate negation of itself.

I believe that the reason for Carter's interest in Sade lies mainly in the provocative strength of his thought; he never falls into what Bataille defined as "lies of omission", into the escapism of consolatory belief (like that which negates man's capability of committing the most violent crimes). More than once in her critical writings - for example in "Notes from the Front Line" - Carter has condemned such comfortable illusions, whose main source she locates in myth. While she uses myth herself, she offers a disillusioned reading of myth, in order to strip it bare (the best example is perhaps The Passion of New Eve, discussed in chapter IV).

The first work by Carter to be examined in this thesis is the exquisitely Sadian title-piece to The Bloody Chamber. As the table of contents suggests the sequence of the various chapters is not chronologically orientated. I have chosen instead to start with a work of 1979, one of Carter's most famous pieces, and a stimulating one for any critical analysis, not only because it contains in a compressed space almost all the themes and images developed in the rest of her works, but also because I believe Carter is at her best in the short-story genre (she has been called "the poet of the short-story"). The justification of this contention will be provided in the first chapter.

Clearly, there are many omissions in this study, in particular the early stage of Carter's career: novels like Love, Shadow Dance, The Magic Toyshop are only briefly mentioned or are not discussed. This is not to

say that they are unworthy of critical attention; rather that a complete discussion of Carter's entire corpus would not necessarily provide a better focusing of the themes and narrative strategies considered here. Instead of expanding (and thus diluting) my analysis I have concentrated my attention on three collections of short-stories and four novels which, I believe, are exemplary enough of the entire corpus. It is also worth noting that there is no definitive section of "conclusions" to this thesis: this is partly a denial of any "definitive" reading of Carter, but also reflects my attempt to put a final emphasis on her complex relation to feminist/postmodernist thought.

Unfortunately, Angela Carter died just when she had reached her full artistic maturity. "Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death", says Benjamin in the epigraph to this preface, words that Carter used as the epigraph to her last collection of critical writings, Expletives Deleted. The storyteller has borrowed his authority from death; his glory is doomed from the start, and when he finally disappears, what is left are his tales, always the same and yet always different with each reading. What I intended to offer with my thesis are some of the infinite possible readings of such tales.

## CHAPTER I

### The Bloody Chamber

#### Section 1

All our inner world is real,  
it is perhaps even more real  
than the outer world. If we  
define a fantasy or a fairy  
tale what appears to be  
illogical, then we only  
prove not to have understood  
nature.

(Marc Chagall)

In an interview with John Haffenden almost ten years ago,,  
Angela Carter clearly explained her aims in The Bloody  
Chamber, a collection which includes ten of the most  
popular fairy tales rewritten by the author in a rather  
unconventional manner:

My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American  
edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but  
to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and  
to use it as the beginnings of new stories. The stories could  
not have existed the way they are without Isak Dinesen, Djuna  
Barnes and Jane Bowles - especially Isak Dinesen, because in a  
way they are imitations of nineteenth-century stories, like  
hers. I wrote them in Sheffield [...] which is probably why  
they are all such cold, wintry stories.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, London & N.Y.  
Methuen, 1985, p.84.

There are several implications here: first Carter's strong rejection of the definition "adult fairy tales" is a clear indicator of the particular kind of intertextual operation the author wishes to carry out, an operation which tends to limit as much as possible the distance between the old stories and the new ones. Paradoxical as it might seem, the main task of the writer seems that of offering to the reader some even more "faithful" versions, in that she intends to extract from the traditional ones what, in psychoanalytic terminology, is defined as the latent content and use it as, I would say, the supplement of her new stories. The adoption of psychoanalytic terminology reveals the kind of cultural perspective which stands behind Carter's writing especially when she chooses the particular form of the tale<sup>2</sup> - a recurrent form in all her works. Her perspective links psychoanalysis and feminism with stimulating but also controversial results. In another interview she maintains that "the latent content [of the tales] is violently sexual. And because I am a woman, I read it that way".<sup>3</sup>

Further evidence of the attention Carter pays to the psychoanalytic content of the stories is the fact that

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<sup>2</sup> On this point see P. Duncker, "Re-imagining the fairy tales: Angela Carter's bloody chambers", in Popular Fictions, P. Humm et al. eds, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1986, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> K. Goldsworthy, "Interview with Angela Carter", Menjin, XLIV, 1, 1985, p. 10. For an interesting discussion of the relationship between female discourses, psychoanalysis and literary theory, here only briefly hinted, see M. Jacobus, Reading Woman, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1986.



her practice of rewriting the traditional fairy tales becomes an implicit critical reply to the arguments of Bruno Bettelheim. In the same interview with Haffenden she declares:

Everyone knows that Bettelheim is terrific with children, but I think he is sometimes wrong. I'm not sure that fairy tales are as consoling as he suggests. [...] I do find the imagery of fairy tales very seductive and capable of innumerable interpretations [...] But some of the stories in The Bloody Chamber are the result of quarrelling furiously with Bettelheim.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, pp. 82-83. A consoling vein similar to the one Carter detects in Bettelheim characterizes also the work of an expert in folk traditions like Max Luthi. In his The Fairy Tale as Art Form, Bloomington, Indiana, 1987, he argues that: "The fairy tale is the poetic expression of the confidence that we are secure in a world not destitute of sense, that we can adapt ourselves to it and act and live even if we cannot view or comprehend the world as a whole" (p. 145).

For a criticism of Bettelheim's arguments see J. Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell, London, Heinemann, 1979, in particular chapter 6 "On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children, Bruno Bettelheim's Moralistic Magic Wand" pp. 160-182. According to Zipes, "Bettelheim's book [The Uses of Enchantment] disseminates false notions about the original intent of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and about the literary quality of folk tales and leaves the reader in a state of mystification" (p. 160). Zipes' criticism focuses above all on the excessive therapeutic properties the Swiss scholar attributes to the folk-tale and on the role of prominence conferred to psychoanalysis in the process of disclosing the inner meanings of the stories. He maintains that Bettelheim has contributed "to the banalization of Freudian theory by blindly applying its tenets without rethinking and reworking them in the light of social and scientific changes" (p. 165).

However, in his successive study entitled Don't Bet on the Prince, Aldershot, Gowen, 1986, Zipes returns to this point regretting that his discussion of Bettelheim's arguments contained in his previous book had been mistakenly regarded as an attack on Freudianism tout court, whereas his intention was only that of pointing

Moreover, as Carter admits, her writing has strong affinities with that of others female writers like Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), Djuna Barnes and Jane Bowles, all women writers who, according to Ellen Moers, belong to a tradition of "female gothic" which extends from Ann Radcliffe to Sylvia Plath.<sup>5</sup>

Later in this section I will discuss Sade's influence on Carter's writing, the gothic aspects present in The Bloody Chamber and, in a more general context, the transgressiveness of the gothic genre especially when adopted for feminist ends. But I will begin with a few considerations about the arrangement of the stories. I agree with Paola Altini when she detects in The Bloody Chamber not only a kind of metaphorical progression from the light of civilization to the dark abyss of the unconscious, but also a precise structural geometry:

to the first four tales, in which prevails the practice of antropomorphization, are diametrically opposed the last four in which prevails the practice of zoomorphization, whilst the fifth and the sixth - the geometric centre of the book - reveal a more "vegetal" dimension in so far as they envisage a sort of interpenetration of man and nature. Besides, the first

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out how neither Freud nor Jung could be used acritically while interpreting a fairy-tale. See note no. 3, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> E. Moers, Literary Women, N.Y. Doubleday, 1976. As Toril Moi rightly observes, Moers was perhaps the first to describe the history of women's fiction "as a rapid and powerful undercurrent" and for this reason her book had quite an enthusiastic reception, unfortunately today it presents several weak points, among them, according to Moi, is a too limited use of literary theory together with a narrow conception of history. See T. Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, pp. 53-55.

four seem to conform to a precise contrapuntal design [...] giving rise to strong effects of "chiaroscuro" from the alternation of grim and macabre atmospheres with others which are naively sentimental or cheerful.<sup>6</sup>

The collection opens with the title-piece "The Bloody Chamber". Strikingly, the protagonist narrates her own story - this happens very seldom in traditional fairy tales - by recalling her adventurous matrimonial experience. From the beginning the reader is introduced into a pervasive sensuous atmosphere, conveyed by the rhythm of the prose, an evident sign of the psychological tension which, together with an ironic vein, constitutes the main feature of this tale. The author sustains this psychological tension in spite of the fact that the reader is perfectly aware from the start that the female protagonist has survived the perils which await her:

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietitude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> P. Altini, Eros, Mito e Linguaggio nella Narrativa di Angela Carter, Pisa, ETS ed., 1990, pp. 77-78. In particular, according to Altini it is important that "The Bloody Chamber" is the first tale of the entire collection since it is the one where Carter's feminist ideology is more evident. Without any apparent reason the original sequence has been altered in the Italian translation. See La camera di sangue, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> A. Carter, The Bloody Chamber (1979), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981, p. 7. All the quotations refer to this

An explicit symbolic cromatism is evident in the above passage: the virginal white of the pillow, the red of a burning cheek, the pounding of an excited heart in unison with the ceaseless pistons of the train. The sexual act is metaphorically envisaged here, as if already present in the mind of the young girl before her body has experienced it.

From a thematic point of view the plot immediately presents a striking resemblance to that of a gothic novel: the virgin heroine, only seventeen years old, has voluntarily accepted the marriage proposal of the old man who is going to become her persecutor, a libertine Marquis, perhaps the richest man in France, a persistent courtier who presents her with a cascade of beautiful flowers, precious jewels and mouth-watering marron glacés. Strangely, the Marquis has been a widower three times and in very obscure circumstances. Here is how the protagonist describes the man who has just become her husband:

He was older than I. He was much older than I; there were streaks of pure silver in his dark mane. But his strange, heavy, almost waxen face was not lined by experience. Rather, experience seemed to have washed it perfectly smooth, like a stone on a beach whose fissures have been eroded by successive tides. And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay

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edition, and are indicated by their page number.

underneath this mask. Or else, elsewhere. (pp.8-9)

But a gloomy future is in prospect for this new Justine. The tension mounts and the signs are ominous: the Marquis is particularly fond of red opals and his engagement present is a ring with a huge red opal - a stone which brings bad luck, as the old nanny observes, casting a dark shadow of doubt on the the young girl's excitement. The heroine suspects that something is terribly wrong: how is it that such a rich and powerful man has chosen a poor girl to become his wife, after having married such clever and mature ladies, an opera singer, a famous model, and the last a Rumanian Countess? After all she is just the daughter of a poor widow, still a child in spite of her age, whose only ability consists in playing the piano.<sup>8</sup>

Such doubts are not however sufficient to induce her to call off the wedding, which takes place just before they leave for the Marquis's residence in Brittany. His castle is entirely surrounded by the sea, isolated from the mainland during the high tide. Here is how the young girl describes it:

And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his

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<sup>8</sup> Considering this point in The Sadeian Woman, London, Virago, 1979, Carter writes: "For the libertine chooses to surround himself, not with lovers or partners, but with accomplices. The libertine would not trust a partner who would rob him of pleasure by causing him to feel rather than to experience. [...] The libertine's perversions are the acting-out of his denial of love" (pp. 146-147).

castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewling about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and purple evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day [...] that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves [...] That lovely, sad, sea siren of a place!(p. 13)<sup>9</sup>

The owner of such a place can only be an extraordinary man. His liminal existence between the world of human beings and that of the infernal powers is reflected in the description of his castle as "a Universe of Death" which is on the mainland for part of the day and in the middle of the sea for the remainder. It is a place of magic and sensuous excitement, where one eats voluptuous marron glacés and drinks cups of Asti Spumante. But, above all, this is a place where, according to the Sadian precepts, there is in every beautiful thing an element of perversion.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The castle described in "The Bloody Chamber" resembles those depicted by Piranesi for its dreadful and "sublime" setting. On the important role of place within the general field of gothic fiction here are the opinions, respectively, of Kay Mussel and Eva Figes: according to the former the gothic heroines "are doubly victimized: by their feminine powerlessness and by their location in a place, castle, monastery, crumbling mansion, remote island where a gothic villain can threaten them." See Women's Gothic and Romantic Fiction, Westport & London, Greenwood Press, 1981, p. xi. Similarly, Figes argues that: "in the Gothic novel the house changes from being a symbol of male privilege and protection conferred on the fortunate female of his choice, to an image of male power in its sinister aspect, threatening and oppressive. [...] For the mind of woman the marital home is a prison, rank with the smell of decay and death [...]" Sex and Subterfuge, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1982, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> In The Sadeian Woman Carter writes that: "Sade has a

It is not surprising that the fervid imagination of the girl enriches the Marquis with a curious symbolism, when she compares him to a phallic flower:

I know it must seem a curious analogy, a man with a flower, but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily. Yes. A lily. Possessed of that strange ominous calm of a sentient vegetable, like one of those cobra-headed, funeral lilies whose white sheaths are curled out of a flesh as thick and tensely yielding to the touch as vellum. (p. 9)

The metaphor distances him from any human resemblance - perhaps he only wears a mask of humanity as she has already said - emphasizing by contrast his belonging to another world where Death is the only Supreme Being.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to what the girl had expected, the Marquis decides to delay the actual consummation of the marriage; he only strips her of her clothes, gazing at her pale limbs as if she were some kind of delicious food he was about to eat. The scene is by far the most explicitly sensuous in the story:

He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke. [...] He approached his familiar treat with a weary appetite. And when nothing but my scarlet,

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curious ability to render every aspect of sexuality suspect, so that we see how the chaste kiss of the sentimental lover differs only in degree from the vampirish love-bite that draws blood [...]" (p. 24).

<sup>11</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, in her study An Introduction to the Psychology of Fairy Tales, N.Y., Spring, 1970, argues that Bluebeard "embodies the death-like, ferocious aspects of the animus in his most diabolical form [...] Woman, on the other hand, serves life, and the anima entangles a man in life. [...] The animus in his negative form seems to be the opposite. He draws woman away from life and murders life for her" (p.43).

palpitating core remained, I saw in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together [...] the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. [...]

At once he closed my legs like a book and I saw again the rare movement of his lips that meant he smiled. (p. 15)

What is typical of Carter in this passage is first of all the adoption of a vegetable analogy, when the young girl is ironically compared not to a beautiful flower whose petals are about to fall - as one might have expected - but to a modest artichoke whose leaves are unceremoniously stripped off one after the other. The woman is nothing more than an object in the hands of her male persecutor. Scenes of humiliation like this are quite frequent in Carter's work - one of the most brutal is that in The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman where a dozen girls are kept in a cage in a beast-like situation.<sup>12</sup>

Another image present in the above passage and which constantly recurs in the macrotext is the mirror. On this occasion it functions as the medium of a sophisticated intertextual operation where, instead of choosing a written text, an iconographic image - an

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<sup>12</sup> The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman, (1972) Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1982, p. 132. I will discuss this scene in chapter III as a problematic example of Carter's handling of pornographic material.



etching by Rops - is metaphorically used to originally illustrate the mechanism through which the woman's self is traditionally constructed. The fact that the old libertine is described as perfectly dressed whereas the woman is completely naked before him becomes the symbolic indicator of male predominance.

Finally, I wish to point out the metanarrative nature of the narrator's comment in the above passage, when she admits that the scene just described contains the "Most pornographic of all confrontation". The comparison of the girl's body with a book ("he closed my legs like a book"), as if the Marquis considered his wife as a volume to be added to his rich collection of pornographic publications suggests that sex for him is a kind of intellectual activity in the Sadian tradition.<sup>13</sup> It is in his library, where a strong odour of Russian leather suffuses the air (the odour of the libertine himself, conveying the idea that he is part of that perverse textual universe) that the young bride nervously awaits her wedding night. The young girl decides to stay in the library although the books it contains do not seem a suitable reading for a seventeen year old. Titles like The Initiation, The Key of

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<sup>13</sup> Again in The Sadeian Woman, while referring to Sade Carter maintains that: "his idea of pleasure, [...] is always intellectual, never sensual" (p. 28).

It is worth recalling that the metaphor of the female body described as a book recurs quite often, the most famous and obvious example is Donne's Elegy; an example contemporary with Carter's text is in Ishmael Reed's Mumbo Jumbo, N.Y. Avon Books, 1978: "He got good into her Book tongued her every passage thumbing her leaf and rubbing his hands all over her binding" (pp. 208-209).

Mysteries, The Secret of Pandora's Box suggest perversity. In an hidden corner of the room she discovers a volume full of bewildering etchings, obscurely prophetic of her fate, like the one entitled "Reproof of curiosity", where a masked man masturbates while torturing a young naked woman lying at his feet; or the more macabre one called "Immolation of the Wives of the Sultan". It is as if while in the library the girl were "reading" her own story and the events which are about to happen, according to the plan elaborated by the Marquis who has deliberately delayed the marriage's consummation in order for her to visit the library, and for himself to better enjoy the pleasure of waiting. When he finally turns up he is announced by his shadow in a scene like that in a horror movie: "There was a pungent intensification of the odour of leather that suffused his library; his shadow fell across the massacre" (p. 17).<sup>14</sup>

The marriage is consummated in the huge nuptial bed that had belonged to the Marquis's family for generations. The walls are covered with mirrors which like a camera record each pornographic sequence whose main protagonist is, nolens volens, the young bride;<sup>15</sup>the

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<sup>14</sup> The scene clearly resembles that of a horror film, in which the menacing shadow of the vampire looms over his virgin victim. The analogy of the Marquis with a vampire is confirmed by the fact that he is once described as "the descendant of Dracula", and when he himself declares: "My little love, you'll never know how much I hate daylight!" (p. 36).

<sup>15</sup> The presence of mirrors in the bedroom makes one think of what Borges once said: "mirrors and copulation are abominable, since they both multiply the numbers of men" Ficciones A. Kerrigan ed. N.Y. Grove 1962, p. 17.

air is suffused by the intense odour of the lilies to the point that the whole room looks more like an embalmer salon than a bedroom. Having sex with the Marquis has no corrupting effect on the girl, contrary to what Paola Altini seems to suggest;<sup>16</sup> it seems to confirm to the girl that her own desire already tends towards those aspects of cruelty and perversity embodied so well by the libertine. She acknowledges what, unconsciously, was part of her being:

I lay in our wide bed accompanied by a sleepless companion, my dark newborn curiosity.

I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me. (p. 22)

Sexual intercourse has thus added to the emotional dependence of the girl the erotic entanglement at the core of any sado-masochistic relationship ("I clung to him as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could comfort me for suffering it" (p. 18)).<sup>17</sup>

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The image of a mirror that reflects an endless copulation is to be found also in Dr Hoffman's laboratory, see The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman, pp. 213-214.

<sup>16</sup> P. Altini, op.cit., p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> The female protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber" seems then to behave just like Justine who cannot kill Roland because, as we read in The Sadeian Woman, "He is my master and I must obey him" (p. 54). Thus the girl is entirely at the mercy of the man; in a sense her own virtue becomes an excuse for complete submission: "In herself, this lovely ghost, this zombie, or woman who has never been completely born as a woman, only as a debased cultural idea of a woman, is appreciated only for her decorative value. Final condition of the imaginary prostitute. [...] She is most arousing as a memory or as a masturbatory fantasy. If she perceives herself as

But, unexpectedly, the perversely magic atmosphere of the tale comes to an end. Carter often introduces a sudden realistic element in her work: in this case the telephone rings and reality, at least for a while, regains prominence. The Marquis is not just a libertine eager to pursue the pleasures of the flesh, but also a clever businessman; his wealth is not only due to inheritance, but is also the result of a good policy on the Stock Exchange. A financial matter takes him away for several weeks and while he is away the young wife will keep all the keys of the castle. As in Bluebeard she can enter any room she likes with the exception of one; if she really loves him she must stay away from that door. After all it is only a private room, "a den" - as the Marquis defines it, thus reiterating his distance from the rest of humanity and his proximity to the bestial world - where he forgets what he calls "the yoke of marriage".<sup>18</sup>

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something else, the contradictions of her situation will destroy her. This is the Monroe syndrome. [...] When she suffers she exists. She will embrace her newly discovered masochism with all her heart because she has found a sense of being through suffering" (Ibid., pp. 70, 75).

<sup>18</sup> As Max Luthi aptly reminds, prohibitions recur quite often in many fairy-tales: "[They] are again primarily just an element of fairy-tale style. They help to give the fairy-tale its conciseness. But underlying these severe prohibitions and commands, one senses a way of thinking similar to that in the taboos of primitive peoples" (op. cit., p. 78).

There are many versions of the Bluebeard tale all over Europe, they all have in common the central motif of the forbidden chamber and the irresistible curiosity of the heroine who wishes to see what is inside, quite aptly K. Lokke compares the curiosity motif to the ancient myth of Amore and Psyche; see K. Lokke, "Bluebeard and the Bloody Chamber the Grotesque of Self-Parody and self-Assertion",

As one should expect she finally decides to use all the keys she has at her disposal, hoping that she will gather enough information to throw some light on the real nature of her husband. The ambiguity regarding the Marquis's self is a point raised early in the tale; the protagonist is now trying to find some proof in order to support her suspicions. One of the keys opens his study, and she sees on the desk lots of telephones, papers, a clear sign of his business activities, but more interestingly she discovers some love letters and a very strange card in a drawer. The girl's curiosity increases as she notes that it depicts a vampire digging a grave, while underneath is written: "Typical Transylvanian Scene - Midnight, All Hallows". On the back of the card she then reads: "On the occasion of this marriage to the descendant of Dracula - always remember, 'The supreme and unique pleasure of love is the certainty that one is doing evil" (p. 26). As a signature there is just the initial: C.

At this point one should note the evident change of tone in the story. Two different genres the Gothic tale and the detective story come together in a sort of collision, again a recurrent practice in Carter's work. Unsurprisingly our heroine, who now looks more like a detective than a young wife, immediately recalls that C was the initial of the Marquis's last wife, the Rumanian Countess - the reader (in a way also turned into a detective himself) who has a certain familiarity with the

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Frontiers, 10, 1, 1988, p. 12, note no. 8.

gothic genre cannot help assuming that C might stand for Carmilla, the title of a famous story by Sheridan La Fanu, or even for Carter!<sup>19</sup>

At this point the girl has only got one key left, the one that opens the door of "the bloody chamber" which is situated, as in the best gothic tradition, in the lowest part of the castle. Once inside the chamber the scene before her eyes certainly goes beyond any possible gruesome imagination:

And now my taper showed me the outlines of a rack. There was also a great wheel like the ones I had seen in woodcuts of the martyrdoms of the saints in my nurse's little store of holy books. And - just one glimpse of it before my little flame caved in and I was left in absolute darkness - a metal figure, hinged at the side, which I knew to be spiked on the inside and to have the name: the Iron Maiden. Absolute darkness. And, about me, the instruments of mutilation. [...]

The walls of this stark torture chamber were the naked rock; they gleamed as if they were sweating with fright. At the four corners of the room were funerary urns, of great antiquity, Etruscan, perhaps, and, on three-legged ebony stands, the bowls of incense he had left burning which filled the room with a sacerdotal reek. Wheel, rack and Iron Maiden were, I saw, displayed as grandly as if they were items of statuary and I was almost consoled, then, and almost persuaded myself that I might have stumbled only upon a little museum of his perversity, that he had installed these monstrous items here only for contemplation. (p. 28)

From what she sees it is evident that the key that opens the door of the bloody chamber does not lead to the heart

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<sup>19</sup> "Carmilla" is now included in The Best Ghost Stories of J.S. Le Fanu N.Y. Dover, 1964, it first appeared in In a Glass Darkly in 1872, more than twenty years before the publication of Dracula.

of the Marquis, as the girl naively had believed, but to his own private hell, the place where this caricature of a man, a combination of the gothic villain and the Sadian hero, celebrates his filthy rites (everything in the above description seems to indicate a satanic parody of a ritual liturgy), a kind of bottomless abyss where his black soul descends every time he tortures his fellow human beings, and, in so doing, inflicts an even more painful torture on himself. As the girl comments with mingled feelings of horror and pity "I felt a terrified pity for him, for this man who lived in such strange, secret places [...] The atrocious loneliness of that monster!" (p. 35)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> As Carter herself points out in The Sadeian Woman, Sade in his introduction to Philosophy in the Boudoir, writes: "It is only by sacrificing everything to sensual pleasure that this being known as Man, cast into the world in spite of himself, may succeed in sowing a few roses on the thorns of life" (p. 135).

The loneliness of many Sadian heroes resembles, in many ways that of some characters in the novels of W. Burroughs, described by Carter as "the avatar of nihilism of the late twentieth century", The Sadeian Woman, (p. 34).

Back in August 1843 in The Black Cat Edgar Allan Poe, one of Carter's favourite writers, defined perversity in a way similar to the features of the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber": "this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself to offer violence to its own nature - to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" in M. Bulgheroni, "Poe e il demone americano", Studi Americani, 9, 1963, pp. 71-82. However, the analogies with Poe do not stop here, especially if one considers the description of the bloody chamber, a "theatre of horror". G.R. Thompson comments: "it is as if Poe sought to blend two kinds of Gothic romance: the shocking, supernatural, Teutonic tale; and the insinuated, explained, English tale". G.R. Thompson, Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales, Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1973, p. 34, quoted in N. Cornwell, The Literary Fantastic From Gothic to Postmodernism, N.Y. &

Something really sinister stands in the middle of this private museum of horrors: a gloomy catafalque surrounded by tall candles and white lilies (the same lilies as in the bedroom). Inside the catafalque lies the naked and embalmed body of the opera singer. The third wife of the Marquis is not far away, she is inside the Iron Maiden. At that sight our heroine is paralysed with fear and the key falls to the floor in a pool of blood.

From now on the rhythm of narration accelerates: the Marquis returns early from his journey and wants to see the key, on which a blood stain is still visible, a clear indication of the fact that his wife has disobeyed him. The right punishment for such a crime can only be death by beheading.<sup>21</sup> Everything is done according to a precise ritual: the sacrificial victim wears white clothes and a necklace of red rubies. Her only comfort is the presence of the young Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner, whom in the last part of the tale the girl defines as "my lover"; he is the first to hear a horse approaching the castle, a small ray of hope for the girl who is about to be murdered. All is ready for the decapitation, the sword of the Marquis is already in the air, the head on the block, before the classic coup de théâtre; reinforcements arrive in the guise of the girl's mother who drills the new Bluebeard with a shot in the head:

The Marquis stood transfixed, utterly dazed, at a loss. It

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London, Harvester, 1990, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> A metaphorical punishment of course for the knowledge she has acquired.



must have been as if he had been watching his beloved Tristan for the twelfth, the thirteenth time and Tristan stirred, then leapt from his bier in the last act, announced in a jaunty aria interposed from Verdi that bygones were bygones, crying over spilled milk did nobody any good, and as for himself, he proposed to live happily ever after. The puppetmaster, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns. (p.39)

So the music changes, the dark Wagnerian atmosphere that had pervaded the story up to that moment gives way to a more lively Verdian aria, the puppetmaster, as it is often the case in Carter's writing ("Lady Purple", The Magic Toyshop) is destroyed by the creatures he believed he could always command. On this occasion he is so surprised by the events that he remains incredulous contemplating his own death ("open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent"). At this point the story is about to end: the castle is transformed in a school for the blind, the girl marries the young piano-tuner, the only sign of what has happened in the past is a small red stain on her forehead, a sign she has never been able to remove since the Marquis pressed the key on her skin, perhaps the token of her lost innocence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Carter describes it as "the caste mark of a Brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain" (p. 36). Lokke notes that: "By acknowledging the glamour of sado-masochistic self-annihilation as well as its ultimate brutality, ugliness, and misogyny, Carter reveals both the difficulty and the absolute necessity of a feminist redefinition of sexual pleasure and desire. Thus the heart on the heroine's forehead is not only a mark of shame, a sign of complicity; it is also a badge of courage. She is rewarded for breaking the patriarchal taboo with a

From the outset I have hinted at the many gothic aspects which characterize Carter's rewriting of Bluebeard: the setting, the female protagonist. However she differs from her literary model: she has received from her mother a certain sexual education, as she proudly admits: "My mother, with all the precision of her eccentricity, had told me what it was that lovers did. I was innocent but not naive" (p. 17). Such a statement might well indicate a kind of feminist awareness on the part of the girl, but this is not the case: the seventeen year old bride ends up representing once again the character of the passive heroine typical of so many gothic novels and fairy tales. One scene in particular can illustrate this point:

When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of my self in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like thin wire [...] And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away. (p. 11)<sup>23</sup>

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knowledge of the human heart" (op.cit., p. 11).

However, it should also be stressed that the mark in question is a sign of guilt: unlike her mother our heroine has accepted a marriage without love in order to gain a wealthy life; she herself admits to have sold her soul to the devil for "a handful of coloured stones and the pelts of dead beasts" (p. 16).

<sup>23</sup> In The Sadeian Woman Carter writes: "In the looking-glass of Sade's misanthropy, women may see themselves as they have been and it is an uncomfortable sight" (op. cit. p. 36). The experience of a visualized self obtained through a mirror, or otherwise through the metaphorical mirror of the gothic genre is, according to Moers, central to women's writing, it derives from the fact

The mirror, a borderlike medium between the imaginary and the symbolic, gives back the false image of herself as seen by the Marquis; in other words one could well argue that the construction of the feminine self is once again accomplished through the powerful gaze of a male. The blind piano-tuner whom the heroine finally marries has no gaze of course, and the girl notes with relief that "his eyes were singularly sweet" (p. 31) when she first sees him in a situation in which she had expected her husband. The figure of the blind man recurs often in novels written by women - the best example is Jane Eyre - as if only through the symbolic castration of the male were it possible for the woman to get rid of all the constraints of an heterosexual relationship.<sup>24</sup>

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that: "nothing separates female experience from male experience more sharply, and more early in life, than the compulsion to visualize the self". With reference to this point Moers quotes some verses by Christina Rossetti which are worth here reporting since the female protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber" experiences the same ubiquity of the mirror:

All my walls are lost in mirrors,  
whereupon I trace  
Self to right hand, self to left hand,  
self in every place,  
Self-same solitary figure, self-same  
seeking face.

C. Rossetti, "A Royal Princess" (1866) cited in E. Moers, Literary Women, N.Y. Doubleday, 1976, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> The comparison with Jane Eyre is suggested by P. Duncker in "Re-imagining the fairy tales: Angela Carter's bloody chambers", pp. 233-234. It is also worth noting that in this case the critic's opinion coincides perfectly with that of the author: in her collection of critical writings Expletives Deleted, London, Chatto & Windus, 1992, Carter maintains that in Jane Eyre we can

The young heroine of the "The Bloody Chamber" is well aware of "her potentiality for corruption" (she considers killing her husband: "If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him" p. 35). But she also follows the example of the usual stereotype according to which woman's only role is that of the victim, a puppet in the hands of her torturer; moreover she has mingled feelings of repulsion and desire towards her husband. On his part, the Marquis - depicted as a grotesque satyr, a monocled lecher who examines her limb by limb - has a desire so powerful that there is no way she can resist it: "And it was as though the imponderable weight of his desire was a force I might not withstand, not by virtue of its violence but because of its very gravity" (p. 9).<sup>25</sup>

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detect several motifs from fairy-tales, first of all BlueBeard, - Thornfield Hall resembles the castle of the old tale - but also Beauty and the Beast and Cinderella, p 162. For a further confirmation of these intertextual connections with Jane Eyre see also K. Rowe "'Fairy-Born and human-bred': Jane Eyre's Education in Romance" in The Voyage In, E. Abel, M. Hirsch, E. Langland eds. Hanover U.P. of New England, 1983.

According to Altini, the blind piano-tuner represents love itself, since he is blind just like the god of love, moreover because of his musical skills he is depicted as a particularly sensitive and tender man (op. cit., p. 95).

<sup>25</sup> I perfectly agree with Lokke about the grotesque characterization of the old satyr. She also maintains that such grotesque aspects are to be found not only in "Bluebeard" but in many other fairy-tales; Lokke also argues that Carter's prose is similar to that of some women's writers like Djuna Barnes, Flannery O'Connor, Isak Dinesen, all belonging to the so called "feminine grotesque", although: "Carter's is more akin to the original, emancipatory Renaissance grotesque called 'grotesque realism' by Bakhtin", "Bluebeard and the Bloody Chamber the Grotesque of Self-Parody and self-

The only real difference from the traditional fairy tale of Bluebeard and the usual gothic paradigms consists in the fact that in this case it is not a male hero who saves the girl from her imminent death, before marrying her at the end of the story, but it is another woman, the heroine's mother. The character of the mother is that of a strong and willing woman whose adventurous life has left her with a great love for independence and self-confidence. Her unusual youth spent in Indochina is proudly recalled by her daughter at the beginning of the story:

My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I? (p. 7)

However, the fact that she is a mother sui generis, doesn't prevent her from being a bit emotional, as all mothers are, on their daughter's wedding day. She doesn't even try to dissuade the girl from marrying an old man, although such a marriage would certainly be the solution to her financial difficulties. She simply accepts her daughter's decision reluctantly. Notwithstanding, the bond between the two women does not cease to exist after the wedding; on the contrary it becomes even stronger, to the point that at the end of the story it is depicted in telepathic terms: "I can only bless [...] the maternal

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Assertion", p. 8. I will discuss the influence of the Bakhtinian grotesque on Carter's writing in chapter V.

telepathy that sent my mother running headlong from the telephone to the station after I had called her" (p. 40). A kind of telepathy certainly helped by a timely phone call!

According to Ellen Cronan Rose, Carter's intention in creating the character of a "fighting mother" in the "Bloody Chamber" was to emphasize the importance of the mother-daughter relationship. Quoting Adrienne Rich on this issue, she maintains that:

the most important thing one woman [a mother] can do for another [her daughter] is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities. [...] A mother 'who is a fighter' - Rose adds - gives her daughter a sense of life's possibilities. Following her example, Bluebeard's widow and her 'sisters' in the stories that follow are enabled to explore life possibilities, to develop into adult women by learning to love themselves.

Rose concludes by pointing out that Carter's rewritings state very clearly that:

female development [...] has been distorted by patriarchy; that it is and must be grounded in the mother-daughter matrix; that it involves not only the discovery but the glad acceptance of our sexuality. That a woman who loves the woman who is herself has the power of loving another person. And perhaps some day even patriarchy will 'yield' to that power.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The quotations are respectively from p. 222 and p. 227 of Rose's "Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales" in Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development, Abel E. Hirsch M. Langland E. eds., Hanover & London, 1983, pp. 209-227. About the relationship mother/daughter and its implications on female writing see: A. Rich, Of Woman Born N.Y. W.W. Norton & Co. 1976; E. Abel, Writing and sexual Difference, London, Harvester Press, 1982; J. Arcana, Our Mothers' Daughters, Berkeley, Shameless Hussy Press, 1979 and P. Palmer, Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory, N.Y. & London, Harvester, 1989, pp. 112-124.

As it has been previously pointed out "The Bloody Chamber" follows in many respects the gothic paradigm of a Sadistic and irresistible villain and a passive and acquiescent heroine, working according to the mechanism of male desire. On the mechanisms of desire inherent in gothic narrative Peter Brooks writes:

Narratives portray the motors of desire that drive and consume their plots, and they also lay bare the nature of narration as a form of human desire: the need to tell as a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener, to implicate him in the thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name [...]<sup>27</sup>

What is clear if we consider Carter's work and that of other writers experimenting with new modes within the Gothic genre is the vitality of the genre. It is certainly true that in the general field of contemporary Fantasy the Gothic still retains a prominent role, thanks mainly to feminist women writers who have been particularly able in using the huge repertoire of themes and conventions typical of fairy-tale, of romance, of the supernatural and myth. According to Rosemary Jackson the reasons for this vitality are mainly psychological: "the history of the survival of Gothic horror is one of progressive internalization and recognition of fears as generated by the self."<sup>28</sup> Secondly, for Jackson the longevity of the genre is linked to the evolution of a

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in A. Cranny-Francis, Feminist Fictions, London, Polity Press, 1990, p.15.

<sup>28</sup> R. Jackson, Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1981, p. 24.

feminist awareness and to its repercussions on the cultural level, so much so that "no breakthrough of cultural structure seems possible until linear narrative (realism, illusionism, transparent representation) is broken or dissolved "<sup>29</sup>

It is from this perspective then that we should evaluate the work of those women writers who re-use gothic themes - Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood (for example in Bodily Harm), or Emma Tennant (in whose novel The Bad Sister lesbian practices are associated with vampirism, violence and sadomasochism according to patterns typical of both nineteenth century novels and contemporary horror films). All such writers represent new versions of the tradition of female gothic that for Jackson, as it was for Moers before her, has seen among its best practitioners people like Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti, Isak Dinesen, Carson McCullers, Sylvia Plath.<sup>30</sup>

From what has been said up to now one could easily infer that the Gothic, and more generally the Fantastic, is a transgressive genre, able to manipulate or even disrupt the cultural structures of the society in which it is produced. This is, for example, the opinion of Karen Schaafsma:

Modern fantasy of the last two centuries has traditionally been a subversive, even dangerous literature, challenging the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, note no.10, p. 186.

<sup>30</sup> M. Atwood, Bodily Harm, London, Virago, 1983 (Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1981); E. Tennant, The Bad Sister, London, Picador, 1983 (London, Gollancz, 1976).



patriarchal values of the culture in which it arises while drawing much of its power from ancient mythologies and folklore that retain the images and motifs of the matriarcate. It is a language which speaks not in the language of abstract conceptuality, but as Ursula Le Guin noted, "in the language of the unconscious - symbol and archetype."<sup>31</sup>

Eva Figes similarly maintains that "the Gothic mode eventually became an imaginative vehicle for feminism, since it provided a radical alternative to the daylight reality of conformity and acceptance, offering a dark world of the psyche in which women were the imprisoned victims of men."<sup>32</sup>

For Hélène Cixous the role of the Fantastic in relation to reality is somewhat differently described as "a subtle invitation to transgression."<sup>33</sup> Whether such an invitation is accepted and subsequently put into practice by the writer, Cixous seems to suggest, is a matter entirely to be verified case by case. Overall, several doubts regarding the real transgressiveness of the gothic genre have been expressed by many critics, although for very different reasons, David Punter for example has suggested that the Gothic:

enacts psychological and social dilemmas: in doing so, it both confronts the bourgeoisie with its limitations and offers it modes of imaginary transcendence, which is after all the dialectical role of most art. Gothic fiction demonstrates the

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<sup>31</sup> K. Schaafsma, "The Demon Lover: Lilith and the Hero in Modern Fantasy", Extrapolation, 28, 1, Spring 1987, p. 52.

<sup>32</sup> E. Figes, Sex and Subterfuge;, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1982, p.57.

<sup>33</sup>In R. Jackson, op. cit., p. 180.

potential of revolution by daring to speak the socially unspeakable; but the very act of speaking it is an ambiguous gesture.<sup>34</sup>

Even Rosemary Jackson finally admits that the labyrinthine structures of gothic fiction weaken the same potentiality for transgression that inhabits them, thus:

When fantasy has been allowed to surface within culture, it has been in a manner close to Freud's notion of art as compensation, as an activity which sustains cultural order by making up for a society's lacks. Gothic fiction, for example, tended to buttress a dominant, bourgeois ideology, by vicarious wish fulfilment through fantasies of incest, rape, murder, parricide, social disorder. Like pornography, it functioned to supply an object of desire, to imagine social and sexual transgression.<sup>35</sup>

It is also my contention that today's gothic fictions, and among them many of Carter's, have the merit of emphasizing the deep ambiguities inherent in such an established literary mode, the outcomes are stimulating, although often controversial. It is worth quoting Paulina Palmer on The Bloody Chamber:

the sensuous and rhetorically ornate style of the stories in The Bloody Chamber, does [...] allow room for ambiguity. Certain features of the title-story in the volume, such as the female protagonist's admission that she finds her husband's objectification and violent treatment sexually stimulating, the visually explicit reference to the pornographic pictures he owns [...] form a whole which verges dangerously close to

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<sup>34</sup> D. Punter, The Literature of Terror, London, Longman, 1980, p.417.

<sup>35</sup> R. Jackson, op. cit., pp. 174-175.

pornography.<sup>36</sup>

A few pages later, however, Palmer slightly modifies her opinion - adding the ambiguities of critical discourse to the ones present in Carter's text - when she acknowledges that: "Alternatively, it may be a pastiche of it. [...] In the story [...] the point of view is the complex, and at times contradictory, one of the female victim. This, combined with the strongly feminist dénouement to the tale, possibly saves it from toppling over the edge".<sup>37</sup>

We will return in the following sections to the many ambiguities which characterize Carter's narrative discourse and the several genres (gothic, fairy-tale) she has chosen for her fictional reelaborations. For the moment I wish to underline the fact that, as Douglas Fowler rightly points out, the term "gothicism" is in many respects highly inaccurate, nevertheless such a genre seems perfectly able to pursue a very definite aim.

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<sup>36</sup> p. Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" in Women's Reading Women's Writing, S. Roe ed., Brighton, Harvester Press, p.189. On the issue of pornography it is worth quoting Carter on Oshima's film Ai No Corrida: "Sexuality is a hitherto taboo area of human experience which it is now possible to explore for the benefit of large audiences. It always raises, in the most provocative fashion, the nature of the relation of the individual to society. Which is one of the reasons why pornography as a genre attracts radicals. However, pornography presents a number of artistic problems - not least because it has even more stringent intellectual limitations [...] It also necessarily involves a discussion of the nature of realism". "Japanese Erotica" (1978), in Nothing Sacred, London, Virago, 1982, pp.131-132.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p.190.

On this point Fowler quotes the opinion of Leslie Fiedler according to whom the main task of gothic fiction is that of transporting the reader "out of the known world into a dark region of make-believe [...] which is to say, [into] a world of ancestral and infantile fears projected in dreams.", "Dream forms" - Fowler concludes - "are the key to the imaginative resonance of the form".<sup>38</sup> The reference to the role played by the psyche, and in particular by the inner world of dreams in this kind of fiction seems quite appropriate in the case of Angela Carter who, in the interview with Haffenden quoted earlier on, gives some sort of personal definition of imaginative life:

there is certainly a confusion about the nature of dreams, which are in fact perfectly real: they are real as dreams, and they're full of real meaning as dreams.[...] but the point is that if dreams are real as dreams, then there's a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously.<sup>39</sup>

Such a statement, intended as a reply to the interviewer's objection about the purely escapist nature of some of her novels, reveals the peculiar sensitivity that pervades her conception of writing, strikingly similar to that of a painter like Marc Chagall - whose words form the epigraph to this chapter. His comments stand as an implicit confirmation that the endless

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<sup>38</sup> D. Fowler, "The Pleasures of Terror", in Extrapolation, 28. 1, Spring, 1987, p. 76.

<sup>39</sup> J. Haffenden, op. cit., pp. 82 e 85.

process of understanding human nature, although it sometimes follows different paths, has always a common denominator: the constant aspiration to overstep the bounds of the outer world to embark on a new, stimulating exploration of the mind.

## Section 2

In every man there are two simultaneous aspirations, one towards God, the other towards Satan. (Baudelaire)

In this section I am going to discuss two more of the other nine tales included in The Bloody Chamber, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride". Both are versions of the famous fairy-tale "Beauty and the Beast". As is the case with "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves", adaptations of "Red Riding Hood", (examined in section 3).

Carter offers two different versions of the same story, as if to further demonstrate not only the adaptability and the thematic richness of the tradition, but also her own artistic versatility, a versatility that drives the author towards endless variations of the same motif, each different from the other because, <sup>it</sup> is different for the reader the combination of its elements: an irresistible miscellany of witty humour, lascivious language, sarcastic eroticism and dirty jokes which often step into mere vulgarity.<sup>40</sup>

All the tales I am about to examine both in this and in the following section play, although in a deliberately different manner, with the concept of metamorphosis, certainly one of most recurrent

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<sup>40</sup> In The Pleasure of the Text, N.Y., Hill & Wang, 1974, Barthes underlines the cohabitation in Sade's texts of different languages. He observes that: "antipathetic codes (the noble and the trivial, for example) come into contact, pompous and ridiculous neologisms are created; pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure that they might be used as grammatical models" (p. 16).

within the ancient tradition of popular fairy-tales. <sup>41</sup>

I will start by hinting at some psychoanalytic implications, inherent in the traditional tale of "Beauty and the Beast" (Rowe, Bettelheim), followed by the analysis of Carter's two versions in which I underline the significant differences in their plots from the original story (this is especially the case of "The Tiger's Bride") and how such differences play an important role in achieving a truly feminist writing, although remaining within a traditional narrative pattern (fairy-tale). I will conclude by putting Carter's two versions of "Beauty and the Beast" in a more general context with regards to the numerous historical rewritings and reformulations of the original tale when different media (i.e. animated cartoon) have contributed to its popularity.

