

Jerzy Kamionowski

NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES.
ANGELA CARTER'S FICTION



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Refereed by
prof. Jacek Wiśniewski
prof. Wiesław Krajka

WYDANIE I

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Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu w Białymstoku
15-097 Białystok, ul. M. Skłodowskiej-Curie 14
tel. (085) 745 70 58, 745 70 59

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ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCES

- BC **The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories** (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).
- FW **Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces** (London: Chatto&Windus, 1987).
- HV **Heroes and Villains** (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).
- IDMDH **The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman** (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).
- NC **Nights at the Circus** (London: Picador, 1985).
- PNE **The Passion of New Eve** (London: Virago, 1982).
- SW **The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History** (London: Virago, 1993).

PREFACE

Angela Carter died of lung cancer in 1992 at the early age of fifty-one. Her death came at the moment when her fiction was becoming widely discussed not only in feminist circles, but when it also began to attract the attention of academic criticism. Her *oeuvre* consists of nine novels, three collections of short stories (one of them published posthumously), three volumes of essays and theoretical writings, and four radio plays inspired by paintings by Richard Dadd. Besides being a creative writer, Carter was also an editor (she edited two volumes of fairy tales for Virago, a feminist publisher), a translator (she rendered into English Charles Perrault's fairy tales), a visiting professor in the USA, a writer in residence in Australia, and a part-time teacher at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. She also spent two years in Japan working briefly for a broadcasting company. Unquiet a spirit as she was, she never had a permanent publisher – she published for Heinemann, Hart-Davis, Quartet, Gollancz, Virago, and finally Chatto&Windus. From a handful of facts scattered in books and essays on her fiction written by her friends (e.g. in Lorna Sage's *Angela Carter*), it seems that her personal life must have been equally restless and impermanent.

This restlessness and the quality of displacement is reflected in Carter's fiction, which aims rather at breaking existing rules than forging new ones. Over those twenty-five years of Carter's artistic activity, her fiction underwent at least two basic shifts. Each of her novels and collections of stories makes use of new ideas and utilises different – often seemingly contradicting – literary genres, flirting with tradition and contemporaneity. On the other hand, if we look at Carter's fiction in its bulk form and analyse her stories in terms of their poetics, we must notice an impressive consistency that enables us to perceive her artistic development in terms of a continuum.

There seems to be a universal, though not always overtly stated agreement to perceive Carter's literary *oeuvre* as a process consisting of three quite clearly distinguishable phases. The first is represented by the five novels written in the 1960s: *Shadow Dance*, *The Magic Toyshop*, *Several Perceptions*, *Heroes and Villains* and *Love* (published in 1971). The second phase consists of two novels, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, and two collections of stories, *Fireworks* and *The Bloody Chamber*, that appeared in the next decade. Also the non-fiction work *The Sadeian*

Woman should not be overlooked here, as it provides a necessary context to Carter's fiction of the late 1970s. The last stage – and because of Carter's sudden death an incomplete one – seems to begin with *Nights at the Circus*, with *Wise Children* as the true indicator of the irreversibility of the shift, although "Black Venus", a story originally published in 1980, might arguably be regarded as a harbinger of the transformations that were to take place later. The posthumously published collection of stories *American Ghosts & Old World Wonders* does not seem to make things easier as the stories included in this volume do not necessarily move in the direction indicated by *Wise Children*.

It is my conviction that a closer look at the middle period of Carter's literary career – namely the 1970s – provides us with the key to this continuity, at the same time helping us to appreciate her artistic and intellectual originality. That is why I concentrate on Carter's works written in the 1970s: two novels – *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*, and two collections of stories – *Fireworks* and *The Bloody Chamber*. Although the almost universally acclaimed *Nights at the Circus* marks the change to perhaps another stage in Carter's writing, I have no doubt that this novel remains anchored in Carter's literary achievements of the 1970s, and in a sense represents the crowning success of the genuine artistic method she had developed earlier. Hence, in the last chapter I concentrate entirely on *Nights at the Circus*, demonstrating to what extent it is indebted to much less recognised earlier novels, especially *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*.