The definitive version of "Beauty and the Beast" was published in 1756 by Madame Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont (1711-1780) who, in her turn, had used for her adaptation a longer version published sixteen years earlier by Madame Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve. Of these two versions, dating back to the Eighteenth century, Zipes gives an ideologically marked critical interpretation: both he argues "totally corrupt the original meanings of the folk tale motifs and seek to legitimate the aristocratic standard of living in contrast to

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<sup>41</sup> On this point Jackson argues that: "by indicating the bisexuality of desire (refusing distinctions between male and female gender), Sade questions the sexed identity of the subject, anticipating explorations of sexual difference through thematic clusters in the fantastic, such as metamorphosis, vampirism, androgyny, etc." (op. cit., p.75). According to Jackson, metamorphosis has always played a central role in fantastic literature, but differently from the case of fairy-tales and medieval allegories where it had a teleological function, thus becoming a symbol of redemption, after the Romantic period, it seemed to occur without meaning or the will of the subject, (pp.81-82).

the allegedly crass, vulgar values of the emerging bourgeoisie."<sup>42</sup>

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Karen Rowe in her article "Feminism and Fairytales" underlines the strong bond which exists between Beauty and her father in the traditional tale. Their bond, according to Rowe, becomes even stronger due to the lack of a character like the wicked stepmother who is in competition with the daughter for the love of the father, thus prompting the young girl to strive towards an adult sexuality. It is Rowe's contention that:

The tale suppresses intimations of incest; nevertheless, it symbolizes the potent, sometimes problematic oedipal dependency of young girls [...] Complementary to the natural mother's role [...] the natural father's example of desirable masculine behaviour likewise shapes her dreams of a saviour and encourages the heroine's later commitment to the prince.<sup>43</sup>

Although the heroine in "Beauty and the Beast" shows great resolution when she stubbornly insists on giving herself to the Beast in order to save her father's life, nevertheless as the story goes on she seems more and more submissive to male will, and any possibility of real independence is denied:

Beast's transformation rewards Beauty for embracing traditional female virtues. She has obligingly reformed sexual reluctance into self-sacrifice to redeem Beast from death. She trades her independent selfhood for subordination. She garners

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<sup>42</sup> In J. Zipes, Breaking the Magic Spell, Heinemann 1979, p. 8. For an analysis of the two eighteenth century versions of this tale see J. Zipes, Fairy Tale and the Art of Subversion, London, Heinemann, 1983, pp.38-41. Although there is no space here for commenting on Zipes's critical method, I would argue that his arguments often seem vitiated by some kind of "idealism of the origins".

<sup>43</sup> K. Rowe, "Feminism and Fairytales", Women's Studies, 6, 1978-9, p.244. The theme of incest is also implied in "The Snow Child", Carter's very brief version of "Snow-White" in The Bloody Chamber, pp.91-92.



social and moral plaudits by acquiescing to this marriage.<sup>44</sup>

Bruno Bettelheim discusses "Beauty and the Beast" in the final section of his The Uses of Enchantment. The Swiss psychoanalyst detects in this tale what he considers as the apex of evolution towards adult femininity, that is the transfer of the Edipic bond from the father to another male partner.<sup>45</sup> But, as I have pointed out in the previous section, Carter's tales often seem to imply a critique of Bettelheim.

In "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" the author does not alter the plot completely, she only modifies some aspects.<sup>46</sup> The story opens with Beauty described in her usual role of daughter/wife: once her housework is over she rests sitting beside the window, outside the snow is falling and the girl is terribly worried because her father is late. While on his way back, after having lost almost all his fortune, the old man's car broke down leaving him hopeless in the middle of the street, the only thing his eyes could see in the distance was the outline of a great mansion. Unlike the shy and fearful father in the traditional tale, the man hurries up in that

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<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 245.

<sup>45</sup> Bettelheim's arguments are echoed by Luthi when he argues that: "It may well be - as psychologists of the Jungian school assert - that the marriage with the animal bride or animal prince, [...] and the wedding of the princess and the goat-herd are images for the union of disparities in the human souls, for the awareness of a hitherto unrecognized spiritual strength, and for the maturation into a complete personality." (Op. cit., pp. 139-140).

<sup>46</sup> As S. Bryant rightly points out one of the main differences from the traditional tale is that Carter's version is set in twentieth century England, thus implying a strong criticism of some patriarchal mechanisms still in force. Moreover the fact that Beauty's name is absent from the title confirms that the author has deliberately chosen to give prominence to the male perspective. "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'", Criticism, Fall 31, 4, 1989, p. 446.

direction, "In too much need to allow himself to be intimidated" (p. 42). Once inside he immediately recognizes the touch of eccentricity that characterizes the houses of wealthy people. As Sylvia Bryant rightly observes Beast and Beauty's father - although the latter is momentarily financially ruined - are both "Masters", men used to lead a life of luxury and to collect beautiful, precious objects.<sup>47</sup>

The only living being inside the house seems to be a white and black spaniel, and it is he that provides the man with everything he needs in order to resume his journey. The old father is already in the garden, about to leave, when he sees a white rose almost entirely covered by the snow. It was a beautiful present for Beauty and surely his host would not object to such a simple request. As soon as the man picks up the flower there appears a terribly angry Beast. Standing before that huge and monstrous being, whose appearance has something of dignity in it - as the narrator aptly points out "There is always a dignity about great bulk, an assertiveness, a quality of being more there than most of us are" (p. 44), - the old man can only clumsily mumble a "My good fellow", perhaps too familiar an appellation for a Beast, and, in any case, a further evidence of the similarity the two rich men seem to share. To the Beast, who like the Marquis of "The Bloody Chamber" is an expert in certain matters, a brief instant is enough to detect in Beauty, whose photograph the father has just showed him, "a certain look [...] The camera had captured" (p. 44). In order to appease his anger he orders that the girl should be conducted to his house to have dinner with him.

At this point Beauty's reaction is very similar to that of the

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<sup>47</sup> Ibidem. In this respect they are also very similar to the Marquis of "The Bloody Chamber".

original story: the young virgin "who looked as if she had been carved out of a single pearl" (p. 46), voluntarily endorses the barter. Once she is before the Beast "she stayed and smiled because her father wanted her to do so" (p.45); the situation is one of complete passivity, of which she seems perfectly aware: "she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial" (p.45). In vain the narrator warns the reader: "Do not think she had no will of her own; only, she was possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree, and, besides, she would gladly have gone to the ends of the earth for her father, whom she loved dearly" (pp.45-46) (emphasis mine). The assertion of her alleged free will is increasingly dissolved in the progression from "only", followed by a verb in the passive voice, (Beauty does not possess a sense of obligation but is possessed by it) to "besides" which introduces the reason for such a sacrifice, willingly accepted because of the love for her father.

Once she stands in front of Beast, the girl has mingled feelings: first of all pity for that monstrous being, his melancholy eyes "moved her heart", because of her sensitivity then, she immediately understands that the lack of servants in the house is due to the fact that, if surrounded by humans, the Beast would suffer even more for his being so different from them. The fact that he is different is soon perceived as an insurmountable barrier between them, so much so that "She found his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable; its presence choked her" (p.45). Beauty remains several days in Mr Lyon's house, until his lawyers successfully help her father to regain all his fortune; like the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber", the girl decides to spend some time in the library, the books she reads there provide a kind of transfigural anticipation of what lies ahead: "she browsed in a book

she had found [...] a collection of French fairy tales about white cats who were transformed in princesses and fairies who were birds" (p.46).

As time goes by Beauty's feelings towards her host become more and more mingled: whenever she hears the hollow sound of his voice Beauty is "Fascinated, almost awed"; moreover when she thinks of spending the entire evening chatting with him besides the fireplace "She no longer felt the slightest apprehension [...] she was happy there [...]" (p. 47), perhaps there is something magic in their conversations about the movements of the moon, the stars and the other planets. Some sort of intellectual affinity develops between them, "Yet still his strangeness made her shiver; and when he helplessly fell before her to kiss her hands, as he did every night when they parted, she would retreat nervously into her skin, flinching at his touch" (pp.47-48).<sup>48</sup>

Before leaving Mr Lyon's house the girl promises to come back to visit him again, a promise that, not surprisingly, she is going to forget, now that she enjoys again a pleasant and luxurious life. But the fact that she is away from the Beast and the passing of time start: a peculiar metamorphosis:

A certain inwardness was beginning to transform the lines around her mouth, those signatures of the personality, and her sweetness and her gravity could sometimes turn a mite petulant

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<sup>48</sup> According to Bryant, Mr Lyon's characterization as a sort of intellectual gentleman concurs to blur the distinction between man and beast, an observation that I share only partly since it is worth recalling that Beauty's mingled feelings towards him seem to indicate, at least at the beginning, the presence of an almost insurmountable barrier between the two: "a lion is a lion and a man is a man and, though lions are more beautiful by far than we are, yet they belong to a different order of beauty and, besides, they have no respect for us: why should they?" "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", p. 45.

when things went not quite as she wanted them to go. You could not have said that her freshness was fading but she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days, and the face that smiled back was not quite the one she had seen contained in the Beast's eyes. Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterizes certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats.

(p. 49)

The idea of narcissistic femininity here implied is linked at the end of the above passage to the analogy with a cat which signals Beauty's shift towards the bestiality of Mr Lyon.<sup>49</sup>

When the spaniel comes into her hotel room and reminds her of the promise she did not keep, she hurries back to the house where the Beast is dying: le

"I'm dying, Beauty,' he said in a cracked whisper of his former purr.

"Since you left me, I have been sick. I could not go hunting, I found I had not the stomach to kill the gentle beasts, I could not eat. I am sick and I must die; but I shall die happy because you have come to say good-bye to me." (p. 50)

As in the original tale, the girl takes the blame on herself for the Beast's condition. But Mr Lyon has also undergone a strange metamorphosis, as his above quoted words confirm. Such changes make him closer to the human, a fact confirmed when the girl, looking straight into his eyes notes that "His eyes flickered. How was it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own

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<sup>49</sup> "Carter ironically and explicitly implies that, sans Beast, this Beauty, too, is somehow not completely Beauty, for she is not possessed of that desirable goodness [...]" S. Bryant, "Reconstructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast', p. 447.

face, reflected there?" (p. 50). This discovery increases her sense of guilt for the poor state of the Beast, whose humanity she ought to have recognized earlier. Deeply touched by his words, Beauty solemnly promises not to leave him anymore and suddenly the transformation the reader is expecting takes place: the lion becomes a beautiful man.

A very concise ending, just a couple of lines, describes Mr and Mrs Lyon walking in the garden while the spaniel drowzes on the grass. With reference to such an ending I agree with Sylvia Bryant's comment that "Ironically, Carter ascribes the last words of this text to Mr Lyon, rapidly re-inscribing Beauty back into her womanly supporting role. The story ends, but the ideology of the narrative continues".<sup>50</sup>

Thus the irony, Bryant is here detecting, does not seem, at least in this first new version of "Beauty and the Beast", incisive enough to support a real reversal of the usual mechanism of female submission and acceptance of the traditional feminine virtues already at work in the old fairy-tale. More interesting from this point of view is Carter's second version of "Beauty and the Beast", entitled

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<sup>50</sup> Idem. According to Paola Altini the happy ending of "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", which clearly refers to a period that follows of some years the events just told, deliberately glosses over the sexual side of their union, thus confirming the tenderly and sentimental nature of their relationship. (*Op. cit.*, p. 80). To better corroborate her argument, Altini also observes that in the whole tale there is no description of Mr Lyon wearing clothes; unlike the Marquis he would not impersonate the figure of the male tyrant; (however at page 44 of this same tale we read that he wears "a smoking jacket of dull red brocade").

It is Palmer's opinion that the final metamorphosis of the beast into a man which often applies to some male protagonists in Carter's versions: "appears to signify the female hero acceptance of the validity of sexual desire. In certain instances, it also signifies the transformation of masculinity. Thus Mr Lyon loses his power of aggression and becomes fully human". "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman" in Women's Reading Women's Writing, p. 196.

"The Tiger's Bride".

One important difference from "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" regards the fact that this time Beauty herself narrates her story, starting off with the first line: "My father lost me to the Beast at cards" (p. 51).<sup>51</sup> It is Beauty who tells how the life of a young woman has become the object of a barter in a game of cards because of a weak and stupid father. From the beginning, however, Beauty's story appears to the reader worth retelling not just because it is a very peculiar one, but rather for its value as an *exemplum*, in a sense in fact it is as if she were speaking, in feminist terms, in the name of all those women who are impotent before the folly of their men, the same men who govern their lives: "I watched with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly, while my father [...] rids himself of the last scraps of my inheritance" (p. 52).

Thus, from an understandably cynical point of view, Beauty does not care at all for the mental health of her father, who is completely a slave to vice and she is most concerned about the loss of her inheritance, rightly assuming that any possibility of real independence stems from it.

The story takes place in a small town in Northern Italy, where time seems to have stopped in the eighteenth century. Ironically it is Beauty herself who has insisted on stopping there for a while since there is no casino. Unfortunately, she did not know of a curious custom of the town, according to which each passing traveller

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<sup>51</sup> Beauty is similar to the the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber", since both tell their tale using the first person and have mingled feeling towards the beast hidden behind a human mask.

has to play a game of cards with Milord. Milord, obviously, is the Beast; he wears human clothes and his face is always hidden behind a mask. The sharp gaze of the girl, however, is not deceived by the elegance, a bit out of fashion, of his apparel. In fact she seems, since from the start, perfectly able to see what is concealed:

I never saw a man so big look so two-dimensional, [...] There is a crude clumsiness about his outlines, that are on the ungainly, giant side; and he has an odd air of self-imposed restraint, as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would far rather drop down on all fours. He throws our human aspirations to the godlike sadly awry, poor fellow; only from a distance would you think The Beast not much different from any other man, although he wears a mask with a man's face painted most beautifully on it. [...] but one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human: one profile of his mask is the mirror image of the other, too perfect, uncanny. He wears a wig, too, [...] A chaste silk stock stuck with a pearl hides his throat. And gloves of blond kid that are yet so huge and clumsy they do not seem to cover hands.

He is a carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair; and yet he has the Devil's knack at cards. (p. 53)

So, the female gaze offers us a precise description of this strange being forced into human clothes which do not fit him at all, for the purpose of hiding his own body from other people's sight; a body that seems to be only a blasphemous parody of the Supreme Being. It is, in fact, as if his aspiration to be humanlike was too strongly supported to be real.<sup>52</sup> The mask on his face is precise to the point that it culminates in an overall "uncanny" effect, reinforced by the presence of false hair. Unlike Mr Lyon, whose dignity of appearance

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<sup>52</sup> A certain parodic attitude towards religion is also confirmed by the comparison of the Beast with the devil for his extraordinary dexterity in playing cards.



is often stressed, in Milord's case it is his clumsiness which is emphasized in spite of the fact, or perhaps we should say because of the fact, that he uses human clothes to conceal his bestial nature.

When Beauty is for the first time in front of this mysterious being, it is as if her organs of sense had acquired a particular sensibility, beside the sight, in fact, the smell had already helped her in outlining a good description of the Beast:

My senses were increasingly troubled by the fuddling perfume of Milord, far too potent a reek of purplish civet at such close quarters in so small a room. He must bath himself in scent, soak his shirts and underlinen in it; what can he smell of, that needs so much camouflage? (Ibid.)

Beauty's father and Milord start their game of cards until they arrive at the last hand, when the father can regain all he has already lost or lose also his daughter. "You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at no more than a king's ransom" (p.54), the girl bitterly comments, obviously choosing a word like ransom in order to better describe the situation in which she is the involuntary victim. As expected her father loses. The next day, according to the agreements previously arranged Milord's valet comes to accompany Beauty to the house of his master who has sent her, as a present, a bunch of white roses "as if a gift of flowers would reconcile a woman to any humiliation" (p. 55). Beauty comments with sarcasm, pointing out quite clearly the patriarchal logic that sometimes lurks behind the apparently most common deeds (like presenting flowers to a woman). Before she leaves the father asks Beauty <sup>1/21</sup> one of the roses as a sign that she has forgiven him, but while she is giving him the rose, she pricks her finger, a small drop of blood stains the flower, a clear symbolism of Beauty's imminent

defloration; far from forgiving her father, the girl reiterates his fault. Moreover, in contrast to the heroines in the previous versions who willingly accept their fate, her resentment against the old man is so strong that she even avoids looking back at his face while departing: "I drew the curtains to conceal the sight of my father's farewell; my spite was sharp as broken glass" (p. 55).

In the carriage the girl cannot refrain from imagining all sorts of things about the mysterious being she is about to meet; suddenly the words of her old English nanny come to her mind, who in order to keep her quiet used to tell her the story of a monstrous tiger-man, "for I was a wild wee thing and she could not tame me into submission with a frown or the bribe of a spoonful of jam" (p. 56). The choice of an adjective like "wild" and of a verb like "tame" immediately links the character of the young girl to the animal world, a world that was very familiar to her as a child, and which she had never feared, not even when the nanny - whose role is similar to that of the grandmother - used to tell her of the wicked and voracious tiger-man, "Yes, my beauty! GOBBLE YOU UP! How I'd squeal in delighted terror, half believing her, half knowing that she teased me" (p. 56).<sup>53</sup>

The animal world was for the child an endless source of knowledge, even of sexual education, as when her maids showed her a bull mounting a cow. Needless to say such notions were very confused

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<sup>53</sup> It seems that here Carter is recalling her own childhood: in the interview with Haffenden she speaks of how her grandmother used to tell her the tale of "Little Red Riding Hood", the old woman "had no truck with that sentimental nonsense about a friendly woodcutter carefully slitting open the wolf's belly and letting out the grandmother; when she came to the part about the wolf jumping on Little Red Riding Hood and eating her up, she used to jump on me and pretend to eat me. Like all small children, I loved being tickled and nuzzled". (*cit.*, p. 83).

since they concerned the huge field of popular beliefs, a field where the world of men and that of animals often mingle giving rise to extraordinary results, as in the story of the waggoner's daughter. On that occasion people said that the girl, ugly as sin,<sup>54</sup> was made pregnant by a bear, her son born with teeth in his mouth and a full pelt. Like the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" Beauty, though still a virgin, is not naive; she seems perfectly able to assess in a detached manner the situation she finds herself in up to the point of cynically contemplating the reification of her own body: "I knew well enough the reason for the trepidation I cosily titillated with superstitious marvels of my childhood on the day my childhood ended. For now my own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I'd make my first investment" (p. 56).<sup>55</sup>

Unlike Mr Lyon's opulent and comfortable house, the Tiger's is in a very bad state, "a world in itself but a dead one", a realm of loneliness and desolation, a sort of trap for humans. The valet accompanies her to Milord who lives in a dark room in the highest part of the house. Any verbal communication between Beauty and the Beast is greatly complicated by the fact that his voice, or better his roar, is unintelligible to the human ear; only the valet can understand what he says. He tells Beauty that his master's only wish

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<sup>54</sup> The ugly girl is clearly the exact opposite of Beauty whose name - as Bryant points out - "acquired as a child because she was 'very pretty', functions as metaphor for her worth as person in the narrative - Beauty/beauty is indeed inextricably linked to goodness". S. Bryant, "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'" p. 444.

<sup>55</sup> The familiarity with the animal world Beauty developed during her childhood is further confirmed by her comment a few pages earlier: "I had always held a little towards Gulliver's opinion, that horses are better than we are, and, that day, I would have been glad to depart with him to the kingdom of horses, If I'd been given the chance" (p. 55).

is to see her naked; afterwards she will be allowed to go back to his father together with the immense fortune he has lost and many other presents. The girl's reaction is surprising: a burst of laughter, a cheerful, liberating, uncontrolled laughter; certainly not the most appropriate behaviour for a well brought-up girl; but, as we have seen earlier, in spite of her nanny's teachings, Beauty was a difficult child to tame. Once she stops laughing the girl, who can also speak Italian, the local language, replies that she agrees at one condition: she will accept only the money that the Tiger would give to any other woman in the same situation. In this way, by refusing her father's fortune and equating herself to any other woman also able to satisfy such an unusual request, Beauty aims at weakening the Beast's bargaining position, emphasizing even further the characteristic of a vulgar barter in the entire business. Crudely speaking, the Tiger is willing to pay in order to obtain something from her, so in Beauty's mind it is pointless trying to embellish the matter with silly and hypocritical excuses. The Tiger's reaction to her words is astonishing: a tear drops slowly on his mask. The girl cannot hide her satisfaction: "How pleased I was to see I struck The Beast to the heart! For, a baker's dozen heartbeats, one single tears swelled, glittering, at the corner of the masked eye. A tear! A tear, I hoped, of shame" (p. 59).

Beauty has thus succeeded in causing the first and also the last metamorphosis of Beast: crying is a unique human prerogative. After some embarrassing moments when no one dares to speak the valet leads Beauty to her room, more a cell than a room without windows and situated in the lowest part of the house. Some time passes before the girl is summoned again to the presence of the Beast who repeats his former request, on this occasion Beauty's anger and indignation are

even more explicit:

Take off my clothes for you, like a ballet girl? Is that all you want of me?

'The sight of a young lady's skin that no man has seen before -' stammered the valet.

I wished I'd rolled in the hay with every lad on my father's farm, to disqualify myself from this humiliating bargain. That he should want so little was the reason why I could not give it; I did not need to speak for The Beast to understand me. (p.61)

A second tear glitters again on the Beast's perfect mask.

The positions of the two protagonists are thus clear: on one side we have the Beast and his desire to see "a young lady's skin that no man has seen before" - one should note how by choosing the word lady he restricts his request to a woman of high social position - on the other we have the girl who, paradoxically, had expected a very different request from the Tiger, and now, perhaps a bit disappointed at his voyeuristic curiosity, regrets having restrained herself from doing what in her younger years she desired: to see whether humans did it differently from bulls and cows.<sup>56</sup>

Some hours later the valet comes to her cell and gives her a small casket, inside there are two diamonds ear rings - the two tears of the Beast - then he tells her that his master wishes to go for a ride with her. With the valet there is also a strange puppet, a sort of mechanical maid. Beauty is given a riding habit identical to the

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<sup>56</sup> The Tiger's request "is so shocking and untenable to her because to comply she must throw off the familiar ideological constructs and patterns that have so comfortably clothed and covered over her own unexpressed sexual desires that she realizes not that she even possesses them [...]" S. Bryant, "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'", p. 448.

one she had left at home in Russia. While riding Beauty meditates on her own situation; these are not the considerations of an immature girl, but of a young and intelligent woman:

I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason. If I could see not one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me, then the six of us - mounts and riders, both - could boast amongst us not one soul, either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out. Understand, then, that though I would not say I privately engaged in metaphysical speculation as we rode through the reedy approaches to the river, I certainly meditated on the nature of my own state, how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand. That clockwork girl who powdered my cheeks for me; had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her? (p. 63)

Beauty's reasoning leads her to the conclusion that she has something in common with Beast, with his monkeylike valet, with the horses she has always loved, in a word with that animal world where they belong. Perhaps what they have in common is that they are unlike the others; for some obscure reasons they all have been forced to live on the margins of the human community. Above all Beauty realizes that up to that moment her own life has been very similar to that of the mechanic maid, a well assembled puppet, whose threads are in the hands of a puppet master.

Once they stop riding the valet tells her that if she still refuses to meet the Tiger's request, Milord has decided to strip himself in front of her. Quite understandably Beauty is first dismayed, but when he does unrobe, she feels a strange sensation of

joy: "I felt my breast ripped apart as I suffered a marvellous wound" (p. 64), while she stands in admiration before the naked Beast, whose body is so different from that of a human: "Nothing about him reminded me of humanity" (Ibid.). Beauty, like Marianne in Heroes and Villains, is fascinated by the wild appearance of Beast, by his total lack of humanity and the fact that they both get rid of their clothes seems to indicate a new positive conception of bestiality.

The mysterious being, perhaps not so mysterious anymore, is about to dress up again when Beauty asks him to stop, her body is trembling, not with fear, but with pride while she starts undressing herself. Once everything is over and Milord's curiosity has been satisfied, the girl, quite surprisingly, feels again an unknown sensation "I felt I was at liberty for the first time in my life." (p. 64)<sup>57</sup>

As soon as they return to the palace, the valet tells Beauty that she is free to go whenever she likes, together with a beautiful fur that his master wishes to offer her as a present. But by that time the girl has already made up her mind: she will send back to her

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<sup>57</sup> On this point Rose maintains that: "although it is not easy for her to obey the Beast's command, Beauty has nothing to lose and everything to gain by stripping herself of her clothes and her socialized identity. Abandoned by men, she turns to the Beast and discovers herself". "Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales", p. 224. On this same issue Bryant argues: "Never in complicity with the dominant, oppressive ideology, the Beast in fact stands directly opposed to it [...] and acquiring the girl not out of a selfish desire to save (or serve) himself, but because she, like he, is different, a rarity [...]", Beauty is thus well aware of their having something in common but, although she does not know what it is, "she undresses for him, consummating the reciprocal relationship of desire and trust, not with words, but with the equal, non-differentiating, illuminating gaze that makes her subject, not just object, and makes a place for her desire [...]". "Reconstructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'", pp. 449-450.

father the mechanic maid, dressed up with her old clothes to be his daughter. With only the fur to cover her nakedness, she hurries up towards the Beast's den. When the girl enters she discovers that Milord has definitively abandoned his human camouflage, the mask together with the false hair lie on a chair. Not frightened at all by the sight, now that her nanny's stories seem to have become reality, Beauty comes even closer to him and discovers, to her surprise, that the Tiger is more frightened of her than she is of him. Finally, they embrace and it is then that the very last metamorphosis takes place: Beauty's skin is transformed into a beautiful fur.<sup>58</sup>

It is evident that "The Tiger's Bride" is in many respects very different from the traditional tale as well as from the version in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon". My point here coincides with Sylvia Bryant's comment:

By appropriating the personal voice, the girl in this second tale not only takes charge of telling the narrative of her life, and consequently of the narrative tradition of the fairy tale, but she also makes clear from the start that what blame there is to be assigned lies not with her but with the dominant systems to which she is only a bargaining chip.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> According to Palmer, Carter in "The Tiger's Bride" offers a sensual representation of the metamorphosis from woman into beast, employing at the best of its possibilities the old motif of the identification of the human body with nature. The same motif is also at work in The Infernal Desire Machines with its mutable prostitutes, half women half vegetable beings. What Palmer criticizes, however, is that in Carter's writings such images have a strong sensationalistic effect, in other words they function merely as a rhetorical display, differently from Margaret Atwood who succeeds in communicating to the reader a deep sense of moral indignation for the position of brutal degradation in which the female characters find themselves. P. Palmer, Contemporary Women's Fiction, N.Y. & London, Harvester, 1989, p. 26.

<sup>59</sup> S. Bryant, "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the



Beauty's prominence is also confirmed by the fact that whereas in the previous version her name was completely absent from the title, now she is mentioned, at least as "The Tiger's Bride".<sup>60</sup> Another difference is the way in which Beauty is defined: she is not compared to "a pearl" in the second tale, clear metaphor of her purity and innocence, but she is addressed quite simply as "the girl" or "the young lady", or even "a woman of honour" (pp. 59, 61), reinforcing the impression that she is more determined and self-confident than the heroine of the previous version. Besides, in this second tale the girl seems to know perfectly well what she does not want to be, she refuses to follow in her mother's footsteps, she too was treated only as a bargaining chip when she was forced to marry the descendant of a noble family. It is because of such differences that, by "Actively initiating herself into the dominant discourse, she bargains with the status quo to redeem her story and her subjectivity on her own terms".<sup>61</sup>

In short, this female character seems able to go well beyond the usual behavioural patterns of the traditional tale, although remaining within a kind of narrative pattern where the Edipic paradigm, at least according to de Lauretis, restricts and controls

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Beast'", p. 448.

<sup>60</sup> This second version of "Beauty and the Beast" is regarded by Altini neither as a short story like "The Bloody Chamber", nor as a fairy tale, but as a f erie working like a play. Throughout the tale Carter aims at creating the "illusion of reality" by emphasizing any detail of her descriptions. Paradoxically, such a technique produces the opposite impulse: the demystification of the illusion and the unveiling of the fictitious spectacle she has created; it is in this light then that one should consider the recurrent acts of unmasking and undressing. Op.cit., pp. 116-117.

<sup>61</sup> S. Bryant, op.cit., p. 449.

from the start any possible variation.<sup>62</sup> Carter then seems to aim precisely at exceeding such limits, even succeeding in achieving what, according to de Lauretis, should be the main task of every feminist writing in order to subvert the above mentioned paradigm, "Woman - Beauty - is imagined/imagined as 'mythical and social subject' in her own right, providing her own referential frame of experience, writing her ending to her own story".<sup>63</sup>

Carter's tales, of course, are not the only new versions of the fairy-tale by Madame de Beaumont; there are several cinematographic adaptations, among them a famous 1946 version by Cocteau,<sup>64</sup> not to mention a more recent musical production of 1987, or the film by Eugene Marner of the same year, worth citing for its extreme fidelity to the traditional tale, or a popular television series set in New York, or, finally, the numerous Disney versions, the last directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise.<sup>65</sup>

If we consider "Beauty and the Beast" in the light of the very

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<sup>62</sup> T. de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema, Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1984, see chapter V.

<sup>63</sup> T. de Lauretis quoted in S. Bryant, op.cit., p. 441. Beauty discovers the beast within herself, what Bettelheim defines as the untamed Id, thus "Carter's tale is just as much about 'undoing the repression of sex' as is the original. But it is also about undoing the oppression of gender". E. Cronan Rose, "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'" p. 225.

<sup>64</sup> On Cocteau's cinematographic version of "Beauty and the Beast" see S. Bryant, "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'", pp. 439-445. Cocteau was appreciated by Carter, as she admits in the interview with Haffenden, op. cit., p.80.

<sup>65</sup> Curiously enough, the Beast in the last Disney film does not resemble one animal in particular, but is the result of many mixed together: he has the lion's mane, the skull of a bison, the tusks of a wild-boar, the forehead of a gorilla, the paws and the tail of a wolf and the body of a bear. For a comparative analysis from a feminist point of view of the brothers Grimm tales and their Disney versions see Kay Stone "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us" in Woman and Folklore, Claire R. Farrer ed. Austin, University of Texas Press, 1975.

ancient tales of our Western civilization, we could even maintain that the origin of the motif lies in classic mythology and in particular in the sixth canto of the *Odyssey*, when Nausicaa first meets Ulysses, depicted as a monster whose body has been disfigured by the saltiness of the sea, before he is transformed, thanks to prodigious unguents, into a man. Actually classic mythology, perhaps the biggest repertoire of tales that Western culture possesses, has often presented cases where the beautiful and the monstrous have come close to one another: it is no coincidence that the ugly and lame Vulcan is the spouse of Venus. Usually in such myths the Beast has been denied the right of living peacefully within the human community; he has hidden himself in a condition of voluntary confinement because his borderlike existence as animal-man cannot be allowed if the world wishes to conserve an order which is threatened by that chaos to which he belongs.<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps what distinguishes recent versions of this tale from earlier ones, besides the obvious feminist implications inherent in the cases examined earlier, is the fact that now the Beast is allowed to speak in favour of all those beings which, for one reason or another, are different from us.<sup>67</sup> One could hope that he finally leaves his exile and starts going around in the world again, the

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<sup>66</sup> It is worth noting that of the numerous stories which have a Beauty and a Beast as protagonists, only King Kong is denied the final transformation and the happy ending of the marriage, be it with Fay Wray or Jessica Lange.

<sup>67</sup> Speaking of Carter's rewritings S. Bryant observes: "To tell a different story, to imagine and construct otherness as positive not negative difference, and to offer positive positionalities for identification within that otherness, to disrupt the ideological status quo enough to disturb the heretofore complacent acceptance it has met among readers and viewers; such is precisely the work of Carter's fairy tale narratives". "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'", p. 452.

magic of the fairy-tale has shown us that a kiss of Beauty is enough to free him from his semi-savage condition, from such unbearable, needless pain.

### Section 3

I feel a deep repugnance  
against the confused  
mingling of beast and angel.  
But I love each of them in a  
separate manner.

(Valery)

As in the case of "The Bloody Chamber" I will start my analysis of the two versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" included in the collection, "The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves", by quoting Bruno Bettelheim's conclusions with regards to the original tale. In fact, as it has been already pointed out, Carter's texts are often a kind of fictional/critical reply to the arguments put forward by the Swiss psychoanalyst. I will then discuss the question of whether the fairy-tale genre can ever be able to convey feminist discourses (considering such critics as Cranny Francis, Zipes, Rose, Dworkin) and, above all, whether Carter succeeds in showing the process of woman's construction of her self as outside the usual Freudian perspective. In this sense issues like "the power of the gaze" and "woman's desire" will be examined. I conclude by hinting at the interesting relations between the genre of the fairy-tale and the Fantastic and their presumed transgressiveness (Jackson, Zipes) and by underlining how Carter's "magic realism" is in a way similar but also different from both a South

American writer like Marquez and others who have published new feminist versions of the "Red Riding Hood" tale (Ungerer, Storr, Lee).

Ending the analysis of "Little Red Riding Hood" in his study The Uses of Enchantment, Bettelheim maintains that:

Little Red Riding Hood lost her childish innocence as she encountered the dangers residing in herself and the world, and exchanged it for wisdom that only the a 'twice born' can possess: those who not only master an existential crisis, but also become conscious that it was their own nature which projected them into it. Little Red Riding Hood's childish innocence does as the wolf reveals itself as such and swallows her. When she is cut out of the wolf's belly, she is reborn on a higher plane of existence; relating positively to both her parents, no longer a child, she returns to life a young maiden. (emphasis mine)<sup>68</sup>

Cranny Francis is perfectly right when she affirms that "the higher plane of existence" mentioned by Bettelheim is nothing but a patriarchal situation to which the girl returns after having experienced a rape threat by the wolf, from which she is rescued by another male character: the hunter who, in some versions of the tale, is also her father. In other words, we are faced here with a kind of analysis whose limit consists in applying a Freudian paradigm without considering the ideology of gender at work in it. Cranny Francis' arguments are implicitly echoed by Jack Zipes when he writes that:

Ultimately, the male phantasies of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm can be traced to their socially induced desire and need

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<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Cranny Francis, Feminist Fictions., p. 90.

for control - control of women, control of their own sexual libido, control of their fear of women and loss of virility. That their controlling interests are still reinforced and influential through variant texts and illustrations of Little Red Riding Hood in society today is an indication that we are still witnessing an antagonistic struggle of the sexes in all forms of socialisation, in which men are still trying to dominate women.<sup>69</sup>

Such suggestions come at the end of his study Don't Bet on the Prince, particularly in the last chapter entitled "A Second Gaze at Little Red Riding Hood's Trials and Tribulations", entirely devoted to an analysis of the classic iconography concerning the encounter of the girl and the wolf in the forest. According to Zipes the illustrations reveal how:

Little Red Riding Hood is not really sent into the woods to visit grandma but to meet the wolf and to explore her own sexual cravings and social rules of conduct. Therefore the most significant encounter is with the wolf because it is here that she acts upon her desire to indulge in sexual intercourse with the wolf, and most illustrations imply that she willingly makes a bargain with the wolf, or, in male terms, 'she asks to be raped'.<sup>70</sup>

Besides, the iconographic comment emphasizes even further the peculiar dynamic of the gaze which characterizes the meeting of the wolf and the girl in the woods. On this point Zipes writes that the girl:

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<sup>69</sup> J. Zipes, Don't Bet on the Prince, Aldershot, Gower, 1986, p.230.

<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, p. 239.

gazes but really does not gaze, for she is the image of male desire [...] The gaze of the wolf will consume her and is intended to dominate and eliminate her. [...] Thus the positioning of the wolf involves a movement toward convincing the girl that he is what she wants, and her role is basically one intended to mirror his desire. [...] the feminine other has no choice. Her identity will be violated and fully absorbed by male desire [...]<sup>71</sup>

From a purely chronological perspective, Zipes adds, the illustrations of the traditional fairy-tale show a continuous censorial process aiming at eliminating any sexual connotation from the story. This also explains why the wolf, especially in the most recent versions, appears increasingly anthropomorphized and perfectly dressed. Unlike the Victorians, Zipes argues: "we are no longer sexually curious, rather sexually controlled and defensive. [...] Control is of essence today".<sup>72</sup> LR

I will return to Zipes' firm belief in the capability of the fairy-tale genre to convey feminist discourses, but first I will focus my attention on the two versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" included in The Bloody Chamber.

The first, entitled "The Werewolf", starts in a very peremptory and incisive manner, like "The Tiger's Bride": "It is a northern country; they have cold weather, they have cold hearts" (p.108). In such a place living is a very risky endeavour, and it is no wonder that many die while they are still young. As a further evidence of the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 258.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem, pp.257-258.



cultural isolation of the inhabitants, the narrator explains how: "To these upland woodsmen, the Devil is as real as you or I. More so; they have not seen us nor even know that we exist, but the Devil they glimpse often in the graveyards" (Ibid.). We now know that those inhabitants are more familiar with the obscure and mysterious world of the beyond than with the here and now of their fellow human beings. Speaking of vampires, witches, werewolves is not just telling fairy-tales; such beings are considered as a real threat, which is why such a community tries to defend itself from them in any possible way. This is most evident if one considers that many, as Carter tells us with anthropological accuracy, still keep the old custom of putting garlands of garlic on the doors to scare off the vampires or do not hesitate to kill the granny who lives nearby if she is suspected of being a witch. So, it is in this kind of community that Little Red Riding Hood lives. As in the traditional story, her mother asks her to bring a basket full of biscuits to the grandmother who lives in the woods, only that this time the young girl, an apt representative of such resourceful people, is well prepared to face the wolf, so much so that the wolf itself comes off worse:

It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw.

The wolf let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. It went

lolloping off disconsolately between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it.

(p. 135).

Not at all frightened, the girl even cares to clean the blade of her knife from the blood, before hiding the wolf's paw in her basket. Once she arrives at her granny's house she discovers that the old lady has a very high fever. The cause of the fever seems to lie in the fact that her right hand has just been amputated; in its place there is only a putrescent stump. Even more mysteriously the wolf's paw has transformed itself into a woman's hand. By now the girl has no doubt that the granny and the wolf are the same person; she has even recognized the right hand in her basket as that of the old woman. She crosses herself and starts shouting in order to attract the neighbours' attention. When they arrive they cannot but recognize all the signs of witchcraft and stone the old woman to death. The story ends with Red Riding Hood who, from that moment onwards, decides to live in her granny's house.

In this very brief version of the traditional tale we are presented with a community whose members are as cruel as the wolves and with a girl who is perfectly at ease in it, able to use the typical instruments of a patriarchal society and self-confident enough to slash off with a knife the animal's paw, before getting possession of all her granny's property immediately after her death.

According to Ellen Cronan Rose it is only due to the identification of the granny with the wolf that the

young girl realizes how "to be a mature woman means to be a sexual animal".<sup>73</sup> She is understandably frightened by such a revelation - that is why she calls in the neighbours to kill the old woman. However, Rose argues, the main point is that afterwards Little Red Riding Hood does not return to the house of her childhood, her parents' house, but decides to live in that of her grandmother: "She is symbolically declaring her readiness to grow up".<sup>74</sup> Such a process of growing up is completed in the second of Carter's versions, "The Company of Wolves", where the girl not only stays in her granny's house, but gets possession, symbolically, of her bed. Rose again:

Red Riding Hood has in a sense become her grand mother [...] Bettelheim says that it is love which transforms adult sexuality into something beautiful. Carter seems to be saying that love is not possible until one has come to accept and enjoy her sexuality, an accomplishment she associates in this stories with the mother/daughter relationship.<sup>75</sup>

In this way, Rose suggests, Carter seems to offer a feasible alternative to the usual Freudian perspective according to which female sexual maturity can finally be achieved only when a metaphorical, as well as an actual, transfer from the father to another male partner takes place.

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<sup>73</sup> E. Cronan Rose, "Re-constructing Oedipus through 'Beauty and the Beast'", p. 225. In this sense the young girl is similar to the heroine in the "Tiger's Bride".

<sup>74</sup> Idem.

<sup>75</sup> Idem.

Actually, "The Company of Wolves" seems in many respects just a longer version of the previous tale. From the start there are the same folkloric connotations regarding the place where the story occurs and the community living there, Red Riding Hood is again depicted as a cunning and self-confident girl who loses her bet with the wolf on purpose, in order to arrive after him at her granny's house. It is on the Wolf, symbol of active sexuality, that Carter focuses her attention. She accentuates the girl's attributes of puberty in order to make her even more desirable:

Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month. She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a close system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing.

(pp. 113-114)

As in the traditional tale, the girl and the wolf meet in the forest, the fabulous place where everything can happen,<sup>76</sup> only that in this case the beast is disguised as a handsome youth, thus making him more appealing to

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<sup>76</sup> Le Goff has rightly suggested that the forest, especially in Medieval times, has often been regarded as a metaphorical place where one could run into great perils as well as make wonderful discoveries; see Il meraviglioso e il quotidiano nell'occidente medievale, a cura di F. Maiello, Bari, Laterza, 1983.

the girl. Once she arrives at her grandmother's house, Little Red Riding Hood does not find the old woman, already devoured by the wolf; in her bedroom there is only the handsome youth she met earlier. The girl realizes that her life is in danger and would like to seize her knife, but she cannot "because his eyes were fixed upon her - huge eyes that now seemed to shine with a unique, interior light, eyes the size of saucers, saucers full of Greek fire, diabolic phosphorescence" (p. 117). It is the power of his gaze then - whose symbolic implications have been previously pointed out by Zipes - which stops her from using the weapon. Since there is no way she can escape, the wise girl - "wise child" is in fact her usual description - decides to play the role of the main protagonist in a script that, it is worth stressing, somebody else has written for her:

The firelight shone through the edges of her skin; now she was clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh. This dazzling, naked she combed out her hair with her fingers; her hair looked white as the snow outside. Then went directly to the man with red eyes in whose unkempt mane the lice moved; she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. What big arms you have.

All the better to hug you with [...]

What big teeth you have! [...]

the wise child never flinched, even when he answered:

All the better to eat you with.

The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing [...]

See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between

the paws of the tender wolf (p. 118).<sup>77</sup>

Thus, Little Red Riding Hood decides to satisfy her own desire for the wolf, which is also a longing for the mature sexuality he represents.<sup>78</sup> When he is about to gobble her up, the young girl, like Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride", bursts into an uproarious, spontaneous laugh, a laugh that seems to stem from the innermost part of her being, the magic space of her virginity, which she has finally resolved to lose.<sup>79</sup> Little Red Riding Hood actively strips the wolf of his clothes before throwing them into the fire together with her own; the wolf is in no way similar to the frightening animal

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<sup>77</sup> W. Holbrook in his study Images of Women, N.Y. Univ. Press, 1989, maintains that what the Freudians define as the "castrating mother" is symbolically present in many fairy-tales: "In response to the infant's involvement in parental sexual excitement, which the infant conceives of as a consuming oral voraciousness, the child dreads that the mother (or combined parents) will turn on him, thus castrating or annihilating him (eating him). It is not difficult to find symbols of this dread in fairy tales [...] such as [...] Red Riding Hood. Such symbols are also represented by wolves in fables [...]" (pp. 65-66).

<sup>78</sup> In Don't Bet on the Prince, Zipes argues that: "it is possible to interpret Little Red Riding Hood's desire for the wolf as a desire for the other, or a general quest for self-identification. [...] She wants to establish contact with her unconscious and discover what she is lacking. By recognising the wolf outside of her as part of herself, just as the wolf seeks the female in himself, she can become at one with herself" (p. 243).

<sup>79</sup> It seems that for Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride", as well as for Little Red Riding Hood, the act of undressing has a liberating effect exemplified by the burst of laugh. However, on that instant, both girls also face for the first time the truth about that side of their selves they have never acknowledged before; I think it was Nietzsche who quite appropriately once said: "false is any truth that is not accompanied by a laugh!"

of the traditional tale, rather he is depicted more like an amorous lover.

Considering the metamorphosis topos which occurs quite often at the end of Carter's tales, when the beast appears completely tamed and constitutes no more threat for the female protagonist, Paulina Palmer has observed that:

The metamorphosis of beast into human, performed by certain of the male protagonists in the stories, appears to signify the female hero's acceptance of the validity of sexual desire. In certain instances, it also signifies the transformation of masculinity. Thus, Mr Lyon loses his power of aggression and becomes fully human [...] while the wolf in The Company of Wolves discovers that he possesses a capacity for tenderness.<sup>80</sup>

According to what has been argued so far it would seem that the female hero in this latter version really succeeds in appropriating the typical patriarchal characteristics in order to assert her own sexuality, thus resulting into a complete reversal of the original tale that, far from being only a record of female submission, now becomes the account of the difficult process of maturation of a young girl. Such a reversal, in order to work better, necessarily requires a continuous dialogue with the traditional story, often creating a sort of metafictional dimension, which is the typical aspiration of this kind of writing.

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<sup>80</sup> P. Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", p. 196.

Robert Clark's opinion on this point is quite different. Although conceding that Carter's versions describe women who have learnt to use sexuality for their own pleasure and as a powerful instrument for taming the wolf, he concludes that "These positive aspects, [...] are achieved at the cost of accepting patriarchal limits to women's power [...] The wolf is agent, she is responsive object. [...] Old chauvinism, new clothing".<sup>81</sup> Though not fully agreeing with Clark's caustic, and perhaps too simplistic account, I would concede that Carter's texts often provide some ground for this kind of objections. This is the case also of "The Company of Wolves" in which the girl's decision to stay and thus satisfy her own desire appears to be vitiated from the start, since it is the wolf's powerful gaze that has prevented her from escaping. Clark is then right to maintain that:

When the girl strips off her clothes, the fact that the wolf is essentially coercing her is obliterated as attention focuses on the surprising readiness with which the girl undresses. [...] The point of view is that of the male voyeur; the implication may be that the girl has her own sexual power, but this meaning lies perilously close to the idea that all women want it really and only need forcing to overcome their scruples.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> R. Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine", Women's Studies, 14, 2, 1987, p. 149.

<sup>82</sup> Idem. Patricia Duncker has also criticized Carter on this point, according to her: "Carter envisages women's sexuality simply as a response to male arousal. She has no conception of women's sexuality as autonomous desire". "Re-imagining the fairy tales", p. 228.



"The Werewolf" and "The Company of Wolves" are not the only tales in the collection which present a wolf as one of the main characters, there is in fact also a strange story, vaguely gothic, entitled "Wolf-Alice" in which the wolf is portrayed as the victim of the hate and prejudice people usually reserve for the outcasts.

Alice has been brought up by the wolves - like Romulus and Remus - and finds herself trapped in a double nature, half-woman half-beast, similar in many respects to that of her host, a lycanthrope Duke. Initially, the child had lived in a convent, but since there was no way of taming her, the nuns had decided to abandon her on the door of the Duke's castle.<sup>83</sup> The allusion to Lewis Carroll is intensified by the fact that the wolf-girl seems to feel very peculiar emotions when she stands before the mirror, the medium through which she will symbolically achieve her own female identity. What Carter's tale represents are, in fact, the girl's strenuous efforts towards that goal; at the end Alice will be able to recognise herself in the mirror, thus accepting also the precise mechanism of her female physiology well exemplified each month by her menstrual blood. What we have here is an example of "healthy narcissism" which far from being futile contributes to enhance her self-confidence.

Quite appropriately, "Wolf-Alice" is the last tale in

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<sup>83</sup> The wolf-girl in "Peter and the Wolf" is also quite difficult to tame, Black Venus, London, Chatto & Windus, 1985, pp. 77-88.

the collection, its gloomy atmosphere suffused by a nauseating odour of blood - Alice's sense of smell is so good that she is even able to distinguish her own menstrual blood from that of the Duke who has been wounded by the peasants. The symbolics of blood link it to the first tale, "The Bloody Chamber", and to its gothic setting. I would even argue that a thread of blood runs through the whole narrative texture, a thread of blood that wedges itself in the fabric of Carter's chromatic prose, in its surrealist elegance and in the intricate convolutions of its baroque rhetoric. The stories narrated in The Bloody Chamber are twice-told tales; nevertheless the reader seems to forget that fact, seduced by the narrative potentialities so successfully exploited by the author.

I wish to conclude this chapter by recalling that Carter's tales are not the only rewritings of the traditional fairy-tales, and in particular of "Little Red Riding Hood". Jack Zipes in his study The Art of Subversion tells us of the interesting work carried out by the members of the Merseyside Women's Liberation Movement in Liverpool, these women have published some new versions of the original tales emphasizing their ideological content and with the aim of disrupting the illusion of the usual happy ending, in favour of a more realistic feminist perspective.<sup>84</sup> Zipes also cites other

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<sup>84</sup> See Red Riding Hood, Liverpool, Fairy Story Collective, 1972.

versions of "Red Riding Hood" by writers like Tomi Ungerer, Catherine Storr, Max von der Grun, T. Lee. What all such authors have in common is the fact that they try "to expand the possibilities of questioning the fairy-tale discourse within the civilizing process".<sup>85</sup> In particular, Zipes observes, writers like Carter or Lee "insist that women seek contact with the 'wolfish' side of femininity, that is their sensuality, to be proud of their animistic ties to nature. The celebration of the 'wolf' should not be misread as a celebration of 'brute power'".<sup>86</sup> The celebration of the wolf should be linked to that of the magic world in which werewolves, witches, and other extraordinary beings "were once revered in archaic societies as the mediators between the wilderness and society. They provided contact with the other world, a sacred divine and forbidding world. And this contact was necessary if the civilised world were to rejuvenate itself".<sup>87</sup>

From a psychoanalytic perspective Holbrook seems to suggest if not a celebration, at least an acknowledgment of this obscure side of our psyche: "Hate remains a problem because it is 'out there' in the world as a menace that, like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, threatens all security of existence. Once we find that hate is merely an aspect of our own ambivalence and is

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<sup>85</sup> J. Zipes, The Art of Subversion, London, Heinemann, 1983, p. 183.

<sup>86</sup> J. Zipes, Don't Bet on the Prince, p. 25.

<sup>87</sup> Idem. For a history of lycanthropy from 75,000 B.C. to 1991 A.D. see A. Douglas, The Beast Within: A History of the Werewolf, London, Chapman's, 1993.

'embraced', or loved, as a component of human nature - and of nature itself - there can be reconciliation and peace".<sup>88</sup>

Going back to Zipes and to his seminal study of the fairy-tale as a literary genre, it is worth pointing out the stress he puts on the ideological implications he sees inherent in it. In Breaking the Magic Spell, for example, Zipes traces the history of the genre, focusing his attention particularly on the nineteenth century, when it enjoyed a great popularity due, above all, to the work of the brothers Grimm. It was then that the fairy-tales took the role of moral guidance for the children, to the point that they were considered almost like morality plays:

Once the bourgeoisie power was firmly established, the tales were no longer considered immoral. [...] The tales took on a compensatory function for children and adults alike who experienced nothing but the frustration of their imaginations in society. [...] Like other forms of fantastic literature [...] the tales no longer served their original purpose of clarifying social and natural phenomena but become forms of refuge and escape in that they made up for what people could not realize in society.<sup>89</sup>

From this point of view, contemporary feminist rewritings have the merit of throwing light on the ideological apparatus, by exposing one of the ways through which men and women, since childhood, are induced to accept

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<sup>88</sup> W. Holbrook, op.cit., p. 182.

<sup>89</sup> Quoted in A. Cranny Francis, Feminist Fictions, p. 104.

definite roles, thus limiting from the start any possibility of free choice in the future. But it is particularly in his introduction to the more recent Don't Bet on the Prince that Zipes looks in detail at the development in the past twenty years of the feminist fairy-tale, a development that, according to him, should confirm the vitality of the genre and its ability to convey a different content from the traditional one.<sup>90</sup> Such an argument is in sharp contrast with that of some feminist critics like Andrea Dworkin, in so far as Zipes tries to avoid an easy reductionism by firmly holding that the genre in question is always capable of exerting a positive influence. He criticizes Dworkin mainly because in her analysis she proposes too rigid and almost automatic a fruition of the genre, since every tale, in her opinion, contains the same identical message. Zipes believes that scholars like Dworkin or Rowe are wrong because they reject the traditional fairy-tales simply on the ground of their patriarchal ideology, without taking into account the historical evolution of the genre and its utopian character, not considering the potentiality for endless reformulations of the old motifs. It is that flexibility which enables the new versions to stimulate in the reader a different consideration of his notion of gender and of the logic of

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<sup>90</sup> Introduction to J. Zipes, Don't Bet, pp. 1-36. Incidentally, this study includes also a tale by Carter entitled "The Donkey Prince" (pp. 62-72), previously published by Simon & Schuster, New York, 1970.

power related to it.<sup>91</sup> It is Zipes's contention, in fact, that "the significance of the feminist fairy tales lies in their utopian function to criticise current shifts in psychic and social structures and to point the way toward new possibilities for individual development and social interaction".<sup>92</sup>

In his Fairy-Tale and the Art of Subversion Zipes discusses, too briefly perhaps, the quite interesting relations between the genre of the fairy-tale and the

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<sup>91</sup> According to Karen E. Rowe: "fairy-tales perpetuate the patriarchal status quo by making female subordination seem a romantically desirable, indeed an inescapable fate. [...] fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths which encourage women to internalize only aspirations deemed appropriate to our 'real' sexual function within a patriarchy". "Feminism and Fairytales", p. 239. Moreover, they can have a negative influence on the psychological development of young girls by undermining their self-confidence since any solution to their problems comes as some kind of magic from the outside; in particular, Rowe adds, any woman is induced to believe that: "marriage is an enchantment which will shield her against harsh realities outside the domestic realm and guarantee everlasting happiness." Ibidem, p. 250.

<sup>92</sup> J. Zipes, Don't Bet, p. 32. According to Zipes it is unsurprising that two writers like Angela Carter and Tanith Lee, who have rewritten respectively fairy-tales by Perrault and the brothers Grimm (Lee's collection is entitled Red as Blood Or Tales from the Sisters Grimm, N.Y. Daw Books, 1983) have chosen the word blood for their titles, perhaps to suggest that the path towards Utopia is strewn with thorns.

Zipes's belief in the usefulness of the fairy-tale genre for feminist purposes seems shared also by C. Heilbrun who, while referring to Sleeping Beauty, writes: "she is not confined to the role of the princess; [...] the hero, who wakens Sleeping Beauty with a kiss, is that part of herself that awakens conventional girlhood to the possibility of life and action". In Reinventing Womanhood, N.Y., Norton, 1979, p. 150. In other words, Heilbrun thinks that fairy-tales are still worth considering because they show perfectly well the difficult development from childhood to adult age.

more general category of the fantastic. As main point of reference here is Rosemary Jackson, whose thought Zipes cites. According to Jackson:

each fantastic text functions differently [...] but the most subversive fantasies are those which attempt to transform the relations of the imaginary and the symbolic. They try to set up possibilities for radical cultural transformation by making fluid the relations between these realms, suggesting, or projecting, the dissolution of the symbolic through violent reversal or rejection of the process of the subject's formation.<sup>93</sup>

What Zipes objects to is the fact that by distinguishing the fairy-tale, more similar to the so-called "marvellous", from the fantastic Jackson sticks to a too-rigid model of the genre, without considering its radical transformations over the years and thus missing what in his opinion are instead its "close connections" with the fantastic.<sup>94</sup> I would agree with Zipes on this point, especially if, as he stresses, one looks at the genre in question not as a static one - as if any genre could ever be static - moreover it is in the light of such theoretical assumptions that Carter's rewritings should also be considered.

In Carter's case it is worth recalling the well known characterization of "magic realism", which initially was referred only to the works of Marquez and other South American writers. If we apply such characterization to

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<sup>93</sup> R. Jackson, op.cit., p. 91.

<sup>94</sup> J. Zipes, The Art of Subversion, pp. 99-100.

Carter's work, it should not be intended as a kind of definite classification, an end in itself, but as a possible means of accounting for the dichotomic, conflicting, aspiration of her writing that, although based on a strictly materialistic conception of reality, still possess what she has defined as an uncontainable "imaginative gaiety".<sup>95</sup>

In other words, we could also maintain that Carter's tales do not aim at replacing realistic experience with literary fantasy, rather they offer different scenarios, new imaginative possibilities to our habitual perception of reality. It is worth quoting Carter's own opinion about the difference between the "magic realism" of her work and that of a novelist like Márquez:

Marquez is a very great writer, but the kind of social forces which produce a writer like Marquez are in fact very different from those that produced, say, me. He was very much going back to the Colombian countryside and folklore, [...] I tend to use other people's books, European literature, as though it were that kind of folklore.<sup>96</sup>

Such a statement is important, not only because it reveals the social base of her narrative, but also how such narrative works by selecting from the immense

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<sup>95</sup> For an interesting discussion of the term "magic realism" see N. Cornwell, Literary Fantastic from Gothic to Postmodernism, p. 22 and the note no. 16, pp. 232-233.

<sup>96</sup> J. Haffenden, op. cit., p. 84. In the same interview Carter also admits: "Folklore was a late addition, and came about as such with The Bloody Chamber [...] But I think I must have started very early on to regard the whole of western European culture as a kind of folklore". Ibid. p. 85.



repertoire of myths, legends, folk-tales so characteristic of popular culture, following a typical intertextual practice ("I tend to use other people's books").<sup>97</sup>

Writing about the recurrence of elements of popular culture in many works by women's writers, Judie Newman notes how "Women's writing seems particularly sensitive to the ways in which female acculturation and socialization are promoted by such texts as folklore, myth, fairy tales, movies etc. [...]".<sup>98</sup> Examples include Alison Lurie who like the authors cited by Zipes earlier for their feminist perspective (A. Carter, T. Lee, T. Ungerer, C. Storr etc.), rewrote many traditional fairy-tales in a volume entitled Clever Gretchen and

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<sup>97</sup> The term intertextuality has been coined by Julia Kristeva and is based on the assumption that "every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text". New York Literary Forum 2, 1978, p. xiv; for further theoretical elaboration of this concept see also: Laurent Jenny, "The Strategy of Form" in T. Todorov ed., French Literary Theory, Cambridge U.P., 1982, pp. 34-64 and Jeanine Parisier Plottel & Hanna Charney eds. "Intertextuality: New Perspectives in Criticism", New York Literary Forum, 2, 1978.

About the relevance of such concept with reference to Carter's writing it is useful to quote Susan Stewart. In her study Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature, Baltimore, J. Hopkins, 1979, she inserts the term intertextuality into a larger perspective by linking literary culture to aspects of everyday life. Stewart writes: "our neighbourhoods are full of Madame Bovarys, Cinderellas [...] and wise fools, as much as fictions are full of people from our neighbourhoods" (p. 26).

<sup>98</sup> J. Newman, "The Revenge of the Trance Maiden: Intertextuality and Alison Lurie", in Plotting Change, L. Anderson ed., London, Arnold, 1990, p. 114.

Other Forgotten Folktales (1980).<sup>99</sup>

Returning to Carter, it seems evident that her choice of this particular genre aims mainly at exposing the traditional ideals inherent in it in order to transform them. A sort of deconstructive practice investigating what is usually considered "normal" or "natural" to reveal the phallogocratic inclination of such concepts. Her practice of experimenting with several popular genres, with a clear parodic intent should be considered in this light - comparable to writers like Suniti Namjoshi or Joanna Russ. As Palmer puts it:

she uses strategies of wit and humour in a way which may be described as carnivalesque. Inverting heterosexual norms and conventions, they present to the reader, as Bakhtin says, "a world inside out". In their humorous treatment of sexual attitudes and codes of conduct "they liberate us from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths and offer the chance to have a new outlook on the world [...] and to enter a completely new order of things".<sup>100</sup>

As I have pointed out earlier, the transgressive potentiality of the fairy-tale as a genre is not without

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<sup>99</sup> A. Lurie, Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Fairy Tales, N.Y., Cronwell, 1980. See also by Suniti Namjoshi, Feminist Fables, Sheba, 1981, in which she rewrites many fairy-tales from a lesbian point of view, combining her feminist purposes with the Hindoo tradition. Also M. Atwood's production has drawn much of its structural power from the European fairy tale, S. Rose Wilson in her Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics, University Press of Mississippi, 1994, examines precisely this aspect of her work.

<sup>100</sup> P. Palmer, "Contemporary Lesbian Feminist Fiction: Texts for Everywoman" in Plotting Change, p. 57.

ambiguities and Carter's work is, in many respects, an example of that. Palmer is more optimistic about the effects of her writing on this point when she argues that:

In the Bloody Chamber Carter succeeds in transcending the ideological limitations which fairy-tales generally reveal. While the fairy-tale format of the stories enables her to treat women's conventional role as object of exchange, the motif of magical metamorphosis which it includes gives her the opportunity to explore the theme of psychic transformation, liberating her protagonists from conventional gender roles.<sup>101</sup>

What is indisputably evident in The Bloody Chamber is an ingenious predilection for the art of variation on a well known motif combined with the more baroque one for exhibiting and astonishing effects; crude and violent plots are by contrast conveyed in an exquisite prose, in a refined lexicon, in a lyrical syntax. The result is a meticulously made text that implicitly reflects an image of literature as a playful and fascinating activity. By rewriting the traditional fairy-tales, the author has in fact transformed them according to the impulses of her imagination. As in the case of the most popular folk-tales, the absurd and the inexplicable abound, but they seem to be in a sort of natural harmony with the real, to the point that although a perfect synthesis is never achieved, nevertheless the two sides manage to exist one close to the other with surrealist nonchalance. In

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<sup>101</sup> P. Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", p. 195.

other terms, Carter's personal fantastic mode looks very akin to what Barthes used to describe as the "reality effect".<sup>102</sup>

Furthermore, her tales based on the interaction of beasts and human beings seem to remind us that in everyone there is a side we know nothing about, that we are, in a way, alien to ourselves, thus confirming the often denied links with the darkest aspects of reality. As a consequence, we should be able to learn that the wolf does not deserve to be hunted, persecuted, killed, but it has to be accepted for what he is and symbolizes, with his indomitable boldness, his strenuous struggling for survival even in the most difficult situations, his capacity for obeying his instinct.<sup>103</sup> Once faced with the wolf, we can no longer sustain our presumption of human univocity, the individual is not one; "I is another", Rimbaud already warned at the end of the nineteenth century, the beast is inside us. "Every one, as you ought to know, has a beast-self" MacDonald confirmed, "which it takes a good deal of crushing to kill!"<sup>104</sup> The result is an impure mixture kept in its

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<sup>102</sup> For an intriguing discussion of the Barthesian term "reality effect" see R. Campra, "Il fantastico una isotopia della trasgressione", Strumenti Critici, XV, II, giugno 1981.

<sup>103</sup> Max Luthi points out that: "Modern psychology believes that our own unconscious can appear to us as an animal [...] It prepares to devour us, but in our battle with it, we win the princess. Only this confrontation with the demon leads us to the highest goal [...]" op.cit., p. 80.

<sup>104</sup> G. MacDonald, Lilith, Michigan, Eerdmans Press, 1964, pp. 210-211.

The image of the beast, or of the alien element which

place only by the power of love and whose effects are still unforeseen. Yet, when we look at the monstrous beings, the hybrids which inhabit our natural world we cannot but shiver with horror, just like Beauty before the Beast, since it is precisely in that moment that we clearly perceive the ephemerality, the evanescence of any borderline which we believed could defend us from the uncontrollable multiplicity of the world, from the dark powers within ourselves.

Carter's peculiar sensitivity has focused precisely on such intersecting areas of hybridization by offering in her tales a metaphorical representation of the "forest of signs" that, according to Rilke, surrounds us. Her narrative universe is then a sort of Mundus Imaginalis, an intermediate world of forms and colours, of animate and inanimate things, of angels and wild beasts lost in the dark night of fantasy. It is thus clear why it becomes very difficult for any critic to fit such a world into the usual categories of the fantastic or the marvellous without risking a theoretical irrelevance. Man continues to be, for Carter, a strange mixture of angel and beast, he is neither only one nor only the other, but both at the same time, an hybrid being with something monstrous in him for the reason that he keeps within himself the two conflicting aspects of instinct and rationality. Certainly, it is unsurprising that

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inhabits our being, has perhaps found its best illustration in many SF movies, the obvious reference is to the various Aliens.

Carter, in order to express her thought on these matters, has chosen the genre of the fairy-tale: the only genre that could really meet her aesthetic demands, and a genre in which for centuries humanity has enrolled the core of its culture and its experience of the world, in the apparently simple magic of a tale.

## CHAPTER II

### Section 1 Fireworks

Fireworks, the first of the two collections of short-stories I am about to examine, was first published in 1974. The edition which will be considered here is the revised one of 1984.<sup>1</sup> The immediate impression one has while reading such stories is that of a further confirmation, if still needed, that Angela Carter finds especially in the brief and compressed space of the short-story a suitable medium for her writing. All the nine stories included in Fireworks, although apparently very different from a thematic point of view, have something more profound in common: a deep desire to narrate what cannot be narrated. They do so with witty and even malicious humour, not caring whether our strongest beliefs crumble; the reality principle is reduced to a mocking joke and even an ordinary gesture like watching oneself in the mirror becomes an excuse for the most intimate of introspections.

The first story is "Souvenir of Japan". It is pervaded by a sensual and alluring exoticism, and is followed by the brutal cruelty of the executioner in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter" and the ruthless hunter in "Master". The melancholy gracefulness of "The Smile of

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<sup>1</sup> A. Carter, Fireworks, London, Chatto & Windus, (1974), 1987.

All the quotations in this chapter refer to the more recent edition and are indicated by page number.

Winter" is succeeded by the edenic atmosphere of the primordial forest in "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest", the surrealist introspections of "Flesh and the Mirror", the magical mirror in "Reflections" and, finally, by the aleatory conspiracy in "Elegy for a Freelance".

In this section I will focus my attention on "The Loves of Lady Purple" and "Reflections" as representative texts, since they develop in an extraordinary way images and motifs already present in other works by Carter. The image of woman as femme-fatale, puppet, object of male desire and also prostitute capable of speaking her own desire is recurrent. In "The Loves of Lady Purple" Carter presents all such images while reworking a literary myth, Pygmalion, which embodies the platonic problem of the priority of the copy or of the original. This leads to a discussion of the much-debated question of representation and, as I will argue further on, one can view this story as a splendid parable of the art of writing, a sort of reflection, in metafictional terms, on the literary profession through what I see as an implicit comparison between the puppeteer and the writer.

The word "reflection" is very much at the core of the second story I am going to examine. In "Reflection" Carter again reworks a myth, this time that of Narcissus, addressing the same platonic problem and adding the figure of the androgyne (the immediate comparison is with Tristessa in The Passion of New Eve).



The main point of the story is the question of gender identity and the desire for the other exemplified by the act of passing through the mirror. Similar themes and images have already been detected in The Bloody Chamber (i.e. the various metamorphosis which occur in many stories or the mirror in "Wolf-Alice"). One of the differences consists in the fact that the gothic atmosphere - still present in "Lady Purple" - has been replaced by a surrealist one. Notwithstanding the above mentioned similarities I consider "Reflection" a unique tale within Carter's corpus, one of her best examples of sophisticated symbolism and conceptual insight.

Lady Purple is a beautiful puppet. But it becomes immediately clear she is no reassuring, ethereal, figure of a blond dame dressed in white gowns, but a real "Queen of Night":

There were glass rubies in her head for eyes and her ferocious teeth, carved out of mother o' pearl, were always on show for she had a permanent smile. Her face was as white as chalk because it was covered with the skin of supplest white leather which also clothed her torso, jointed limbs and complication of extremities. Her beautiful hands seemed more like weapons because her nails were so long, five inches of pointed tin enamelled scarlet, and she wore a wig of black hair arranged in a chignon more heavily elaborate than any human neck could have endured. This monumental chevelure was stuck through with many brilliant pins tipped with pieces of broken mirror so that, every time she moved, she cast a multitude of scintillating reflections which danced about the theatre like mice of light. Her clothes were all deep, dark, slumbrous colours - profound pinks, crimson and the vibrating purple with which she was synonymous, a purple the colour of blood in a love suicide. (p.26)

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, it is with descriptions like this that Carter evokes a vaguely gothic atmosphere; the rhythmic use of adjectives and almost fetishistic attention to minute detail recalls the catalogues of Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes" or of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition. In this case, it is the choice of the colour red that is important, the red of the rubies - stones which bring bad luck, as the nanny observes in "The Bloody Chamber" - or the purple of the clothes which, in a singular analogy, is linked to the suicide prompted by passion. The fragments of glass scintillating on her hair are obviously the result of a broken mirror - implying misfortune and fractured identity.<sup>2</sup> Lady Purple resembles a monstrous and ominous goddess, able perhaps to live her own life, independent of the hands of the puppet master, "wholly real and yet entirely other" (p. 26). Like Tristessa, the beautiful transvestite of The Passion of New Eve, the puppet is entirely a man's creation - in this case of his extraordinary ability in handicraft - this is why she is the quintessence of eroticism, "for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As F. Amendolagine rightly points out: "The breaking of a mirror is according to classic thought an extremely negative act which involves the totality of phenomenal events. The fragmentation of the medium through which images are reflected has strong repercussions on reality involving it in its destiny". (Translation mine) In "Fallit Imago", Meccanismi, fascinazioni e inganni dello specchio, Ravenna, Longo, 1984, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> The story told here might suggest a development of Romantic motifs by Carter since it recalls, in many respects, a beautiful one by Arnim entitled Isabella von

As in The Magic Toyshop the puppet master, this time called "the Asiatic Professor", has assistants: a deaf nephew and a dumb foundling girl. Communication is understandably difficult for them, particularly because the old man speaks a foreign and mysterious language. Nonetheless the people who watch his shows greatly appreciate the voice he gives to his favourite puppet, a sort of "lascivious murmur"; it is a voice which makes them shiver with pleasure.

The title of the spectacle of which Lady Purple is the protagonist is "The Notorious Amours of Lady Purple the Shameless Oriental Venus". In brief, it is the story of her life, full of horrendous crimes, totally devoted to the pursuit of erotic pleasures of any kind, including the most sadistic ones. She becomes the most famous

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Aegypten oder Kaiser Karl V erste Liebe, 1819, in which the double essence of any being assumes the appearance of a golem, the Hebraic word that in some legends stands for automaton or a self-moving simulacrum. In his tale the golem is a terra-cotta figure perfectly identical to Isabella. The young Carlo V firmly believes in this illusion to the point that he even falls in love with the double who possesses a diabolical soul. The conflict here is between two different kinds of love: one which belongs to a higher order, almost divine, the other which drives man towards the pleasures of the flesh in the arms of the creature he himself has created. Consequently, man's capacity of creating something out of nothing is both a sign of his aspiration for a higher reality, but also a dangerous temptation.

It is worth mentioning here that many of E.T.A. Hoffmann's tales - a writer similar to Carter for his way of dealing with fantastic themes - are full of automata so identical to human beings that the male protagonist inevitably falls in love with them. This is a further confirmation of the great attraction, but also of the fear that Romantic writers seemed to feel when confronted with the possibility of illusion and reality being confused.

prostitute of her times, for whose favours the descendants of the most noble families are willing to waste their fortunes, but "she was not a true prostitute for she was the object on which men prostituted themselves". In a certain sense her power is only apparent because it emanates from the same men who at the end become its victims, reduced to the state of ghosts covered with rags, shadows of a humanity which has experienced a maximum degradation. But Lady Purple will at the end meet the same fate as her victims: once she has lost what was human in her, she becomes an exact copy of herself, a puppet of wood representing "the shameless Oriental Venus".

The story told, the old man puts the puppet away, as he does every evening, chatting with her about the weather, about his backpain, as if she were an old friend; he even kisses her good night. But that night something unexpected happens: just like a Sleeping Beauty Lady Purple wakes up. Like Pinocchio the puppet is transformed into a living being who responds to the old man's kiss in a way that seems to come from "the dark country where desire is objectified and lives" (p. 36), a kiss that soon becomes the bite of the vampire leaving the puppet master without a drop of blood in his veins.<sup>4</sup> As soon as she has finished with him, the

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<sup>4</sup> Carter's comment on the murder of the puppet master is helpful: "She is a puppet, and a man made her, and made up her entire biography as a femme fatale, and willed her into being because he wanted so much for her to exist, and if she destroys him the very minute she comes to life, then it is his own silly fault for

Oriental Venus stretches her limbs so that the new acquired blood can reach every part of her body and alters the smiling expression which her creator had imposed on her face. Like a ferocious beast that has been secluded and now is finally free, Lady Purple savours again the instinctual physicality of her being. Although a bit confused about her new ontological nature, she is sure of one thing: "the notion that she might perform the forms of life not so much by the skill of another as by her own desire" (p. 37). The woman who once was a puppet now decides that it is time to set fire to the old puppet-theatre, with all its puppets and the corpse of its master, before hurrying to the only brothel still open in the nearest town.

This then is the story of Lady Purple, the most famous prostitute in the Orient, the female sinner par excellence, whose soul knows no redemption. It is easy, in the midst of the innumerable intertextual allusions which make up this story - something of a game that the author enjoys playing with her reader - to see in the Oriental Venus a new Salome or a Lilith ready to dance with incomparable voluptuousness before an enraptured audience. There is one scene in particular in which the analogy with Salome or Lilith seems justified; she dances "with the supplest and most serpentine grace" for her lovers, while they play a flute made with the thighbone

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thinking such dreadful things in the first place". Introduction to Wayward Girls and Wicked Women, London, Virago, 1986, p. x.

of a politician she once poisoned simply for pleasure. During the puppet show such a dance was "the apex of the Professor's performance for, as she stamped, wheeled and turned to the sound of her malign chamber music, Lady Purple, became entirely the image of irresistible evil" (p.32).<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that the puppeteer's art, so central in this story, metaphorically resembles that of the writer. Like the writer, "The puppeteer speculates in a no-man's-land between the real and that which, although we know very well it is not, nevertheless seems to be real" (p.23). The old wooden timbers of the stage could symbolically be replaced by the blank space of a book's page, the textual space that each writer wishes to fill in by creating his own world of fictional characters, ready to become alive whenever the reader's gaze lays on

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<sup>5</sup> For an interesting discussion of the figure of "Lilith" in the field of modern fantasy see K. Schaafsma, "The Demon Lover: Lilith and the Hero in Modern Fantasy", Extrapolation, 28, 1, Spring 1987; R. Jackson, in Fantasy the Literature of Subversion, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1981, looks in particular at G. MacDonald's Lilith, (pp. 148-150).

According to William Irwin Thompson the figure of Lilith has not completely disappeared from our culture. Starting from the consideration that "each culture casts its own shadow, a shadow which is a perfect description of its own form and nature" he argues that "the shadow which our technological civilization casts is that of Lilith, the 'maid of desolation' who dances in the ruin of cities [...] To effect a reconciliation with her, man must not seek to rape the feminine and keep it down under him. If he seeks to continue his domination of nature [...] and the repression of the spiritual [...] Lilith will then dance in the ruins of Western civilization". The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light, quoted in K. Schaafsma, "The Demon Lover: Lilith and the Hero in Modern Fantasy", p. 61.

them for the limited time of the reading. Like the puppets which "once again offer their brief imitations of men and women with an exquisite precision which is all the more disturbing because we know it to be false", the characters of a story move before our eyes showing us the spectacle of a simulated life, not for this reason less alluring; "and so this art" - the puppeteer's - "if viewed theologically, may, perhaps, be blasphemous" (p.24).

This is a kind of artistic blasphemy which Angela Carter eagerly pursues, with the morbid, at times narcissistic, delight of the great story-teller who enjoys holding the readers in her power and is pleased when her fantastic stories stimulate an astonishment that often transmutes into enchantment, just like in the case of the puppets' show when: "The incantatory ritual of the drama instantly annihilated the rational and imposed upon the audience a magic alternative in which nothing was in the least familiar (p. 27).<sup>6</sup>

What at first sight seems inexplicable or unacceptable suddenly erupts into the alleged natural order of the artistic fruition disrupting it, the result is, as Lovecraft suggests, that the laws of Nature are due to collapse under the attack of chaos and of dreadful

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<sup>6</sup> The impression here is similar to what Freud defined as unheimlich, something which causes uneasiness, inquietude, a deviation from reality and from the norm, something able to insinuate itself slowly into our imagination. See S. Freud, "The Uncanny", Standard Edition of the Complete psychological Works, vol. 17, pp. 217-252.

demons.<sup>7</sup> Lady Purple is described as the embodiment of a demon because of her tempting power, unsatisfiable lust and ruthless cruelty. It could also be said that in her body hides the poetic spirit of a daimon, a word whose etymology lies close to that of "demon", thus reiterating the transgressive potentiality of a writing which refuses the frustrating limits of any empty codification, choosing to stay, as the "blasphemous" Blake Angela Carter prefers, "on the devil's side", that is on the side of someone who is different and for this reason persecuted by the "angels".<sup>8</sup>

I have argued that "The Loves of Lady Purple" is a parable of the art of writing, indeed of the concept of representation in all its forms. If issues of representation are central to contemporary postmodernist aesthetics, this was already the case in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, a period when the idea of "reality" was thoroughly debated, as the works of Cervantes, Calderon de la Barca and Shakespeare clearly demonstrate. In "The Loves of Lady Purple" it is as if

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<sup>7</sup> H.P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature, N.Y., Ben Abramson, 1945, p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> For Blake the angels represent conventional, orthodox religion and hypocritical morality; C. Corti in her article "I trasgressori di W. Blake" points out that: "Blake delineates a relativistic and subjectivist gnosiology provocatively based on the values of sexuality. According to Blake the itinerarium mentis and the aspiration towards knowledge are defined through erotic drive, that is an endless stimulus to self-consciousness, thus ensuring the continuous perception of one's self which eventually leads to a true perception of the world" (translation mine). C. Corti, ANNALI Istituto Universitario Orientale, XXXI, 1-2, Napoli, 1988, p. 87.



the mimetic process was stretched to the point of being negated, ending up in a phantasmagoria of intertextual reflections which refer to Freud for his analysis of the subjective point of view, to the myth of Pygmalion - not so much the character described by Ovid in the Metamorphosis, but the one belonging to Greek mythology who used to embrace the statue of Venus as if she were alive - and finally to Baudrillard's theory of simulacra. In one passage in the story the above mentioned references find a dramatic expression. The wicked Lady Purple has just regained some sort of animated life, and is struggling with ontological doubts, whose answer she does not know:

But, even if she could not perceive it, she could not escape the tautological paradox in which she was trapped; had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette?

(pp.37-38)

In other words, we are faced here with the eternal platonic dilemma regarding the priority of the copy or of the original, that is whether the puppet created by man is the duplicate of a verisimilar reality, or, on the contrary, an empty simulacrum of an "identical copy for which no original has ever existed".<sup>9</sup> What the story

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<sup>9</sup> F. Jameson's opinion on this point is to be found in "Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism", New Left Review, 146, 1984, p.66. Actually, Baudrillard argues that Postmodernism has dissolved this dilemma; Jameson derives his ideas from a different ideological perspective.

seems to suggest is that our perception of reality is never well-defined from the start, but always mediated but the act of representing, a kind of filter we cannot get rid of. The fatal seduction the puppet is able to exert on its victims, driving them to folly and ultimately to death, seems to exemplify the tendency of the image to become a separate protagonist in the cultural scene, thus revealing its inner aspiration to replace reality. It is almost as if by killing its own creator the copy would be set free from its artificial status of dependency; in a word; from a referent.

Lady Purple is above all the emblematic representation of a woman, or rather of a typical female condition, trapped in the role of a puppet whose threads are controlled by somebody else. As it has been pointed out earlier, the "Oriental Venus" is entirely a creation of male desire; according to which she is the embodiment of the object of an unrestrained libido, to the point that the figure of the prostitute is finally transfigured into "a corpse animated solely by demonic will". Woman/devil, "femme fatale", tempting Eve; in this story Angela Carter plays admirably with the usual set of female roles. Obviously, the reader could have expected a different ending to the story, perhaps an open one like in The Magic Toyshop in which Melanie and Finn run away from the tyrant/puppeteer, heading towards a future filled with hopes. Here Lady Purple, as soon as she gets rid of her creator, walks rapidly towards the nearest brothel "making her way like a homing pigeon,

out of logical necessity". But that is what we should have expected from her: a redeemed life, all sins amended? It is because of the ending that Lady Purple resembles the Jerusalem created by Blake, incapable of feeling any sense of guilt while strenuously asserting her corporal dimension against Vala who instead represents the official Church and the moral code.<sup>10</sup> "The Shameless Oriental Venus" though she is free from those threads which bind her to the artificial existence of an endless performance, keeps on playing her familiar role, thus confirming the validity of the old maxim according to which "The most difficult performance in the world is acting naturally, [...] Everything else is artful" (p. 70).

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<sup>10</sup> See "The Song of Jerusalem" by W. Blake in The Complete Writings of William Blake, G. Keynes ed., London, Oxford U.P., 1966, pp.164-284.

## "Reflections"

What an astonishment, it is within ourselves that we have to look at the outside. The dark, deep mirror is hidden inside man. [...] When something is reflected by the soul it has a giddy effect. It is more than an image, it is a simulacrum, and there is a bit of a ghost in it [...]

(Victor Hugo)

Mirror should reflect for a while before reflecting the images. (Cocoteau)

"Reflection" is one of those words which reconciles one with language, with its imperfections, with its limits, with its eternal inability to accurately convey the ever-changing movements of our soul and the capricious intentionality which governs our actions. With its double meaning of image reflected in a mirror and careful thought, it seems to belong to that small group of words which satisfy, at least momentarily, our endless desire of conferring meaning to our thoughts in order to communicate, through the medium of the voice or a blank page. Perhaps one of the reasons why such a word succeeds where others fail lies in the fact that it contains in the brief space of its few syllables two opposite worlds: the experimental reality of physical phenomena and, on the other hand, the most imponderable world of all, that of our psyche. Reflections do not stop on the surface,

they delve deep into the more intimate part of our being, until they arrive at the wicket gate each of us hides. It is then that the mirror breaks up, the surface proves to be much deeper than we had imagined, disclosing the way to a sudden flow of emotions. At the end it is a question of opening ourselves for a while to the universe of dreams, to contemplate the strangeness of the human condition, a condition full of worries, hazards and limits which ask only to be crossed over.

This is what happens to the protagonist of Carter's story, a story filled, as always is the case with this writer, with a delicate and sophisticated symbolism, not to mention the presence of an oxymoroc game of "deep surfaces", a game which regards mainly the mirror conceived as a metaphor for the traversable border that separates the known world from the one beyond.

It is a beautiful spring day when the protagonist starts walking in a wood, the trees and all the other plants are still wet for the rain that had fallen during the night, the air is crisp; suddenly he hears a woman's voice singing: "Under the leaves [...] the leaves of life", cryptic words which "seemed filled with a meaning that had no relation to meaning as I understood it" (p. 82). He has just resumed his walking when he stumbles over a mysterious object hidden in the grass: a shell, not a thing one should expect to find in a forest. More strangely still,

The whorls of the shell went the wrong way. The spirals were

reversed. It looked like the mirror image of a shell, and so it should not have been able to exist outside a mirror; in this world, it could not exist outside a mirror. But, all the same. I held it. (p. 83)

A few moments later a bullet whirs over his head while a swarm of black crows - a bad omen - rises from a nearby tree. The man is assailed by an enormous black dog, which is called away by a girl with "necromantic hair", wearing blue jeans and with a rifle in her hands. Without saying a word she picks up the shell and examines it, before indicating that the man should get up and follow her through the woods. After a while they reach a garden which leads to a decrepit bricked house, its front door "ajar like the door of a witch's house". Understandably the protagonist begins to shiver with fear, "Before the door, I involuntary halted; a dreadful vertigo seized me, as if I stood on the edge of an abyss" (p. 86).

Once inside he is forced to walk through a hall. He notices that the floor is covered by something soft and viscous, like a strange cobweb. Finally they stop before a door, inside which a surprise waits:

It was a large room, part drawing room, part bedroom, for the being who lived in it was crippled. She, he, it - whoever, whatever my host or hostess may have been - lay in an old-fashioned wicker Bath chair [...] Her white hands finished in fingers indecently long, white and translucent as candles on a cathedral altar; those tapering fingers were the source of the bewildering muffler, for they held two bone needles and never ceased to move. [...] One of her profiles was that of a beautiful woman, the other that of a beautiful man. It is a defect in our language there is no term of reference for these indeterminate and undefinable beings [...] (p. 87)

An androgyne then, or hermaphrodite, the mythical son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who embodies a synthesis of opposites. Just like a Parca the mysterious being keeps on knitting; s/he cannot stop. The shell found in the wood has come from a stitch s/he dropped, a mistake easy to correct since the object is about to return to its own dimension, beyond the huge mirror which stands in the middle of the room. The girl, whom the androgyne addresses as her niece Anna, is the only being able to pass from one dimension to another, an ability implicitly contained in her palindromic name.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, the androgyne too belongs to both dimensions, as Anna points out: "She can [...] go both ways, although she cannot move at all. So her power is an exact equivalent of her impotence, since both are absolute". "Not, my darling, absolutely absolute" the androgyne adds looking down at her erect phallus, "Potency, impotence in potentia, hence relative. Only the intermediary, since indeterminate" (p. 90).

The androgyne's words are the statement of a maximum relativity, of the cosmic relativity which pertains to the opposites and brings to light their essence of empty

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<sup>11</sup> The intertextual references here are numerous. One example is Kurt Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions, N.Y., Delacorte, 1973 - published a year before Carter's collection. In Vonnegut's novel the protagonist, a science-fiction writer, is convinced that mirrors are "leaks" or "holes between two universes", to the point that "If he saw a child near a mirror, he might wag his finger at a child warningly, and say with great solemnity, 'Don't get too near that leak. You wouldn't want to wind up in the other universe, would you?'" (p. 19).

covering which can be turned inside out in an entropic vortex that knows no end. The narrator's act of knowing, although not intended, must be punished: "You know too much" the androgyne says with a menacing look, the punishment won't be death but a sort of "perpetual estrangement": a life behind the mirror!

"Kiss yourself," commanded the androgyne in a swooning voice. "Kiss yourself in the mirror, the symbolic matrix of this and that, hither and thither, outside and inside." [...] I advanced my own lips to meet the familiar yet unknown lips that advanced towards mine in the silent world of the glass.

I thought these lips would be cold and lifeless; that I would touch them but they could not touch me. Yet, when the twinned lips met, they cleaved, for these mirrored lips of mine were warm and throbbed. [...] It was too much for me. The profound sensuality of this unexpected caress crisped the roots of my sex and my eyes involuntary closed whilst my arms clasped my own tweed shoulders. The pleasure of the embrace was intense; I swooned beneath it.

When my eyes opened, I had become my own reflection.

(p. 92)

Once the protagonist passes through the mirror with Anna, his first impression is that the world behind is the exact opposite of the other one. Everything retains its resemblance, but it is upside down like in a negative: light is black, the force of gravity works the other way round, the day is night and the night is day.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It seems that in this respect for Carter's protagonist, as well as for Carroll's Alice, the adventures are produced by the character's dreams, by his/her unconscious, it is not surprising then if in both cases the mirror becomes a "literal symbol" of reflection where everything is reversed.

As an implicit comment to the reversal of light into darkness described in the story, I recall an evocative comment by Schelling: "If a light resplended in the



The overall effect is of estrangement; so much so that the man even starts doubting priorities: "how could I ever be certain which was the primary world and which the secondary - " (p. 93). As in "The Loves of Lady Purple" the question is once again the priority of the copy or of the original.

This upside down world is completely soundless, the atmosphere is stuffy, one has almost the feeling of being in cosmic space, or on the bottom of the sea - thousand of shells are spread around. Suddenly and without any apparent reason Anna jumps on the young man and sexually abuses him - in this world women rape men:

She raped me; perhaps her gun, in this system, gave her the power to do so.

I shouted and swore but the shell grotto in which she ravished me did not reverberate and I only emitted gobs of light. Her rape, her violation of me, caused me atrocious physical and mental pain. My being leaked away from me under the visitation of her aggressive flesh. My self grew less in agony under the piston thrust of her slender loins [...] I knew the dreadful pleasure of abandonment [...] (p. 98)

The atrocious pain of violation transforms itself into "the dreadful pleasure of abandonment", once again one opposite sliding imperceptibly into another.

At that point the man decides that he has to act quickly if he really wants to save his life; he fights back and kills Anna. His desire to return "to the right-

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night, if a night turned into a day and a day turned into a night could embrace us all, that would be the supreme satisfaction of our desires".

hand side of the world" reasserts itself. As soon as he passes through the mirror back to his own world, he immediately attacks the androgyne who cannot defend her/himself while knitting. Before dying h/she only murmurs a few words:

"The umbilical cord is cut, [...] The thread is broken. Did you not realize who I was? That I was the synthesis in person? For I could go any way the world goes and so I was knitting the thesis and the antithesis together, this world and that world. [...] Cohesion gone. Ah!" (p. 101)

Having stabilized his identity (and gender) he returns once again to a desire for the other. But watching himself in the mirror is an act of excessive self-confidence that will lead him to absolute annihilation:

Proud as a man, I once again advanced to meet my image in the mirror. Full of self-confidence, I held out my hands to embrace my self, my anti-self. my self not-self, my assassin, my death, the world's death. (Ibid.)

"Reflections" is a dreamlike tale, or better the tale of a dream, resembling a dream in its wandering among unexplored possibilities, and in its imperturbable atmosphere, in which even the most curious events seem realistic. It also has the ephemerality of a dream in which the enchantment is always about to be dissolved by the presence of consciousness. Extraordinary circumstances are introduced side by side with events of everyday life, with no apparent distinction, apart from the fact that they are often frightening. Such

circumstances appear to be neither less nor more artificial than real ones, since they stem from a place where the imaginary inhabits real life, and reality comes true through imagination. In "Reflections", as well as in many other stories by Carter the dream/tale - always on the verge of becoming a nightmare - conveys to the reader a sense of artifice which leads to a realism sui generis, by somebody defined as "magic", or to an impression of reality.<sup>13</sup>

With the exception of one occasion when the protagonist even doubts "which was the primary world and which the secondary", he always seems able to know in which of the two worlds he wishes to recognize himself, the border between self and not-self,<sup>14</sup> a border symbolically represented by the androgyne's immense mirror. Instead of displaying a hard and thus impenetrable surface, it seems fluid like water, as if obeying a different law of gravity:

But I looked as if I were reflected in a forest pool rather than by silvered glass for the surface of the mirror looked like the surface of motionless water, or of mercury, as though it were a solid mass of liquid kept in place by some inversion

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<sup>13</sup> As regards the term coined by Barthes "reality effect" see note no. 104 in the previous chapter.