After *Nights at the Circus* (1984) was published, Angela Carter's fiction received a great deal of critical attention, which resulted in a plethora of articles and critical essays – her name appears in every book on contemporary British women writers published after 1985, which was not the case in the previous decade. Lorna Sage, undoubtedly the earliest serious researcher of Angela Carter's works and a passionate admirer of her talent, was the prime mover and the editor of the most complete collection of essays so far dedicated solely to Carter's work, entitled *Flesh and the Mirror* and published two years after the writer's death. The volume contains thirteen essays contributed by different authors, each of them analysing a different aspect of Carter's fiction. As the essays cover the subsequent stages of Carter's literary career – moving from the early novels that appeared in the 1960s towards her last work of fiction *Wise Children* (1991) – the reader receives not only several fine essays, but also a chronological presentation of Carter's development as a writer.

All these texts prove that there are many ways of grouping Carter's fiction together. Nevertheless, two features of her writing are always stressed by critics: its feminist purposes (criticism of patriarchy and cultural liberation of women) and artistic inventiveness (sharp awareness of what she is doing and full control of the material). It is not surprising then that Carter is often labelled as a feminist and/or a postmodernist, which does not necessarily serve her ar-

tistic reputation – as John Bayley’s presentation of her *oeuvre*, published soon after her death, shows. Bayley’s seemingly objective appraisal of Carter’s literary achievement and the effort he puts into praising her writing skills do not succeed in masking his covert contempt for the writer. He attaches to Carter the labels of ‘postmodernism’ and ‘political correctness’ as if they were the two artistic mortal sins which must lead towards lack of artistic discipline (in Bayley’s own words, in postmodernism “everything goes”, everything can be “fused together in a single permissive whole”¹) on the one hand, and the curbing of intellectual freedom (“Carter ... always comes to rest in the right ideological position”²) on the other. Bayley’s manipulative essay (he has nothing to say about Carter’s best novels: *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*) prompted some critics to defend Carter³, which seems to have had at least one negative effect: it has postponed a serious reconsideration of Carter’s fiction in the light of her creative attitude to postmodern poetics. Linda Hutcherson’s essay “Postmodernism and feminisms”, which I refer to at the end of the first chapter, proves that such reflections seem worth undertaking and that they would almost certainly prove fruitful.

Critics have apparently paid more attention to the ideological and political side of Carter’s fiction (which undoubtedly is fascinating and important), but her novels also demand analysis in terms of their poetics. This work is an attempt to bring these two things together – bearing in mind Carter’s revolutionary purposes and subversive attitude toward patriarchal culture, I demonstrate what effect they have on the world presented in her fiction. My claim is that the construction of the presented worlds in Carter’s fictions is in fact a *deconstruction* of traditional literary symbols, images, topoi and archetypes: Carter probes them, questions them, subverts or overthrows their meanings – there is no literary motif she takes for granted.

In order to pinpoint her method, and better explain how it works and what its purpose is, I have decided to introduce in this book two terms of my own coinage: the *virtuality* of the presented world and *archetypomimetic* characters. I regard them as indispensable tools if we are to grasp the full phenomenon of Carter’s originality, since both terms refer to the deconstructive quality of her fiction.

We can speak of the *virtuality* of the presented world by analogy with *virtual reality* which, as defined in *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, is “a set of images and sounds produced by a computer which seem to represent a place or a situation in which a person experiencing it can take part”.

¹ John Bayley, ‘Fighting for the Crown’, *The New York Review of Books*, 39/8 (23 April 1992), pp.9-11.

² *Ibidem*.

³ See the essays of Isobel Armstrong, Elaine Jordan, Hermione Lee and Lorna Sage included in Lorna Sage (ed.), *op.cit.*

In virtual reality you can open your bedroom door and walk out directly through the Bridge of Sighs into, say, Buckingham Palace, from whose windows you can see a Martian countryside. Virtual reality only seemingly imitates 'reality'. In fact, it replaces the 'reality', usurps it. It is like a *simulation* as defined by Jean Baudrillard:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is a generation by models of real without ... reality: a hyperreal ... it is the map that precedes territory.⁴

Similarly, Angela Carter's spaces do not represent or reflect any 'objective reality' (as is the case with realistic novels). Instead, it is a spatial image (simulacrum) that is the result of the deconstruction of the cultural reality we live in. Carter's spaces are always symbolic, packed with often contradictory meanings – in consequence they question and overthrow the so-called 'natural order of things', depriving some ideas of their privileged status by presenting them as relative and volatile. Carter's purpose is to subvert cultural myths, and she does it deliberately, always fully aware of what she is doing:

I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the new wine makes the old bottles explode.⁵

The person who is to experience the situation is in fact the reader. Elaine Jordan points out that Carter's protagonists are often just narrative devices because their only role is to enable "the reader to pass through possible options, as it were experimentally".⁶ Carter's spaces are always images-cum-meanings whose symbolic dimension is exposed, rather than imitations of real deserts, forests, castles etc.