Actually, I would not argue that, in the case of Carter's writing, one is presented with an harmonious synthesis of dream and reality, the kind of "surreality" envisaged by Breton, (see his Manifeste 1924 and Vases communicants 1932), although it often happens in her prose that, to use Nerval's words, dreams flood into real life.

<sup>14</sup> Such a border has often moved or even disappeared as in the case of the German Romantics Novalis and Arnim or, later, of Rimbaud and the French Surrealists.

of gravity (p. 88)

It is worth recalling that the mirror has always been a fascinating although contradictory symbolic medium: a space of light and opacity, on the one hand in fact it has signified for the artist the dream of a perfect representation of reality; on the other it has been its opposite, a place of simulations and deceits, of fictitious and illusory images which mock what it should normally reproduce. And yet the mirror has always been regarded as that which reveals directly man's image, his double, his ghost, his simulacrum.<sup>15</sup> "Mirrors never lie" the saying goes, and it is for this reason that the wicked Queen in "Snow-White" resorts to a mirror to test her beauty. On a different level and more recently it has represented that stage of human development characterized by the consciousness of the self.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the mirror, with all its repertoire of symbols and metaphors, recurs within literary tradition. This is the case in the stories collected in Fireworks, which seem to dwell on the elusiveness of reality, a reality where the only law is that of perennial metamorphosis, where men can easily become animals and vice versa - as is the case in The Bloody Chamber - or where just by watching ourselves in the mirror - as in "Reflections" -

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<sup>15</sup> For an analysis of the complex symbolism of the mirror refer to J. Baltrusaitis, Lo specchio: rivelazioni, inganni e science-fiction, Milano, Adelphi, 1981.

<sup>16</sup> J. Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, translated into English by Alan Sheridan, London, 1977.

we can discover the other dimension of our being, before dying because the enchantment has been broken.

The first time the young protagonist watches himself in the mirror it is not by choice but "out of rage and desperation". His instinct tells him that he should avoid watching, from a fear of losing his identity or soul. Besides the many possible parallels, the passage through the mirror which occurs in this story immediately recalls Alice's adventures. In the case of Carter the act of "going beyond" is forced upon the protagonist, although he cannot but experience an intense pleasure while doing it, as in the already cited: "The pleasure of the embrace was intense; I swooned beneath it".<sup>17</sup> This is a moment of ecstasy in the real etymological sense of the word, "ekstasi": that is the act of coming out of our habitual state, possibly to go into a different one - as in "Reflections" - where the antinomic condition of the perspectival inversion reigns within a physical space. In such a world there is always the danger of complete annihilation, of not-existing, of losing one's self, a danger that seems initially avoidable when the

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<sup>17</sup> Serpieri acutely observes that such mythic explorations modified: "the classic conception of reality, the logic of identity and causality, making similar incursions into Nature intended as a mystery and into the inner part of ourselves, as the locus of the Other" (translation mine). *Retorica e Immaginario*, Parma, Pratiche, 1986, p. 301.

The motifs of the double, of the Self as the Other and of the androgyne are very common in the literature of any time, some of the best examples in our century are to be found in the works of Rilke and Valery, or in a crucial text like Musil's The Man without Qualities.

protagonist, having killed Anna, hurries back towards the "real" dimension on the other side of the mirror. But the inevitable conclusion is only briefly postponed - a few pages later, he watches himself in the mirror, this time willingly: "I held out my hands to embrace myself, my not-self, my assassin, my death, the world's death."

Both in "The Loves of Lady Purple" and in "Reflections" Angela Carter reworks a myth, in the previous story it was Pygmalion, here Narcissus. In Carter's new version Narcissus did not die, as it is usually believed, because his love for himself was too great, but because he came to discover the corporal nature of his own image and thus his death. Paradoxically, an awareness of corporal nature is conveyed through a reflected image; this is clearly implied in the sensuous scene when the man meets his own lips on the liquid surface of the mirror, or in the episode of his rape when the pain slowly turns into "the dreadful pleasure of abandonment". It is almost as if bodily nature was experienced and enjoyed in the same moment when it is violated or one is on the verge of losing it. It is the same corporal nature whom morality has always branded as sinful in favour of a spiritual salvation to be found in mystical practices. What Carter, with a reversal of perspective, seems to suggest is instead that the light of salvation should be searched for in the darkness (it is significant that the light beyond the mirror is black). It is there in fact that its roots lie, in the darkness where the body discovers

its limitless space which asks only to be explored.

The new Narcissus envisaged by Carter embodies all that, distancing himself from the Ovidian model, closer to the transfiguration of the same myth in Valery, especially if we consider the French poet's contemplation of an intermediate and impure space where identity contains within itself the antithetical forces of intellect and Eros. The proud man cannot take the place of the androgyne, and with his death the possibility of keeping the opposites together in a synthesis disappears; man is not allowed to pass easily from one dimension to the other, the necessity of the choice between the two is among the main conditions of human existence.

Unlike Alice who at the end decides to return to her world, abandoning the one that was leading her to the abyss of entropy, the protagonist of "Reflection" - whose lack of a name suggests his lack of identity - seems almost eager to fall in that abyss, not so much because it is a way of punishing himself and his hubris, rather because he seems to have no other choice.

We should not forget that there are many versions of the Narcissus' myth, so one can wonder whether Carter has based her rewriting on the story told by Pausania, according to whom Narcissus had an identical twin sister, so when the girl died his brother looked at himself in the water of a pond to see her image once again and the sorrow was so unbearable that he died. In that version the symbolism is even more complex: the image in the water is at the same time a representation of the subject

who is looking at it (the male element) and of the lost image (the female element). The syntax of the double thus becomes limitless: twin couple, male and female, life and death, presence and absence. Certainly it is a very ambiguous context, so much so that if we translate it into Carter's story we could consider the moment when the protagonist looks at himself in the mirror, after the androgyne's death, in opposite terms: as an aspiration to take his place thus regaining the female dimension of his own self too briefly experienced while he was on the other side with Anna, or as a kind of "masculine protest" - to use Adler's words - because he cannot stand the androgyne's ambiguity. In any case the conclusion cannot be other than death, Carter's Narcissus is not able to resist the temptation of the complete image of himself and is swallowed up in the mirror.

Death, it is worth noting, is also part of the Pygmalion myth, on which the "The Loves of Lady Purple" was loosely based. Carter's new versions of both myths - Pygmalion and Narcissus - seem a further confirmation that the enchantment of the simulacrum is still capable of inspiring remarkable narrations.



## Section 2 Black Venus

La femme est naturelle, c'est-a-dire abominable.  
(Baudelaire)

Great horrors derive from ambiguity.  
(Edgar Allan Poe)

The collection entitled Black Venus was first published in 1985, but the eight tales it contains date back to the years between 1977 and 1982.<sup>1</sup> As in the case of The Bloody Chamber, the first story gives also the title to the entire collection, a way of emphasizing its prominence and exemplarity. I will start this section by examining "Black Venus", at whose core there are questions of male erotic representation and female and colonial self-representation. These discourses are implied in the exemplary story of Jeanne Duval who is progressively transformed into a prostitute, a "kept woman" and finally a muse. In "Black Venus" narrative strategies typical of postmodernism stand side by side with an interest for social analysis. Here Carter focuses on the issue of sexual relations between coloniser and colonized, but also, from a feminist perspective, on the subordinate role of women within our literary tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Carter, Black Venus, London, Chatto & Windus, 1985. All the quotations refer to the above edition and are indicated by page number.

In conclusion I will briefly discuss "Our Lady of the Massacre", an example of how Carter reworks different literary genres (in this case the American captivity narrative) and emphasize Carter's ability as a short-story writer.

"Black Venus" is a nickname for Jeanne Duval, the creole lover of Charles Baudelaire. Carter's desire to write a story which featured Duval stemmed from the consideration that she has been completely ignored by Baudelaire's biographers, despite living with him for many years. As Carter explained in an interview with Anne Smith:

I was correlating Jeanne Duval with the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, as the mysterious other, and I read what biographies there were of Baudelaire. Nobody had a good word for her [...] I just can't imagine anything more awful than being Baudelaire's mistress - the symbolism put on one's frail shoulders! All my immediate sympathies were for this unfortunate woman - how could they not be?<sup>2</sup>

As so often with Carter, artistic creation springs from a well defined intention - she declares herself in the same interview to be "a writer with a purpose" - here the desire to fill a void in the history of literature, to redress the injury of being ignored, swept away, erased, as if her subject was never part of the human community. Since the victim is a woman, clearly Carter's

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<sup>2</sup> A. Smith, "Myth and the Erotic" (Interview), Women's Review, 1, November 1985, p. 28.

sympathies are for her, for a genuine sense of female solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

What "Black Venus" offers to the reader is a portrait of a young woman who comes from a distant continent and arrives - as in a dream in which the concatenation of events is vague - in a world to which she does not belong and by which she will never be accepted. The analogy with the biblical Eve introduces the motif of knowledge denied:

The custard-apple of her stinking Eden she, this forlorn Eve, bit - and was all at once transported here, as in a dream; and yet she is a tabula rasa, still. She never experienced her experience as experience, life never added to the sum of her knowledge; rather, subtracted from it. If you start out with nothing, they'll take even that away from you, the Good Book says so. (p. 9)

She owns nothing, not even the experience of her own existence. Jeanne has been forced to depend upon others since she was a child in a faraway country - the records do not coincide on this point: it is probably Mauritius, or perhaps Santo Domingo, but as Carter ironically comments, "Her pays d'origine was of less importance than it would have been had she been a wine" (p. 16).<sup>4</sup>

Being an orphan she has lived most of her childhood

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<sup>3</sup> It should be said that the only "representation" we have of Duval is a portrait by Manet, but Manet is "another friend of his", Carter notes, as if to reiterate the predominance of male gaze and thus of male discourse.

<sup>4</sup> We are not even certain of her name, Jeanne in fact was also known as Jeanne Prosper or Lemer "as if her name were of no consequence", "Black Venus", p. 16.

with her grandmother, but the old woman soon gets rid of her. Her first lover, the man who should have taken her away from poverty, instead gives her syphilis. She becomes a prostitute in Paris where she encounters Charles Baudelaire in a cabaret and he falls in love with her: "The greatest poet of alienation stumbled upon the perfect stranger; theirs was a match made in heaven".<sup>5</sup> These are the stages through which Jeanne Duval is transformed into "a kept woman", the creole lover of the great poet. They were so different and yet their union presented some correspondences: if one was "a connoisseur of the beautiful", Carter suggests, the other "was a connoisseur of the most exquisite humiliations", with the difference that "she had always been too poor to be able to afford the luxury of acknowledging a humiliation as such" (p. 14).

Initially the lovers spend days in Baudelaire's home without going out; he watches her almost in trance while she, adorned with the jewels he has given her, dances on the rhythm of an old creole song, following the choreography the poet has devised for the occasion:

This dance, which he wanted her to perform so much and had especially devised for her, consisted of a series of voluptuous poses one following another; private-room-in-a-bordello stuff but tasteful, he preferred her to undulate rhythmically rather than jump about and shake a leg. He liked her to put on all her bangles and beads when she did her dance, she dressed up in the set of clanking jewellery he'd

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<sup>5</sup> In A. Smith, "Myth and the Erotic", p. 28.

given her [...] (p. 11)<sup>6</sup>

The man does not listen to the words which accompany the foreign song; the European's poet does not bother with gathering the sense of a different culture. It is his eyes which are important and they are all for her, for her voluptuous figure, for this beautiful creature whose destiny is that of shining with reflected light:

She looked like the source of light but this was an illusion; she only shone because the dying fire lit his presents to her. Although his regard made her luminous, his shadow made her blacker than she was, his shadow could eclipse her entirely.

(p. 12)

The sense of the "Black Venus" story is perhaps all in

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<sup>6</sup> In her review of Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in her Time by Phyllis Rose, Carter writes: "As toothy, exuberant, not-precisely-pretty Josephine Baker grew into her new role of jungle queen, savage seductress and round Baudelairean Black Venus, she left off making faces". Expletives Deleted, Chatto & Windus, 1992, p. 194. But the personalities of the two women were not similar, as we read in "Black Venus", "vivacity, exuberance were never Jeanne's qualities [...] Consumption, combustion, these were her vocations" (p. 12).

The term "Venus" is often used as a nickname for Carter's female protagonists - the most notorious is Fevvers in Nights at the Circus, aptly called the "Cockney Venus". It could be worth recalling that the pagan goddess "represented the seductive passion to which an ascetic Christianity was austere opposed. However, this figure underwent the process of demonization that transformed all the classical deities during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries [...] Venus is no longer a symbol of the classical joy of life: she has become the devil incarnate, or at least his principal agent of temptation". T. Ziolkowski, Disenchanted Images, Princeton U.P., 1977, p. 27. In my opinion, Carter's use of the name perfectly reflects this dynamic of deification and demonization.

the above lines, in their metaphorical playing with light and shadow, the subtle, perverse chiaroscuro of a writing that transmutes into the most suggestive chromatic symbolism: the white of the light, the black of her skin, a black that gets deeper and deeper until the whole female body becomes invisible in the obliteration of a total eclipse; an eclipse which inexorably condemns her to a "death for oblivion".

The young creole, just sixteen, cannot oppose the will of the man from whom her survival depends. If one asks her the reason for such a submission, Carter argues, she would certainly maintain that, after all, her Daddy - this is the nickname she has given him - "is a good Daddy, buys her pretties, allocates her the occasional lump of hashish, keeps her off the street" (p. 11). So, she regards herself a lucky woman, the man who watches her naked bejewelled body dancing is young and handsome and not an old satyr; moreover she does not care even when he stares at her as if she were "an ambulant fetish, savage, obscene, terrifying" (p. 20). Like the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber" (and Evelyn with the black prostitute in The Passion of New Eve), the poet prefers staring at the woman's body while he is fully dressed:

It is essential to their connection that, if she should put on the garments of nudity, its non-sartorial regalia of jewellery and rouge, then he himself must retain the public nineteenth-century masculine impedimenta of frock coat (exquisitely cut): white shirt (pure silk, London tailored); oxblood cravat; and impeccable trousers. [...] Man [...] is artful, the creation of culture. Woman is; and is, therefore, fully dressed in no

clothes at all, her skin is common property, she is a being at one with nature in a fleshly simplicity that, he insists, is the most abominable of artifices. (pp. 19-20)

Any detail of the woman's body has an inebriating effect on his mind already excited by hashish: "His lively imagination performs an alchemical alteration on the healthy tang of her sweat, freshly awakened by dancing. He thinks her sweat smells of cinnamon because she has spices in her pores. He thinks she is made of a different kind of flesh than he is" (p. 19). To his eyes the "Black Venus" is nothing but a forbidden fruit to be tasted with voluptuous delight, a distillate of the most mysterious exotic liquid, a precious spring from which he can suck the ambrosia of poetic inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, when the poet declaims those lines he has written for her, she cannot help crying: they are the expression of her own submissive condition:

He recited it to her by the hour and she ached, raged and chafed under it because his eloquence denied her language. It made her dumb, a dumbness all the more profound because it manifested itself in a harsh clatter of ungrammatical recriminations [...] which were not directed at her lover so much [...] as at her own condition, [...] an ignorant black girl, good for nothing: correction, good for only one thing [...] (p. 18)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Linda Hutcheon aptly recalls what Baudelaire once wrote in his diary: "Eternal Venus, caprice, hysteria, fantasy, is one of the seductive forms [assumed] by the Devil", The Politics of Postmodernism, London & N.Y., Routledge, 1989, p.145.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview with A. Smith, Carter says: "The Black Venus poems are incredibly beautiful and also terribly offensive [...] I do like to think of her sitting there

Not surprisingly, the man does not understand the reason for that reaction, blind as he is to her real needs; he may expect a word of appreciation from the girl, but he is disappointed. The European poet is not able to comprehend her anger since he has never cared to know her. Carter depicts her sitting for hours beside the fireplace during the cold winter nights. If he had sat with her he would have discovered, although still in fieri, an unexpected tendency towards introspection:

she wondered what the distinction was between dancing naked in front of one man who paid and dancing naked in front of a group of men who paid. She had the impression that, somewhere in the difference, lay morality. [...] Prostitution was a question of number; of being paid more than one person at a time. That was bad. She was not a bad girl. When she slept with anyone but Daddy, she never let them pay. It was a matter of honour. It was a question of fidelity. (p. 12)

Here, Jeanne's desperate attempt to conform her identity and her behaviour with the moral and economic code of the society she lives in is clearly parodic in order to expose its ideological underpinning. However such an attempt is bound to fail because, as we read a few pages later: "Jeanne never had this temperament of the tradesperson, she did not feel she was her own property and so she gave herself away to everybody except the poet, for whom she had too much respect to offer such an

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thinking [...] I mean, she could have had limited revenges. But also, why should she have shored him up? He fucked her over!" "Myth and the Erotic", p. 29.



ambivalent gift for nothing" (p. 21).<sup>9</sup> The incapacity of thinking of herself as an autonomous being, her own property, is unsurprising: how can this "child of a colony", deprived of her history, imagine any kind of power, since she has always been just item of exchange? Even when the poet on his death bed, dying of syphilis, gives her his last francs, she is surprised "to find out how much she was worth" (p. 22).

And yet Jeanne has conserved deep inside her something untamed, irrepressible, a sort of "negative inheritance" no missionary has ever been able to cancel: "if you tried to get her to do anything she didn't want to, if you tried to erode that little steely nugget of her free will, which expressed itself as lethargy, you could see how she had worn away the patience of the missionaries" (p. 17).<sup>10</sup> As the girl herself admits, she and the poet's cat have something in common, not just because the man uses "the same gestures, the same endearments, he used on her" (p. 14) - further proof of how low she stands in his consideration - but because Jeanne seems to possess the same automatic aspiration

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<sup>9</sup> In this respect Jeanne is very different from Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride" who, as it has been previously argued, has a clear perception of herself in economic terms. In order to make the best out of her meeting with the Beast she admits: "my own skin was my sole capital in the world". ("The Tiger's Bride", p. 56).

<sup>10</sup> According to Smith, before writing "Black Venus" Carter might have read The World the Slaves Made by Eugene Genovese, drawing on it for the description of Duval's personality. "Myth and the Erotic", p. 28. However it should be noted that Carter's implication that Jeanne, like all her people has something untamable inside her, itself has elements of the discourse of race.

towards independence all felids have.<sup>11</sup>

The conclusion of the story is somewhat sarcastic: Jeanne, now fifty years old, is about to return to Martinique; this time her route is backwards. She is completely dressed in black and a veil covers a face disfigured by syphilis, and the beautiful figure which once danced naked before the fireplace is hidden behind dark clothes. At her side another man, a pimp, perhaps even a half-brother (Carter is vague on this point). It is he who has taken care of her since Baudelaire's death, who has sold everything he had left her. With the money thus obtained the "Black Venus" sets sail towards the Antilles to open a brothel where "she will continue to dispense, to the most privileged of the colonial administration, at a not excessive price, the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis" (p. 23).<sup>12</sup>

Carter concludes her tale almost with documentary precision: she reproduces in full a poem by Baudelaire - a line had already been quoted earlier in the story - together with the complete list of the works belonging to the so called "Black Venus cycle", usually regarded as inspired by Jeanne Duval.<sup>13</sup> This appendix, besides being

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<sup>11</sup> Like Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride", Jeanne feels she has something in common with a felid, although the implications of her final metamorphosis into a Baudelairean fetish are different from Beauty's.

<sup>12</sup> The conclusion recalls Lady Purple who, after regaining her freedom, hurries towards the nearest brothel.

<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon observes that the inclusion in this short story of some verses from Baudelaire's poem "Sed non satiata" is to be intended as "an ironic intertextual comment" not only on male desire "but also on hers,

a joke about scholarship, has a precise aim, that of emphasizing the impression of veracity; moreover, the sharp contrast with the atmosphere of the previous pages in which history, theory and social analysis had been cleverly transfigured into a polished prose seems to remind us, once again, that the aesthetic roots of Carter's writing lie in her deep interest in the socio-historical factors which are at the base of our existence. Although adopting literary techniques and narrative strategies typical of postmodernism - too quickly dismissed by Carter as a merely mannerist game<sup>14</sup> - she is trying to tackle very serious issues. In the case of "Black Venus", the intention was to say "something quite complicated about colonialism and sexuality" by choosing "the great French poet and his obscure girlfriend as emblematic figures".<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious that among Carter's aims there is also that of carrying out a demystification, from a feminist point of view, of the role of muse assigned to woman. Reversing the usual perspective she declares that the burden of "Black Venus" is "how awful it is to be a

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unsatiated as it is", The Politics of Postmodernism, p. 147. Carter's text contains several other "ironic intertextual comments" in the form of direct quotation from Baudelaire's poems.

<sup>14</sup> In an interview with J. Haffenden Angela Carter, speaking of postmodernist tendencies in contemporary fiction declares: "I think that fiction in Britain, and in the USA, is going through a very mannerist period. I think the adjective 'postmodernist' really means 'mannerist'. Books about books is fun but frivolous". Novelists in Interview, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> A. Smith, "Myth and the Erotic", p. 28.

muse":

Jeanne Duval [...] didn't want to be a muse; as far as one can tell, she had a perfectly horrid time being a muse. She felt that she should take Baudelaire for as much as she could get. He treated her, as they say, Quite Well, except that he appears not to have taken her in any degree seriously as a human being. I mean you can't take a muse seriously as a human being, or else they stop being a muse; they start being something that hasn't come to you to inspire you, but a being with all these problems [...] You can't take people seriously and regard them as a divine [...] The concept of the muse is - it's another magic Other, [...] another way of keeping women out of the arena. There's a whole book by Robert Graves dedicated to the notion that poetic inspiration is female, which is why women don't have it. It's like haemophilia; they're the transmitters [...] But they don't suffer from it themselves.<sup>16</sup>

As in many other works by Carter, we are faced with a story that exemplifies the processes through which gender is originated, but this time Jeanne Duval becomes the subject of her hi/story whereas previously, in the role of muse, she was merely an object.

Linda Hutcheon in The Politics of Postmodernism rightly argues that in this tale "the discourses of male erotic representation of woman and those of female and colonial self-representations are juxtaposed with a certain political efficacy".<sup>17</sup> Yet, if we position Carter's work within a postmodernist perspective, the evidence for such a "political efficacy" is not so clear,

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<sup>16</sup> In K. Goldsworthy, "Interview with Angela Carter", Meanjin, Adelaide, XLIV, 1, 1985, pp. 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> L. Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism, p. 53.

because the real ideological impact of the various aesthetic theories today collected under the label of postmodernism are uncertain. According to Hutcheon "It is not just a matter of feminism having had a major impact on postmodernism, but perhaps postmodern strategies can be deployed by feminist artists to deconstructive ends - that is, in order to begin the move towards change (a move that is not, in itself, part of the postmodern)".<sup>18</sup>

"Black Venus" is not the only story in the collection which aims to throw light on female figures obliterated by history in favour of more famous male partners, be they husbands, lovers or sons. In "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" the protagonists are Elizabeth and Virginia Poe, respectively mother and wife of the famous American writer. As I argued in the previous chapter, Poe had a great influence on Carter - "he was one of my heroes" she admits in an interview with Anne Smith - but the motives for this story perhaps stem from the cryptic comment of one of Carter's American friends, a writer according to whom "Poe had the key to the most peculiar aspects of America".<sup>19</sup> So "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" becomes the most accurate representation of what Carter calls the "dark America", a country divided in two, North and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem p. 149. On the complex and controversial relationship between postmodernism and feminism, see chapter VII below.

<sup>19</sup> In A. Smith, "Myth and the Erotic", p. 29. According to Smith, it is this short-story that best displays Carter's talent "for turning the world outside-in and shaking out the meaning," thus achieving what the author defines as "a kind of literary criticism: literary criticism as fiction, really" Idem.

South, to which correspond a symbolic distinction between light and darkness. Another component of the story is Poe's "bizarre" sexuality, as Carter herself defines it, whose roots she detects in his early life when he experienced two sides of womanhood: one infinitely horrifying, the other infinitely desirable. Since his mother was an actress (often playing young male roles) he perceived the "constructed" element of femininity watching her "making up", but he also saw the biological reality of his mother giving birth or feeding her children.

Among the stories collected in Black Venus I wish also to discuss "Our Lady of the Massacre", another example of how Carter reworks different literary genres, in this case she deals with the American tradition of the captivity narrative which dates back to the late seventeenth century.<sup>20</sup> But "Our Lady of the Massacre" is also a beautiful portrait of a nouvelle Moll Flanders. The protagonist is a prostitute from London who is deported to Virginia to work in a plantation; in the end she escapes from the plantation finding for the first time in her life real freedom among the "savage" Indians. Unfortunately, her freedom does not last long because, as

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<sup>20</sup> The genre begins with Mary White Rowlandson in 1682 when she published The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson. This is an account of Rowlandson's and her two children's captivity in the hands of the Narragansett Indians and of how she gradually learned how to survive with them. The book went through many editions, becoming a classic.

expected, the village is destroyed by the white man in uniform and most of the natives are killed. The girl escapes the massacre together with her baby, but ends up working as a maid in the house of a devoted missionary. His wife, who cannot have children, would like to adopt the baby, leaving the young mother to marry and start a new life, but the "Lady of the Massacre", who throughout her story has always changed her character and nature to adapt to different circumstances (in this way Carter registers how a woman is defined by the society she lives in), proudly refuses. The story ends with a strong affirmation of the right to independence so often denied to outcasts: "she will never have my little lad for her son, nor will I have Jabez Mather for my husband, nor any man living, but sit and weep by the waters of Babylon" (p. 48).

The tone of "Peter and the Wolf" is in sharp contrast with that of the stories mentioned so far, closer in mood to the stories of The Bloody Chamber. It is set in a northern village, among snowy mountains where mysterious beings, werewolves and ferocious beasts, are very much part of life. What is told here is the story of a "Wolf-Alice", a child brought up by wolves. Her relatives, in particular her grandmother, would like to make her a human being again by taming her, but at the end the girl is rescued by the wolves thus regaining that freedom she had lost.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For an interesting reading of "Peter and the Wolf" see E. Jordan, "Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative

In conclusion, I would argue that in Black Venus a very precise intent is at work: that of giving a voice to those figures who have been forced to live on the margins of society and of human history. In the past literature has often been silent accomplice of their marginalization; Carter's work can help in giving them a fictional life.<sup>22</sup>

It should also be stressed that the narrative discourse preferred by the author, in this as well as in The Bloody Chamber and Fireworks, is that of the fantastic, a fantastic which, in the case of Carter, finds its best expression in the short-story and in the tale rather than in the novel.<sup>23</sup> Angela Carter herself

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Fictions" in Plotting Change, L. Anderson ed., London, Arnold, 1990, pp. 24-26.

<sup>22</sup> For its discussion of racial as well as of feminist themes in "Black Venus", and in many of the stories included in this collection, compare the works of some black female writers like Alice Walker, Maria Angelou or Toni Morrison. The latter's Beloved (1987) is the best example in this sense, being a sort of historical novel on negro slavery and a brilliant piece of feminist writing.

<sup>23</sup> As it has been argued in the previous chapter Poe's tales have often been a useful model for Angela Carter. It should also be noted that there hasn't been much theoretical attention to the short-story, (even less to the novella) so, given the lack of critical interest, their enormous narrative potentialities have not been aptly underlined. One of the first studies is by Sean O'Faolan, The Short Story, Cork, The Mercier Press, 1972 (first published London, 1948), I will mention also Frank O'Connor's The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story, London Macmillan, 1963 and, more recently, The Short Story: A Critical Introduction, London & N.Y., Longman, 1983 by Valerie Shaw. Here, speaking of The Bloody Chamber - but the comment is valid also for the two collections I have been discussing so far - Shaw claims that: "The stories in The Bloody Chamber "exemplify the enlivening role short narrative still has to play in 'the long evolution of fiction'", p. 263.



has underlined the advantages of such genres:

I started to write short pieces when I was living in a room too small to write a novel in. So the size of my room modified what I did inside it and it was the same with the pieces themselves. The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative.<sup>24</sup>

But as I argued with reference to The Bloody Chamber, short narratives are not necessarily exempt from those "multiplying ambiguities" which derive from the very personal use each author makes of them, thus proving, once again, how groundless is the idea according to which certain literary genres present a sort of natural or ideological "inclination".<sup>25</sup>

What is evident is that writing short pieces seems particularly congenial to Carter who, following Poe's example, can make the most of it according to her intention and taste.<sup>26</sup> She has an extraordinary

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<sup>24</sup> Afterword to Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces, London Quartet, 1974, cit. in P. Duncker, "Re-imagining fairy tales: Angela Carter's bloody chambers" Popular Fictions, London & N.Y., Methuen, p. 222.

<sup>25</sup> I don't agree with Duncker when she maintains that: "Carter chooses to inhabit a tiny room of her own in the house of fiction. For women that space has always been paralytically, cripplingly small; I think we need the 'multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative' to imagine ourselves whole". "Re-imagining fairy tales: Angela Carter's bloody chambers", pp. 235-236.

<sup>26</sup> According to Shaw "Poe's method is particularly well-suited to fantastic themes, pushing narrative to an extreme point where both reader and protagonist find dream merging with reality", The Short Story: A Critical Introduction, p. 53.

metaphorical talent that, far from falling into the trap of a sterile narcissism, involves precise social demands and a deep exploration of humanity. Such writing is always able to play upon the reader's most intimate feelings, to awake his memories and gather them around the core of a fairy-tale world. Carter's subtly ironic narrative rejects reality as it is but at the same time does not offer an idyllic dream-like alternative; in other words we are faced with something that while reminding us of reality, suggests its difference. The author smashes the facade of univocal reality by refusing its conventional simplification within the strict codification of traditional narration, well aware of the extreme complexity which concerns the relation between things and their names, objects and their representations in a narrative structure. The dimension of the inner Self appears to be estranged, threatening and incomprehensible, writing then becomes the best way of expressing such feelings; the obscure forces which remain latent in our unconscious are finally free from the constraints of morality. What Carter tries to depict with her literary phantasmagorias are not so much fanciful chimeras, rather the materiality of imaginative life in which she so stubbornly believes: the materiality of the unconscious and of its impenetrable dreams.

### CHAPTER III

#### The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

Voluptuousness is the great secret of our being, sensuality the most important mechanism in human machinery. (Tieck)

At the narrative core of The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman, first published in 1972, there is a war on whose outcome the whole destiny of humanity depends.<sup>1</sup> On one side we have Dr Hoffman, who has found a way of modifying the space-time sequence and thus materializing people's desires, on the other the Minister of Determination, who commands the secret police whose main task is that of destroying whatever becomes evident following Hoffman's experiments.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it is as if we were presented with the Freudian reality principle, extremely pragmatic and positivistic, to whom is opposed the surrealist

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<sup>1</sup> A. Carter, The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman, (1972), Hamondsworth, Penguin, 1982. All the quotations in this chapter refer to the more recent edition and are indicated by page number.

<sup>2</sup> "The Minister" is a strenuous defender of a fixed and immutable reality, as Desiderio recalls: "He believed the criterion of reality was that a thing was determinate and the identity of a thing lay only in the extent to which it resembled itself" (p. 23).

aspiration to finally free humanity from the constrictions imposed by reason and history. If we put the novel into the perspective of the period in which it was written we could well agree with Ricarda Schmidt when she argues that Hoffman embodies the radical slogan of 1968: "L'imagination au pouvoir", whereas "the Minster" represents the political Establishment.<sup>3</sup>

I will start with an overview of the protagonist's adventures, a sort of personal quest, as it is argued further on, for his own gender identity. Far from being just plot summary this first stage is a sort of "textual referent" I offer to the reader and in which are introduced (often by way of footnotes) several discourses which are going to be properly discussed later on. There are many and very complex discourses implied in this novel, including those of gender politics and identity shifting (recurrent themes in Carter's work); what is more specific in Hoffman is a parodic criticism of the radical thought of the 1960's (especially of Reich and his attempt to link Marxism and psychoanalysis), and a focus on the question of "Desire" (male and female), on the ways through which it manifests itself and is appropriated both on the social and the discursive level. As in the case of Bloody Chamber (where I discussed the possibility for the fairy-tale genre of being used for feminist aims) I tackle the question of whether Carter's

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<sup>3</sup> R. Schmidt, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", Textual Practice, 3, 1, Spring 1989, p. 56.

narrative subversion of the mechanisms of identification which have trapped women in a category of gender others have defined for them is successful or, paradoxically, corroborates what it had intended to criticize. In order to give an answer to this question I once again put Carter's work in the context of contemporary postmodernist aesthetics. This for two reasons: the first is that although Hoffman was published in 1972, in a way it anticipated many of the questions which are part of today's critical debate, to the point that no critic can "read" this text disregarding this context (Sally Robinson offers an admirable example in her Engendering the Subject). The second reason is that I view Carter's ambiguities (especially from a feminist perspective) as an early example of what Hutcheon defines as "the political ambidexterity of postmodernism" (it should be stressed that the issue of when postmodernism actually begins is highly controversial). In the final part of this chapter I will also briefly discuss Heroes and Villains (1969) which explores discourses like myth, desire and social control, akin to those examined earlier on.

The story is narrated by the protagonist, Desiderio, fifty years after the events took place. By now he has become a sort of national hero, following his defeat of the perilous scientist. His autobiography has no self-congratulatory tone and is tinged with sadness since it is nothing but the account of events now recorded in

history, made by an old man who has lost the identity he once had:

I was a great hero in my time though now I am an old man and no longer the "I" of my own story and my time is past, even if you can read about me in the history books - a strange thing to happen to a man in his own lifetime. It turns one into posterity's prostitute. And when I have completed my autobiography, my whoredom will be complete. (p. 14)

The account begins when the course of the war turned to the worse and the Minister decided to send Desiderio on an important mission to find Hoffman's hiding place and kill him. The young man who ironically bears the name of what he is ordered to destroy, embarks on a long and perilous journey that becomes a personal "quest" which, from a thematic as well as from an iconographic point of view, is figured in terms of myth, anthropology, gothic and picaresque novels, Hollywood films, and fairy tales.<sup>4</sup>

The offensive launched by Hoffman was initially

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<sup>4</sup> In Schmidt's opinion, Carter criticizes the dogma of the late 1960s, according to which freedom, on the individual as well as on the social level, is reached only when the socially motivated repressions that condition our desires are finally eliminated. Carter wishes then to demonstrate how deceptive are those theories with their assumption that human beings are good by nature. She emphasizes instead the unconscious's ability to create conflicting desires, both positive and negative, thus following Freud's teaching with regard to the fact that the sublimation or non-satisfaction of desire is necessary for the development of the subject.

On this point Punter is accused by Schmidt of viewing the "sexual revolution advocated by Reich and Marcuse in rather nostalgic terms", R. Schmidt, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 61.

imperceptible: the taste of sugar, for example, became day after day similar to that of the salt, a door changed its colour from blue into grey and so on until there were serious repercussions for the entire town, initially described as "prosperous [...] thickly, obtusely masculine", and later as a living being about to be destroyed by the seismic vibrations produced by Hoffman:

Consider the nature of a city. It is a vast repository of time, the discarded times of all the men and women who have lived, worked, dreamed and died in the streets which grow like a wilfully organic thing, unfurl like the petals of a mired rose and yet lack evanescence so entirely that they preserve the past in haphazard layers [...] Dr Hoffman's gigantic generators sent out a series of seismic vibrations which made great cracks in the hitherto immutable surface of the time and space equation we had informally formulated in order to realize our city and, out of these cracks, well - nobody knew what would come next. [...] the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity; it had become the arbitrary realm of dream. (pp. 17-18)<sup>5</sup>

In less than two years activity in the town stopped. The only means of transportation allowed by the Minister was the bicycle, since he believed that they work through an act of will: the idea was that by refraining from using

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<sup>5</sup> On the recurrence in Carter's work of the image of the city, often depicted as a human body, she comments: "I was trained as a medievalist; I specialised in medieval English literature when I was a student. And I responded particularly to certain of the imagery of medieval poetry and of course the city was a very strong metaphor". K. Goldsworthy, "Interview with Angela Carter", Meanjin, Adelaide, XLIV, 1, 1985, p. 12. See also notes no. 5 and 6 in chapter IV.

imagination, one could avoid its dangers.<sup>6</sup> The number of suicides grew enormously while epidemics spread; very soon the town, again compared to a living being, was abandoned by its inhabitants:

Slowly the city acquired a majestic solitude. There grew in it, or it grew into, a desolate beauty, the beauty of the hopeless, a beauty which caught the heart and made the tears come. One would never have believed it possible for this city to be beautiful. (p. 21)

At this point Desiderio decides to accept the Minister's proposal and leave in search of the wicked doctor. The first stop of his long journey is in a small town, here he meets an old blind man, owner of a peep show. In spite of his present poor conditions he once was a respected professor, and Desiderio discovers that he taught Hoffman the first notions of physics, before the young scientist abandoned him as soon as he had learnt everything he needed. From then on the old professor has wandered about villages and towns with his peep show full of ready-made desires, now less in demand because Hoffman has started to disseminate them everywhere and for free. Desiderio decides to speak with the Mayor of the town, but his home is empty with the exception of an old maid and his young daughter who immediately perceives the mysterious essence of the young man's name:

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<sup>6</sup> The defensive strategy put in practice by the Minister recalls Plato's expulsion of the poets from the city, Republica, Book III.



"I am Mary Anne, the Mayor's daughter. Who are you?"

"I am a civil servant and my name is Desiderio."

She repeated the name quietly to herself but with a curious quiver in her voice which might have been pleasure and eventually she confided:

"Desiderio, the desired one, did you know you have eyes just like an Indian?" (p. 54)<sup>7</sup>

The ethereal girl, whose skin is as white as marble, usually spends her days playing Chopin, but her real peculiarity consists, as Desiderio finds out, in being a sleep-walker; she does not even wake up when she enters into his room and Desiderio makes love to her. Mysteriously, the next day the body of the girl is found on the beach:

Dead, she could not have had a whiter skin than when she lived. She was dead. But still I tried to revive her.

I was overwhelmed with shock and horror. [...] I crouched over the sea-gone wet doll in an attitude I knew to be a cruel parody of my own previous night, my lips pressed to her mouth, and it came to me there was hardly any difference between what I did now and what I had done then, for her sleep had been a death. (p. 61)

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<sup>7</sup> As Schmidt rightly points out Desiderio is the active form of the verb to desire and not the passive as mistakenly argued by the young girl, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 57. The ambiguity that characterizes the protagonist's name is further emphasised by Punter when he claims that: "'Desiderio,' the desired one, is also anagrammatically ambivalent: the name contains the 'desired I,' but also the 'desired O,' and this encapsulate the problems of subjectivity the text explores". "Angela Carter: Supersessions of the Masculine", Critique Studies Modern Fiction, 4, 25 (Summer), 1984, p. 213. One could add that misnaming (or renaming as in the case of Evelyn, Fevvers or Desiderio himself by the River People) confirms the instability of the subject position.

This vaguely gothic episode forces Desiderio to hastily leave town, the police wanting him for sexual abuse of a minor, murder and even necrophilia. It is only thanks to a perfect disguise and to his facial lineaments, so similar to those of an Indian, that he can safely escape, ending up in the strange community of the River People. Of course Desiderio's face is not the indicator of a "real" resemblance but of a disruption at the level of identity which permeates, as I will argue, the whole novel.

While staying with the River People, Desiderio is adopted by one of the tribe's families; he is given a new name, Kiku, meaning "foundling bird", suitable since he has never known the love of a real family (the son of a prostitute he never met his father, although he carries on his face a genetic imprint of his Indian origin). Not surprisingly, one of the main objectives of his quest consists in looking for a father figure: "perhaps the whole history of my adventure could be titled 'Desiderio in Search of a Master'" (p. 190).

The tribe of the River People is not only a perfect hiding-place, but also a place where Desiderio can experience for the first time in his life the warm atmosphere of a real home:

As for myself, I knew that I had found the perfect place to hide from the Determination Police and, besides, some streak of atavistic, never-before-acknowledged longing in my heart now found itself satisfied. I was in hiding not only from the Police but from my Minister as well, and also from my own quest. I had abandoned my quest.

You see, I felt the strongest sense of home-coming. (p. 76)

As Sally Robinson rightly points out in her stimulating study Engendering the Subject, the tribe of the River People is defined according to female terms: their thinking does not follow a linear logic but proceeds by "subtle and intricate interlocking circles";<sup>8</sup> their social structure "was theoretically matrilineal though in practice all decisions devolved upon the father" (p.80). The young Desiderio is soon completely immersed in this culture still unspoiled by civilization and extreme in its "ex-centric ethnicity".<sup>9</sup> He follows its rites and customs by courting his future baby wife Aoi and by even making love to her grandmother "Mama", thus implicitly resolving his Edipic complex to the point where he can say: "Indeed, I was growing almost reconciled to mothers" (p. 85).<sup>10</sup> This experience has the obvious effect of alleviating his anxieties regarding his maleness, anxieties which derive from the absence of a father and the predominance of the mother. Another way for easing

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<sup>8</sup> S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, N.Y., State Univ. of N.Y. Press, 1991, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> As L. Hutcheon maintains in The Poetics of Postmodernism, London & N.Y., Routledge, 1988, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> According to Altini, the kind of relationships that Desiderio has both with Aoi and her grandmother seem to confirm the idea that "the author views the Edipic situation as closely connected with the symbolic dimension, in other words the prohibition of incest and the Oedipus complex cannot be conceived simply from a biological perspective and outside of the cultural dimension of symbolism". [translation mine] P. Altini, Eros, Mito e Linguaggio nella Narrativa di Angela Carter, Pisa, ETS, 1990, p. 48, note no. 34.

them consists, according to Robinson, in the fact that Desiderio himself, from an androcentric point of view, is convinced that women aspire to masculinity - he finds evidence in the tribe's mothers who manipulate the clitoris of their daughters until it assumes certain sexually appealing proportions.

The idyllic atmosphere Desiderio enjoys among the River People does not last long: he has to leave in order to save his life when the family of his wife decides to eat him as part of the wedding banquet, in order to ingest the knowledge he possesses. It should be noted that these people are completely illiterate and Desiderio had used Gulliver's Travels to teach them how to write and read (significantly, Carter chooses an intertextual referent which parodies travel literature and European civilization).

Following his escape from the perilous tribe, Desiderio joins the so-called fairground people, the very peculiar members of a travelling fair: among them there are Mexican comedians, American riders, Japanese dwarfs, Norwegian acrobatic motor-cyclists and also some living wonders like the alligator man and the bearded woman (Madame la Barbe).<sup>11</sup> Given the continuous process of identity-shifting which characterizes Desiderio's quest

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<sup>11</sup> The repertoire of different humanity that animates the travelling fair brings to mind Tod Browning's Freaks (1932). The film is a symbolic description of the thin border that separates normality from abnormality through the nightmarish story of a trapeze artist who marries a dwarf for his money; later she kills him but is finally punished by the "monsters" of the circus which will transform her into a chicken/woman.

it is unsurprising that the young man is utterly fascinated by the sort of carnivalesque disorder that reigns in this community and by its members; although it should be noted that the appeal was mutual:

They were not in the least aware how extraordinary they were because they made their living out of the grotesque. [...] The fairground was a moving toyshop, an ambulant rare-show coming to life in convulsive fits and starts whenever the procession stopped, regulated only by the implicit awareness of a lack of rules. [...] I must admit that all my guests enchanted me and I, in turn, enchanted them for, here, I had the unique allure of the norm. (pp. 99-101)

The two stars of the travelling fair seem very attracted to Desiderio: Madame la Barbe, whose behaviour towards him is similar to that of an old aunt, spoiling him with sweets and candies, and Mamie Buckskin, "the sharp shooter", the phallic woman often featured in many of Carter's works:

Her rifles were fire-spitting extensions of her arms and her tongue also spat fire. She always dressed herself in fringed leather garments of the pioneers of the old West yet her abundant yellow hair was always curled and swept up in the monumental style of the saloon belle while a very feminine locket [...] bounced between her lavish breasts. She was a paradox - a fully phallic female with the bosom of a nursing mother and a gun [...] perpetually at her thigh. [...] She took a great liking to me for she admired passivity in a man more than anything [...] (pp. 108-109)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The best characterization of the phallic woman is that of "Mother" in The Passion of New Eve.

This is nothing compared with the painful experience Desiderio is about to have with "The Acrobats of Desire", a group of nine Moroccan acrobats by whom he is brutally sodomized:

All nine were the same height and shared a similar, almost female sinuosity of spine and marked developments of the pectorals [...] for their stunning gyrations they donned costumes which might have been designed by Cocteau [...] or Caligula [...] A larger half moon hung from the left ear of each of them and they painted their eyes thickly with khol [...] They gilded their finger and toe nails and rouged their lips a blackish red. When they were dressed, they negated physicality; they looked entirely artificial. (p.113) <sup>13</sup>

The acrobats seem the embodiment or the "artificial creation" of the European male desire as regards homosexuality. Desiderio's rape is described with the same impression of estrangement on the part of the victim, woman or man, that characterizes so many rape scenes in Carter's novels:

The pain was terrible. I was most intimately ravaged I do not know how many times. [...] They were inexhaustible fountains of desire and I soon ceased to be conscious of my body, only of the sensation of an arsenal of swords piercing sequentially that most private and unmentionable of apertures. [...] They gave me the most comprehensive anatomy lesson a man ever suffered [...] (p. 117)

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<sup>13</sup> In an interview with Lorna Sage, Carter declares that the name "The Acrobats of Desire" is similar to that of a rock band in Sheffield. (she was Fellow in Creative Writing at the University from 1976 to 1978). See L. Sage, "The Savage Sideshow", New Review, 39/40, 1977, p. 56.

Thus, Desiderio is given a hard lesson: this episode, according to Ricarda Schmidt, shows how the absolute freedom of desire advocated by Hoffman can be a very positive and satisfying experience on the one hand, but also a very cruel and painful one on the other. Carter emphasizes the victim's voluptuous complaisance to the point that, as in the above passage, Desiderio himself adopts a beautiful metaphor comparing his assailants to "fountains of desire".<sup>14</sup>

After Desiderio leaves the fairground people the atmosphere becomes vaguely gothic again. He meets "The Erotic Traveller", a very peculiar character all dressed in black garments and with the appearance of an aristocrat. He is accompanied by a young boy who addresses him as "Count", and they travel on an eighteenth century carriage. Desiderio, almost immediately, has mixed feelings about him, a sort of attraction/repulsion impulse perhaps because his tall and thin figure, the sinister look of his eyes and the sharp teeth all remind him of a vampire. On the other hand, however, he seems to possess something that makes him very attractive, irony: "Everything about him was excessive, yet he tempered his vulgarity [...] with a black , tragic humour of which he was only occasionally conscious himself" (p. 123). To the list of his virtues one should also add a strong will similar, in many

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<sup>14</sup> R. Schmidt, op.cit., p. 60. I would add that such a metaphor could also be viewed as another exploitation of Desiderio's name/identity, he is a "fountain of desire".

respects, to that of the "Minister". The Count, it becomes evident, is a perfect impersonification of the Marquis de Sade, whose blasphemous creed he thoroughly endorses:

Sometimes my meagre and derisive lips seem to me to have been formed by nature only to spit out the word "no", as if it were the ultimate blasphemy. I should like to speak an ultimate blasphemy and then bask in the security of eternal damnation but, since there is no God, well, there is no damnation, either, unfortunately. And hence, alas, no final negation. (pp. 123-124)<sup>15</sup>

A few pages later he proudly declares:

"I have devoted my life to the humiliation and exaltation of the flesh. I am an artist; my material is the flesh; my medium is destruction; and my inspiration is nature". (p. 126)

Before such a show of malicious ingenuity Desiderio suspects that the Count is Hoffman in disguise. Nevertheless he decides to continue his journey in their company until they arrive at the "House of Anonymity", a castle/brothel in perfect gothic style, whose gate is always open for those who have money. Beyond the entrance are a dozen women locked in cages. All of a sudden, and while the Count is still absorbed in trying to satisfy

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<sup>15</sup> The Count's blasphemous creed is echoed by Carter when to Sage's question: "You feel one needs still to be anti-God?", she replies: "Oh yes! It's like being a feminist, you have to keep the flag flying. Atheism is a very rigorous system of disbelief, and one should keep proclaiming it. One ought not to be furtive about it". Ibidem, p. 57.



his sadistic desires, the police arrive and Desiderio, together with his fellow travellers, is forced to hastily leave again. This time he crosses the sea and lands, after having luckily escaped a shipwreck, on the coast of a savage Africa, populated by bloodthirsty cannibals. It is here that the Count finally is freed from his cruelty when, for the first time in his life, he suffers pain by the hands of a savage tribe that, paradoxically as it could seem, is the product of his imagination. But before the Count is put in the huge pot full of hot water by the cannibals, the reader is given the chance of knowing more about the customs of the tribe in question: it is the chief in person who describes to Desiderio and his two fellow travellers the very strict rules according to which he governs his people. The greatest peculiarity regards the fact that his small army of warriors is entirely made up by women, and for the following good reasons:

Gentlemen, if you rid your hearts of prejudice and examine the bases of the traditional notions of the figure of the female, you will find you have founded them all on the remote figure you thought you glimpsed, once, in your earliest childhood, bending over you with an offering of warm, sugared milk [...] Tear this notion of the mother from your hearts. Vengeful as nature herself, she loves her children only in order to devour them better and if she herself rips her own veils of self-deceit, Mother perceives in herself untold abysses of cruelty as subtle as it is refined. (p. 160)

As if this were not enough, he also adds that all the girls, as soon as they reach puberty, have their clitoris

brutally excised: "So our women folk are entirely cold and respond only to cruelty and abuse".<sup>16</sup>

When the chief finishes his speech about the customs of the tribe, everything is ready for the start of the cannibalistic rite, but Desiderio, quicker than anyone else, disarms one of the guards and kills the chief with a precise shot in his forehead; in the confusion which follows both he and Lafleur, the young companion of the Count, escape into the forest. It should be said at this point that the mysterious Lafleur is in fact Albertina, Hoffman's beautiful daughter. Actually, the image of Albertina had accompanied Desiderio throughout his journey: as with Tristessa in The Passion of New Eve the image of a woman is carried in the mind of the male protagonist, a product of his desire - "I did not know then that she travelled with me for she was inextricably mingled with my idea of her and her substance was so flexible she could have worn a left glove on her right

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<sup>16</sup> On the practice of female circumcision, it is worth citing D. Holbrook in Images of Woman, N.Y. U.P., 1989. Quoting Winnicott he claims: "Psychoanalytical and allied work [...] demonstrate that all individuals have in reserve a certain fear of woman. [...] Winnicott relates this fear to the individual's fear in early childhood of the parents, to the fear of a combined figure ('a woman with male potency included in her powers [the witch]'), and to the 'fear of the mother who has absolute power at the beginning of the infant's existence to provide, or to fail to provide, the essentials for the early establishment of the self as an individual" (p.48). According to Winnicott, Holbrook continues, such fear is the main cause for the immense amount of cruelty and violence that civilization has perpetrated against women, including practices like the "female circumcision", that is the mutilation of the clitoris and the elimination of a physical pleasure.

hand - if she had wanted to, that is" (p. 142).

In the magic forest of the "Nebulous Time" where spatio-temporal categories do not exist Desiderio and Albertina discover a community of Centaurs.<sup>17</sup> Despite their friendly behaviour Albertina will soon be raped by some of them, while, at the same time and in a striking contrast, Desiderio is cuddled by a number of female Centaurs described as "the tenderest, if the most perverse, of mothers". A few days later, wandering about the reality status of that strange society Albertina will admit that: "the beasts were still only emanations of her own desires, dredged up and objectively reified from the dark abysses of the unconscious" (p. 186). However, it could also well be that the violence she has suffered was an emanation of Desiderio's desires, as he himself seems to think:

At the back of my mind flickered a teasing image, that of a young girl trampled by horses. I could not remember when or where I had seen it, such a horrible thing; but it was the most graphic and haunting of memories and a voice in my mind

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<sup>17</sup> According to McHale, Carter is here parodying a kind of imperialism typical of European imagination. There is an Africa populated by the cannibals, but in the same continent there is also room for a Western myth like that of the Centaurs. McHale writes: "Carter elaborates the ontological confrontation between this world and the "world next door" into a literal agonistic struggle, analogous to the science-fiction topos of the 'war of the worlds'". Postmodernist Fiction, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1987, p. 55.

More precisely Robinson points out that misogyny seems to be common both to imperialistic imagination and patriarchal ideology, in this sense it is significant that Desiderio has a certain liking for the Centaurs whose culture regards "the virile principle" so highly. S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, p. 115.

[...] told me that I was somehow, all unknowing, the instigator of this horror. (p. 181)

So, rape seems to be the direct result of male desire, the obvious consequence of a patriarchal and hypocritically puritanical society that views femininity in terms of passivity and masochism.<sup>18</sup>

Having left behind the community of the Centaurs, this time too in a very hasty manner, Desiderio and Albertina finally arrive at Hoffman's castle. By now our hero is well aware that his quest is almost over and hopes to experience again that warm feeling of "home coming" briefly experienced among the "River People". Unfortunately, his hopes are going to be disappointed: "I waited expectantly for a sense of home coming but I experienced nothing. [...] I thought that perhaps now I was a stranger everywhere" (p. 195).

As soon as Desiderio is inside the castle he is amazed to find out that there is no sign of chaos or anarchy in the home of the man who has spread the seed of irrationality throughout the world; he is forced to admit that "everything was safe. Everything was ordered. Everything was secure" (p. 197). While walking along a corridor his attention is attracted by some paintings hanging on the walls. Their subjects are well known, but the history is faulty: one of them depicts Leon Trotsky

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that Desiderio himself has experienced the same kind of violence ("I knew from my own experience the pain and indignity of a rape" p. 179), as will be the case in The Passion of New Eve, when the rapist Evelyn later becomes the raped Eve.

intent on composing the "Eroica" symphony, another portrays Van Gogh writing Wuthering Heights and the most singular of all represents a blind Milton who decorates the Sistine Chapel. Albertina explains: "When my father rewrites the history books, these are some of the things that everyone will suddenly perceive to have always been true" (p. 198).<sup>19</sup>

After supper Desiderio can finally satisfy his curiosity and visit the private study of the scientist:

It was half Rotwang's laboratory in Lang's Metropolis but it was also the cabinet of Dr Caligari and, more than either, as I remember it, [...] it was the laboratory of a dilettante aristocrat of the late seventeenth century who dabbled in natural philosophy and tried his hand at necromancy, for there were even martyred shapes of pickled mandrake in bottles on the shelves and a mingled odour of amber and sulphur filled the air. (pp. 204-205)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> According to Hutcheon such a scene exemplifies the postmodern process of problematizing history, see "The Postmodern Problematizing of History", English Studies in Canada, 14, 1988, p. 380. On this point see also note 14, chapter VI. Hoffman's ability to modify history as he pleases is shared by the chief of the cannibal tribe, who proudly declares: "I have been very careful to suppress history for my subjects might learn lessons from the deaths of kings. [...] I allowed the past to exist as a series of rituals concerning the nature of my omnipotent godhead" (p. 162). The chief's statement could also be viewed as a kind of joke about Hegel's suggestion that Africa "has no history".

<sup>20</sup> Such a description seems to anticipate alchemical themes in Passion of New Eve.

Freud would certainly consider the scientist's exclusive interest in his work and his withdrawal from society as the sign of a neurosis. In Totem and Taboo he writes: "The asocial nature of neuroses had its genetic origin in their most fundamental purpose, which is to take flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of fantasy. The real world, which is avoided in this way by neurotics, is under the sway of

Even more astonishing are the laboratories placed in the castle's basements. At first it all looks like an enormous distillery but, among the various pieces of machinery, stand the outlines of some sort of cylindrical drums. Without pride and with the indolent air of the person who has nothing better to do, Hoffman describes his "reality modifying machines". In a nearby room there are the so-called "desire generators" whose work is supervised by a beautiful hermaphrodite "a harmonious concatenation of male and female [...] the inherent symmetry of divergent asymmetry" (p. 213). The walls all around are covered with mirrors which reflect the images of about a hundred couples, of different races, who copulate with indefatigable intensity within beds very similar to open coffins; it is they who produce the eroto-energy that makes Hoffman's machines working.

Contemplating the prospect of ending up in one of the empty coffins with Albertina, Desiderio, with the resoluteness that has always characterized the most difficult moments of his journey, shouts out his "no" to a destiny that, although apparently favourable in so far as he is allowed to possess the woman he desires forever, in reality condemns him to a death for sensuality. He assassinates the mad scientist, thus accomplishing his mission, and with enormous regret kills Albertina, the

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human society and of the institutions collectively created by it" (p. 74). Trans. by J. Strachey, N.Y., W.W. Norton, 1950 (1913).

woman he never had and whose possession would have meant his own death. In order to ensure that he cannot go back he burns the bridge that leads to the castle, before setting off, sad and disillusioned, towards the town from which he left for his long journey.

As it has been argued at the outset of this chapter, The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman bears marks of its origin in the 1960s, that is in that period of recent history when cultural and political subjectivity, theory and praxis, ideology and political activism were passionately debated. Herbert Marcuse, to take one key figure, proposed a new reading of psychoanalysis, emphasizing the crucial role that Eros and sexuality play in the life of the individual, as well as of the collectivity.<sup>21</sup> Besides his well noted Eros and Civilization (1955), Norman O. Brown's Life against Death (1959) can be regarded as one of the most important texts of those years, mounting a tremendous accusation against a Western civilization guilty, according to Brown, of having reduced to the condition of "symptom" the principle of pleasure that, in the form of desire, constitutes the "essence of man". To the

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<sup>21</sup> Carter herself declares her association with the culture of the 1960's when she says: "I'm from that generation that believed if you could actually find some way of making a synthesis of Marx and Freud you'd be getting towards a sort of universal explanation. Although I don't believe in a universal explanation as such, I really don't see what's wrong with that", A. Snitow, "Conversation with a Necromancer", Voice Literary Supplement, June 1989, p. 15.

normalizing and submissive logic of the reality principle Brown opposes, with his re-reading and re-evaluation of the late Freud, a notion of the unconscious as a polymorphous Eros or "desiring machine", a concept which in more recent times has been taken up by Deleuze and Guattari although (as Mario Galzigna acutely points out in his introduction to the Italian edition of Brown's work) the two French scholars never mention the name of the American.<sup>22</sup>

In any case what is envisaged is a society fully governed by the logic of desire. In this perspective it is easy then to view Hoffman - the one who first declares war on the reality principle, thus posing Superego and Id one against the other - as the perfect embodiment of the Dionysiac man Nietzsche had imagined, the kind of man who only through excess is able to exceed the limit and to arrive, as Blake maintained, at the Palace of Wisdom.<sup>23</sup> Such a Dionysus, in Brown's view, succeeds in

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<sup>22</sup> M. Galzigna, Introduction to La vita contro la morte, by N.O. Brown, (Life Against Death 1959), Milano, Bompiani, 1986, p. II

Desire is the term used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their revision of psychoanalysis, The Anti-Oedipus. The authors "disseminate" man not within language but in the uncodified flux of a "machine désirante", a machine of universal desire. These "schizo-analysts" as they define themselves, advocate a liberation of the instincts and a recognition of desire as the only source of any productive process. "Never", they maintain "can we go too far in the deterritorialization, the uncoding of fluxes. For the new earth [...] lies neither behind nor before us; it coincides with the realization of a desiring productivity [...]" In I. Hassan, "A Re-vision of Literature", New Literary History, VIII, 1, Autumn 1976, p.134.

<sup>23</sup> With reference to Hoffman as Dionysiac figure par excellence it is worth noting that McHale also underlines



containing within himself the two distinct poles of male and female (the hermaphrodite in Hoffman's laboratories embodies such view). In this sense Brown seems to envisage, as Galzigna acutely points out, the formation of a "bisexual consciousness", not at all misogynist; a sort of "corporeal Self" that is not the synthesis of the opposites, rather an ambivalent combination of both.<sup>24</sup> Appropriately the war initiated by Hoffman involves precisely that "dualism of the instinct" which, Brown maintains, is inherent in the subject if viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective.<sup>25</sup>

It goes without saying that there are libertarian aspects in Hoffman's project: liberation of the unconscious implies to him - quoting Marcuse to the letter - liberation of man ("By the liberation of the unconscious we shall, of course, liberate man" p. 208).<sup>26</sup>

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the presence of a manichean opposition between an Apollonian "Minister" and a Dionysiac doctor, Postmodernist Fiction, p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> M. Galzigna, op. cit., p. iv.

<sup>25</sup> It should be stressed that Freud's position on this point is not clear. If on the one hand he seems to suggest a renunciation of instincts, on the other he calls for their liberation or, at least, for a compromise. With regard to this very complex issue see Brown's discussion in Life against Death.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that the Frankfurt's School of the 1960's, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, denounced the miseries of bourgeoisie society, the central role of coitus within it and the sense of continuous frustration this society provokes since it makes promises without keeping them. Marcuse, in particular, claimed that the reduction in the working hours has only apparently been followed by a liberation of love, in other words what has prevailed is not the totalizing and transcendent force of Eros, but a sexuality localized in the erogenous zones. The incapability for overcoming the genital supremacy recalls Freud's warning according to which even the most

This effect is produced by the eroto-energy produced by hundreds of lovers engaged in an endless copulatio. Looking at that spectacle Desiderio cannot help noting the tremendous and unjustifiable hypocrisy of the scientist who, while trying to liberate man is paradoxically willing to deny him the most intimate of freedoms:

Besides, he was a hypocrite.

He penned desire in a cage and said: 'Look! I have liberated desire!' He was a hypocrite. [...] I was sure he only wanted power (pp. 208-209).<sup>27</sup>

If we move our discussion to an epistemological level, it could be argued that this novel offers itself as a metaphor for the debates, especially in the last two decades, between several categories of thought including rationalism and irrationalism. Viewed from this perspective the character of Dr Hoffman represents a whole philosophical tradition including Stirner,

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illimitate sexual freedom is not a real alternative to the repression of Eros, but can even coincide with a further degradation of its "psychic value".

The influence of such theories on the literary scene of the time is exemplified by Frye in "The Knowledge of Good and Evil". He calls for a society that will be able to perceive literature as "a projection of desire", a projection which would stem, according to Frye, not from reason but from Eros; in The Morality of Scholarship, Cornell U.P., 1967.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Clark has seen in the character of the scientist who collects the distillate of the energy produced by the coupling lovers and disseminates it, thus permitting ordinary people to visualize their own desires, a clear hint to Reich's theory (and practice) of the orgone box. "Angela Carter's Desire Machines", p. 154.

Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. The wicked scientist has declared war on the concept of reality, focusing all his energy on the exploration and materialization of what he defines as "the obscure and controversial borderline between the thinkable and the unthinkable". All his efforts aim at transcending linear and binary logic in order to underline the "loopholes in metaphysics". The epistemological revolution he then initiates reaches its climax with the reversal of the Cartesian creed, replaced with a more appropriate: "I DESIRE, THEREFORE I EXIST". By contrast, Hoffman's main enemy, "the Minister of Determination" is described as almost inhuman; he is compared to "a theorem, clear, hard, unified and harmonious".<sup>28</sup> Against him and, above all against the unsympathetic logic of the reality principle, the doctor will employ the mysteriously ambiguous power of the mirror - an important topos in Carter's work - in order to "disseminate" (the Derridian terminology is pertinent) his "lawless images" everywhere.

Actually, Hoffman's project exerts a certain attraction, especially for his attempt to liberate the universe from the coercive grip of logocentrism (a logocentrism of the sign as well as of the psyche: one

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<sup>28</sup> However, the complete cancellation of desire, here embodied by the Minister, can have tragic consequences, as the dystopic novel We, by Eugene Zamyatin clearly demonstrates. Here desires are even compared to a distressful affliction: "It is clear [...] that happiness is when there are no longer any desires, not a single desire any more". Trans. by Gregory Zilboorg, N.Y. E.P. Dutton, 1952 (1920), p. 171.

should not underestimate the clear concern with the psyche and with Desire within what is still a Freudian paradigm). But, as often happens with Carter, the reader is faced with an alternative even more menacing than what is meant to be replaced; the author deliberately emphasises (rather tendentiously I should say) the most destructive and anarchic aspects of this same alternative, to the detriment of a more balanced account of its useful potentialities. Such a strategy on the one hand leads to an ever increasing difference between the two kinds of logic, on the other presents the reader from the beginning with striking similarities between them. This is particularly evident in the scene in which the meeting between the Minister and Hoffman's ambassador is described: the latter reveals the dictatorial designs of his master when he claims "absolute authority to establish a regime of total liberation" (p.38).<sup>29</sup> Both these characters thus share a common, inexhaustible desire for power, in spite of the fact, or perhaps we should say because their positions stem from two different epistemological assumptions.

The Minister, as I have already argued, represents a positivist logic, an epistemology based on the preeminence of the human mind which tends towards the

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<sup>29</sup> B. McHale in Postmodernist Fiction, p. 144, rightly points out that while at the beginning the Minister and Dr Hoffman seemed one the opposite of the other, with the passing of time their characterization appears to be more complex, Desiderio himself will detect a Faustian drive together with a certain imaginative tension in the former and a sort of empiricism in the latter.

systematic elimination of any possible logical contradiction, whereas Hoffman seems to embody the kind of post-humanist epistemology, that, at least in its more vulgar versions, stresses the principle of contradiction, questioning rationality itself. It is also unsurprising that, as Sally Robinson argues, the two systems of thought become accomplices in placing the category of Man in a predominant position, to the detriment of his female opposite.<sup>30</sup> Robinson's argument is that in this novel, as well as in Eve, Carter questions the usual correspondence of biological sex and social gender, tracing at the same time an accurate map of the modalities through which female subjects are "constructed" both on a social and discursive level according to the dominant male categories. In this way the concept of gender is inexorably linked to that of power, giving rise to a whole set of tensions. Hoffman and Eve refer explicitly to such tensions by initiating (already in 1972 when the novel was first published) a practice of deconstruction of theoretical assumptions which are still at the core of contemporary critical discourses regarding our postmodern condition in general and woman's position inside it in particular.

According to Robinson The Infernal Desire Machines is a parody of the fictions of male subjectivity and desire. By creating a textual universe where the forces of reason and philosophical certainties are at war against

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<sup>30</sup> S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, pp. 98-117, passim.

those of desire and indetermination, Carter has parodied the liberal-humanistic tradition, as well as what is nowadays loosely called postmodernist epistemology. The "reality" of this universe is produced by the various articulations of desire. It is significant that the hero of the story is called Desiderio and the Minister of Determination sends him to destroy Hoffman's machines, the same machines which are erasing any glimpse of reality left in the world. In the course of his quest Desiderio, as we have seen, goes through very different experiences that become even more important than the reason for his journey. It should also be noted that woman, seen as a projection of Desiderio/desire, is assigned a whole range of subordinate roles, among which that of the erotic fetish is predominant. In Robinson's words:

She is, like Derrida's 'affirmative woman', an object put into circulation according to the logic of male desire. As object of the male gaze, she is subject to regulation, exploitation and violence. Yet Carter's overt and exaggerated masculinization of her narrative subverts the successful narrativization of violence against women - including the rhetorical violence that keeps women in the position of silent object. The text engenders its readers as political by de-naturalizing the processes by which narrative constructs differences - sexual, racial, class, national - according to the twin logics of desire and domination.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 22. According to Robinson, Albertina is a real "emanation" of her father like Irigaray's Athena, she is flexible, mutable, malleable, the ideal fetish in a text whose aim is precisely that of exposing the ways through which woman becomes a mere instrument in the hands of the male subject. Thus Desiderio - like Evelyn in the case of Tristessa - defines her as "his

As it has been previously argued, the whole textual universe of this novel is constituted by a ceaseless circulation of desire, real motive-power of the narrative discourse within which it is inevitably inscribed:

Narratives both tell of desire [...] and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification. Desire is in this view like Freud's notion of Eros, a force including sexual desire but larger and more polymorphous, which [...] seeks 'to combine organic substances into ever greater unities'. Desire as Eros, desire in its plastic and totalizing function, appears to me central to our experience of reading narrative.<sup>32</sup>

Problems arise when one realizes how hostile to femininity such desire is, thus revealing the necessity for further investigations into the modalities through which desire is generated and appropriated, and the various ways it has of manifesting itself.<sup>33</sup>

Desiderio's narrative strategy openly evokes the mythical quest whose typical plot Teresa de Lauretis

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Platonic other, necessary extinction, dream made flesh" (p. 215). Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>32</sup> P. Brooks quoted in A. Cranny Francis, Feminist Fictions, London, Polity Press, 1990, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> With regard to this issue, feminist critics have often expressed woman's marginalized experiences, thus implicitly basing their revision of the whole narrative process on different logics of coherence. Particularly interesting are, in my opinion, Robinson's arguments when in her Engendering the Subject she clearly states: "I am calling narrative any discourse that is mobilized by a desire to construct a history, an accounting of the limits and boundaries of gender, subjectivity, and knowledge", p. 17. See also the section entitled "Narrative and Desire" in Cranny Francis, Feminist Fictions, pp. 14-16.

identifies with the Edipic story, one of the cornerstones of Western patriarchal society.<sup>34</sup> The comparison with the Oedipus myth seems particularly fitting in this case in the light of the relationships Desiderio has with the different women he comes across - think of the River People for example - but also in consideration of the novel's conclusion. The young hero, after having killed both Hoffman and his daughter, begins his journey back satisfied at the accomplishment of his mission but also, like Oedipus, well aware that he is going to be punished for the knowledge he has acquired through his quest: "I knew I was condemned to disillusionment in perpetuity [...] My punishment had been my crime" (p.220).

I agree with Robinson when she argues that Carter in this novel is doing nothing else but exaggerating the usual parameters of such a mythical story, throwing new light upon the ways through which male desire succeeds in constructing the female subject, or better we should say, the female object according to his own will. Carter herself, as we are reminded, endorses the preeminence of such myths in The Sadeian Woman, when with reference to a certain kind of erotically motivated violence, she

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<sup>34</sup> T. de Lauretis even maintains, perhaps rather deterministically, that narrative discourse is completely male oriented, that is in an Oedipal sense, as a consequence women "should be suspicious of narrative because it tends toward sadism". On this point see her Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema, Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1984, chapter V. However, this does not imply for de Lauretis abandoning narrative activity tout court, rather she calls for a reelaboration of those same processes through which literature is continuously "genderized".



admits that similar practices:

reawaken the memory of the social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by castration, which is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus, to which it is related in the complex dialectic of imagination and reality that produces culture.<sup>35</sup>

It should also be stressed that in Hoffman Carter conducts her narration by appropriating a male subject whose writing could, on some occasions, be defined as pornographic and perfectly able to give voice to clearly misogynist fantasies. This in contrast with a literary tradition in which, as she herself notes in The Sadeian Woman, "Many pornographic novels are written in the first person as if by a woman, or use a woman as the focus of the narrative; but this device only reinforces the male orientation of the fiction".<sup>36</sup>

Such masculinization of narration can be detected in many other texts by Carter whose aim is to subvert those mechanisms of identification which have always supported the narrativization of violence against women. With regards to the ways through which she accomplishes her aim in this novel Robinson writes:

First, [...] is the fact that, because Desiderio is so clearly complicit in his adventures - which include a number of rapes [...] - a reader who identifies with him will uncomfortably share in his complicity. Second, because the text makes

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<sup>35</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, London, Virago, 1979, p.

<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

explicit the economies of male desire behind representations of women, the reader does not so easily get seduced into identification - either with Desiderio, or with the female figures [...] Finally Carter makes explicit the "underside" of narrative and history through the use and abuse of pornographic narrative conventions. This "underside" [...] is brought to the surface and, thus, problematizes the identification that is necessary in order for pornography to do its "work".<sup>37</sup>

In The Sadeian Woman Carter had written about a so-called "political pornographer" who "would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it".<sup>38</sup> Thus the novel does not offer any voyeuristic possibility to the reader since its narrative strategies, as Robinson maintains, continuously deny the kind of "pleasure" that such a reading could arouse. One way in which this is achieved is through the de-humanization of female figures, as in

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<sup>37</sup> S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, p. 105.

<sup>38</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, p. 20. Carter argues: "there is no question of an aesthetic of pornography. It can never be art for art's sake. Honourably enough, it is always art with work to do. [...] when pornography serves - as with vary rare exceptions it always does - to reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas in a given society, it is tolerated; and when it does not it is banned. [...] The moral pornographer would be an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of the current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, [...] of the real relations of man and his kind" (pp. 12,18,19).

the episode of the "House of Anonymity" where the prostitutes kept in cages have lost any female characteristic as well as any human attribute:

Each was circumscribed as a figure in rhetoric and you could not imagine they had names, for they had been reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female. This ideational femaleness took amazingly different shapes though its nature was not that of Woman [...] All, without exception, passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity. They were sinister, abominable, inverted mutations, part clockwork, part vegetable and part brute. (p. 132) <sup>39</sup>

At this point I would juxtapose Heroes and Villains (1969), an earlier text in which the reader finds a reversal of the usual narrative strategies similar to that put forward in Hoffman. This novel is an allegory of the future after the nuclear apocalypse and of the Sixties counter-culture.<sup>40</sup> I will dwell briefly on this novel since it explores the kind of relation that keeps together in a syncretistic as well as problematic manner the three different motifs of myth, desire and social control which are also at the core of Hoffman. The post-

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<sup>39</sup> S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, p. 106. On the question of whether such pleasure is "really" undermined, I believe that Carter's practice of literalization or de-metaphorization of the structures of male fantasy (a practice that Robinson sees exemplified in the quoted episode) still leaves room for doubts and ambiguity.

<sup>40</sup> A. Carter, Heroes and Villains, (1969) Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981. Speaking of this novel in an interview with A. Smith, Carter declares: "I used to try and fill what I thought were long felt wants [...] In Heroes and Villains I quite consciously describe this young man as an object of desire". In "Myths and the Erotic", Women's Review, 1, November 1985, p. 28.

apocalyptic society of the new Dark Age appears to be divided in two conflicting social classes: on one hand there are the Professors who try to save what is left of rational civilization and are still living in the burnt scars of their once beautiful cities; on the other the savage Barbarians, the worshippers of the Snake God, who inhabit the deep and mysterious jungle from which they leave only to ravage the cities and kill whoever lives there. The novel, whose rhythm is initially rather slow, progressively develops into a psychological study: love is depicted as a sharp pain, a kind of madness. The Professor's women and in particular Marianne, the protagonist, who is carried away into the jungle, are fascinated by the Barbarians, by their unpredictability, by their name: "She liked the wild, quattrosyllabic lilt of the word, Barbarian". Marianne, a sort of corrupted Alice, exploits her kidnapper Jewel according to her will, in the light of a radical reversal of sexual roles which takes place after the Bomb. But she herself will experience how rape is used within a patriarchal society in order to obtain and maintain the submission of women. This is in fact the way in which Jewel forces Marianne to marry him: "I've nailed you on necessity, you poor bitch".

Marianne's desires, like those of Albertina in the later novel, seem to highlight the contradictory fascination that women experience when confronted with the horror of their desires. One night she wakes up from her deadly dreams all in a sweat, "though not precisely

with fear", as Carter specifies. One could compare the Centaurs's rape scene in Hoffman, after which Albertina candidly admits the possibility that her own fantasies could have generated the whole episode.<sup>41</sup>

The complex questions regarding the female libido usually viewed, at least from a Freudian perspective, as implicitly not discernible from the male libido, have been at the centre of many theoretical revisions which have also tried to assert the once denied existence of a female desire. However, as Valerie Traub acutely suggests in her recent Desire and Anxiety, affirming women's presence only in the form of a "feminine desire" is not a suitable answer to the problem of female subjectivity, especially if it is not accompanied by some

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<sup>41</sup> In the same interview with A. Smith, Angela Carter also affirms: "My experience would go to show that the sexuality of women is still dynamite [...] that talking about it, describing it, trying to describe it in action is still [...] intensely provocative." Idem. Carter's opinions have striking similarities with those of a feminist scholar like Nancy Friedman, one of the first to break the "conspiracy of silence" that for so long has guarded female sexuality. In an article published by The Guardian Friedman recalls that in 1973 her My Secret Garden was refused by many publishers just because it was difficult in those days to realize that "we women fantasise just like men and that the images are not always pretty". In June 1973 Cosmopolitan even published the point of view of an eminent Dr Allen Fromme, according to whom: "Women do not have sexual fantasies [...] The reason for this is obvious: women haven't been brought up to enjoy sex, women are by and large destitute of sexual fantasy". In Friedman's opinion, "A fantasy reveals the healthy line of human sexual desire and shows where this conscious wish to feel sexual has been blocked by a fear so old and threatening as to be unconscious pressure. I am sufficiently fascinated by sexuality to write about it". In "Sex and the New Woman", The Guardian, Sat./Sun. October 12-13, 1991.

important considerations:

First, any assertion of agency must address those constraints placed on women's lives by the conceptual and material demarcations of a phallogentric system. But secondly (and this is my main concern), reinserting "feminine desire" into discourse reinscribes women's eroticism as always already defined and reified by the gender category "feminine". The adjectival link between "feminine" and "desire" neutralizes the difference between an ascribed gendered subject-position and the erotic experiences and expressions of a female subject. In a move that obscures the constructedness of subjectivity, gender, and sexuality, the female subject is defined in terms of a desire that is implicitly passive, heterosexually positioned in relation to man. Generated as an appeal, "feminine desire" in fact operates as a trick, a double bind for women always already confined by their previous definition. How a woman's sexuality is positioned in accordance with gender ascriptions, and the possibility of resistance to that positionality are questions foreclosed by the appeal to "feminine desire".<sup>42</sup>

Actually, Angela Carter's aim seems to be to re-insert a female counterpart within narrative discourse by employing to the best of its possibilities the erotic repertoire made up of conventional symbologies and

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<sup>42</sup> V. Traub, Desire and Anxiety, London & N.Y., Routledge, 1992, pp. 96-97. One should note, however, that the exaltation of marginality could easily be transformed in a somewhat monolithic theory, like its opposite. As Laurie Finke warns, it is necessary that feminists theories "evolve from a rhetoric of marginality" in order to build "a position from which we can, as a first step, deconstruct - subvert - the hierarchical center/margin dichotomy, unmasking the reified categories that underwrite gender distinctions. [...] such a critical position will always be provisional, always subject to revision based on the shifting relations between the centers and margins of social and critical discourse" in S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, p. 15.

mechanisms of desire. The purpose is again that of a deliberate appropriation of those strategies in order to throw light, sometimes in a very extreme manner, on the complex containment processes through which women find themselves trapped in a category of gender others have defined for them. However, the danger, as Traub has rightly pointed out, is that such a narrative paradoxically corroborates precisely what it had intended to question. Similar objections have often been raised against Carter. Clark's comment on this point introduces the question of whether her work should be viewed in the context of postmodernist aesthetics and in which terms:

her work seems like that of Robbe-Grillet and other postmodernists to move from an understanding of the world as only knowable through modern myths to a writing whose only resort is play and parody.<sup>43</sup>

Judging from the above statement, it seems to me that Clark's idea of postmodernism and of its repercussions on a narrative level is somewhat confused and simplistic, to say the least, in so far as he puts together in its critical/cannibal-like pot some very different and unspecified ingredients. His discussion of Hoffman is founded on a sequence of objections frequently raised against postmodernist aesthetics, even accused of bearing

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<sup>43</sup> R. Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine", p. 155. For a critique of Clark's arguments see E. Jordan, "Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions" in Plotting Change, L. Anderson Edmonton, Arnold, 1990, pp. 26-31.

no coherent significance at all:

Each chapter of Dr Hoffman constitutes an elaborate parodic animation of its intertextual resources, but a parody that has no discernible point of departure or arrival and seems always to verge on pastiche. At odd moments Carter's writing points to itself as an empty stylization, [...] The assumption is, as Frederic Jameson has observed, that there is no longer any "outside," any positive knowable [...] reality or metanarrative on the basis of which one can develop a critique. But this lack of metaposition has damaging consequences for allegory, since allegory by nature implies a level at which coherent meaning will be discovered; here [...] the text builds no coherent significance.<sup>44</sup>

Carter's postmodernist strategies cannot be seen in these terms: she cannot be positioned as advocating an epistemological revolution - one whose negative consequences she herself has openly underlined in Hoffman. It is more useful to recall what Linda Hutcheon maintains with reference to many postmodernist texts: that they both call up and subvert the (so-called) "great narratives" of Western civilization; thus giving rise to

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<sup>44</sup> R. Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire's Machines", p. 156. I don't share Clark's claim that "allegory by nature implies a level at which a coherent meaning will be discovered" (emphasis mine). Such view of allegory as something that "by nature", almost teleologically, tends towards "coherent meaning" seems highly opinable, especially in the light of the most recent reformulations of allegory itself within poststructuralist aesthetics, according to Craig Owens, for example, "Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. [...] He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics". "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism", part 1, October, 12, Spring 1980, p. 69.



a praxis usually defined as "the political ambidexterity" of postmodernism. "Postmodernism", Hutcheon argues, "cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within".<sup>45</sup>

In conclusion, I would argue that Angela Carter is not a "genuine" postmodernist writer (if such a writer does exist!), in spite of the presence in her narrative universe of dreams, improbable encounters, voluptuous fantasies and magic erotism. We must never forget that the conceptual nucleus from which any of her textual explorations start is firmly rooted in a personal conception of Marxist materialism. Such a conception is always open to dialogue and cultural confrontation. Not surprisingly Carter has been interested in and has focused her imaginative energy on most of the major theoretical debates in the last twenty years.<sup>46</sup> The kind of scenarios she has created do not offer, as is the case of the novel examined in this chapter, a complacent serenity; but they are not completely pessimistic, often resorting to a scepticism whose excesses are somewhat mitigated by a witty and intelligent irony. Like

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<sup>45</sup> L. Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, p. xiii.

<sup>46</sup> With reference to the Marxist ideology that seems to pervade all Carter's writing, Snitow affirms: "Her socialism is dreamy. Her books often play - of both words and flesh and they offer ideas about history. Marx proposes; Freud interrupts. [...] both are present - not perhaps in that impossible 'synthesis', but in the imaginary space where writers try to have things, and to give things, we lack". A. Snitow, "Conversation with a Necromancer", p. 18.

Desiderio, Angela Carter's characteristic is a clear "persistence of vision"; it is only thanks to it that we readers are able to preserve an illusion of logical causality, thus giving a sense to our own existence within a human and textual dimension otherwise increasingly difficult to define.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Passion of New Eve

Dr Schreber believed that he had a mission to redeem the world and to restore it to its lost state of bliss. This, however, he could only bring about if he were first transformed from a man into a woman.

(Freud "A Case of Paranoia")

I'll tell you how I turned into a man. First I had to turn into a woman.

(Joanna Russ, The Female Man)

The Passion of New Eve was first published in 1977 and reflects, in many respects, the strong passions and fierce contradictions of that period of feminism.<sup>1</sup> In the course of my discussion I will refer to The Sadeian Woman as an essay of cultural analysis and a sort of aesthetic manifesto of Carter's writing. In many respects, it plays a key role for anyone who is about to construct a critical discourse respectful of the author's voice, a voice that is neither absent nor, dying (think of the old debate about the "death of the author"), but

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<sup>1</sup> A. Carter, The Passion of New Eve, (1977), London, Virago, 1982.

All quotations in the text refer to this edition and are indicated by page number.

stems from a deep sense of indignation and protest against the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes based on inequality and prejudice.

It is thus to this kind of moral demand that Carter has devoted her work, often employing, as the previous chapters argued, many of the strategies and techniques of the postmodernist narrative - from refined pastiche to sophisticated intertextuality. The Passion of New Eve is one of the best examples of her artistic talent with its baroque style, its witty black humour and its apocalyptic vision of a future that, contrary to what one is led to expect in the novel, offers a certain gleam of regenerating hope.

The question at the core of this novel concerns the distinction between biological sexuality and gender, seen as a social construct. In fact, what Carter does is problematize gender oppositions and make them subject to reversal. In The Passion of New Eve this process is exemplified not only in the implications of the story, but, above all, in the author's attempt to find an effective way of dealing with those ambiguous symbols of femininity whose roots lie in the most intimate region of our being:

I think it was Rilke who so lamented the inadequacy of our symbolism - regretted so bitterly we cannot, unlike the [...] Ancient Greeks, find adequate external symbols for the life within us [...] He was wrong. Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them? Therefore we must not blame our poor symbols if they take forms that seem trivial to us, or absurd, for the symbols

themselves have no control over their own fleshly manifestations, however paltry they may be; the nature of our life alone has determined their forms.

A critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives.(p.6) (emphasis mine)<sup>2</sup>

The attentive reader may detect an excessive determinism in the emphasized portion of the quotation, inspired as it is by a notion of absolute, and I should add improbable, correspondence between psychic life and the symbolic potentialities of language, a correspondence that, pace Rilke, not even the Ancient Greeks could experience, and reminiscent of the ideas of Levi-Strauss and Lacan.<sup>3</sup> The discussion of the relation between sexuality and gender in The Sadeian Woman is more measured:

There is the unarguable fact of sexual differentiation; but separate from it and only partially derived from it, are the behavioural modes of masculine and feminine, which are culturally defined variables translated in the language of

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<sup>2</sup> With reference to this point R. Clark objects that "In offering her novels as a 'critique of our symbols', she presumes a universal subscription in the 'our' that a more radical criticism would immediately reject, and in assuming an ideology that is so universally powerful she also seems to anticipate her writing's subjection to it". "Angela Carter's Desire Machine", Women's Studies, 14, 2, 1987, p. 156.

Paola Altini is surely right to maintain that Carter's thought on language is influenced by Levi-Strauss, according to whom the "symbolic" not only allows us to "name" experience, but also to make it thinkable and finally to communicate it. P. Altini, Eros, Mito e Linguaggio nella Narrativa di Angela Carter, Pisa, ETS, 1990, pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief discussion of Lacan's influence on Carter's work see note no. 34 in Ibidem, pp. 48-49.

common usage to the status of universals.<sup>4</sup>

The novel tells the story of Evelyn, a young man from London, who arrives in New York to teach. Unfortunately the situation he finds there does not correspond to his expectations:

I imagined a clean, hard, bright city where towers reared to the sky in a paradigm of technological aspiration and all would be peopled by loquacious cab-drivers, black but beaming chambermaids and a special kind of crisp-edged girl with apple-crunching incisors and long, gleaming legs like lascivious scissors - the shadowless inhabitants of a finite and succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could have found no cobweb corners to roost in. But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world. (p. 10)

Thus, nothing of what he had imagined is true: the abhorred ghosts of history which inhabit European cities have not disappeared, and they assume the appearance of the social misfits, the beggars, the people who know no other law than violence. The result is a town prey to chaos and dissolution, to a kind of degradation that not even the architectural structure of the town, so different from the European, could stop:

It was, then, an alchemical city. It was chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night. Built on a grid like the harmonious cities of the Chinese Empire, planned, like those cities, in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason, the streets

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<sup>4</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, London, Virago, 1979, p. 6.

had been given numbers and not names out of respect for pure function, had been designed in clean, abstract lines, discrete blocks, geometric intersections, to avoid just those vile repositories of the past, sewers of history, that poison the lives of European cities. (p. 16)<sup>5</sup>

And it is in this black, stinking city where rats are as big as a six months old baby and rationality is not to be found, that Evelyn meets the beautiful dancer Leilah, a Lady Purple whose skin is as black as ebony, with red fleshy lips and an aggressive sensuality. She resembles the classic Sadian heroine, victim and at the same time accomplice of the humiliating relationship Evelyn imposes on her, as he admits:

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<sup>5</sup> A brief note on the definition of "alchemical city" Carter gives in this passage. Undoubtedly it has a vaguely gothic tinge, it evokes magic and sorcery, and what can eventually emerge from the the elements of the city. The idea of the city built on a grid makes me also think of the city as a labyrinth, common in 19th century texts. In recent American cinematography it is also imagined as a sort of labyrinthic prison, - for example John Carpenter's "1997 Escape from New York".

On the difference between the American and the European city, J. Baudrillard writes in his travel diary of the United States: "In Europe, the street only lives in sudden surges, in historic moments of revolution and barricades [...] The American street has not, perhaps, known these historic moments, but it is always turbulent, lively, kinetic, and cinematic, like the country itself, where the specifically historical and political stage counts for little, but where change, whether spurred by technology, racial differences, or the media, assumes virulent formes: its violence is the very violence of the way of life. [...] In New York, the mad have been set free". America, London, Verso, 1988, pp. 18-19.

For a discussion of the image of the city in Eve, see N. Vallorani, "The Body of the City: Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve" in Science Fiction Studies, 21, 3, November 1994.

She seemed to me a born victim and, if she submitted to the beatings and the degradations with a curious, ironic laugh that no longer tinkled - for I'd beaten the wind-bells out of her. I'd done that much - then isn't irony the victim's only weapon? (p. 28)

Every day, before she goes to work, Evelyn watches her dressing up before the mirror, a mirror that reflects the image of another Leilah "who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection" (Ibid.). Thus the mirror is again metaphor of the male gaze, reflecting not the real image but that of a human puppet, a mere object of desire, performing a kind of magic ritual every night for the male clients who flock the night-clubs where she performs her strip-tease. Leilah does not experience the consciousness of self in the mirror, but rather the opposite; its temporary loss and obliteration:

she [...] seemed to abandon her self in the mirror, to abandon her self to the mirror, and allowed herself to function only as a fiction of the erotic dream into which the mirror cast me. (p.30)

At a certain point the "love" story between the two starts following a predictable pattern: Evelyn grows tired of Leilah and decides to abandon her when she discovers her pregnancy; she begs him to marry her but he refuses, forcing her to have an abortion which renders her sterile. Evelyn decides to leave New York for good:

I felt that I was in a great hurry but I did not know I was



speeding towards the very enigma I had left behind - the dark room, the mirror, the woman. (p.39)

Evelyn leaves New York, "The City of Dreadful Night", to go towards the desert, in search of the most elusive of chimeras: his own Self.<sup>6</sup> He is kidnapped and led into a mysterious subterranean city populated only by women who try to recreate the symbols of a radical matriarchy, using a mixture of magic arts and advanced technology. Their leader is "Mother", a sort of divine Artemis, who likes to be called also "the Great Parricide" and to inscribe herself with the title of "Grand Emasculator".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The definition of "The City of Dreadful Night" is clearly a reference to the famous poem of 1874 by James Thomson.