Similarly, Carter's characters should not be taken for imitations of real people. One of the most striking features of her characters is the predominance of their appearance at the expense of psychology – it appears that the psychological dimension of Carter's characters hardly exists at all. They are emblems of ideas which they carry with themselves, they are symbolic figures well-rooted in patriarchal tradition, stuffed with conflicting meanings. By analogy with anthropomimetic characters (the term that denotes their dependence on real people – the finest examples are the 'fully human' characters of the best realistic novels), the term *archetypomimetic* underscores a different relation: the relation between a literary character and archetype(s). Carter's characters, as I demonstrate in chapter four, are sewn together – like Frankenstein's Mon-

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in Mark Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press-Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.166.

⁵ Angela Carter, 'Notes From the Frontline', in Michelene Wandor (ed.), *On Gender and Writing* (London: Pandora Press, 1983), p.69.

⁶ Elaine Jordan, 'Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fictions', in Linda Anderson (ed.), *Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), p.36.

ster – from bits and pieces of archetypes in circulation in phallogocentric culture.

Nonetheless, it is important to remember that in Carter's fiction the reader is not confronted with archetypes themselves, but with their emanations in art and literature, in consequence with their social significance and cultural function. In my analysis of *archetypomimetic* characters I do not concentrate my attention on the character's feelings, emotions, thoughts, idiosyncrasies, relations with other people, complexes, fears and phobias, intellectual capacity etc. (i.e. the character's character), but treat the character as a sign, asking about its meanings and social function. This is an attempt to see archetypes within a political context as patriarchal instruments of power. Here feminism intermingles with postmodernism, since both question the existing cultural order as constrictive and oppressive to modern women and men. The myth of patriarchal culture that is reflected in its art, symbols and archetypes does not "bear any relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum".⁷

⁷ Baudrillard, op.cit., p.170.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM WOMEN'S WRITING TRADITION TO POSTMODERN DEMOLITION

In spite of her uniqueness and originality, Angela Carter may be neatly pigeonholed in a variety of categories; the most rudimentary and obtrusive of which would be to label her as a “contemporary English woman writer”. And although I believe that she herself would have preferred a different order (woman, contemporary writer, English), there is no point in pretending that those categories are utterly irrelevant. In order to explore this point a little further, I suggest considering her fiction in the context of the English literary tradition, especially its feminine trends, both past and contemporary.

To what extent is Angela Carter an inheritor of tradition? How much is her fiction rooted in postmodernism with its concepts of art and society? We can hardly disregard the fact that literature has always been closely accompanied by ‘theory of literature’ or rather its plentiful forms which – as Terry Eagleton suggests – are historically and culturally determined. Awareness of this basic assumption accounts for certain simplifications. Thus, this presentation of Carter's involvement in feminine tradition and postmodernity will be selective rather than exhaustive.

1.1.

WOMEN'S LITERATURE AS A LITERARY SUBCULTURE

There is a similarity between Eagleton's concept of literature as a tool for propagating class interests and a feminist view of literature as a patriarchal tool for socialising women. Although Eagleton can be accused of simplifying the matter, or even of being a new-Left doctrinaire, his theories explain sources from which the feminist concept of women's writing as a literary subculture

springs. This similarity shows that feminists are not the only ones to refuse to perceive the English literary tradition as a mutual heritage.

Eagleton argues that mid-Victorian ideology and its imperialist interests saw in literature a potent tool for underpinning the endangered social order, namely a mutual ground for a divided society, a national heritage with which people could identify. English literature appeared to be an ideal means for moulding and assimilating the masses. Matthew Arnold, a key figure in this context, warned with healthy frankness:

They arrive, these masses, eager to enter into possession of the world, to gain a more vivid sense of their life and activity. In this their irrepressible development, their natural educators and initiators are those immediately above them, the middle classes. If these classes cannot win their sympathy or give them their direction, society is in danger of falling into anarchy.¹

According to Eagleton such an explicit expression of anxiety about the domination of the working class was a pervasive, if not obligatory, tone of Victorian writing about the role of literature in society.