While on the point of leaving New York Evelyn declares: "I would go to the desert, to the waste heart of that vast country, the desert on which they turned their backs for fear it would remind them of emptiness - the desert, the arid zone [...] the abode of enforced sterility, the dehydrated sea of infertility, the post-menopausal part of the earth" (pp. 38-40).

Writing on the desert in America, Baudrillard notes that "American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution [...] one may speak of the abstraction of the desert, of a deliverance from the organic, a deliverance that is beyond the body's abject passage into carnal existence, into that dry, luminous phase of death in which the corruption of the body reaches completion" (pp. 63-71).

<sup>7</sup> "Mother" is the grandest of Carter's phallic women. As she suggests in The Sadeian Woman, such figures make evident how mistaken are the habitual conceptions of femininity and the myths related to it: "All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway" (p. 5).

Mother has experimented on her own body with plastic surgery, in a prodigious metamorphosis that has provided her with numerous breasts. Here is how she appears before the dismayed Evelyn:

I was appalled by the spectacle of the monster. She was personified and self-fulfilling fertility. Her head, with its handsome and austere mask teetering ponderously on the bull-like pillar of her neck, was as big and as black as Marx' head in Highgate Cemetery; her face had the stern, democratic beauty of a figure on a pediment in the provincial square of a people's republic and she wore a false beard of crisp, black curls [...] She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow - she possessed two tiers of nipples [...] Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of giant fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. Her skin [...] looked [...] as if she herself were the only oasis in this desert and her crack the source of all the life-giving water in the world. (p. 59)

Standing in front of such a materialized symbolism, Evelyn realizes that he is defenceless. There is no way he can establish any kind of connection with her, not least through his phallus, the instrument through which he habitually relates to women: "Since I had no notion how to approach her with it, she rendered it insignificant; I must deal with her on her own terms" (p. 60).

Moreover, as time goes by, Evelyn becomes aware that his life journey as a man has come to an end in the caverns of the subterranean Beulah. The name of this extraordinary city brings to mind the Beulah of Bunyan's The Pilgrim's Progress, and "the daughters of Beulah",

the inspiring muses of Blake. But whereas Bunyan and Blake's Beulah is an imaginary place where the expected conciliation of masculine and feminine is finally achieved, in Carter's city the battle of the sexes is still raging:

Proposition one: time is a man, space is a woman. Proposition two: time is a killer. Proposition three: kill time and live forever. (p. 53)<sup>8</sup>

It is in Beulah that Evelyn is raped by Mother and transformed into a woman, Eve, during a sort of grotesque sacrificial ceremony. The plastic surgery is followed by a so-called period of re-education, during which Eve is presented with a set of images representing the infinite horrors, throughout the whole history of humanity, perpetrated against women. At the end of the two scheduled months, the moment comes of facing a mirror for the first time:

when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical

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<sup>8</sup> "Time is a man, space is a woman, and her masculine portion is death" accurately echoes Blake's words in Vision of Last Judgement; the same quotation is to be found in The Sadeian Woman, p. 70. In the passage about Beulah there is also a clear intertextual reference to Dante, before his descent into the subterranean city Evelyn reads a Latin tag: "INTROITE ET HIC DII SUNT". It recalls and reverses the one before Dante's "Inferno," "LASCIA TE OGNI SPERANZA O VOI CHE ENTRATE". The difference is that whereas no one can leave the "Inferno", Beulah - Hell, but also Purgatory - is a place from which Evelyn will come out transformed and ready to start a new life.

abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines. (p. 74)

As for Leilah earlier, for Eve too the mirror does not seem capable of reflecting the full image of her own self; rather that of a dichotomic dissociation. Eve/lyn has become a transsexual being, a new Tiresias doomed to live within himself the inner (and external) contradiction of maleness and femaleness, together with a sharp conflict between mind and body: "I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self [...] brought with it a shock of introspection," (pp. 101-102).<sup>9</sup>

But Eve's misadventures do not stop here. Following his escape from Beulah, s/he is captured by Zero the poet, a strangely maimed figure with only one eye, a wooden leg and the curious habit of grunting instead of speaking. Eve's time in the unpleasant company of the poet/libertine Zero, whose harem already contains seven wives, is a real Sadian apprenticeship. Women are forbidden to speak, they cannot eat with a knife and a fork because "Zero believed women were fashioned of a different soul substance from men, a more primitive, animal stuff, and so did not need the paraphernalia of civilised society" (p. 87). The existence of the concubines centres on their cyclic alternation into

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<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Altini, I do not believe that Eve/lyn can finally overcome, following the kind of experiences s/he goes through, the dualism man/woman so inherent in her/him. Eros, Mito e Linguaggio nella Narrativa di Angela Carter, p. 27.

Zero's bed, situated in his private study where he listens to Wagner and keeps a bust of Nietzsche, together with a poster of the famous actress Tristessa, upon which he has written "Public enemy number one".

The repeated rapes Eve/lyn is forced to suffer accentuate that spilt between mind and body already underlined in the scene of the first encounter with the mirror:

I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self, which always brought with it a shock of introspection, forced me to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation. (pp. 101-102)

Eve/lyn suffers the same pain that in the past he had inflicted on women, and Zero certainly knows an infinite number of possibilities through which such pain can be dispensed. He offers an ironic parody of how the male psyche reacts when confronted by a menacing female presence, such as that represented by Beulah:

I think Zero must have picked up some distorted rumour about Beulah, [...] he fed his paranoia on rumours until his head was full of strange notions that cross-fertilised one another and ingeniously produced reams of fresh, false, self-contradictory but passionately believed information. He no longer needed news of the world, since he manufactured it himself to his own designs. (p. 101)

However, Zero's hate towards the whole female sex appears to be focused on one figure in particular: Tristessa, whom he blames for his own sterility. Eve learns of the

circumstances from one of her fellow concubines. Zero was watching the actress in a scene from the film Emma Bovary when:

He'd felt a sudden, sharp, searing pain in his balls. With visionary certainty, he'd known the cause of his sterility. He was like a man who could not cast a shadow, and that was because Tristessa had sucked his shadow clean away. Wow [...] would you ever believe [...] (p. 104)

One day Zero decides to leave (with all his wives) and to go in search of the mythical home of Tristessa in the heart of the desert. The quest is successful, but Tristessa's home is of a curious constitution: made of glass, and able to revolve on itself. The inside is similarly full of surprises: the poet and his women come across a sort of macabre wax museum where perfect reproductions of several famous actors - Jean Harlow, Valentino, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, "all the unfortunate dead of Hollywood" - are kept inside glass coffins surrounded by candles. Tristessa is soon found. Eve sees her as a being from another dimension:

Tall, pale, attenuated enigma, your face an invitation to necrophilia, face of an angel upon a tombstone, a face that will haunt me forever, a face dominated by hooded eyes whose tears were distillations of the sorrows of the world, [...] in their luminous and perplexed depths, I saw all the desolation of America, or of more than that - of all estrangement, our loneliness, our abandonment. [...] I fell in love with you the moment I saw you, though I was a woman and you were a woman and, at a conservative estimate, old enough to be my mother.  
(pp. 122-123)

Eve's first impressions are soon shattered, Zero forces the actress to undress, revealing the best kept secret in Hollywood: Tristessa is not the "real" femme fatale, the star everyone admired, but a transvestite! When Eve is confronted with the truth s/he comments:

That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity [...] Tristessa, the sensuous fabrication of the mythology of the flea-pits. How could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you?

(pp. 128-129)

This means that Tristessa as a symbol of femininity "has no ontological status, only an iconographic one" (p.129). The perfect man's woman then, once again, appears to be nothing but the result of male desire, a sort of artificial and distorted creation that stems from patriarchal stereotypes and finds no correspondence in any essence. In this perspective, the art of transvestitism plays a key role in carrying out the whole deceit, but perhaps more importantly, it becomes a medium through which the encounter of different sexual identities is made possible. From such an encounter, Carter seems to suggest, can come something able to disrupt the usual pattern of subordination which affects

the relationship between the two sexes.<sup>10</sup>

The act of crossdressing functions like a metaphorical mirror, an endless source of intertextual references, as in the mocking wedding between Eve and Tristessa. Tristessa wears the white wedding dress s/he once used in "Wuthering Heights" and Eve the suit of an actor who had impersonated Chopin. The paraphernalia gives rise to a whole set of allusions, since George Sand, Chopin's partner, used to wear male suits, whereas Chopin was often described as a sort of effeminate man.<sup>11</sup>

But the interplay of references does not stop here; there is also a direct reference to Rosalind, the Shakespearian heroine who uses the crossdressing device with superb results:

[...] the transformation that an endless series of reflections showed me was a double drag. This young buck, this Baudelairean dandy so elegant and trim in his evening clothes - it seemed, at first glance, I had become my old self again in the inverted world of mirrors. But this masquerade was more than skin deep. Under the mask of maleness I wore another mask of femaleness but a mask that now I never would be able to remove, no matter how hard I tried, although I was a boy disguised as a girl and now disguised as a boy again, like

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<sup>10</sup> The project of decostruction of the "erotic binarism" hinted here seems to be carried out in the name of what Foucault, in The History of Sexuality, defines as the interests "of bodies and pleasures"; vol. I, N.Y., Random House, 1978, p. 157.

<sup>11</sup> On this point see M. Garber, "The Transvestite's Progress: Rosalind the Yeshiva Boy" in J. I. Marsden, The Appropriation of Shakespeare, N.Y. & London, Harvester, 1991, pp. 145-161. See also my article "Da Rosalind alla nuova Eva: miti, maschere e travestitismi dell'uomo/donna", in proceedings of the XV Conference of the Italian Association of Anglistica (A.I.A.), Parma, 22-24 October 1992.



In such a perspective Rosalind becomes the semantic mark par excellence of that process of identity-construction exemplified by Eve/lyn throughout the novel. It should be stressed however that Eve/lyn is "literally" made subject to it by way of plastic surgery and only briefly finds a sexual identity in the sexual conjunction with Tristessa from which the new platonic hermaphrodite will be born.

In The Passion of New Eve the matriarchal alternative is refused in favour of the androgynism which in the 1970's characterized many feminist discourses. However, it should be noted, that this is only an issue for discussion and not a definite solution, since the novel can also be read as a critique of the dream of the abolition of gender which lies behind 70s utopian discourse on androgyny. The end of the novel when after

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<sup>12</sup> The description of the curious marriage forced upon Eve and Tristessa recalls a somewhat similar Sadeian episode in The Sadeian Woman, the protagonist is Nourceil and his words are the following: "I should like to get married, not once, but twice on the same day. At ten o' clock in the morning, I wish to dress as a woman and marry a man; at noon, wearing male dress, I wish to marry a female role homosexual dressed as my bride [...] I wish, furthermore, to have a woman do the same as I do, and what other woman but you, Juliette, could take part in this game? You, dressed as a woman, must marry a woman dressed as a man at the same ceremony where I, dressed as a woman, become the wife of a man. Next, dressed as a man, you will marry another woman wearing female attire at the same time that I go to the altar to be united in holy wedlock with a catamite disguised as a girl". Such a parody of marriage demonstrating just how changeable gender can be, represents, according to Carter, the annihilation of Juliette's femininity, (p.98).

Tristessa's death the pregnant Eve is worried about the possibility of giving birth to a being similar to herself, seems symptomatic of a condition of "undecidibility" - to use a Derridian term - in which the re-thinking of sexual stereotypes appears to be an endeavour whose results remain unforeseeable. It is then with resigned, but not defeated awareness that Eve/Carter affirms:

Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another. I am sure of that - the quality and its negation are locked in necessity. But what the nature of masculine and the nature of feminine might be, whether they involve male and female [...] that I do not know. Though I have been both man and woman, still I do not know the answer to these questions. Still they bewilder me. (pp. 149-150)

In the last pages of the novel Eve has taken shelter in a cave in order to escape the dangers of the nuclear war which is spreading all over the United States. In the cave there is a broken mirror in which Eve tries in vain to see her own reflection, together with a picture of Tristessa which s/he immediately destroys. Eve's exploration of the cave, a sort of uterine journey within the womb of Mother who has also taken refuge there, is very hard but at the end s/he comes out on the beach of an amniotic sea where s/he meets again the black stripper Leilah, whose name is now Lilith, like the first wife of Adam.<sup>13</sup> Leilah shows Eve the insignia of his past

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<sup>13</sup> Referring to Lilith, Eve/lyn observes: "She can never have objectively existed, all the time mostly the

virility carefully kept in a portable refrigerator, on a bed of dry ice; if s/he really wants it Eve can become Evelyn again! But like several of Carter's heroines facing a crucial moment (Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride", Red Riding Hood in "The Company of Wolves or Fevvers in Nights at the Circus) Eve's reply is uproarious laughter: the decision is already taken. She will face the ocean that stretches before her and to that ocean entrust her own re-birth: "Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth" (p. 191).

As has been argued in the opening pages of this chapter, Eve can be read as a commentary on feminism in the late 1970's, in all its ardent passions and sharp contradictions. Such contradictions are reflected, on a thematic level, in the way in which two key questions are discussed: the concept of androgyny, and the matriarchal alternative, or more generally, the new attitude towards maternity that women tried to envisage - a still controversial question within contemporary feminist thought.<sup>14</sup> A pioneering study by Heilbrun

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projection of the lusts and greed and self-loathing of a young man called Evelyn who does not exist either" (p. 175).

<sup>14</sup> As regards the myth of the androgyny and its distinct but strictly related companion, hermaphroditism, it should be stressed that this is a very ancient one, since it was already mentioned by Plato in the Symposium; moreover it has often acquired a transgressive connotation if we think that the gnostic/Catharist heresy even maintained the bisexuality of Christ and the androgyny of Adam. More recently, within the literary field, this same motif is prevalent for example in nineteenth century literature, in the Dada and Surrealist movements and in

(1973), stressed the liberating function that androgyny had with reference to the usual social and psychological patterns which force the individual into a preordained behaviour. Heilbrun's study gave rise to many controversial discussions. Its main merit, however, was of stimulating a debate in the feminist movement, a debate that was quickly taken up in fiction.<sup>15</sup>

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postmodernist rewritings. On this point see S. M. Gilbert, "Costumes of the Mind: Transvestitism as Metaphor in Modern Literature" in Writing and Sexual Difference, Brighton, Harvester, 1982, note no. 22, p. 209. Such a myth is also envisaged in one of the most important novels of Modernism: Bekentnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull by Thomas Mann. Here, as well as a passion for androgyny and hybridism, there are some suggestive descriptions of the metropolis as the place where the chameleon being lives, within a milieu of masks, travestitism, and loss of Self.

<sup>15</sup> Eve is not the only case of feminist writing fascinated by the concept of androgyny. See e.g. Ursula LeGuin's The Left Hand of Darkness, (1969).

For an interesting discussion of the critical debate within feminism following the publication of Heilbrun's study see R. Schmidt, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", Textual Practice, 3, 1, Spring 1989, p. 66 and the note no. 23 p. 75. The impact of androgyny on feminist thought is well depicted by Hester Eisenstein in her Contemporary Feminist Thought, Boston, G.K. Hall, 1983. Eisenstein distinguishes three phases: the first, coinciding with the early 1970s, is characterized by androgyny, since it was thought that only by diminishing the polarization of gender one could hope to change the kind of social control imposed upon women, the second phase from the mid 1970's to the early 1980's sees a refusal of androgyny in favour of a perspective in which the woman plays a central role; in other words instead of cancelling polarization the emphasis was on feminine experience. The third phase registers the idea of some physiological superiority of the female sex, but, according to Eisenstein, it has also reached an impasse because of "a divorce from Marxism and the political left; a consistent emphasis on psychology at the expenses of economic factors; and a false universalism that addresses itself to all women, with insufficient regard for differences of race, class, and

In The Passion of New Eve the myth of the androgyne is clearly embodied both by Eve/lyn and by the Garbo-like Hollywood star Tristessa. The author's strategy is that of picking out from the huge repertoire of cultural symbolism the sexual archetypes - especially those which relate to film - thus enabling her own imagination to rework them. In an interview with John Haffenden, for example, she describes the origins of the bizarre idea of transforming the Hollywood star into a transvestite:

The promotion slogan for the film Gilda, starring Rita Hayworth, was "There was never a woman like Gilda", and that may have been one of the reasons why I would make this Hollywood star a transvestite, a man, because only a man could think of femininity in terms of that slogan.<sup>16</sup>

A further confirmation of how the figure of Tristessa is symptomatic of a certain image of woman exemplified in the Hollywood films of the 1930's and 1940's can be found in The Sadeian Woman. Carter argues that the main stars of the period, Garbo and Dietrich, "both often appeared in drag, which is always reassuring to men, since a woman who pretends to be a man has also cancelled out her reproductive system, like the post-menopausal woman, and may also freely function as a safety valve for homoerotic fantasy".<sup>17</sup> It was in those years, Carter continues, that Hollywood recreated the ghost of Justine,

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culture" (p. xii).

<sup>16</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, p. 64.

thus obeying the moral logic according to which female virtue is nothing but frigidity, since a woman's reputation is strictly connected to her sexual activity.

Returning to Eve it should be noted that Carter's androgyny has a gothic tinge inherent in Tristessa's name which (the text tells us) symbolizes "passionate sorrow", "romantic dissolution" and "necrophilia incarnate". Like Leilah, Tristessa reminds the reader of Sade's Justine because of the masochism which seems to dictate all her actions, an indispensable requisite for arising man's sadistic pleasure. Evelyn remembers "the twitch in my budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in me" (p. 8).

It is also worth noting that her surname "de St Ange", only briefly mentioned in the novel, brings to mind the Madame de Saint-Ange who guides the young Eugenie through the pleasures and sufferings of sadism in Philosophie dans le boudoir. If this were not enough, consider the scene of the sexual intercourse between Eve/lyn and Tristessa, in which the sexual act is described in terms of domination and submission typical of the roles habitually assigned to masculine and feminine:

When you lay below me [...] I beat down upon you mercilessly, with atavistic relish, but the glass woman I saw beneath me smashed under my passion and the splinters scattered and recomposed themselves into a man who overwhelmed me. (p. 149)

This is a moment when gender binarism is reimposed

violently, just as Eve's surgery is a violent inscription of gender.

The Passion of New Eve is of course a text about androgyny (which has to do with ideas of sexual "intermediaries" or, in its utopian form, ideas of the effacement of gender), but, even more importantly it is about transsexualism (a fantasy of literalization; since sex is invested in organs and hormones) and transvestitism or cross-dressing (which sees gender as invested in appearances and behaviours). Judging from Carter's observations in The Sadeian Woman, the act of crossdressing has far-reaching implications on the symbolic as well as on the social level. Sartre used to say that the real shame consists in "being an object". Decency, in particular, the fear of being surprised in a state of nudity, are nothing but symbolic specifications of a sort of original shame, an objectivity in front of which we are defenceless. In this light, the habit of wearing clothes aims at dissimulating such objectivity and supporting the right to be a subject. From such a perspective one could well argue that in the course of human history dressing has not been sufficient to women in order to regain their individual subjectivity; quite often they had to resort to transvestitism (Rosalind), thus opening the way to new and previously unforeseen possibilities, possibilities that contemporary feminist thought has just begun to explore. The obvious reference here is to the studies by Cixous, Irigaray and Joan Riviere, Riviere in particular was the first to theorize

the concept of "masquerade". According to Riviere:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisal expected if she was found to possess it [...] The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth recalling that also Lacan considers the "mask" as characterizing mainly the sexual sphere, to the point that the emphasis on "appearance" deriving from it has the effect "that the ideal or typical manifestations of behaviour in both sexes, up to and including the act of sexual copulation, are entirely propelled into comedy".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> J. Riviere "Womanliness as Masquerade", Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality, H.M.Ruitenbeek ed., New Haven, College & U.P., 1966, p. 213. For a critique of Riviere see J. Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, N.Y. & London, Routledge, 1990.

Recently, feminist critics have thoroughly discussed the mechanisms which govern the process of identification especially in the context of cinema, it has thus become clear that the woman spectator who identifies herself with the female character is confronted with a very passive and masochistic attitude, whereas her identification with the male protagonist implies, on her part, the acceptance of what Laura Mulvey defines as a "masculinization of spectatorship"; see L. Mulvey, "Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Screen, 16, 3, 1975, pp. 6-18; and also "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by Duel in the Sun" Framework 6. 15-17 Summer 1981, pp. 12-15.

<sup>19</sup> In Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne, Juliette Mitchell and J. Rose eds., N.Y., Norton, 1982, p. 85. With reference to the concept of "Masquerade", see also M. A. Doane "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator", Screen, 23, Sept./Oct. 1982, pp. 74-87.



Actually, if one reconsiders the already mentioned scene of the sexual intercourse between Eve and Tristessa or the many others in the novel (like for example Evelyn's rape in Beulah before being emasculated) in the light of what has just been said, it will be easy to detect in the excess of tone and images a spirit of ironic comedy; in the interview with Haffenden Carter confirms that The Passion of New Eve "was intended as a piece of black comedy".<sup>20</sup>

That the act of crossdressing often carries with it more problems than the ones it intended to solve in the first place - with reference to the process of female identity construction - is further confirmed by the fact that Tristessa's glass house clearly symbolizes a certain psychological fragility. But the glass house is also the emblematic image not only of the America disrupted by the nuclear war, but of the image of itself that America projects onto the outside world: an artificial image, apparently formidable, but in fact vulnerable.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, p. 86.

<sup>21</sup> In an interview with Lorna Sage, speaking of the image of the "glass house", Carter observes: "it's a centrifuge, and America is a glass culture, but the revolving house, the whirling tower, is in Celtic mythology, it's a very antique image. That's one of the things about delving around in obscure corners". "The Savage Sideshow", New Review, 39/40, 1977, p. 56. On the same point but in an interview with John Haffenden, she laments that: "It was intended to say something about representation, but readers seemed to think that it was all just part of the fantastic décor of the house. However, this is bound to happen sometimes". Novelists in Interview, p. 87.

The "glass house" recalls also . the one in which Breton suggested we should all live, as a result of the new achieved clarté, once we have replaced the causal chain of events with a glass one. Unfortunately, Carter's glass house obeying a logic as cruel as it is inevitable, starts losing its aura of brilliance and glossiness and is transmuted into a huge vitreous sarcophagus containing in its inside many smaller ones in which wax statues of Hollywood stars are kept. One could even wonder whether one day a metamorphosis will take place and we discover that what happened in reality was only a cinematographic fiction: Marilyn Monroe did not commit suicide because of her unhappiness - an unhappiness that did not match the character of the femme fatale she performed on the screen - rather she has only fallen into a deep and prolonged sleep, like a modern Sleeping Beauty, or, in more recent times, the virile heroine of the SF film Alien 2, who also lies in a kind of glass sarcophagus in order to travel through space.

As I argued at the outset, in The Passion of New Eve, perhaps more than in other works by Carter, the question of female identity is central; its construction and peculiarities, and the question of whether femininity resides in a biological difference, in the attributes of sex, or as Julia Kristeva suggests, in the position of marginality assigned to the female subject within the dominant culture. Angela Carter clearly evolves and problematizes the first hypothesis to explore the

aesthetic as well as the social feasibility of the other two. Given the difficulties inherent in her project, the presence within the text of contradictions, inconsistencies and other blindspots is understandable. According to Pauline Palmer for example, in spite of the fact that Carter's aim was that of writing "a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity", such femininity in the novel is completely cancelled. Apparently female characters are in fact either biologically males (Eve, Tristessa) or they possess male features like Leilah/Lilith. The novel contains no positive representation of femaleness. Mother is presented like a grotesque parody of maternity in accordance with the chauvinistic paradigms (Palmer maintains) conceived by Freud and Laing. Moreover the transsexual Eve/lyn almost takes up the role of the perfect woman.<sup>22</sup> Angela Carter, in sum, seems to adopt a typically male perspective by depicting the female mask (Eve) from the outside, and seems to show a good deal of narcissistic self-indulgence while describing the various ways through which Leilah and Tristessa seduce men.

Much criticism focuses specifically on the several sexual scenes portrayed in the novel. Robert Clark, for example points out "the literary sensationalism" that, in his opinion, characterizes them, the reference is to Eve and Zero:

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<sup>22</sup> P. Palmer, Contemporary Women's Fiction, N.Y & London, Harvester, 1989, pp. 16-20.

He [...] told me to lie down on the floor regardless of the excrement which littered it, unfastened his fly, brought out a weapon which I now saw was of amazing size and, with a wild cry, hurled himself upon me; he entered me like the vandals attacking Rome. I felt a sense of grateful detachment from this degradation. (p. 91)<sup>23</sup>

Doubtless scenes like this can offend the sensitivities of individual readers; however the reader familiar with Carter can interpret such passages as "black comedy", a position which diffuses any sense of "sensationalism". The cruelty of the situation stems from the grotesque exaggeration of its elements (the image of the Vandals attacking Rome is symptomatic), a situation where there is nothing to be merry about (I want to stress that this is black humour), since what we are witnessing is, after all, a rape.

As in the previous chapter, Clark's critique of Carter's work allows our discussion to shift towards questions regarding feminism, postmodernism and Carter's position. Clearly, Clark repeats the objections of an ideologically orientated critique applied to postmodernist writing. Such a criticism is so undifferentiated that it inevitably leads towards prejudiced judgements and gross generalizations. The following passage is worth quoting at length precisely because it is symptomatic of the critical attitude just described:

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<sup>23</sup> R. Clark, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine", Women's Studies, 14, 2, 1987, p. 152.

her writing is often a feminism in male chauvinist drag, a transvestite style, and this may be because her primary allegiance is to a postmodern aesthetics that emphasizes the non-referential emptiness of definitions. Such a commitment precludes an affirmative feminism founded in referential commitment to women's historical and organic being [...] her fascination with violent eroticism and her failure to find any alternative basis on which to construct a feminine identity prevent her work from being other than an elaborate trace of women's self-alienation. Her recourse to allegory seems both a way forwards in that it allows the expression of problems that naturalism serves to mask, and its own form of trap in that its very abstraction derives from and confirms the political isolation and aesthetic investments of the writer. The consolation for such writing, and the sole aspect that grants its ideas the illusion of concreteness is its fascination with style and its exploitation of desire - the advertiser's mixture [...] the incantatory rhythms and tantalizing literariness, are strategies that bind the reader poetically, give the illusion of general significance without its substance, and put the reason to sleep, thereby inhibiting satire's necessary distancing of the reader from both the text and the satirized illusions.<sup>24</sup>

Angela Carter's stance regarding contemporary postmodernist aesthetics, her feminist aims and, above all, the very personal manner in which her writing carries out such aims, will be the object of our discussion in the final chapter.<sup>25</sup> For the moment it is worth recalling that Carter herself insists in defining

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<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, pp. 158-159.

<sup>25</sup> In an interview with Haffenden, Carter complains that: "Quite a number of people read [*Eye*] as a feminist tract and recoiled with suitable horror and dread, but in fact there is quite a careful and elaborate discussion of feminity as a commodity, of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities - [...] I was disappointed that it should be treated as just another riotous extavaganza". Novelists in Interview, p. 86.

The Passion of New Eve as an "anti-mythic novel" according to her idea that "myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice".<sup>26</sup> The myth she re-elaborates in this novel is that of the creation of Eve, although there are also intertextual references to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. The chronological setting is that of an unspecified future when urban civilization is about to collapse due to a cultural dissolution which is nearly causing its total annihilation; the best representation of such dissolution is the character of Zero who, in force of his name, is a perfect representation of the impotence that, according to the author, underlines all phallogocentric cultures. In the novel Carter offers three examples of female construction: the first, from a biological perspective, is embodied by Eve/lyn - not the perfect woman Palmer speaks of but one in eternal conflict with herself, although in the end she learns to accept her own status and rejects the possibility of becoming a man again. The second example is Tristessa, object of Evelyn's desire: she is a living demonstration that plastic surgery is not always necessary to modify one's sexual identity; a perfect transvestitism together with a good performance can make it convincing enough. Tristessa, in other words, represents the triumph of culture over nature, of artificiality over authenticity.

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<sup>26</sup> On this point see A. Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", in On Gender and Writing, M. Wandor ed., London, Pandora, 1983, pp. 70-71.

The third example is that of Leilah who at the end of the novel abandons her guise of seductive woman and sexual fetish to reveal herself as one of Mother's most eager followers. I personally do not believe that these three examples of femininity can be viewed as negative tout court, as Palmer seems to suggest. What they reflect in an incisive manner and with the help of a complex handling of the formal pattern, is the reality of a female condition still constrained by cultural conditioning, so much so that the public as well as the private sphere are affected. What is erroneously conceived of as natural or innate is in reality an artificial and skilfully achieved construction. Moreover sexual practices are not exempt from the process; on the contrary they become the preferred channels through which such a strategy is carried out:

Our Flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived. Flesh is not an irreducible human universal.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, concepts and stereotypes regarding femininity seem to originate within a web of ideological forces which then give shape to subjectivity. This does not necessarily mean that female characters stop trying to get rid of those aspects of passivity and masochism usually attributed to them, often by re-constructing

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<sup>27</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, p. 9.

examples of maleness very different from the traditionally oppressive ones. It is worth pointing out that in the cave/uterus in which Eve takes shelter at the conclusion of the novel there is a broken mirror that cannot reflect her image, since all the old images of femininity, artificially constructed in the course of the literary fiction, have been erased; in the end Eve destroys even a picture of Tristessa, the idea of woman she had once loved as a man, the being who had raised artifice to a real modus vivendi.

As for the character of "Mother", she is useful in so far as represents a critique of any possible idea of matriarchy together with that of "maternal superiority", a fictitious and illusory theory advocating female superiority over men. As Carter writes in The Sadian Woman:

This theory of maternal superiority is one of the most damaging of all consolatory fictions and women themselves cannot leave it alone, although it springs from the timeless, placeless, fantasy land of archetypes where all the embodiments of biological supremacy live [...] It puts those women who wholeheartedly subscribe to it in voluntary exile from the historic world, this world.<sup>28</sup>

It is significant that Mother, like Hoffman, desires to put an end to historical time, and for this reason is punished. The figure of the Great Mother, the cruel avenger of the abuses committed against women, unites several images of Sadian heroines: Clairwil, the woman

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<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 106.



who has never wept and who proudly declares "I adore avenging my sex for the horrors men subject us to when the monsters have the upper hand".<sup>29</sup> Mother reminds also of Durand, living in a universe where pseudo-scientific knowledge and witchcraft often mingle. Durand is a sort of wicked step-mother typical of fairy-tales, but endowed with an hermaphroditic nature.<sup>30</sup> She is the anti-myth of maternity par excellence; instead of a reproductive function she has acquired an absolute mastery over the natural world, although in her still remain some elements typical of the omnipotent mother of early childhood, huge and cruel. With Durand whose posture, like Mother's, resembles the goddess Kali's, the illuminism of reason is baffled by pure mythology. Durand is a virile mother who chooses her own children and seduces them, she is a phallic mother who can violate nature itself.

The desecration of the female reproductive function implies, according to Carter, a process of secularization that concerns not only women but all of humanity. This is the reason why any change of perspective in the matter is fiercely opposed:

I think this is why so many people find the idea of the emancipation of women frightening. It represents the final secularization of mankind.<sup>31</sup>

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29 Ibidem, p. 89.

30 Ibidem, p. 93.

31 Ibidem, p. 110.

In conclusion, I wish to re-emphasize that in this novel the author, although not offering a practicable solution to the many problems which characterize the relation between the sexes, problematizes in a very incisive manner gender-relations and their construction. As often happens in Carter's novels, myth transfigured into the language of allegory or of symbolic allusion becomes at the end - pace Clark - an indispensable instrument to communicate different discourses whose referentiality is not nullified in a postmodernist textual universe where signs are allegedly devoid of their semantic value. On the contrary, Carter's textual universe employs diverse and multiple discourses within a perspective of continuous experimentation and research, although this does not necessarily mean that the results reflect a perfect harmonization of intentions on the artistic level, as Paola Altini suggests. Altini argues that Carter succeeds in "harmonizing the ideological commitment with the artistic one, thus being able to present a polemic feminist vein in perfect consonance with her almost decadent taste for the écriture artiste and with the typically postmodernist tendency towards the contaminations of genres and styles".<sup>32</sup> Such aesthetic problems however do not affect in any way Carter's firm conviction that a fully female emancipation can be achieved in the future. In order for this to happen (and echoing Emma Goldman) Carter affirms:

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<sup>32</sup> P. Altini, Eros, Mito e Linguaggio nella Narrativa di Angela Carter, p. 11.

It will have to do away with the absurd notion of the dualism of the sexes, or that man and woman represent two antagonistic worlds. Pettiness separates, breadth unites. Let us be broad and big. A true conception of the relation of the sexes will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but one great thing: to give of one's self boundlessly in order to find one's self richer, deeper, better.<sup>33</sup>

These words constitute, I believe, an appropriate epilogue to the story of Eve/lyn, the man who became a woman experiencing in his own skin the pain, but also the joy of both gender conditions.

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<sup>33</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, p. 151.

## CHAPTER V

### Nights at the Circus

To me circus is a magic  
spectacle that comes and  
goes just like a world.

(Marc Chagall)

Nights at the Circus was first published in 1984, seven years after Carter's previous fictional work, The Passion of New Eve.<sup>1</sup> This long gestation period seems understandable, since the novel's structural set-up is more complex than elsewhere, intertextual references are abundant - Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Joyce, Ibsen, to name a few - and the general orchestration follows the rhythmical movement of a rich and phantasmagoric polyphony.<sup>2</sup>

I wish to stress from the beginning that the bird-woman protagonist of Nights at Circus, Sophia Fevvers, in many respects represents the provisional point of arrival of the author's quest (a quest started in Hoffman and

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<sup>1</sup> A. Carter, Nights at the Circus, London, Chatto & Windus, 1984. All quotations in the text refer to this edition and are indicated by page number.

<sup>2</sup> As Palmer rightly puts it, this narrative strategy leads towards "a polyphonic interplay of European cultural attitudes and moments". In "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight" Women Reading Women's Writing, S. Roe ed., Brighton, Harvester Press, 1987, p. 197. For a brief discussion of some Surrealist images present in this novel see *ibidem*, p. 204, note no. 48.

Eve) for a more plausible female subjectivity, free from any patriarchal constriction. The connection with Eve is particularly worth stressing. As Ricarda Schmidt points out: "Fevvers is Eve's daughter. [...] She is the archaeopteryx Eve had envisaged, that mystical being, 'composed of the contradictory elements of air and earth'".<sup>3</sup> Sophia Fevvers is a kind of living contradiction since the two elements of earth and air co-exist in her, thus creating a personality as much incredible as fascinating. Her more "earthly" aspects are represented by the vulgarity of her habits and her dimensions, which surpass the ordinary human ones; but in contrast she has on her back a pair of beautiful wings, which lift her, materially and metaphorically, over the miseries and baseness of earth on which she was born.<sup>4</sup>

The story narrated in Nights at the Circus is set in the last year of the nineteenth century. Fevvers is the most famous aerialiste of the time, performing her

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<sup>3</sup> R. Schmidt, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", Textual Practice, 3, 1, Spring 1989, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> A further connection with Eve lies in Fevvers's first name, Sophia, like the woman who escorts Evelyn in the chamber where his sexual transformation takes place. Sophia is in reality Leilah in disguise, the young dancer abandoned by Evelyn in New York. One should also note that compared to Eve, in which the figure of the mythic bird reemphasized the symbolic relevance of androgyny, in this novel that concept is less central; the only hint at androgyny is represented by a minor character Albert/Albertina (the same name of Hoffman's daughter) in the museum of Madame Schreck. This is because "Circus is not concerned with the invention of such unity, of one humanity [...] but with matching woman and freedom in a new symbol of femininity". R. Schmidt, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction" p. 67.

acrobatic spectacles in a circus that visits the most important European cities. Everywhere she goes the reaction is the same: the audience is completely fascinated by her extraordinary ability, incapable of answering the fundamental question of whether such a being is "fact or [...] fiction?" (p. 7).

Fevvers also captures the attention of the American journalist Jack Walser, who wishes to interview her for a series of sceptical articles to be entitled "Great Humbugs of the world". Carter offers a detailed description of Jack Walser: he is twenty-five years old and has already behind him "a picaresque career" that has conducted him to many corners of the world. He has "the privileged irresponsibility [of the journalist] the professional necessity to see all and believe nothing" (p. 10), peculiarities that are combined "with a characteristically American generosity towards the brazen lie".

The interview takes place in Fevvers's dressing-room during a magic night in which time seems to stop, checked by the tolling of Big Ben, while the bird-woman, with the help of her adoptive mother Lizzie, unfolds the tale of her life like a Scherazade with a hoarse voice and a heavy cockney accent.<sup>5</sup> Walser's attentive gaze, used to

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<sup>5</sup> Succeeding in giving the impression to the reader that time stands still seems to be, according to Carter, the mark of the great writer: "All writers are inventing a kind of imitation time when they invent the time in which a story unfolds, and they are playing a complicated game with our time, the reader's time, the time it takes to read a story. A good writer can make you believe time stand still". Expletives Deleted, London, Chatto &

the automatic registration of the smallest particular, wanders in the disorder that reigns in the room, among a mountain of costumes scattered everywhere, pieces of underwear, beauty creams and other cosmetics and, finally, a small bunch of Parma violets in what was once a marmalade jar.

Occasionally, whenever her fantastic story presents realistic details, Walser takes note of them carefully in order to verify their truthfulness. His sceptical attitude, however, is mainly focused on Fevvers's alleged ability to fly: whether her extraordinary performances with the trapeze are only the result of a perfect athletic training with the help of some invisible strings. The journalist is forced to admit that the aerialiste during her spectacle does not surpass the actual possibilities of a human being, although perhaps in a very different manner:

he was astonished to discover that it was the limitations of her act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable - that is the absolute suspension of disbelief.

For in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman - in the implausible event that such a thing existed - have to pretend she was an artificial one? (p. 17)

One should also consider the possibility that:

if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all, for it's her arms that ought to be her wings! [...]

Now, wings without arms is one impossible thing; but wings

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Windus, 1992, p. 2.

with arms is the impossible made doubly unlikely - the impossible squared. (p. 15)

Walser's amazement increases even further when the bird-woman confesses that she has been hatched, she has never known her parents because immediately after her birth someone abandoned her in a basket on the front stairs of a brothel in London.<sup>6</sup> The child was soon accepted very warmly by the residents of the house as "the common daughter of half-a dozen-mothers" (p. 21), but it was the minute Italian Lizzie who took care of her more than any other. She even followed Fevvers in her first attempts to fly, as a mother would do with her baby when she starts walking. The brothel thus became for the child a real home where important experiences took place. It is in there that Fevvers learns for the first time how to use her wings to earn her living: she is still a child when she poses as Cupid, and a bit older she becomes the living statue of "Victory with Wings". This was also the nickname Ma Nelson, the madame of the house, had given her (Ma Nelson herself was so called because she had lost an eye by the hands of a drunken sailor). In the brothel, Fevvers admits, she "existed only as an object in one's eyes [...] Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world?" (p. 39).

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<sup>6</sup> In this manner, Schmidt observes, "she fantasizes a beginning for herself outside the Oedipal triangle, outside the Law of the Father", "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction" p. 67.



Clearly, the living statue of a winged-virgin who keeps a sword in her hands did not seem the most suitable to receive the guests of such a house, the aerialiste comments with irony above all if one considers the effect that the sword had on the younger visitors who, just graduated from Eton, came to learn everything about the mysteries of sexuality. According to Fevvers, the source of their strange emotions in watching that image of femininity was the negative influence exerted on them by a certain Baudelaire: "a poor fellow who loved whores not for the pleasure of it but, as he perceived it, the horror of it, as if we was, not working women doing it for money but damned souls who did it solely to lure men to their dooms, as if we'd got nothing better to do [...]" (p. 38).<sup>7</sup>

Finally the moment came when the girl with the wings was ready to fly for the very first time in her life, the moment when she had to abandon the safeness of earth and face the mystery of the sky and, above all, of her own difference. This moment is described with extreme intensity:

I suffered the greatest conceivable terror of the irreparable difference with which success in the attempt would mark me.

'I feared a wound not of the body but the soul, sir, an irreconcilable division between myself and the rest of humankind.

'I feared the proof of my own singularity.'

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<sup>7</sup> Fevvers herself clarifies the circumstances which push women towards prostitution: "No woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity, sir" (p. 39).

'Yet, [...] - I pushed.'

'The transparent arms of the wind received the virgin. [...] The earth did not rise up to meet me. I was secure in the arms of my invisible lover! (p. 34)

At this point Jack Walser is completely rapt, entirely fascinated not only by the peculiarity of Fevvers's story, but even more by the hypnotic voice of the teller:

It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife. Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with [...] Her voice, with its warped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's. (p. 43)

One has almost the impression that the story of the mysterious winged creature is unfolded before the eyes of Walser - and those of the reader - with the vividness and immediacy of a film.

The next scene regards the moment when the brothel is forced to close, following the death of Ma Nelson, initiating a series of painful experiences for Fevvers,<sup>8</sup> first in Madame Schrenck's gloomy museum of horrors, then in the neo-gothic castle of Mr Rosencreutz. Madame Schrenck is a horrible figure, thin as a skeleton, dressed in black from head to toe and incredibly greedy. In her museum of horrors there are characters that for one reason or another are "marvels of nature": Fanny Four Eyes, Sleeping Beauty, the Wiltshire Wonder,

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<sup>8</sup> Schmidt maintains that such episodes represent a parody of the gothic novel; see "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 68.

Albert/Albertina the androgyne, and finally a girl called Cobwebs because of the webs which covered all her face. Needless to say, each of these figures has a fantastic story to tell.<sup>9</sup> Fevvers's work consists again in posing as a sort of tableau vivant, only that this time she represents "the Angel of Death". At her feet on a cold marble slab lies a naked Sleeping Beauty. Although Madame Schrenk's clients limit themselves to watching the apparently dead body and the angel who watches over her tomb, their gaze has the power of freezing one's blood: "there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them" (p. 62).<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, as soon as Fevvers escapes from Madame Schrenk's museum she falls prey of another, perhaps even more dangerous, figure: Mr Rosencreutz. In his eyes Fevvers is an ambiguous entity, a complex and fascinating mixture of arcane myths and obscure symbolism:

Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species, manifestation of Arioph, Venus, Achamath, Sophia [...] Lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament. (p. 81)

His true intention is that of "immolating" Fevvers on a sort of sacrificial altar during a rite that should

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<sup>9</sup> Such characters recall, perhaps even in a more gloomy sense, those met by Desiderio in the travelling fair, see note no. 12, chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson suggests that Madame Schreck's subterranean museum is the perfect representation of the female body from a typically male perspective, Fevvers herself points out that their clients not so much buy female bodies, rather they: "hire the use of the idea of [them]". S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, New York, State Univ. of N.Y. Press, 1991, pp. 128-129.

confer him eternal youth. Luckily, our heroine is astute enough to always carry a sword, so she escapes, thanks also to her wings, from a very perilous situation.<sup>11</sup>

At this point Fevvers's account of her life stops and with it also the first part of the novel, dawn is breaking and a new day is about to start. Time - what the magic of narration had forced to stand still for a while - resumes its slow, continuous flow.<sup>12</sup>

The second part of the novel is set in St Petersburg, the next destination of the Circus in which Fevvers performs. Incapable of resisting the attraction that he feels towards her, Walser has decided to follow the

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<sup>11</sup> The man's desire to utilize her for his vampiristic rite should be viewed according to Turner in the light of the fact that "ambiguous entities [...] are thought to have great power and are often used in ritual". From a similar perspective, "ambiguous symbols are used to represent the qualities of change, renewal, and disorder that serve as a counterpoint to the structured processes of existence". R. Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus", Folklore Forum, 20, 1/2, 1987, respectively pp. 43,47,48.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidt argues that: "With this night-long Scheherazadic narration [...] overflowing with vitality, the theme of the novel is developed beautifully: a fantastic sketch of female freedom [...] In the remaining two thirds of the novel this theme is played through without ever reaching the intensity of the exposition again". "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 68.

On the continuously digressive structure of the novel, L. Hutcheon observes that: "Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus [...] straddles the border between the imaginary/fantastic (with her winged woman protagonist) and the realistic/historical, between a unified biographically structured plot, and a decentered narration, with its wandering point of view and extensive digressions". A Poetics of Postmodernism, London & N.Y., Routledge, 1988, p. 61.