A quote from J.C. Collins's *The Study of English Literature* published in 1891 will enable us to see the problem from another angle. The people are perceived as those who “need political culture, instruction, that is to say, in what pertains to their relation to the State, to their duties as citizens; and they need also to be impressed sentimentally by having the presentation in legend and history of heroic and patriotic examples brought vividly and attractively before them.”²

At this point two main tendencies meet. Literature's first function is to provide education in the so called ‘universal human values’ in order to tame and temper all barbarian attempts to violate them. Literature becomes a tranquilliser, an antidote to political extremism, unquestionable evidence of middle class achievements which inspires reverence for them. Hence, the sorts of literary works that do not abide by these rules and refuse to serve as transmitters of moral standards cannot enter the realm of English cultural treasures. The other function is a patriotic and heroic one, demanding inculcation of the mind with confidence in English cultural superiority and security in terms of its national identity. Not surprisingly, English literature was included in the Civil Service examinations in the Victorian period.

On the other hand literature with its concern for the finer feelings was regarded as an entirely feminine affair, unlike science and other academic disciplines, and thus suitable for “women ... and the second- and third-rate men

¹ Quoted after: Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p.24.

² Quoted after Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), p.100

who ... become schoolmasters.”³ Except for the working classes, women were the main oppressed layer of Victorian society. The persistent character of this oppression was described by Virginia Woolf in her two political pamphlets: *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*.⁴

The implications of what has been considered so far are astonishing yet logical. Language which, as Barthes demonstrated, is arbitrary, more often than not tries to hide its relative status and pass itself off as the only conceivable way of perceiving the world and therefore irresistibly turns into ideology. Consequently, language cannot resist the temptation to naturalise social reality, that is to present culture as if it were as innocent and legitimate as nature. Barthes does not hesitate to name this literary ideology which expresses such a ‘natural attitude’ and subdues any alternative, and labels it *realism*.

Realistic literature employs language as a translucent window to the object, which eliminates any distortion or subjectivity. Neutral language makes for representation of ‘objective reality’ and never interferes with it. It is not surprising then that the conventions of the Victorian and Edwardian novel were forged as realist forms, but their perseverance in more recent prose perplexed even David Lodge who stated in 1971 that there is “a good deal of evidence that the English literary mind is peculiarly committed to realism, and resistant to non-realistic modes.”⁵ In this context the so-called ‘Modernist breakthrough’ seems to be an exception to the rule (or a reaction against it) since Bernard Bergonzi also observes a certain suspicion of innovation as a characteristic feature of Englishness:

The most important fact about contemporary English life ... is that it did not undergo the radical transformations that took place in countries which underwent the traumatic experience of totalitarianism and defeat in war. Ancient traditions and continuities remained undisturbed In cultural matters we find an unrepentant insularity and an involvement with native elements and traditions, as against the cosmopolitan innovations of the Modern Movement.⁶

Angela Carter belongs to those experimental novelists who co-forged, rather than borrowed, contemporary literary devices. She also exhibits a critical aversion to the realistic techniques of writing and, being as verbally flamboyant as can be imagined, represents “a movement towards fantasy and dream more widely apparent in recent British fiction.”⁷ Moreover, her books display overt

³ Quoted after Eagleton, op.cit., p.27.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own. Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵ David Lodge, *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.7.

⁶ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp.58-59.

⁷ Randall Stevenson, *British Novel since the Thirties* (London: B.T.Batsford Ltd., 1987) p.159.

hostility towards the male-dominated society. In this sense her literary output must be perceived as revolutionary, offering no sedative and never complying with the 'natural' state of culture. On the contrary, Carter draws attention to the arbitrariness of language and its artificiality by condensing the net of lexis and imagery. Her re-creation of popular fairy tales, re-working of myths and recycling of well known literary themes provide an antidote to a contemporary mythology embodied by Western democracy and its values. Nevertheless, Carter does not reject these myths without reservation; she rather probes the petrified versions, discovering their ambiguities and adding alternative meanings to those established ones.

Thus, the function of literature becomes an active one: challenging the social and cultural status quo, in contrast to the Victorian tendency to make literature prop up the system. On the other hand, there seems to exist a certain didactic strain in Carter's fiction, vaguely resembling the radical feminist beliefs which I refer to below when discussing "Images of Women" criticism. Although Angela Carter often dealt with female identity and in a sense wrote at least several 'useful stories' for women, she never exercised this kind of feminism.

Looking at women's literature from a feminist perspective, it seems that no contemporary woman writer of prominence can avoid being seen and interpreted as a link in the chain which began with Jane Austen. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, women writers have managed to make their distinctive statement in every literary period. In literary history this process is marked by only a few names of 'the great': Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. It is worth remembering though that the female tradition is founded on the works of many women who have not been included in the canon, but whose feelings about art and gender, the sacrifices they made, and their relationship to tradition and profession cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* presents this process clearly, finding in 'the great' the representatives of those many who stitched the tapestry with their own needles. I would like to underscore several of her observations which help place Angela Carter's work in the historical context.

Showalter claims that women's literature is a literary subculture. She identifies three major stages in it: the Feminine phase (from the discovery of the usefulness of male pseudonyms by women writers in the 1840s to the death of George Eliot in 1880); the Feminist phase (from 1880 to the winning of the vote); and the Female phase from the 1920s onwards, but entering a new stage of self-awareness about 1960.

These phases are not arbitrarily rigid categories, for they correspond to three major phases presented in the essays of Robert A. Bone and Northrop Frye on other literary subcultures, as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian⁸

⁸ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1978), p.13.

(categories which, it should be noted, make no reference to women as a subculture). Respectively, there is a prolonged phase of imitation and submission to the dominant tradition, a phase of protest against its oppressive standards, and eventually a phase of self-discovery, namely a search for identity.

Thus, Feminine novels complied with the regulatory demands of realism as a yardstick for literariness and with the common Victorian contempt for women writers (hence the male pseudonym, guilt and anxiety). But, as Showalter precisely observes, it took the shape of “an all inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and community.”⁹

The female subculture was also constituted by a shared physical experience: menstruation, puberty, sexual initiation, childbirth, menopause – all forming the female sexual life cycle. Obviously, the Victorian training in self-censorship and concealment (which concerned also male writers although to a lesser extent) forced the inhibited women writers to elaborate unconventional and covert means to express the complexity and anxiety of the inner life as exemplified by the intensely symbolic and profound prose of Charlotte Brontë. Nonetheless, we cannot speak of any coded, secret language by which 19th century women writers communicated secret messages to their readers. Those messages (or better – anxieties) remained subliminal in the minds of Victorian women writers, and now can be discovered by feminist critics. The authors of a collection of essays on nineteenth century women writers entitled *The Madwoman in the Attic* put it in these words:

Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.¹⁰

Additionally, there were also language restrictions by which women novelists had to abide. In 1849 *The North British Review* complimented Anne Marsh for “pages ... absolutely like green pastures”¹¹ expressing in this way Victorian expectations from a writing woman who should have limited her range of verbal expression to that of a lady. Any attempts to trespass the boundaries of standard language were rebuked as ‘coarseness’, a term equally useful for the dialect in *Wuthering Heights*, the ‘damns’ in *Jane Eyre*, the colloquialisms in *Aurora Leigh* or the moral tone of *Adam Bede*. The repression of feelings, the thought-control and the concealment of emotions generate almost a special language based on obscurity and allusion, a code of submerged meanings.

⁹ Ibidem, p.29.

¹⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.73.

¹¹ Quoted after Showalter, op.cit., p.26.

This provides an interesting context for Angela Carter's overabundance of language in terms of vocabulary, syntax and styles, since she does not respect any taboos and restrictions, either thematic or stylistic. Moreover, her delight with 'coarseness' is conspicuous and despite her grace and inventiveness in applying it, remains provocative. Carter, being aware of the cultural censorship of the female language, made it sensual and sexual to the furthest limits and employed it on purpose; as she once said:

I spent a good many years being told what I ought to think, and how I ought to behave, and how I ought to write, even, because I was a woman and men thought they had the right to tell me how to feel, but then I stopped listening to them and tried to figure it out for myself but they didn't stop talking, oh, dear no. So I started answering back. How simple, not to say simplistic, this all sounds; and yet it is true.¹²

She made this confession in the introduction to a collection of her criticism *Expletives Deleted*, which she began with a more ominous statement: "I am known in my circle as notoriously foul-mouthed."