Cockney Venus by working as clown in the Circus. When he first looks at his face in the mirror, a face now hidden behind the mask of the clown, the experience is almost overwhelming:

As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively back at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sense of freedom that [...] never quite evaporated [...] he experienced the freedom that lies behind the masque [...] (p.103)

Among the various characters which inhabit the complex universe of the Circus - in itself a clear "symbol of life", as Schmidt calls it <sup>13</sup> - there is the American owner, Colonel Kearney and his inseparable young sow Sybil, so called since he believes she could foretell the future. There is Sanson, the strong man who soon proves himself a coward; the clowns defined as "the whores of mirth" (p. 119); a nouvelle Mignon whose experiences before joining the Circus resemble those of the heroine in Berg's work Wozzeck; <sup>14</sup> the dancing tigers of the "Princess of Abyssinia" and the trained monkeys of Monsieur Lamarck. Their various stories are unfolded in the second section of the novel in a

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<sup>13</sup> R. Schmidt, "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> On this point Carter affirms: "Our literary heritage is a kind of folklore. In Nights at the Circus[...] the character Mignon is the daughter of Wozzeck - I'm more familiar with the opera by Berg than with the play - who is left playing at the end: she doesn't know what is going to happen. That is a reference to a common body of knowledge, a folklore of the intelligentsia". J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, p. 82.

relatively autonomous manner, while Fevvers's narrating voice is hardly heard. A particular stress is given to the story of the frail Mignon, as if the author had chosen to oppose it to that of the aerialiste, told in the first part.

Mignon represents the exact contrary of Fevvers: she has a minute body; she is docile and weak, the victim par excellence. As soon as she starts working with the tiger-tamer "Princess of Abyssinia", the two women fall in love with each other. For Mignon this represents the opportunity to enjoy life again, and to forget all the pains and suffering the men she had met in the past had inflicted upon her.<sup>15</sup>

Another important figure of the circus is "Buffo the Great" the leader of the clowns. From him Walser learns

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<sup>15</sup> According to Schmidt "Even for a comic novel this is rather too much of a happy ending, which seems to be motivated by Carter's belated recognition of lesbianism in her fiction and the political intention to portray it positively". "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 69. Palmer's opinion on this point is also in part negative, she notes that: "Carter's treatment of the topic of lesbianism is [...] blander and more idealized" than that carried out by a writer like Weldon, nevertheless she admits that it reflects "the feminist theorization of lesbianism as a form of resistance to patriarchal power". P. Palmer, "Contemporary Lesbian Feminist Fiction: Texts for Everywoman" in Plotting Change, L. Anderson ed., London, Arnold, 1990, p. 61.

With reference to the peculiar "musical relationships" that links Mignon to the Princess, Palmer observes that: "Carter's decision to represent the relationship between Mignon and the Princess in terms of music, her description of the emotional transformation which the relationship involves and her suggestion that it prefigures a new feminist era, generally accord with Cixous' treatment of the image". "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", p. 201.

not only all the secret skills of the profession, but, above all, the deep sense of freedom which derives from it, a freedom which is also a kind of eternal damnation:

'It is given to few to shape themselves, as I have done, [...] as you have done, young man, and, in that moment of choice - [...] exists a perfect freedom. But, once the choice is made, I am condemned, therefore, to be "Buffo" in perpetuity. Buffo for ever; long live Buffo the Great! Who will live on as long as some child somewhere remembers him as a wonder, a marvel, a monster, a thing that, had he not been invented, should have been, to teach little children the truth about the filthy ways of the world. As long as a child remembers [...] (p. 122)

At this point of the novel Walser has almost lost everything of his past identity as a journalist: his rational approach, his detachment, even the capacity of writing - while trying to save Mignon's life from the attack of the tigers, his arm was wounded: "his disguise disguises - nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a real clown" (p. 145). But there is another reason for his transformation: Walser has fallen in love, "a condition that causes him anxiety because he has never experienced it before. [...] no woman ever tried to humiliate him before [...] and Fevvers has both tried and succeeded. This has set up a conflict between his own hitherto impregnable sense of self-esteem and the lack of esteem with which the woman treats him" (Ibid.).

As for Fevvers, she is about to endure another hard experience similar, in many respects, to that in the neo-

gothic castle of Mr Rosencreutz. Allured by the offer of some beautiful jewels, the aerialiste has accepted, against the will of Lizzie, a dinner invitation from an extremely rich and mysterious Grand Duke. In his palace Fevvers discovers that among the many precious artistic objects he possesses there is an amazing ice statue, her own exact image, wearing a collar of pure diamonds. The aristocrat presents himself as "a great collector of all kinds of objets d'art and marvels", then, with a winking of his eye he adds: "Of all things, I love best toys - marvellous and unnatural artefacts" (p. 187).

One of the most precious pieces in his collection is an egg of jade from which, thanks to a complex mechanism, springs out a small bird that starts singing: "Only a bird in a gilded cage". As soon as she hears those words Fevvers starts feeling extremely uncomfortable, as if she perceived the dangers about to come. At the same moment she also realizes that there is no window in the room, so there is no possibility of using her wings to fly away in case of necessity. In the meantime the Grand Duke has discovered her sword and has taken it; Fevvers really seems condemned to spend the rest of her life in a golden cage when, suddenly, taking advantage of a brief moment when the man has reached the climax of his excitement, the aerialiste succeeds in escaping again, just in time to reach the rest of the company on the point of leaving St Petersburg.

The third and last part of the novel begins by



describing the journey on the Great Siberian Railway, a journey that stops before reaching its destination and with the Circus' total disarray. A group of outlaws attacks the train and in the confusion that follows Fevvers and Walser lose track of each other. From that moment onwards the bird-woman comes across characters that, in various ways, have been deprived of freedom. First of all the outlaws which, quite naively, believe that Fevvers is able to intercede with Queen Victoria, and she in her turn with the Tzar in order to grant them pardon. They are literally swept away, together with the clowns, during a blizzard caused by the clowns who invoke Chaos with their "deadly dance of the past perfect which fixes everything fast so it can't move again" (p. 243).<sup>16</sup>

Then, there is the encounter with the idealist fugitive, a character halfway between Rousseau and Kropotkin<sup>17</sup> who, in the end will be incapable of resisting the allure of capitalism represented by the

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<sup>16</sup> The first victims of the attack to the train were the elephants and the tigers. Carter writes: "as if Nature disapproved of them for their unnatural dancing, they had frozen into their own reflections and been shattered, too, when the mirrors broke. As if that burning energy you glimpsed between the bars of their pelts had convulsed in a great response to the energy released in fire around us and, in exploding, they scattered their appearances upon that glass in which they had been breeding sterile duplications". Nights at the Circus. p. 206. According to Turner, the image of the tigers transfigured into fragments of mirrors is a reference to Blake's "The Tyger", see R. Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus", p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> As Schmidt suggests in "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", p. 70.

figure of Colonel Kearney; and finally with an elderly teacher of music, also an idealist, who has been deceived by the people who had promised him a career as talent scout in the taiga. Fevvers herself is now undergoing a difficult moment: the sword she always used to carry as a symbol of her invulnerability is lost, one of her wings has been broken during the assault on the train, her physical decline seems to be progressing to the point when even the colour of her wings and her hair is fading. She comments: "Pity the New Woman if she turns out to be as easily demolished as me" (p. 273). According to Schmidt it is significant that this decline has started as soon as Fevvers has lost the possibility of being admired by an audience, as if it was necessary for her to have this kind of continuous verification.<sup>18</sup> It is at this point that she decides to start looking for Walser: wanting to see again her own image reflected in his eyes, but also to watch his face hidden behind the mask of a clown:

Underneath his make-up, that face like a beloved face known long ago, and lost, and now returned, although I never knew him before, although he is a stranger, still that face which I have always loved before I ever saw it so that to see him is to remember, although I do not know who it is I then remember, except it might be the vague, imaginary face of desire.  
(p.204)

Lizzie warns her in vain about the possible outcome of her search:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 72.

And, when you do find the young American, what the 'ell will you do, then? Don't you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes? True lovers' reunions always end in marriage. (p.280)

But for Fevvers the solution is quite easy: a complete reversal of roles:

Oh, but Liz - think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, and not expect the vice versa! [...] I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well - I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century. (p.281)

One should not be surprised if, following such high-sounding rhetoric, things go quite differently. Walser, whose adventures have been told on parallel with those of Fevvers, has undergone a further transformation following his stay with a tribe of Bear worshippers. He has completely lost his memory, but has developed some other powers, among them the so called "spiritual vision", mainly due to the drugs that the Shaman gives him; moreover Walser himself has become the Shaman 's apprentice.<sup>19</sup> A further irony is the fact that for this

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<sup>19</sup> Walser's ability brings to mind the so-called "second sight" Rimbaud writes about in his "Letter to the clairvoyant", that is a kind of sight able to surpass its usual potentialities thanks to the exaltation of all the other senses. The transformation Walser undergoes is even more evident if we consider that at the beginning of the novel we read that he: "had not experienced his experience as experience [...] In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one quiver of introspection" (p. 10).

tribe "there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead a sort of magic realism. Strange fate for a journalist, to find himself in a place where no facts, as such, existed!" (p. 260).<sup>20</sup>

When Walser and Fevvers finally meet again in the village, the former has behind him "an apprenticeship in the higher form of the confidence trick" (p. 294); to his eyes, dila .ted by drugs, Fevvers is only one of the many hallucinations which crowd into his mind. This has quite a destabilizing effect on the bird-woman:

In Walser's eyes, she saw herself, at last, swimming into definition, like the image of a photographic paper; but, instead of Fevvers, she saw two perfect miniatures of a dream.

She felt her outlines waver; she felt herself trapped forever in the reflection of Walser's eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her life: 'Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?' (p.290)

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<sup>20</sup> Schmidt quite rightly points out that the Shaman and Fevvers have something in common: both their lives depend upon the fact that the society they live in believe in them, accepts them and remunerate them for what they do: "The Shaman provides concrete manifestations of the spirit world [...] Fevvers is the concrete manifestation of an idea, the free woman". Thus, the aerialiste is a sort of materialized symbolism as already was the case with Mother in Eve. Moreover, Schmidt adds, she is certainly more vulnerable than the Shaman since there has been no one like her before, and her vision does not stop to an a-historical present but tends towards a utopian future. This is why "Her confidence must [...] be nurtured by the admiration of an audience". "The Journey of the Subject in Angela Carter's Fiction", pp. 71-72.

Being the first of her kind, however, has also some positive aspects, as Lizzie admits: "You never existed before. There's nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are Year One. You haven't any history and there are no expectations of you except the one you yourself create" (p. 198).

Without the verification of the other's gaze Fevvers is utterly lost. It is significant that she will regain confidence in herself, when the people of the village look at her wings in amazement: "that told her who she was" (Ibid.).

The novel ends with the two protagonists finally making love just on the eve of the twentieth century, thus symbolizing the beginning of a re-conception of heterosexual relations, and with the loud laughter of Fevvers who breaks the last of all illusions: the one regarding her own virginity. Throughout the novel Walser had always believed that the Cockney Venus was "the only fully-feathered intacta in the world".<sup>21</sup>

As it has been argued at the outset, Nights at the Circus is the result of a very complex intertextual strategy. My aim at this point is not that - or at least not only that - of pedantically tracing all the textual references disseminated throughout the novel, rather that of offering several levels of readings of this work, levels which, given the heterogeneous material chosen by the author and her very personal handling of it, cannot but give rise to somewhat different perspectives.

First of all, as Pauline Palmer rightly suggests in "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", it is worth

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<sup>21</sup> According to Turner the presumed virginity of Fevvers obeys the structural mechanisms of the plot "in line with most romantic fiction: virgin and hero struggle". "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus", pp. 58-59.

noting that the interaction of the various fragments and references which make up the novel seems to follow a kind of carnivalesque pattern. According to Bakhtin the carnivalesque is "a flexible form of artistic vision". Typical of the Carnival are some of the images and the terminology adopted in Carter's work. Ma Nelson, the owner of the brothel where Fevvers spends her childhood, is depicted as "The Mistress of the Revels" (p. 49), Buffo, the Master Clown is clearly defined as "the Lord of Misrule" (p.117), not to mention Fevvers herself, her enormous dimensions and her reprobable habits which link this character to that notion of the "Bakhtinian low", already implied at the outset when I described her more "earthly" side.<sup>22</sup>

I will not go into the details of Bakhtin's thought here; I only wish to recall that typical of the carnivalesque is a mixture of sacred and profane, together with the introduction of utopian elements and a relative perspective towards reality. In Bakhtin's work the true spirit of Carnival is the one that proclaims "the joyous relativity of everything". According to Palmer, Carter adopts in this novel also another typically Bakhtinian image: the grotesque body, a body that undergoes a sort of continuous transformation, in

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<sup>22</sup> P. Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", pp. 197-198. It is also worth recalling that according to Bakhtin "exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style". See M. Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World, tr. H. Iswolsky, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1968, p. 303. Fevvers is similarly excessive "Without her clothes on, she looked the size of a house" (p. 292).

the character of Buffo who is able to deconstruct himself within the magic circle of the circus, so much so that "He wears his insides on his outside" (p. 116).<sup>23</sup>

More precisely, Rory Turner argues that "Buffo the Great" and the whole company of the clowns should be considered in the light of that particular kind of grotesque Bakhtin defined as romantic. For Bakhtin "The Romantic mask loses almost entirely its regenerating and renewing element and acquires a sombre hue. A terrible vacuum, a nothingness lurks behind it".<sup>24</sup> It is in this sense then that we should intend Buffo's statement "and what am I without my Buffo's face? Why nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy" (p. 122), and also the subsequent disappearance of the clowns in the Siberian tundra.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> P. Palmer, "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", p. 198. C. Norris rightly believes that this, as well as many other passages in Nights at the Circus, "do catch precisely the logic and the effects of that 'dissimulating' movement that Derrida finds at work in Mallarmé's cryptic text" (the obvious reference is to "The Double Session" in which Derrida discusses a text by Mallarmé entitled "Mimique"). "Angela Carter's clown" - Norris argues - "is an adept of deconstruction before the letter, of a gestural writing that effaces all signs of origin and exists only in the moment of its own production. And Nights at the Circus can be read - indeed, asks to be read - as a text which deconstructs the conventions of mimetic realism, resisting all attempts to naturalize its various extravagant scenes and episodes". C. Norris, Derrida, London, Fontana Press, 1987, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> R. Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus", p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> In Turner's opinion, "By destroying the romantic grotesque figures of the clowns [...] Carter is freeing the grotesque from its modern interpretation. Buffo is a Christlike figure who 'takes away the sins of the world,' in this case the sin being the frozen, static,

Thus, in Nights at the Circus the references to the world of Carnival are numerous and in some occasions labelled (at page 146 we read of "carnival-like proceedings"). One of the main problems when dealing with such a perspective regards the question of whether Carnival offers a transgressive project capable of disrupting the existing status quo. According to Palmer, Angela Carter employs the carnivalesque repertoire with a clear feminist intent, that is to throw a new light on the violence inherent in the patriarchal dominant culture. Such violence is perpetrated mainly against the weakest elements in the Circus: women and trained animals. In this sense, the author's aim is also that of breaking the extremely polarized representation of Woman: angel/goddess or sub-human being/animal.<sup>26</sup> It

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compartmentalized condition of the grotesque". Ibidem, p. 51.

On this point E. Jordan in her "Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions", writes: "In Carter's most amazing and blasphemous tour de force, the discourses of clowning and Christianity are yoked, by way of the primary school classic 'Lord of the Dance' and the idea of Christ as a whore, who gives himself to all, [...] (this scandalous conception can be traced to Sadeian scholarship and to negative theology, the anti-Catholicism which haunts about French 'theory')". In L. Anderson ed. Plotting Change, pp. 39-40

For an interesting discussion of the Bakhtinian notion of "post-Romantic Carnival" see Mary Russo, "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" in Feminist Studies/Critical Studies, T. de Lauretis ed., Univ of Indiana Press, 1986.

<sup>26</sup> Referring to the often dichotomizing characterization of women Toril Moi writes: "Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will [...] share in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos, to view



is precisely from such a perspective that we should view the parallelism between the story of the trained monkeys who, at the end, regain their freedom, and the condition of passivity and segregation that characterizes many of the female communities described in the novel. Women will achieve their freedom only when they rediscover a new sense of solidarity, as in the case of the brothel defined as "a wholly female world [...] governed by a sweet and loving reason" (pp. 38-39). At the Siberian penitentiary, a perfect panopticon, the female prisoners similarly escape once they demolish the barrier of silence built by their cruel warder, a woman herself, and constitute "an army of lovers" (p. 217).<sup>27</sup> As soon as these women get outside the prison the first thing their eyes see is an immense white landscape, a symbol of the infinite opportunities which now stand before them. Clearly, this is one of the most utopian passages in the novel, an utopian perspective that the women in question do not hesitate to embrace advancing "hand in hand" (p.218), while intoning a song of joy.

It is from the same perspective of a feminist use of

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them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as the representatives of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God". T. Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, p. 167.

<sup>27</sup> It is significant that the women prisoners of the panopticon - the old Benthamian idea, later developed by Foucault in Discipline and Punishment - communicate by using their menstrual blood. Far from being a symbol of sacrifice and cyclic suffering, it becomes a valid instrument for writing and claiming their own right to existence.

the Carnavalesque that, according to Palmer, we should consider the descriptions, frequent in the novel, of abnormal states of mind, hallucinations, dreams, all of which underline the dialogic attitude of the subject and its progressive transformation into a new human being. This is the case of Walser, and of Sanson "The Strong Man", who openly confesses his crimes against the female sex:

'All my life I have been strong and simple and - a coward, concealing the frailty of my spirit behind the strength of my body. I abused women and spoke ill of them, thinking myself superior to the entire sex on account of my muscle, although in reality I was too weak to bear the burden of any woman's love. (p. 276)<sup>28</sup>

As regards Fevvers, her being a symbol of woman's freedom is certainly evident (the wings), although sometimes, during the course of the story, the male gaze imposes upon her several stereotypical images like: "Angel of death", "queen of ambiguities", "spectacle", or the most humiliating of all "freak". While sketching the portrait of this character the author is careful in

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<sup>28</sup> Speaking of the various misadventures Walser goes through, Carter affirms: "The whole point about him is that he's not certain; he is a sceptical person. [...] he wants to sustain the illusion of his own scepticism. But [...] his rather two-dimensional idea of himself - as the foreign correspondent, the person in control [...] with the privileged marginality of the journalist - has to be broken down before he can become [...] not a fit mate for Fevvers at all, but a serious person. [...] but it is not Fevvers who does it to him - it's life. When he's recruited from the circus, the colonel asks him, 'Can you stand humiliation?' J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, pp. 89-90.

controlling the complex tensions which usually characterize the external symbolic dimension of the Self and the more intimate aspects of subjectivity. As Turner rightly argues, Fevvers is most clearly a symbol, but in spite of this fact she is also a human being perfectly able to think, capable of undergoing a personal evolution. Notwithstanding the innumerable roles imposed upon her, this extraordinary woman always keeps a very strong sense of identity, indeed "it is the very power of her symbolic identity that contributes to that sense of identity".<sup>29</sup>

Considering the relation existing between the bird-woman and her adoptive mother Lizzie, one would argue that it is rather ambiguous in so far as the latter "is both adjunct to Fevvers and that which Fevvers is moving away from in some sense".<sup>30</sup> The various ways in which Carter explores the complex relation between mother and daughter have already been discussed in the previous chapters. In Nights at the Circus she returns to the issue stressing, perhaps even more strongly, its controversial aspects. When Fevvers decides to go in search of Walser, whose traces have been lost after the

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<sup>29</sup> R. Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus", p. 43. It is Walser himself who admits the importance of Fevvers's symbolic identity: "She ~~ow~~s to herself to remain a woman [...] It is her human duty. As a symbolic woman, she has meaning, as an anomaly, none. As an anomaly, she would become again, as she once had been, an exhibit in a museum of curiosities. But what would she become, if she continued to be a woman?" (p. 161).

<sup>30</sup> R. Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in Nights at the Circus", p. 51.

derailment of the train, the two women have a quarrel during which Fevvers, referring to her early childhood, says: "There I was, unique and parentless, unshackled, unfettered by the past, and the minute you clapped eyes on me you turned me into a contingent being, enslaved me as your daughter who was no man's daughter" (p. 280). It is also worth noting that the aerialiste's attachment towards Walser becomes stronger and stronger following her own process of transformation towards adulthood, Lizzie tries to warn her against the dangers such an attachment could entail:

I fear for you, Sophie. Selling yourself is one thing and giving yourself away quite another but, oh Sophie! What if you rashly throw yourself away? Then what happens to that unique 'me-nes' of yours? On the scrapheap, that's what happens to it! I raised you up to fly to the heavens, not to brood over a clutch of eggs! (p. 282)

The distance that, on this occasion, separates mother and daughter symbolically exemplifies the paradox Fevvers is now facing: she is looking for somebody who can give her back the joy of living, but also, at the same time, has the capacity to destroy her; in other words the question is how women can maintain a strong subjective identity and yet be treasured as a symbolic illusion by a loving other.<sup>31</sup> The solution to the dilemma could consist in the fact that Walser himself, as we have seen, is not his old Self anymore. Turner maintains that "Walser's transformation thus lays a groundwork upon which Fevvers

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 55.

can transform to adulthood in a fashion that doesn't destroy her".<sup>32</sup>

At this point I wish to briefly shift back my argument to the question of the alleged transgressivity of the carnivalesque and its capability of conveying feminist discourses, in order to put these questions in the context of contemporary postmodernist aesthetics. In contrast to Palmer's optimistic perspective, Sally Robinson argues that Carter shows how the Carnival itself, useful escape valve for tensions which otherwise would endanger the status quo, participates in the processes through which difference and marginality are constructed. However this does not diminish its parodic function towards the dominant culture. As Mary Russo aptly reminds us, according to Bakhtinian terminology Carnival is dialogic in so far as:

the categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous [...] They contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, p. 128. The dilemma is underlined in the novel when, referring to the clowns, the author writes that they "could terrify, enchant, vandalise, ravage, yet always stay on the safe side of being, licensed to commit licence and yet forbidden to act [...] even if the clown detonated the entire city [...] nothing would really change" (p. 151). For a criticism of the Bakhtinian attitude towards this topic, too often pervaded by a certain vein of nostalgia and utopic optimism, see P. Stallybrass and A. White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1986, pp. 6-26.

Robinson argues convincingly that Nights at the Circus is in many respects a parody of the postmodernist tendency to underline what Linda Hutcheon defines as the "ex-centric", the Other of Western culture, historically excluded from the places of enunciation. Carter creates a carnivalesque universe where every identity lives only in its performative moment and subjectivity is articulated in the intersections between gender, race, class and ideology. In this way, "difference" becomes spectacle in a textual ambit in which fictional and philosophical discourses give rise to an interesting synthesis.<sup>34</sup> It is certainly significant that Fevvers's identity, together with that of the other characters which inhabit "the magic circle of difference" of the Circus, is constructed through the gaze of the people in power (as well as ordinary people), a power that usually belongs to the centre. It is with this power that they have to negotiate a sort of intermediate position in order to escape the marginality they now experience.

Robinson's arguments find their inspiration mainly in

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See also White's "Pigs and Pierrots: Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction" Raritan, 11, 2, Fall 1982, pp. 51-70.

<sup>34</sup> At this point it is worth quoting what Carter says in an interview with J. Haffenden:

[J. Haffenden] "You've written that exploring ideas is for you the same thing as telling stories: 'a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms'"

[A. Carter] "Sometimes they are straightforwardly intellectual arguments. The female penitentiary [...] is where I discuss crime and punishment as ideas. But my fiction is very often a kind of literary criticism", Novelists in Interview, p. 79.

the feminist criticism of Derrida's theories as expressed in Spurs, where Derrida assigns to the female a specific deconstructive role, able to liberate philosophical discourse from its innate patriarchal tendencies. This is due to the fact that the female element occupies an unstable position within the usual binarism. Robinson's argument, corroborated among other things also by the studies of Luce Irigaray and Teresa de Lauretis, is that Derrida represents once again woman as the other of man, or more precisely as that difference crucial to his "post-phallogocentric" autorepresentation. In sum, the concept of Woman would circulate according to the dynamic of male desire considered as an interchange between two men, a process that Irigaray has defined as "hom(m)osexual economy".<sup>35</sup>

According to Robinson, Nights at the Circus deploys precisely the contradictions existing between the concept of "Woman", univocal object of official narratives and that of "women" multiform subject of its own narrative. It is from this perspective that one should understand the relation between Fevvers, half-woman half-bird, and Walser the journalist, who from the start has mingled feelings towards such an ambiguous expression of femininity. Fevvers's winning strategy will consist in actively appropriating the main instrument of her own submission, the gaze:

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<sup>35</sup> For a critique of Derrida's thought as expressed in Spurs, see S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, pp. 79-97.

Her strategy [...] is to turn the gaze on herself by actively staging her difference and by intervening into the hom(m)osexual economy that requires Woman be made into a fetish-object to safeguard male subjectivity. [...] Nights at the Circus disrupts it through what feminist film theorist have called the subversive potential of the feminine masquerade.<sup>36</sup>

What we have here, Robinson continues, is a strategy very similar to that described by Irigaray as "mimicry", a conscious performance on the part of women of the role

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<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, pp. 23-24. As I argued earlier, the "dynamic of the gaze" is recurrent throughout the novel: think of Fevvers's experiences in the brothel, or in Madame Schrek's museum. She is well aware of the gaze's importance, to the point that at page 35 of the novel we read: "She fixed Walser with a piercing, judging regard, as if to ascertain just how far she could go with him".

It is in this way then that Fevvers tries to resist the process described by M.A. Doane in her "Film and the Masquerade", in which, due to the effect of the male gaze, woman is forced into a sort of "transvestite subjectivity", or she even identifies with the image created by that gaze. The alternative, Doane suggests, consists in "playing the masquerade", that is to accept such a position consciously rather than passively, a position very similar to that chosen by our heroine. Doane writes: "Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic. The transvestite adopts the sexuality of the other - the woman becomes a man in order to attain the necessary distance from the image. Masquerade, on the other hand, involves a realignment of femininity, the recovery, or more accurately, simulation, of the missing gap or distance [...] The masquerade doubles representation; it is constituted by a hyperbolisation of the accountments of femininity". In Screen, 23, Sept./Oct. 1982, pp. 81-82. On this same issue see also L. Mulvey, J. Bergstrom & M.A. Doane, "The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions," Camera Obscura: A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory 20/21 May/Sept 1989 pp. 5-27 and L. Irigaray, This Sex Which Is Not One, N.Y., Cornell U.P., 1985, pp. 23-33.



traditionally assigned to them within different discourses. By focusing her attention on the fact that the concept of gender has no ontological substance and is more a performance - an issue already thoroughly discussed in The Passion of New Eve - Carter seems to subvert the process of naturalization of femaleness, while showing at the same time that, as she maintains also in The Sadeian Woman, "a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick" and the myths concerning sexual differences are nothing else but "consolatory nonsense".<sup>37</sup>

In an interview with John Haffenden Angela Carter compared Fevvers to one of her favourite American actresses, Mae West: "The way Mae West controls the audience-response towards herself in her movies is quite extraordinary. Fevvers is supposed to have something of Mae West's baboon or gunslinger's walk".<sup>38</sup> The exact opposite of Mae West is Marilyn Monroe, a sort of Sadian Justine, and one could argue that in Nights at the Circus the character of Monroe is played by Mignon, who prefers

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<sup>37</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, London, Virago, 1979, p. 24. With reference to myth and to the complex problems related to it, one could argue that in Nights at the Circus, Carter follows Barthes's advice according to which: "The best weapon against myth is perhaps to mystify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth". The figure of the aerialiste in fact, so excessively artificial, seems to stem from such a perspective. See R. Barthes, "Myth Today" in Mythologies, London, J. Cape, 1983, p. 135.

<sup>38</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, p. 88. Speaking of Mae West in The Sadeian Woman, Carter argues that: "She made of her own predatoriness a joke that concealed its power, whilst simultaneously exploiting it", p. 61.

to hide behind "the victim's defence of no responsibility" (p.139). Needless to say, Fevvers's life is a continuous struggle against such victimizing processes. In fact she seems to be fully aware of her experience and of her place in history; she is the New Woman, "child of the new century, the New Age in which no women will be bound to the ground" (p. 25). Walser's task is that of writing the chronicle of her extraordinary transformation, including the stories of many ordinary women like Lizzie:

'Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis,' she said to Lizzie. 'And not of my trajectory, alone, but of yours, too, Lizzie; [...] Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow. (p. 285)

This utopian perspective reaches its climax in the last pages of the novel when Fevvers speaks of the day in which:

all the women will have wings, the same as I. This young woman in my arms, whom we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it; she will tear off her mind forg'd manacles, will rise up and fly away. The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed - (Ibid.) (emphasis mine)<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Carter refers to "mind-forg'd manacles" also in her

However, it should be stressed that the author's attitude towards such an aspiration is clearly ironic - as previously was the case in Eve, in which the prospect of androgyny had been only offered for discussion and not fully endorsed - thus avoiding the rise of a new mythology of the bird-woman. The vision of the future envisaged in the novel's conclusion is not without shadows. The unpleasant task of hinting at them falls to Lizzie: "This old witch sees storms ahead, my girl. When I look to the future I see through a glass, darkly. You improve your analysis, girl, and then we'll discuss it" (p. 286).

These are shadows that not even Fevvers's final laughter can sweep away, in spite of the fact that it is described as a powerful tornado involving the entire universe:

The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. (p. 295)<sup>40</sup>

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"Notes from the Front Line", here she writes: "This investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives - what Blake called the "mind-forg'd manacles" - is what I've concerned myself with consciously since that time. (I realize, now, I must always have sensed that something was badly wrong with the versions of reality I was offered that took certain aspects of my being as a woman for granted". In On Gender and Writing, M. Wandor ed., London, Pandora, 1983, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Palmer argues that Fevvers's laughter is not only festive but "it is socially and psychically liberating". In "From 'Coded Mannequin' to Bird Woman", p. 201; the

Fevvers's last words, when she is in Walser's arms, sound like a mocking of the ingenuous reporter who had believed what the papers said about the aerialiste, that she was "the only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world". To his surprise at the absence of her virginity, she replies with a sibylline: "To think I really fooled you! [...] It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence".

Carter discusses of the possible meanings of this reply in the above mentioned interview with Haffenden, the passage is worth quoting at length:

It's actually a statement about the nature of fiction, about the nature of her narrative. [...] People babble a lot nowadays about the 'unreliable narrator' [...] so I thought: I'll show you a really unreliable narrator in Nights at the Circus! It's not so much a question of Fevvers's wings, which have now established themselves as part of her physiology - she does have wings, obviously, and no navel - as a question about fiction. [...] Her boast is partly a celebration of the confidence trick, among other things, as well as a description of her way of being: she's had the confidence to pull it all off, after all. She's also fooled him about her sexual intactness of course. [...] ending on that line doesn't make you realize the fictionality of what has gone before, it makes you start inventing other fictions, things that might have happened - [...] So that really is an illusion. It's inviting the reader to write lots of other novels for themselves, to continue taking these people as if they were real. [...] it is inviting the reader to take one further step into the fictionality of the narrative, instead of coming out of it and looking at it as though it were an artefact. So that's not

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obvious comparison here is to Bakhtin according to whom: "It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival", Rabelais and his World, p. 12.

postmodernist at all, I suppose: it's the single most nineteenth century gesture in the novel!<sup>41</sup>

In this same interview Carter refuses to acknowledge her writing as postmodernist; earlier she had stressed the adoption in this novel of the picaresque, a typically eighteenth-century genre:

The idea behind Nights at the Circus was very much to entertain and instruct, and I purposely used a certain eighteenth-century fictional device - the picaresque, where people have adventures in order to find themselves in places where they can discuss philosophical concepts without distractions. That [...] occurs, for example, when the characters reach Siberia: they can discuss Life and Art as they stride off through the snow.<sup>42</sup>

The reasons for this refusal of the term postmodernism, which seems to stem from a sort of ideological prejudgment, have already been discussed in the previous chapters. However I cannot help wondering whether a negation so sharply expressed hides instead a full awareness on the part of the author of the fact that her texts present what I would call a "postmodernist contamination". In contrast it is also worth noting that in another moment in this interview Carter assumes a more open attitude towards the possible readings which her novels can suggest: "you don't have to read them as a system of signification if you don't want to. You could

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<sup>41</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, pp.90-91.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 87.

read them as science fiction if you wished [...]"<sup>43</sup>

Obviously, I do not wish to diminish the importance in many of Carter's texts of the deep links existing with genres and narrative traditions typical of the past, like the picaresque; however emphasizing such literary continuity does not automatically imply an exclusion of what is quickly dismissed as an ephemeral literary convention now in vogue and lacking any epistemological substance. The more interesting theorizations of postmodernism have often stressed that the roots of the so called "postmodernist fantastic" lie in the historic novel, in the fantastic, in the Bakhtinian idea of carnivalization that stems from Menippean satire, passing through Romanticism, to emerge in novels as apparently different as Ulysses and The Satanic Verses.<sup>44</sup>

It is from such a perspective that I would read the picaresque quest developed in Nights at the Circus, and the suggestive descriptions of the Circus itself. What perhaps differentiates this text from other postmodernist novels which also adopt similar perspectives is the author's very personal tendency to fuse the surrealist

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<sup>43</sup> Idem.

<sup>44</sup> B. McHale in Postmodernist Fiction, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1987, writes: "Clearly, this repertoire of Menippean and carnivalesque topoi overlaps at certain points with the repertoires of the fantastic and science fiction genres, and thus with the postmodernist adaptations of fantastic literature and science fiction. But in fact the overlap is more general than that: these characteristic topoi of carnivalized literature are also characteristic topoi of postmodernist fiction. [...] Postmodernist fiction [...] in the absence of a real carnival context, [...] constructs fictional carnivals" pp. 173-174.

gaiety of her style with a serious intellectual commitment. Within such a narrative strategy, symbolism seems to play a central role, often defamiliarized according to an imaginative process that Carter herself compares to Surrealism.<sup>45</sup> In this way then symbolism not only is useful in communicating a concept, but in the course of the process it becomes a living figure, full of energy. The obvious example is Fevvers, and also the fantastic universe of the Circus in general. One cannot but think at this point of a painter like Chagall who was so enchanted by the delicate harmony of dancing, theatre, music and language present in the Circus that he decided to work consistently on this motif in the late period of his long career. Actually, Carter's novel often seems to pay an implicit homage to the imaginative force and the suggestive allegorism of Chagall's style, which sometimes resembles poetry more than painting. This happens above all when the motif and its depiction is better expressed by a sophisticated figurative language. It is also worth recalling that Chagall was the favourite painter of the Surrealists; Apollinaire was for a while not only personal friend but also mentor of the Russian artist, although it should be stressed that for

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<sup>45</sup> In the interview with J. Haffenden cited above, Carter argues that: "Surrealism didn't involve inventing extraordinary things to look at, it involved looking at the world as though it were strange [...] Another way of magicking or making everything strange is to take metaphor literally, and in some respects Fevvers [...] starts off as a metaphor come to life - a winged spirit. And she's the Winged Victory [...] except that she does have a head!" Novelists in Interview, pp. 92-93.

Chagall the appreciation the Surrealists showed for the unconscious was more an aesthetic pose than a willing exhibition of the illogical. For Chagall there was no contradiction at all in believing his own dreams and, at the same time, accepting reality.<sup>46</sup>

In Nights at the Circus there is one passage in particular in which, in a metafictional mode, we are offered a beautiful description of Saint Petersburg:

the city, this Sleeping Beauty of a city, stirs and murmurs, longing yet fearing the rough and bloody kiss that will awaken her, tugging at her moorings in the past, striving, yearning to burst through the present into the violence of that authentic history to which this narrative - as it must be obvious! - does not belong.

[...] in the sugar syrup of nostalgia, acquiring the elaboration of artifice; I am inventing an imaginary city as I go along. (p. 97)

Clearly, this is not the first time in Carter's work that the city assumes the configuration, if not the visual concreteness of a human body - as in The Passion of New Eve - only that in this case the surreal dimension is introduced by the allusion to the magic world of fairy-tales: Saint Petersburg is a "Sleeping Beauty" fallen into a deep sleep from which a "rough and bloody kiss" is about to awake her; the kiss is feared, but at the same time longed for, perhaps in the awareness that no one can escape historic reality. Only the magic

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<sup>46</sup> Carter seems to maintain something very similar to this when she says: "there is certainly a confusion about the nature of dreams, which are in fact perfectly real: they are real as dreams, and they are full of real meanings as dreams". Ibidem, p. 82.



artifice of narrative can succeed, an artifice whose illusory power the author clearly indicates to the reader.

In conclusion, it could be argued that perhaps in our postmodern era the artist's task appears to be getting closer and closer to the stance of the ex-centric clown, the bizarre voice of a proliferating and open narrative that undoes the objects in their fundamental elements only to reflect them in the multiplicity of relations and in the absurdity of an unlikely essence. What emerges ineluctably for the writer is the libertarian need "to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque" (p.103). This is not an easy condition for her, forced as she is, to perform in the great textual Circus, standing like an acrobat in precarious equilibrium on the string of her own narrative. In the introduction to Expletives Deleted in fact Carter writes: "We travel along the thread of narrative like high-wire artistes. That is our life".<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Op. cit., p. 2.

## CHAPTER VI.

### Wise Children

"Now, God, stand up for bastards!"

Shakespeare, King Lear

"It's a wise child that knows its own father", goes an old adage, worth recalling at the outset of a critical commentary on Angela Carter's last novel. I use the term "comment" in a Foucaultian sense, that is in full awareness of the double danger it implies: on one hand that of being trapped in the discourse of the text while apparently trying to clarify its meaning, on the other that of shadowing, if not erasing with one's own discourse the discourse of the text.<sup>1</sup> The shortcomings of such a critical strategy, as it has been applied in this chapter, could be that sometimes the voices of the author and the narrator coincide, the direction of argument does not seem clear, and "proper" criticism is continuously deferred. As I have stressed at the outset of some previous chapters, I will start by going through the story, this in order to offer a "textual referent" in which the passages selected implicitly hint at the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of "comment" and of its distinction from "critique" see M. Foucault, The Order of Things, London, 1974.

critical discourses developed in the final stage. In the case of Wise Children such discourses deal mainly with the question of Carnival and its (alleged) transgressiveness, with the textualization of history, the carnivalization of memory, the parodic appropriation carried out by popular culture of national icons (Shakespeare), and the relation between fiction and autobiography. This is a novel in which the bastard contamination of genres, styles, "high" and "low" culture(s) becomes paramount (the twinning and bastardy are a metaphor for high/low culture), so it is no surprise if its commentary reflects such an "impure" nature, showing in so doing the fragility of critical certainties and traditional hierarchies of discourse.

Wise Children is a novel about the immortality of life, the succession of generations and the inevitable transfer of fathers' faults to their sons.<sup>2</sup> Events succeed one another rapidly, without intervals or pauses for reflection; characters, circumstances, situations are extraordinary and at the same time perfectly realistic, rhythmic prose and redundancy mingle in a synthesis apparently impossible, but in the end successful. Once again we are faced with Carter's rich, unrestrained imagination, which goes far beyond any criteria of mere

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<sup>2</sup> A. Carter, Wise Children, London, Chatto & Windus, 1991. All quotations refer to the above edition. I am aware that speaking of the "immortality of life" reads oddly, but the sense of this will become clear in the final stages of the novel with the appearance of the new-born twins.

verisimilitude, adopting a grotesque surrealism which offers a high expressionist distortion of objective reality. The textual structure, in spite of its apparent simplicity, appears to be rather complex; the plot is congested by a multitude of characters whose identity is often uncertain, so much so that even the most attentive of readers is in the end forced to consult the list of the dramatis personae, as if he was not reading a novel but a work written for the stage.

Actually, Wise Children is akin to the world of theatre on a thematic as well as on a stylistic level. It can be seen as a collection of memories covering a century of theatrical history, from an improbable Hamlet played by a pregnant actress, to Cole Porter's "Brush up your Shakespeare". The whole plot is splendidly carried off (as they say in the theatre) thanks to a bastard combination of different genres and styles. The twin protagonists Dora and Nora Chance are bastards since their father, the great Shakesperian actor Sir Melchior Hazard, has never acknowledged their birth. Their art is bastard in so far as the two women earn their living in the underworld of the burlesque and the music-hall, poor relative of the classical theatre: "our father was a pillar of the legitimate theatre and we girls are illegitimate in every way - not only born out of the wedlock, but we went on the halls, didn't we" (p. 11). When one is unlucky enough to be born "on the wrong side of the river", as Dora says, chances are that life is going to be hard. Here is how Dora, the narrating voice

of the novel, describes the situation, with a lucidness tinged with a certain bitter irony:

Good Morning! Let me introduce myself. My name is Dora Chance. Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks.

Put it another way. If you're from the States, think of Manhattan. Then think of Brooklyn. See what I mean? Or for a Parisian, it might be a question of rive gauche, rive droite. With London, it's the North and South divide. Me and Nora, that's my sister, we've always lived on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the bastard side of Old Father Thames. (p.1)<sup>3</sup>

Again in Carter's fiction (think of Eve, Hoffman, or Nights at the Circus) we have the image of the city, often compared to a human body palpitating with life, only this time the city seems the unwilling accomplice of an inescapable injustice for someone who has the misfortune of being born in the wrong side of the town, or from a more general perspective, in the wrong part of the world. "But" Dora comments "you can't trust things to stay the same", in fact "There's been a diaspora of the affluent, they jumped into their diesel Saabs and dispersed throughout the city". So, social inequality is not confined only to a certain area or neighbourhood, but is more heterogeneously disseminated throughout the city.

The day just begun is a really important one for Dora and Nora Chance, their seventy-fifth birthday, a date

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the novel the overtly ironised narrative voice will offer an implicit critical dimension in its dialogic relation with that which it narrates.

that they wish to celebrate in style in order to forget, perhaps, their approaching death. The two sisters long to do something, anything "to remind us we're still in the land of the living" (p. 4). By a strange coincidence, their natural father, Melchior Hazard, also has his birthday on April 23rd, the date on which, according to tradition, Shakespeare was born. An "appropriate" coincidence since a love of the stage seems to run in both legitimate and bastard branches of the family. Ranulph Hazard, father of Melchior and of his twin brother Peregrine - although Dora refers that at the time there were some doubts on the fact that he was the real father - was a Shakespearian actor, whose mission in life consisted in bringing the word of the Bard to the remotest corner of the world, with a pioneering spirit like that of Captain Kirk. ("Willy-nilly, off must go his wife and children, too to take Shakespeare where Shakespeare had never been before" p. 17).<sup>4</sup>

In the end Ranulph's degree of commitment to his theatrical roles was so great that "[he] couldn't tell the difference between Shakespeare and living"; so much so that no one was surprised when, after a performance of Othello, he killed his young wife and her alleged lover in a hotel room before committing suicide himself. There couldn't have been a better exit for a

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<sup>4</sup> This sentence seems to echo the motto of Star Trek: "to boldly go where no man has gone before!" Later changed for obvious reasons in "to boldly go where no one has gone before!" in Star Trek the Next Generation.

Shakespearian actor!

So, "there was more than a hint of romantic, nay, melodramatic illegitimacy in the Hazard family long before Nora and myself took out first bows" (p. 17), Dora comments - hardly hiding her satisfaction and before starting the narration of the events which proceeded their birth. There was the war on, and Melchior Hazard was a penniless young actor, living in Mrs Chance's lodging-house in Brixton (the name of the street prophetically appropriate for the career he intended to follow: Bard Road). It was in Mrs Chance's house that he met their mother, "Pretty Kitty", a young girl just seventeen years old. Unfortunately she died immediately after the two sisters were born, so they remained in the care of the landlady who gave them also her name - "Chance by name, Chance by nature", as Dora specifies - and in the care of their uncle Peregrine who, in spite of his incessant travelling all over the world - to be true to his name - was like a real father for them.

The day they were born is evoked by Carter with a suggestive image. It was washing day in Brixton and all over the neighbourhood coloured clothes hang in the sun as in a wild can can. This was the first image the two new born babies saw, a presage of the life of dancing and singing that lay ahead. One song in particular was due to accompany the sisters all their life. The first time they heard it was when uncle Perry gave them a phonograph as a present. The refrain was famous:

I can't give you anything but love, baby,

That's the only thing I've plenty of, baby ...

It was listening to that promise of love - "a promise our father never kept", Dora bitterly comments - that the two sisters danced for the first time, since when they have never been able to stop, even if reduced to being "Two batty old hags" ready to perform in a pub for a glass of gin.

Dora's narration unfolds by linking, in an atemporal syncretism, events of the past and of the present, with the verisimilitude and vividness of image that only a senile memory can recreate (Carter is adept at creating a narration which reproduces such an effect). So the reader is introduced to all the numerous characters which constitute the large Hazard family: first of all Melchior's first wife, Lady Atalanta Hazard - who now lives with the twin sisters in the old house of Bard Road crippled and affectionately nicknamed "Wheelchair" - her twin daughters Saskia and Imogen, rightfully recognized by Melchior as his children, but in reality natural daughters of his own brother Peregrine. Then there is his second wife, the American Delia Delaney; and finally the third and last, a young actress who, like Melchior's mother many years before, had played the role of Cordelia next to a Lear who became her husband - "marrying your Cordelia, evidently something of a Hazard family tradition" is Dora's ironic comment before admitting that the woman in question has some merits:

She was a forward-looking woman. She looked ahead and she saw



- television! [...] Who would have thought that little box of shadows would put us all out of business, singers, dancers, acrobats, Shakespearians, the lot? But Melchior's third wife planned for the late twentieth century. (p. 37)

The whole Hazard family is involved in this new kind of performance, starting with the two sons born from Melchior's third wedding, Tristram and Gareth - also twins - or Melchior himself who works in a commercial that ends with the slogan: "The Royal family of the theatre gives its seal of approval". The wife of the celebrated actor also goes in for commercials: in her favourite one for a margarine she recites "to butter or not to butter", gaining Dora's sarcastic nickname "My Lady Margarine".