The Feminist phase could be rightly paraphrased as the 'answering back period', because in its core it meant confrontation with male society and the Victorian sexual stereotypes that fettered women's self-expression.¹³ For the first time women's demand for their rights and attack on the patriarchal institutions of society took the shape of a collective movement. The extreme wing of the movement tended toward countercultural contestation and campaigned for "the sexual separation of Amazon Utopia and suffragette sisterhoods."¹⁴ This thinking has its supporters even nowadays, and not just among radical and lesbian feminists, so its significance is more than historical. In the feminist classic *Thinking About Women* published in 1968, Mary Ellmann feels obliged to point out differences in tone between male and female writing, claiming that traditionally men write in an authoritarian mode whereas women writers remain 'imprisoned' in the language of sensibility. Ellmann advises resistance to or subversion of these traditional roles:

I hope to define the way in which it is now possible for women to write well. Quite simply, having not had physical or intellectual authority before, they have no reason to resist a literature at odds with authority.¹⁵

¹² A.Carter, *Expletives Deleted* (London: Vintage, 1993), p3.

¹³ It is interesting to note, however, how the stereotypes concerning sex and especially sexual roles survived basically intact into post-Second World War period, despite late Victorian and especially Georgian changes (i.e. the Bloomsbury Group). The 1960s, which witnessed the sexual revolution and emergence of permissive society, is also the decade when the earliest feminist manifestos were published (i.e. by Betty Friedan and Mary Ellmann).

¹⁴ Showalter. op.cit., p.29.

¹⁵ Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p.166.

However, this phase of revolutionary declarations of independence passed, leaving no distinctive mark on literature. Indeed, the superior goal of the movement required sacrificing individualism to the collectivity of the suffragettes. The purest examples of feminist literature were short stories and fragments called 'dreams', 'keynotes' or 'fantasias', followed by poems, novels and plays written as suffragette propaganda. Yet they managed to make a significant breakthrough in two other areas of literary life.

First, they abolished the monopoly of male publishers. Second, they instigated a coherent body of theory about women's literature. These two achievements should not be underrated, because they freed women's literature economically and intellectually. The men who published the works of feminine novelists had in practice controlled their contents. This shift also embraced editions of women's magazines, retention of copyrights and the commissioning of printers – all of which meant real independence in control of publishing outlets. Jeanette Winterson's delight over Great Moments Ltd, her own literary agency-cum-production company shows to what extent this sort of independence keeps its validity nowadays.¹⁶ In this context Angela Carter's dedication to and cooperation with Virago – a well-known feminist publishing house – both as a writer and editor (she prepared for them two volumes of fairy tales with feminist messages collected from the world over) seems obvious and wise.

While the independent publishing outlets enabled women writers not to play the market or submit to the demands of commercialism, a theory of women's literature begun by Elizabeth Robins underlined the complicity of heroines, plots, conventions and images of women in fiction with the requirements of the male publishing industry and the socialisation of women. This trend is continued nowadays in the so-called "Images of Women" criticism. In the next chapters we will see what use Angela Carter makes out of these components of the presented world.

The First World War brought the next major shift in the character of women's literature – it moved from the Feminist to the Female phase. This was a move towards an aesthetic of new consciousness. Explorations of female experience were superseded by the pursuit for a distinctively female consciousness perceived as the essence of being. The war had only strengthened discontent with 'male' order based on technology, law and politics that maintained the illusion of progress. Civilisation lay in ruins and this fact put in question the foundations of knowledge. At the moment when women's literature became relatively emancipated from its cultural subordination to the male tradition, it took the shape of a new spirituality, a heritage from the feminist social evolutionists and spiritualists. It stressed subjective understanding, a consequence of the idea that the world was sexually polarised in psychological terms. As early

¹⁶ 'The Body Politic', *The Guardian*, 26 Aug. 1992.

as 1920 R.Brimley Johnson, in his book entitled *Some Contemporary Novelists (Women)*, presented a concept of the female version of realism:

The new woman, the female novelist of the twentieth century, has abandoned the new realism. She does not accept observed revelation. She is seeking, with passionate determination, for the Reality which is behind the material, the things that matter, spiritual things, ultimate Truth. And here she finds man an outsider, wilfully blind, purposely indifferent.¹⁷

This remark seems accurate in relation to the conflict between the Edwardian novel of external realism epitomised by Arnold Bennett and the Georgian trends represented by his fierce critic Virginia Woolf. And although the lines of controversy seem to be less male/female and more conventional/progressive, the fact remains that for the most prominent women writers of that period (i.e. Woolf and Richardson) going 'progressive' was the only choice. On the other hand the above quotation does not capture the reason why such a shift in understanding 'realism' occurred and, what is more important, why it became attractive especially (though not only) to women writers of that period.

As I believe, it also encapsulates the features of a much larger process in literature between the wars, the process whose prophetic figure is T.S.Eliot. In fact his concept of Tradition and myth had not been successfully challenged until Angela Carter. Although she never attacked T.S.Eliot directly, her purpose is to bring to light the arbitrariness of myths as sources of social/sexual roles on which patriarchal society is founded. This assumption accounts for Carter's distrust of myths. We will come back to this point later in this chapter, after a brief presentation of the most predominant concepts of myth and tradition from T.S.Eliot to Northrop Frye to Alaisdair MacIntyre. The common denominator of all these concepts is a notion that myths, by providing role models and patterns of behaviour, enable society to function with relative efficiency.

1.2. PATRIARCHAL ORDER AND MYTH

According to Showalter, the beginning of the Female phase is marked by the emergence of the so called *female aesthetic* in women's writings, whose concept of language reminds us of the main feminist theories current in the 1970s. In spite of the obvious differences between the concepts of literature presented by the female aesthetic and T.S.Eliot, both visions spring from a dissatisfaction with 'progress' and 'reason'. Stressing individualism and con-

¹⁷ Quoted after Showalter, op.cit.,p.241.

sciousness, the female aesthetic, seemingly, differs totally from T.S.Eliot's philosophy of literature, where personality must be sacrificed to an impersonal order, which in the sphere of literature means the Tradition. Eliot was also looking for 'the ultimate Truth behind the material', and his quest, despite different assumptions, ran parallel to that of the female aesthetic. Both were suspicious of language, both clung to avant-garde literary techniques in order to better present the multiplicity of associations, both managed to create a closed and sterile world ('female consciousness', 'the Tradition').

Dorothy Richardson implied that women communicated on a higher level than men, that 'words' were men's invention, so women could not convey their meaning through them. The essence of their art was invisible, based on creating an atmosphere; communication took place beyond language, like telepathy. T.S.Eliot, disgusted with abstractions of rationalist thought, demanded that poetry communicate with readers by the "cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracks."¹⁸ The panacea lay in myth: female consciousness or collective unconscious. Its foundation is a belief that literature must touch or revive symbols rooted deep in the psyche and archetypes that are immune to history. Not surprisingly, Eliot recognises in Joyce's *Ulysses* a sign of his times, the birth of "the mythical method."¹⁹

Once again, Angela Carter appears to be a subversive successor of this phase. Like Virginia Woolf she presents a world polarised by sex, as a battlefield of male and female principles, but she does not fall prey to Woolf's aesthetic escapism. Her preoccupation with myths, fairy tales, literary motifs, and cultural heritage in general, bears the features of a polemic with T.S.Eliot's extremely influential concepts. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" Eliot fetishises the continuity of the larger European traditions and places himself with respect to them. Angela Carter seems to be aware of the simultaneous existence of the literary past and present, but she treats this past as a shop with old decorations from which she composes her subversive works.

Quite similarly, Northrop Frye suggests that mythology through its *koine* enhances the existence of Tradition. He concentrates on how literature preserves the ancient images, and the emotions and beliefs connected with them. This concept recognises how this everlasting substance changes its shape throughout the evolution of literature. In this formulation a literary work is woven from archaic patterns that exist in the human psyche, thus traditional symbols and myths constitute its primary reference system.

On this foundation we should perceive all literary works as variations on several themes. These themes function as a closed circulatory system in which symbolic units undergo constant rearrangement and fluctuation, but consis-

¹⁸ T.S.Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', in Peter Faulkner (ed.), *A Modernist Reader* (London: B.T.Batsford Ltd, 1986), p.99.