In the second of the novel's five parts Dora's story/autobiography goes back in time again, to the day of their seventh birthday when Mrs Chance brought the two girls to theatre to watch a famous musical Lady Be Good. There they saw for the first time their young and handsome father among the audience in the company of a beautiful blond woman, his first wife. With the passing of time their curiosity for the unknown and mysterious man gave rise to an adolescent, incestuous, love, "You could say we had a crush on Melchior Hazard, like lots of girls. You could say he was our first romance, and bittersweet it turned out to be, in the end" (p. 57), Dora candidly admits.

Their debut was in a pantomime entitled Babes in the Wood, in which the sisters played two sparrows. Another

memorable occasion was when uncle Perry had the bad idea of bringing the girls in the dressing-room of their father after one of his performances, but the great actor ignored them completely. The painful memory of that day is still very much alive in Dora's mind:

He slammed the door behind us. Us. Unkissed, unwelcome, worse than unacknowledged. Our washers were leaking, I can tell you. How we blubbered. Cried so much we couldn't see where we were going [...] (p. 73)

Then came the hard times of the second world war, the twin sisters were famous as "The Lucky Chances" and worked on keeping up the morale of the troops. That was also the time of their first loves, sexual encounters, disillusion. But, all of a sudden, something they could have never foreseen happens: their great father decides to call the two girls for a small part in What! You Will!, the most successful show of the West End, in which Melchior obviously represents "Will", Shakespeare himself, while Dora and Nora recite a parody of the famous monologue from Hamlet, wondering whether a parcel should be delivered to "2b or not 2b". Months of success and of wealth follow for the two sisters, who are even invited to the famous "Twelfth Night Costume Ball" at Lynde Court, decorated in a perfect "Shakespearian" style by the owner, Melchior Hazard. Unfortunately, the ball soon degenerates into a tragicomic farce: a fire destroys the house and in the great confusion the desperate voice of Melchior is clearly heard, acting like Richard III he

shouts: "Give me that crown!" He is referring to an old crown worn by his father Ranulph during his famous performance of King Lear, Melchior used to keep the crown as a precious relic and now his brother Perry, after having miraculously saved it from the fire, displays it under his nose with the same nonchalance with which he would throw it back in the flames.

The third part of the novel is devoted to the narration of the greatest adventure of the two sisters's career as chorus girls: their participation in the Hollywood version of A Midsummer Night's Dream, directed by Melchior and destined to go down in the history of cinematography as "a masterpiece of kitsch". And it couldn't be otherwise since the whole film was shot in "the Land of Make-Believe", "Dreamland", where in order to simulate history and to reproduce at all costs even what cannot be reproduced everything is possible. It is significant that the troupe is lodged in a motel named "the Forest of Arden", and composed of a series of small bungalows, perfect reproductions of Anne Hathaway's cottage, surrounded by impeccable gardens, the work of an army of clever Japanese gardeners.<sup>5</sup>

But the greatest profanation of the Shakespearian heritage was about to come: Melchior had asked the two sisters to bring over from England an urn containing the sacred soil of Stratford. The idea was to spread it on

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<sup>5</sup> On the typically American ability to reproduce what seems not reproducible at all, see J. Baudrillard, America, London, Verso, 1988, p. 101.

the stage the day the shooting started as a sort of good omen and, also, as good publicity for the film. Only an histrionic vanity could imagine such an act. Unfortunately, a cat decided that the urn from Stratford was a suitable place for his physiological necessities, so Dora and Nora had to refill the urn with the less sacred and more profane soil of the garden/replica in the "Forest of Arden Motel".

The two sisters were enthusiastic about their job and life in the States: Nora had fallen in love with a young Italo-American Tony who worked in a restaurant, while Dora embarked on a love affair with Ross O'Flaherty, nicknamed "Irish", the classic figure of the stone-broke intellectual who got it into his head to be her Pygmalion: "When did it first enter his head to educate me? Because he didn't have sufficient cash to buy a mink. Therefore he gave me Culture" (p. 123), Dora comments with her usual cynicism, before adding:

Attracted as he was to my conspicuous unrefinement, all the same Irish thought it would only make sleeping with me all right in the end if we could read Henry James, together, afterwards, and I was nothing loath because ther'd been precious little time for book-learning in my short life as I'd been earning a living from age twelve and sometimes Irish, when he remembered that, would forgive me everything. [...] He was a lovely man in many ways. But he kept on insisting on forgiving me when there was nothing to forgive. (Ibid.)

The relation with Irish has, in any case, left its trace in the old woman, since she owes to his teachings the ability to write down the memories of a long gone past.

Here, in one of her frequent hints to the reader, she even congratulates herself, in a typically ironical mode, for the literary style of her prose:

Poor old Irish. I gave him all a girl can give - a little pleasure, a little pain, a carillon of laughter, a kerchief full of tears. And, as for him, well, it was he who gave me the ability to compose such a sentence as that last one. Don't knock it. That's lyricism. (p. 119)

The "American" characters do not stop with Tony and Irish. We also have Daisy Duck, unmarried name of Delia Delany, second wife of Melchior's producer "Gengis Khan" (so nicknamed for his baldness). In the meantime the various love affairs of the people involved in the film seem to take an unexpected turn. Daisy Duck becomes infatuated with Melchior and leaves "Gengis Khan" who, to avenge himself on the rival, decides to marry Dora, (Nora towards whom he had first focused his attention, is still in love with Tony). Thus, everything seems leading towards the final "happy ending", as in the best tradition of Shakespearian comedies, with the announcement of three imminent weddings, except that the party organized for the occasion on the set of the Dream, "on the wood near Athens", is soon transformed into a farcical pandemonium like the Lynde Court Ball.

Gengis Khan's first wife makes her entrance on the scene: in a desperate attempt to win again her husband's love she has resorted to plastic surgery in order to resemble his current flame. So, in a miracle of reproducibility, there are three Chance sisters! Then

it is the turn of Tony's Italian mother to make a sudden entry into the party, and to profane Nora's veil with red tomato sauce. In the confusion which follows, Dora gets drunk.

At this point Dora's narration of the present stops, events happened in reality fade away as if entirely suffused by an indefinite, dreamlike aura: "These days, half a century and more later", ponders the old soubrette, "I might think I did not live but dreamed that night, if it wasn't for the photos, see? ... There I go again! Can't keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative" (p. 158).<sup>6</sup>

So what if everything was a dream? The journey to America, the events, the characters, the Dream, her entire life ... And how could the reader possibly expect a coherent, linear, precise narration, when real-life and stage effects are joined in a passionate, indissoluble love embrace. Such an encounter gives rise to a drunken, sometimes panting, narrative, although one can easily detect in it a reserve of richness which derives from a subterranean comic vein and from a detached - in some cases even cynical - observation of reality. Fortunately, there are some photos, even an entire film to demonstrate that the past has really happened:

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<sup>6</sup> Here one has the impression that H/history, as Benjamin said, "breaks down into images, not into stories", images to be analyzed as if they were dreams. See W. Benjamin, "N [Theoretics of Knowledge; Theory of Progress]", tr. L. Hafrey e R. Sieburth, The Philosophical Forum, 15, 1-2, p. 25.

It took me donkey's till I saw the point but saw the point I did, eventually, though not until the other day, when we were watching The Dream again in Notting Hill, that time, couple of batty old tarts with their eyes glued on their own ghosts. Then I understood the thing I'd never grasped back in those days, when I was young, before I lived in history. When I was young, I'd wanted to be ephemeral, I'd wanted the moment, [...] the rush of blood, the applause. Pluck the day. Eat the peach. Tomorrow never comes. But, oh yes, tomorrow does come all right, and when it comes it lasts a bloody long time, I can tell you. But if you've put your past on celluloid, it keeps. You've stored it away, like jam, for winter (p. 125).<sup>7</sup>

The fourth section of the novel opens with the memories of the years immediately after the second world war, the death of Mrs Chance, and the beginning of the professional decline of the "Lucky Chances", now forced to squalid spectacles of strip tease in order to make both ends meet. In contrast "those were the days when high culture was booming, our father cutting a swathe with the senior citizen roles in Shakespeare - Timon, Caesar, John of Gaunt - but he still didn't want anything to do with us, as ever was" (p. 165).

Then, with a usual abruptness, the narration returns to the actuality of the present, to the day of their seventy-fifth birthday. On the same day their insensitive father is one hundred years old, and the two

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<sup>7</sup> Dora is here catching hold of memory as Walter Benjamin says we do, that is "as it flashes upwards at a moment of danger".

It should be noted that the tone of Dora Chance's story is very different from the melancholic tinge with which Desiderio opens his autobiography, cf. on this point The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman, (1972), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1982, p. 14.

sisters have received an unexpected invitation to his birthday party. It is a wonderful occasion for the old girls to look in their dusty wardrobes in search of something right to dress: the next step takes place before the mirror and regards the perfect use of make-up. After having spent so many years in their kind of business the sisters have developed quite a technique:

Foundation. Dark in the hollows of the cheeks and at the temples, blended into a lighter tone everywhere else. Rouge, except they call it 'blusher', nowadays. Two kinds of blusher, one to highlight the Hazard bones, another to give us rosy cheeks. Nora likes to put the faintest dab on the end of her nose, why I can't fathom, old habits die hard. Three kinds of eyeshadow - dark blue, light blue blended together on the eyelids with the little finger, then a frosting overall of silver. Then we put on our two coats of mascara. Today for lipstick, Rubies in the Snow by Revlon.

It took an age but we did it; we painted the faces that we always used to have on to the faces we have now. (p. 192)

It seems as if the idea of the mask or masquerade, as we have discussed it in the previous chapters, is here reenacted by showing its "material" side, the artificial nature of the whole process. Women are sometimes incapable of detaching themselves from the image of their Self as it was in the moment of their prime splendour and keep on dressing and using make up in the same exact way they did in the past, as if time stood still, showing in so doing the "constructed" element in femininity and the feminine.<sup>8</sup> The mirror, mocking accomplice in this

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<sup>8</sup> Such an element is recurrent in Carter's production, often exemplified in scenes of "dressing up" (think of



game of deception, always reflects the precise image one wishes to see in it, the signs of the time fade, the wrinkles disappear behind a perfect make up, for a while one has really the impression that a miracle has happened. Unfortunately, soon enough one discovers that the magic effect won't last for long, the cruel reality gets the upper hand, the mirror is again that truthful and trustful instrument it seems, the artificial obscenity of the mask manifests itself with unbelievable clearness: "It's every woman's tragedy", said Nora as the two sisters contemplated their painted masterpieces, "that, after a certain age, she looks like a female impersonator" (p. 192).

Thus, farce has the last word in the long performance of the sisters Chance, always true to themselves, to their style of vulgarity and indecorous excesses, ready to play their grotesque characters till the end with a coherence which goes far beyond human capacity.<sup>9</sup> Only a poet like Irish could be able to fully grasp its intimate essence; here, recalled by Dora herself, is the ruthless portrait he sketched in his Hollywood Elegies, written in America during the shooting of the Dream:

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Leilah dressing in front of the mirror in Eve) and "making up" (as in "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" in which the young Edgar watches his mother, an actress, preparing for the stage).

<sup>9</sup> In this sense there are many similarities with Fevvers, moreover the two sisters are Cockney like her, make their living by being the object of a male gaze and have even made their first stage appearance "as little brown birds".

I'm the treacherous, lecherous chorus girl with her bright red lipstick that bleeds over everything, and her bright red fingernails and her scarlet heart, sexy, rapacious, deceitful. Vulgar as hell. The grating Cockney accent. The opportunism. The chronic insensitivity to a poet's heart. And you couldn't trust her behind a closed door either. Such turned out to be the eternity the poet promised me, the bastard. (pp. 119-120)

In the fifth and last section of the novel we finally see the two sisters crossing the Thames to attend the birthday party of their father, held in his house in Regent's Park. All around the place there is a great movement of journalists and television troupes, while the guests, in their evening dresses, get out of their luxurious cars. Inside the huge ball room on the ground floor, the great actor welcomes them while sitting in the middle of it like a pope on his throne. When, finally, their turn comes and the two sisters manage to approach him, something wonderful happens. The long expected moment of their acknowledgment becomes reality at last, but, even on that occasion, Melchior Hazards behaves like an actor, rather than like a father:

"Dad," said Nora, and I said, "Dad." He gave us another hug. "My lovely girls." I don't know what changed him. [...] He kept his profile at an angle so the cameras wouldn't shoot his double chin, he couldn't help it, it was in his blood. Just because he repented in public with half England watching didn't mean it wasn't genuine. He gave us another hug, and another, making up for all the hugs we never got.

(pp. 200-201)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Later Dora will ascribe such a change to the

The party goes on merrily and, as in a comedy that is about to finish, we have the return of all the characters we have met in the earlier acts. To the notes of "Hello Dolly" the American Daisy Duck makes her triumphal entrance accompanied by her gigolò, and others there include the two previous wives of Melchior, "Lady Margarine" and "Wheelchair", his children, Saskia, Imogen et cetera et cetera...

All of a sudden there is a roll of drums, the party reaches its climax with the traditional cutting of the cake, everything is ready, Melchior has raised his sword in the air when, completely unexpected in the silence of the room there is a knock on the front door, and a mysterious zephyr announces the presence of Perry Hazard, just back from Brazil and surrounded by a swarm of many coloured butterflies. From that moment everything seems to precipitate, the intricate knot of different kinships and illegitimate paternities is finally undone. "You never loved us" cries out Saskia, addressing her father Melchior, "Don't worry, darlin'", 'e's not your father!" Dora replies, before informing her reader of a new, astonishing possibility rising from a comparison of the Hazard family - and the rather precarious degree of relationship of its members - with those of some famous Shakespearian plays:

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deterioration of her father's mental faculties, "I fear our father's softening of the heart was not unconnected to the softening of his brain" (p. 203).

What if Horatio had whispered that to Hamlet in Act I, Scene i? And think what difference it might have made to Cordelia. On the other hand, those last comedies would darken considerably in tone, don't you think, if Marina and especially Perdita weren't really the daughters of ...

(p. 213)

The prospect of rewriting the works of the bard altering the relationships of his characters is certainly tempting; what if, just for once, the bastards could take their revenge? That is the case now for the two old sisters, finally acknowledged by their famous father who, as a cruel nemesis of an even more cruel destiny, discovers that the daughters he had always believed to be his own - Saskia and Imogen - are in reality the result of Perry's adultery.

At this point of the story the curtain could well drop and the lights die out in a burst of cheering. But this is not what happens; the party goes on and the immense ball room is crowded with couples dancing to the rhythm of a wild foxtrot. In the confusion of the moment no one notices that Perry and Nora are sneaking away upstairs to carry out the last and perhaps the greatest of all profanations narrated in the novel: making love in Melchior Hazard's bed. Even more surprising is the fact that this is not going to be a moderate, senile intercourse, as one could expect given the age of the people involved; on the contrary this is sex at its best, powerful to the point that the chandelier in the ball room below swings. But nobody can describe this extraordinary situation better than Nora herself:

Perry was a big man - would bring down that chandelier and all its candles, smash, bang, clatter, and the swagged ceiling, too; bring the house down, fuck the house down, come ('cum'?) all over the posh frocks and the monkey jackets [...] and the lovers, mothers, sisters, shatter the lenses that turned our lives into peepshows, scatter little candle-flames like an epiphany on every head, cover over all the family, the friends, the camera crews, with plaster dust and come and fire. (p. 220)

However, what could have happened does not, one must be content only with the swinging of the chandelier, the disastrous apotheosis is deferred indefinitely; notwithstanding one cannot help thinking the unthinkable, the hypothetical "if" that is always able to change the course of History, to modify its outcomes and multiply the alternatives:

What would have happened if we had brought the house down? Wrecked the whole lot, roof blown off, floor caved in, all the people blown out of the blown out windows [...] sent it all sky high, destroyed all the terms of every contract, set all the old books on fire, wiped the slate clean. As if, when the young king meets up again with Jack Falstaff in Henry IV, Part Two, he doesn't send him packing but digs him into the ribs, says: 'Have I got a job for you!' (pp. 221-222)

The Shakespearian text evokes a moment when everything is in nuce, when any possibility could still happen; Falstaff could have remained with his prince and together they would have governed the world, and then who knows what else could have happened... But this was not to be.

Surely, we can always give free play to our own imagination in search of the alternative lives we could

have lived and have not. But reality is itself; we cannot change the past (as Waugh says in Brideshead Revisited we possess nothing certainly except the past), at most we can nostalgically reflect ourselves into it as in a mirror, discovering the ghosts of our selves in some photos yellowed with age or in an old, forgotten, film. The past remains and with it also the books which cannot be set on fire, because History is not to be cancelled by metaphorically "wiping the slate clean", as Nora says; in fact one should simply accept it, perhaps with a spice of irony. "The carnival's got to stop, some time" Dora reflects, and in this consideration consists her true wisdom, precisely in recognizing when the moment to stop has come. In fact: "There are limits to the power of laughter and though I may hint at them from time to time I do not propose to step over them" (p. 220).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, by acknowledging the limits of human frailty and accepting the idea that everything is due to end "some time", moreover by realizing when that moment has come, Dora avoids Falstaff's mistakes; the fatal mistakes which caused his ruin, his death and the Death of Carnival.

This is not the case with the sisters Chance whom, as a reward for their wisdom, will be even allowed to defy

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the real or presumed transgressiveness of Carnival see note no. 33, chapter V. On a different level, if one assumes that Wise Children shows a certain awareness of the carnivalesque potential of the novel form itself, reflecting about the limits of carnival also implies a problematization of the same act of narration.

immortality and to live for many years. After all they have got something that gives a new meaning to their lives now: taking care of a couple of new born twins that uncle Perry, with the dexterity of a magician, takes out of his pockets as a birthday present for them. At the sight of those beautiful babies Dora cannot help commenting: "if we've got those twins to look out for, we can't afford to die for at least another twenty years" (p. 230). Other twenty years at least, but Dora and Nora know that the certainty of death is only postponed since: "The birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old".<sup>12</sup>

Once the party is over we find the two sisters on the other side of old father Thames on their way back to Bard Road. This time they are not alone: there are two babies to take care of and to cuddle, to whom they can sing the thousands songs in their repertory, starting with that refrain "We can't give you anything but love, babies, That's the only thing we've plenty of, babies", the sweet promise of love their father never kept, and a promise that the two old ladies intend to honour. The story has finally come full circle; the creed which has inspired their lives springs once again from their throats, "What a joy it is to dance and sing!" The two happy sisters are ready to face the future with the same

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<sup>12</sup> The reference here is to Bakhtin, see his Rabelais and his World, tr. H Iswolsky, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1968, p. 256.

energy and musical lightness that has characterized their past.

What comes out most clearly from Dora Chance's autobiographical story seems to be a very deep awareness of time. The passing of time is often represented by an aging human being who becomes its living allegory, positioning himself half way between a past that extends more and more its shadow on the present and a future which appears indefinite. Sometimes one has the impression that in the novel past and present are cunningly blended together (the past itself is not so certain as Waugh would like to think), thus underlining the paradoxical nucleus of a writing that on the one hand aspires to the truthful recording of the "real events" which constitute the materiality of any existence - taking advantage even of the more advanced auxiliary tools<sup>13</sup> - and on the other hand cannot conceal its fictional nature, necessarily linked to the inventio of a story.<sup>14</sup> A process of natural sedimentation allows then

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that Dora is even capable of using a word processor to write her autobiography, as it is implied in this comment by Nora: "'I must admit, sometimes, it gets ever so lonely, especially when you're stuck up in your room tapping away at that bloody word processor lost in the past while I'm shut up in the basement with old age'" (p. 189).

<sup>14</sup> As Hutcheon rightly reminds us: "the novel and history have frequently revealed their natural affinities through their narrative common denominators: teleology, causality, continuity". In "The Postmodern Problematizing of History", English Studies in Canada, XIV, 4, December, 1988, p. 368.

The meaning of history is a much debated question nowadays. Among the numerous studies devoted to the issue



for those events to come to light again as memories, sometimes fragmented memories which await only to be recomposed in the present.

Oscar Wilde once wrote that: "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it". And what better opportunity of observing such a "duty" than that of rewriting precisely our personal history, that is elevating what has been our "private experience to public consciousness"?<sup>15</sup> Among other things Wise Children is the "rewriting" of about fifty years of England's theatrical history, from the double perspective of the personal lives of two old girls and from that of an entire family, pillars of the English classical theatre. "After all, the Hazards belonged to everyone. They were a national treasure", we are told (p.38). But this novel is also the detailed account of the many, apparently insignificant changes, which have characterized a huge town like London. Think for example of the Lyons teashops, once a local institution: Dora and Nora lunched there when times were hard, now they have disappeared. Other significant changes concern the evolution of personal habits: the novel includes frequent descriptions of the various ways

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are Une pensee finie by J.L. Nancy, The end of History and the Last Man by F. Fukuyama, L'Illusion de la fin by J. Baudrillard and, from a different perspective, the work of Hayden White on the various tropes and patterning devices employed to make sense of history. Such a debate cannot but give rise to a fruitful relation/confrontation with philosophical and literary discourses, further evidence of the tendency within contemporary culture to cross disciplinary boundaries.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in L. Hutcheon, "The Postmodern Problematizing of History", p. 372.

in which women used to make up forty or fifty years ago and the magically exotic names of the perfumes they used to wear, names like Shalimar, Mitsouko ... (names linked to an age, and now replaced by others similarly exotic).

Thus, History breaks up into many, smaller hi/stories, without for this reason dissolving itself and disappearing, but simply rediscovering its discursive nature. It textualizes (and carnivalizes) itself into a sort of discontinuous and unstable writing which ceases to pursue the magical chimera of stylistic/thematic cohesion, which does not mind hopping around, bending now on one side, now on the other, as if it were an old drunkard outside a pub ("drunk in charge of a narrative" are the words, as we have seen earlier, Dora used to describe herself). One could even argue that what Carter rejects here is the classical counterposition of memory as vague, inaccurate and subjective as opposed to history, abstract, objective, authoritative, thus delighting in the polysemic permissions of postmodernism (certainly a further contamination).

Sometimes the author seems to transform herself into the creator of a mosaic, able to collect various tesseras in the past and to reassemble them in ever new projects. Her writing knows no reticence, it does not stop before anything, not even before the inevitable mixture of different styles and genres, of what is usually regarded as sacred and what, on the other hand, belongs to the "low" ambit of the profane. So it is not surprising that Shakespeare who, over the centuries, has

added to his role as national icon that of icon of all Western civilization, is very much entangled in the very complex network of references, iterations and reformulations which constitutes the core of Wise Children.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the use of so many references becomes an important device for the exploration of a past whose certainties - although presumed to be such - are essential to face the unknown future.

The events which characterized the life of the Hazard family - whose most celebrated members Ranulph and Melchior seem unable to distinguish reality from theatrical performance, so deep is their identification with the characters they play - become the symbolic representation of that process through which the Shakespearian myth has been appropriated by popular culture. Melchior, as we have seen, at the end of his successful career agrees to take a part in some quite highly remunerated commercials. Elsewhere one of

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<sup>16</sup> On this point see B. Loughrey & G. Holderness "Shakespearean Features" in I.J. Marsden ed., The Appropriation of Shakespeare, Harvester, N.Y. & London, 1991, pp. 183-201. Apart from Nietzsche, among the first to recognize the signs of the modernist tendency to bricolage was Walter Benjamin who, already in 1934, suggested that we should all get used to the idea "that we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force". "The Author as Producer" in W. Benjamin, Reflections, trans. E. Jephcott, H.B. Jovanovich, N.Y., 1979, pp. 220-238.

Significantly, the Shakespeare canon appears to be self-consciously related to this "last" work by Carter in a way which confirms our choice of structuring this thesis around successive "moments" in the author's career.

Shakespeare's most famous monologues is ungracefully transformed into a parodic "2b or not 2b" in the sketch played by the sisters at the beginning of their career, or into "to butter or not to butter" recited by Melchior's third wife for the promotion of margarine - it is as if television went on doing what music hall had started.<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, in the age of technological reproduction the face of the poet from Stratford is to be found on a myriad of different objects, including banknotes. The irony inherent in the situation cannot escape Dora's attentive wit:

I shoved over a twenty for the stockings and spotted Old Bill on the back. That gave me a start, to see how Shakespeare, to whom our family owed so much, had turned into actual currency, not just on any old bank note but on a high denomination one, to boot. (p. 191)

Here we see her giving away a bit of literary culture - metaphorically symbolized by a twenty pounds banknote - to an old actor who played Bottom in America at the time of the Dream:

I'd got a twenty in my hand, ready to pay the cabby. Shakespeare, on the note, said: 'Have a heart.'  
'Take that,' I said and pressed his literary culture into

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<sup>17</sup> The entrance of the Hazard's family into the world of television seems to mark that typical postmodernist passage from the universe of the Book to that of electronics, a passage that Dora apparently dislikes, (although, as it has been previously pointed out, she resorts to a word processor).

the hand of he who once personated Bottom the Weaver. [...] 'Don't you know it's Shakespeare's birthday? Cry God for England, Harry and St George. Go off and drink a health to bastards.' (pp. 196-197)

So, the bastard sisters are finally going to take their revenge, Edmund's call has been heard, the metaphorical script where everything seems already written, now looks entirely improvised, open to a thousand of possible transformations. If for Wilde the duty we owe to History is to rewrite it, perhaps even more imperative is the duty we have to rewrite History's closest companion: Literature. In order to achieve this aim there is no need to set the old books on fire, since it is to them that the imagination is going to make continuous reference, thus underpinning its otherwise unstable projections.<sup>18</sup> And it is not so important whether the transgression is going to last only for the few pages of a tale whose narrator is a witty old lady, a bit vulgar perhaps, who still enjoys a good laugh once in a while. We (critics/readers) should have known from the start what was about to happen:

Well, you might have known what you were about to let yourself in for when you let Dora Chance in her ratty old fur and poister paint, her orange (persian Melon) toenails sticking out of her snakeskin peep-toes, reeking of liquor, accost you

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<sup>18</sup> "Everything in the world exists to end in a book" Mallarmé once wrote, desperate as it could seem, I would hope this is still the case also in an age like ours, when the practice of telling a story seems increasingly confined to a screen, be it of a television set or of a cinema.

in the Coach and Horses and let her tell you a tale. (p. 227)

In the end one could reasonably argue that Dora is not only a wise child, as the title of this novel clearly indicates, but also a wise woman. She, like her twin sister, has always remained truthful to her own self, to her mask of music hall soubrette, thus succeeding in narrating even the rudest and most shocking events of her very hard life with a sense of lightness, joy and vitality. Surely, her sister is right in maintaining that we might have known what we were about to let ourselves in for being trapped in such a viscous web of events and extraordinary situations; and yet at the end of our reading we are not disappointed, well aware that the last performance is perhaps the best one, the one that sticks in one's mind.

Just like in a theatre then: let's dim the lights, drop the curtains, burst of applause.

## CHAPTER VII

### FEMINISM/POSTMODERNISM: THE CRITICAL INTERSECTION

And the novelists in the future will realize more and more the importance of those reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories.

(V. Woolf)

What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?... Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies, another thinking, as yet not thinkable, will transform the functioning of all society.  
(H. Cixous)

Recent developments in poststructuralist theory (deconstructionism, postmodernism) have reached some interesting conclusions from their encounter with feminist thought. Evidence of this includes the huge amount of theoretical work on fundamental concepts like identity, subjectivity and history in relation to gender. Feminist studies have shown above all how such concepts are deeply affected by gender, race, class. The category of gender, in particular, has been distanced more and more from the former definition of an immutable

attribute attached to any single individual, to gain a sort of "performative" depth. In other words, thinking of the category of gender in a "performative" sense, instead of in an essential one has meant, as Judith Butler maintains, that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results".<sup>1</sup> What follows is that neither the concept of identity, nor that of gender can exist a-priori outside their articulation in historically specific discursive contexts.

It should be noted, however, that the debate between feminism and post-structuralism has also given rise to a crisis of feminist theory, forcing feminists to negotiate a new position "between positive politics and negative critique".<sup>2</sup> In other terms, as Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson have stressed in their "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism", the detotalizing impulse typical of postmodernism threatens to de-politicize feminism as it cancels the presence of "the critique of pervasive axes of stratification, [...] of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination [...]"<sup>3</sup>

A possible solution to the epistemological impasse could be the one put forward by Denise Riley, who views

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in S. Robinson, Engendering the Subject, Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction, New York, State Univ, of N.Y. Press, 1991, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Ibidem p. 4.



the notion of identity in a temporary and rather strategic way. Actually, the feminist aim of de-essentializing the concept of Woman is implicated in that of overcoming the binary opposition between maleness and femaleness, deconstructing in so doing the singularity and unity of these categories. This would not necessarily imply their total rejection, rather, according to Riley, a different utilization of the category of gender not based on some crystallized notion of sexual difference.<sup>4</sup>

The various contrasting perspectives which at the moment characterize feminist thought are summarized by Sally Robinson as follows:

the general and the systematic versus the specific and local; the negativity of critique versus the positivity of transformative politics; unified identities versus the positivity of transformative politics; [...] sexual difference versus multiplicitous gender differences.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of what has been said one can easily agree with Robinson herself on the crucial role that narrative discourse plays for women, so much so that the American scholar compares it to an arena "in which gender and subjectivity are produced in powerful ways. [...] it is through narrative that women most often become Woman, but that process can be fractured through women's self-representation".<sup>6</sup> By "self-representation" Robinson means mainly the process through which some subjects

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

reproduce themselves within particular discursive contexts, a process which is not linear or teleological, but characterized by a double movement that simultaneously proceeds against the usual representations of Woman produced by social practices and hegemonic discourses and towards new forms of representation set against such habitual practices.<sup>7</sup>

Addressing the idea of the specificity of women's writing, Sally Robinson considers any notion of its separate identity as entirely counterproductive if not utopian. The reason is that it presupposes the unlikely possibility of isolating female writing from the

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<sup>7</sup> According to Robinson, what is really important is that critics focus their attention not only on the ways in which "texts written by women represent 'female experience'" but also "on how texts produce experience, identity and gender". Ibidem, p. 13. In "Notes from the Front Line" Angela Carter writes: "It is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women - it is part of the slow process of decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought. [...] It is to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed" (p.75).

patriarchal context in which it is also produced.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly writing fiction has always implied for women the opportunity of imagining some sort of alternative life within a discursive context able to offer, at least apparently, greater margins of liberty compared to those they had in society. The "textual" presence of women in the past centuries is impressive, their role as inspiring muses - like the Jeanne Duvall considered by Carter - has always been known. One could argue that women have always existed historically, but not in such a way as to leave many textual traces; the main aim on our critical agenda should now be the "reclaiming of history", going beyond the narrow ambit of a merely "textual" presence. Such an aspiration seems to pose a further element of friction between feminism and poststructuralist thought. This point is put clearly by Linda Anderson:

The fear that post-structuralist theory could be disabling for

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<sup>8</sup> Elaine Showalter provides a reply to Robinson's objection - that I partly share - by proposing the notion of "gynocriticism". Showalter has aimed at underlining how any writing is characterized by gender, and, above all, how female writing in particular is always "bitextual", that is in dialogue with the male literary tradition as well as with the female one. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness", Showalter rejects the feminists fantasy of a female consciousness and of a culture outside patriarchy, maintaining instead that "there can be no writing or criticism outside of the dominant culture". As a consequence both female writing and female criticism identify themselves with a "double-voice discourse" that contains both the dominant and the dominated. See "Feminist Criticism in the Wildernes", in Writing and Sexual Difference, E. Abel ed., Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982, pp. 9-37.

women, making history disappear even before we have had a chance to write ourselves into it, needs to be set against another danger: the constant danger that by using categories and genres which are implicated in patriarchal ideology we are simply re-writing our own oppression. The "reclaiming of history", [...] can help to assure us that despite the evidence, we do in fact exist in the world; yet if we ignore how that existence is textually mediated we end up simply reconstituting "reality" as it is. The battle between theory and empiricism, textuality and experience, in which feminist thinking is also caught up, can feel as if it leaves little room for fresh negotiations and yet both sides of the debate could be seen as exerting a pressure towards conformity, towards aligning truth on one side or the other, which needs to be resisted.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> L. Anderson, "The Re-Imagining of History in Contemporary Women's Fiction", in Plotting Change, L. Anderson ed., London, Arnold, 1990, p. 134. In Technologies of Gender, Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1987, Teresa de Lauretis argues that a great deal of contemporary European philosophy (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze) is negative towards women in so far as it implicitly denies them the status of an historically oppressed category and, consequently, also the strategies they used and still use to resist. In her opinion, poststructuralist thought has not been able to acknowledge "The epistemological contribution of feminism to the redefinition of subjectivity and sociality" (p. 24). de Lauretis' criticism seems to be echoed by Cranny Francis when she claims that "The classification of feminism within the discourse of postmodernism tends to suppress both the long history of women's oppression under patriarchy and their struggle against that oppression" in Feminist Fiction, London, Polity Press, 1990, p. 6.

The opinion of D. Elam is very different on this point. In the opening pages of her recent Romancing the Postmodern, London & N.Y., Routledge, 1992, Elam declares: "I want to link feminism to postmodernism's calling into question of the established rules of historical and cultural representation" (p. 3), see also chapter 5, pp. 141-174.

On the question of problematizing/textualizing of the Hegelian concept of history, see Derrida's Speech and Phenomena, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1973 (1967); Glas, Paris, Galilée, 1974.

Anderson's suggestion concerning the necessity of resisting any rigidity in the two sides of the debate seems reasonable. It should be stressed, however, that such a line of argument does not necessarily call for a synthesis of the contrasting perspectives above mentioned. Rather it is an obvious invitation to pursue the possibility of finding enough room for "fresh negotiations". It is in this light that Linda Gordon's interesting attempt to situate her own sense of history in a middle ground between fact and fiction should be evaluated:

I would like to find a method in between. This in-between would not imply resolution, careful balance of fact and myth, or synthesis of fact and interpretation. My sense of a liminal method is rather a condition of being constantly pulled, usually off balance, sometimes teetering widely, almost always tense. The tension cannot be released.<sup>10</sup>

Gordon's formula presents some striking affinities with what, on a narrative level, characterizes Carter's work, in particular with a novel like Nights at the Circus in which the sense of history, from a general as well as from an individual point of view, is successfully "negotiated" within a very personal version of magic realism.

The passage from Anderson quoted earlier brings forward another question, partly discussed in the first chapter of this thesis: the danger - always present in

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<sup>10</sup> L. Gordon "What's New in Women's History" in L. Anderson, Plotting Change, p. 135.

the operation of rewriting/reelaboration of texts and literary genres "implicated in patriarchal ideology" - of reiterating the ideology inherent in them. Jameson quite rightly warns us that:

When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form. [...] The ideology of the form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the later, more complex structure as a generic message which coexists - either as a contradiction or, on the other hand, as a mediatory or harmonizing mechanism - with elements from later stages.<sup>11</sup>

One could easily object that the examples of rewriting offered by feminist women novelists not only propose plots in some cases very different from the original stories, but also that their texts work differently. The implications from the structural as well as from the semantic point of view are significant. The main aim of these texts is that of de-naturalizing habitual representations of gender, emphasizing them while constantly and implicitly comparing them with the original stories. As Cranny - Francis maintains:

Women are both inside these narratives and outside them; inside the ideology which presents them as "woman" and outside it. [...] Feminist generic texts are sites of ideological struggle, just as are conservative generic texts - but the feminists texts show the struggle in process. The struggle

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<sup>11</sup> F. Jameson, The Political Unconscious, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1981, p. 141. On this issue see also A. Cranny Francis, Feminist Fiction, chapter 7 "Conclusion: Gender and Genre", pp. 193-208.

takes place inside the conventional space of the text [...] and outside, [...] The feminist writer continually crosses the boundaries which delimit the operation - formally/aesthetically/ideologically - of the traditional generic text and, in so doing, shows that those boundaries exist.<sup>12</sup>

Francis, like Gordon, tries to overcome the difficulties which characterize the feminism/post-structuralism relationship, theorizing a position that, by making use of a typical deconstructive terminology, calls for an end to the distinction between "inside" and "outside".<sup>13</sup>

The contradictions which pervade contemporary feminist thought seem to emerge, although under very peculiar guises, in the narrative of Angela Carter, a writer that, as I have stressed in the previous chapters, has clearly acknowledged the often neglected contiguity which characterizes the relationship between critical and fictional discourses and has always been attentive to any theoretical debate.

Angela Carter's novels, in the best picaresque tradition, sometimes tell about fantastic journeys, journeys which do not end with the acquisition of a definitive and univocal knowledge, but are open to a whole set of different meanings and contaminations, thus revealing the only provisional certainty according to which, as we read in Nights at the Circus, "to travel

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<sup>12</sup> A. Cranny-Francis, Feminist Fiction, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> J. Derrida describes the kind of thought envisaged in his "grammatology" as "the thought for which there is no sure opposition between outside and inside" in Positions, London, Athlone Press, 1981, p. 12.

hopefully is better than to arrive". This does not imply, at least in the author's intention, an automatic negation of any "radical" analysis of the condition of women in our society, or an abstention from deconstructing precisely those modalities through which old stereotypes are perpetuated. On the contrary, by offering to the reader the possibility of reaching different interpretations s/he is led to a rethinking of his/her own position with regard to the topics discussed. As Carter herself affirms, - "Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode [...]"<sup>14</sup> One should note, however, that the author has some doubts about the political efficacy of such a literary practice: "It is after all, very rarely possible for new ideas to find adequate expression in old forms".<sup>15</sup>

Ambiguity also characterizes Carter's attitude towards the feminist movement. On the one hand she proudly

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<sup>14</sup> A. Carter, "Notes from the Front Line" in On Gender and Writing, M. Wandor ed., London, Pandora, 1983, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> A. Carter, "The Language of Sisterhood", in The Fate of the Language, L. Michaels & C. Ricks eds., Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1980, p. 228. Such doubts, however, do not undermine her strong conviction of being a political writer. In "Notes from the Fron Line" in fact she admits: "[...] do I 'situate myself politically as a writer'? Well, yes; of course. I always hope is obvious, although I try, when I write fiction [...] to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways" p. 69.



declares "The Women's Movement has been of immense importance to me personally and I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm feminist in everything else [...] growing into feminism was part of the process of maturing [...]".<sup>16</sup> On the other hand some years later, while answering a precise question posed by Haffenden regarding whether she had ever felt inclined to put fiction to the service of feminism, she quite firmly replies "No. I write about the condition of my life, as everyone does. You write from your own history".<sup>17</sup>

To increase even further the ambiguities concerning the feminist intentions of her writings one should also note the profound influence that the Marquis de Sade has exercised on Angela Carter. It is mainly due to that influence that some of her works have been labelled as mere pornography. What she loves most of Sade is his tendency towards transgression, a tendency that soon transforms itself into an intellectual project - shared in more recent times by another French writer, Bataille - in which artistic activity becomes "the perpetual immoral subversion of the existing order".<sup>18</sup>

As Susan Sontag pointed out in 1969, after the second world war Sade has been reinterpreted by many French intellectuals, whereas in the English-speaking world he has been continuously marginalized as a figure whose only

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<sup>16</sup> Idem.

<sup>17</sup> J. Haffenden, Novelists in Interview, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, London, Virago, 1979, p. 91.

interest lied in his psychopathological features. Thinking of him as an ante-litteram philosopher was thus completely out of question.<sup>19</sup> However in the past decade the situation Sontag denounced in 1969 has changed: numerous reprints of Sade's works are now available in most European languages. Carter's The Sadeian Woman (1979) - a sort of "exercise of the lateral imagination" as she defines it - in many respects anticipated the trend. The importance of the ideas underpinning her book, many of which find expression in her works of fiction, has often been stressed in the previous chapters; the aim now is that of adding a few comments in order to further illustrate their capability of conveying sometimes contrasting ideological perspectives.

In The Sadeian Woman Carter offers an implicit explanation for her use of sexual metaphors and images: "sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place" and "if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations" (italics

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<sup>19</sup> S. Sontag, Styles of Radical Will, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, N.Y., 1969; see the chapter entitled "The Pornographic Imagination", pp. 35-73. For a feminist critique of The Sadeian Woman see K. Myers, "Towards a Feminist Erotica" in R. Betterton ed. Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media, London, Pandora, 1987, pp. 193-195.

mine).<sup>20</sup> A few years later, in an essay polemically entitled "Notes from the Front Line", Carter stresses again how it was her own experience as a woman that made her adopt some discourses instead of others in her literary practice: "Since it was [...] primarily through my sexual and emotional life that I was radicalised - that I first became truly aware of the difference between how I was and how I was supposed to be, or expected to be - I found myself, as I grew older, increasingly writing about sexuality and its manifestations in human practice".<sup>21</sup>

Obviously, it still remains arguable whether an explicit sexual description would fulfil the aims of the author better than a less "spectacular" use of sexual material. Such ambiguities are typical of some contemporary fiction in which elements of popular literature and of the carnivalesque have found a new vitality. On this point Linda Hutcheon notes:

Much self-reflexive fiction using a strictly pornographic

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<sup>20</sup> A. Carter, The Sadeian Woman, p. 20. In the same study Carter writes: "Flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh," (p. 11). The quotation has a certain Foucaultian flavour, especially if compared to that passage from The History of Sexuality in which Foucault claims that the importance of sexuality lies not in its inherent meaning, but in the experience one has of it: "as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power [...] endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies". Vol. I, N.Y., Random House, 1978, p. 103.

<sup>21</sup> A. Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", p. 72.

model, however, does tend to suggest the more negative pole of the ambivalence which Bakhtin detected in verbal and narrative sexuality and scatology. Perhaps this is because of the very existence today of Porn, that is of a conventionalized popular erotic model, for pornography is clearly an exploitive mode, as feminists have made us aware. But contemporary metafictionists tend to displace this aggression, or rather to make it ambivalent: seduction and aggression are ambivalent inversions of each other, and symbolic of other levels of subversions.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the ambiguities of sexuality should be considered from a more general perspective which keeps in focus the very close relationship between sexuality and a new notion of textuality. Barbara Johnson, in her seminal study The Critical Difference, writes:

If human beings were not divided into two biological sexes, there would probably be no need for literature. And if literature could truly say what the relations between the sexes are, we would doubtless not need much of it then, either. Somehow, however, it is not simply a question of literature's ability to say or not to say the truth of sexuality. For from the moment literature begins to try to set things straight on that score, literature itself becomes inextricable from the sexuality it seeks to comprehend. It is not the life of sexuality that literature cannot capture; it is literature that inhabits the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic for us speaking animals. Literature is not only a thwarted investigator but also an incorrigible perpetrator of the problem of sexuality. (italics mine)<sup>23</sup>

One could thus maintain that the Sadianism which

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<sup>22</sup> L. Hutcheon, "The Carnavalesque and Contemporary Narrative: Popular Culture and the Erotic", University of Ottawa Quarterly, 53, 1, 1983, p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> B. Johnson, The Critical Difference, Baltimore, J. Hopkins U.P., 1980, p. 13.

pervades Carter's novels does not aim at conveying "the truth of sexuality", to use Johnson's words; rather it renders explicit "the very heart of what makes sexuality problematic". What we have here is the same critical dilemma discussed earlier on; in other words the literary text seems incapable of resisting its contradictory double tendency: as a valuable medium in order to investigate the many problems which are at the core of our existence and, on the other hand as accomplice in the perpetuation of the same problems it aspired to solve.

Although aware of this logic, a logic that could easily lead any writer towards a very dangerous pessimism and a certain flatness of expression, Angela Carter never stopped her continuous experimentation with different narrative strategies.<sup>24</sup> In a sense one could even say that her work represents a partial fulfilment of Virginia Woolf's prophecy recalled at the start of this chapter: in Carter's texts there is no realism, rather a transfiguration of reality, a transfiguration that springs from an urge to communicate, a need to narrate not only what has been actually seen and experienced, but also and, perhaps, above all what has been imagined. In so doing Carter explores those depths

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<sup>24</sup> In an interview with P. Bono Carter affirms: "Writing is for me a process, a long work-in-progress; much of my writing has been an exploration of narrative genres in search of a form which would be viable as a vehicle for ideas. Emphasizing artificiality, choosing forms which explicitly assume it, which are indeed based on the explicitation of their artificiality, has seemed to me a possible solution". DWE, 2, 1986, p. 100.

Woolf alluded to. At the same time, however, in her prose there is also a very peculiar tension, a vaguely utopian one; not the prefiguration of future idylls, but the kind of hope that the cynic hides, the hope that one day "another thinking, as yet not thinkable", to use Cixous' words, will finally transform the imperfect reality of our imperfect world.

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