¹⁹ T.S.Eliot, 'Ulysses. Order and Myth', in Peter Faulkner (ed.), op.cit., p.103.

tently in relation to each other, entirely separated from any reference beyond itself. The term for literature coined by Frye in his crucial statement *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) reads 'autonomous verbal structure'. Terry Eagleton develops its meaning as follows:

Literature is not a way of knowing reality but a kind of collective utopian dreaming which has gone on through history, an expression of those fundamental human desires which have given rise to civilization itself, but which are never fully satisfied there. It is not to be seen as the self-expression of individual authors, who are no more than functions of this universal system: it springs from the collective subject of the human race itself, which is how it comes to embody 'archetypes' or figures of universal significance.²⁰

Actually, however pious and amiable this sounds, literature in Frye's terms is not only, as Eagleton wants, "an imaginary alternative to modern society"²¹, but a medium of a natural order, which springs from the very core of human psyche. It seems not accidental then that T.S.Eliot's essay on *Ulysses* has the subtitle "Order and Myth". Its author welcomes in Joyce a fellow mind because "using the myth, ... manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity ... is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."²² In this sense myths maintain relevance to social life. This political function of myths also found expression in Frye's *The Critical Path* (1971), where he presents notions of conservative 'myths of concern' and liberal 'myths of freedom'. This intentional contrast guarantees balance and delivers civilisation from the vertigo of extremism.

The idea reminds one of Levi-Strauss's conviction that myths are imaginary solutions to real social contradictions. Here, myths are understood as a kind of language which underlies every narrative; and this happens unintentionally, as if myths thought themselves up through literature or the human mind. "Myths have a quasi-objective collective existence, unfold their own 'concrete logic' with supreme disregard for the vagaries of individual thought."²³

It is indispensable to underscore here the fact that although Angela Carter makes use of mythology and alludes to many literary works belonging to the strict European canon, her purpose does not lie in supporting the balance of civilisation; on the contrary, she never lets herself be led by the myths' "concrete logic". Like all true feminists she is not interested in buttressing the order, since the existing status quo serves only the interests of men and, as Derrida defines it, is phallogocentric in its core. Feminist writers work towards deconstructing or even overthrowing it.

²⁰ Eagleton, op.cit., p.93.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² T.S.Eliot, op.cit., p.103

²³ Eagleton, op.cit., p.104.

The intersubjectivity of myth remains at odds with its normative and balancing function, because one could always ask whose interests are represented by the society founded upon a particular mythology. Behind every impersonal authority lurks a human being or a group who have their interests; as mass media consumers we know this too well. Ernst Cassirer in his classical work *An Essay on Man* reflects that the main changes of religion in Ancient Greece resulted from the social and political evolution towards individualism.²⁴ These processes neatly dovetail with the conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy. According to Erich Fromm, the Oedipus myth remains the reflection of this rudimentary polarisation of the primeval powers, but at the same time Sophocles uses it as a critique of the official religion of the state after the Peloponnesian War.²⁵ Angela Carter also toys with this political, conflicting, polarising aspect of myth – her re-working of mythological motifs uncover their arbitrary, authoritarian side, which in most cases legitimises the submission of women in society.

The normative function of mythology – its proneness to serve as a moral yardstick – has been underscored by one of the leading philosophers of post-modernism, Alasdair MacIntyre, whose reflections on morality allowed him to claim that mythology provides a certain range of narrative archetypes which function as models of social and cultural identity. Members of a culture acquire their personal identities through such instruction – which does not mean, however, that mythology succeeds in providing a stable representation of reality. Its nature is conflicting and contextual, and the truths it reveals can be understood only as provisional and alterable.

Obviously, this is a consequence of the postmodern aversion to consensus as a regulative ideal of discourse and its subsequent praise of ‘conversation’ as a means of culture's own continuation, albeit an aimless one; the idea of progress has been discarded, because that ultimately would suggest an end. On the other hand, when it comes down to harsh reality, mythology proves effective in determining customary ethics and offering society a topical range of social roles. MacIntyre's vision turns out to be helplessly pessimistic, because he forces us to choose from what is on display, as he writes:

I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society ... with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, good children, good but misguided kings, wolves that suckle

²⁴ Ernest Cassirer, *Esej o człowieku*, trans. Anna Staniewska (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1971), pp.164-165.

²⁵ Erich Fromm, ‘Mit o Edypie’, in *Zapomniany język*, trans. Józef Marzęcki (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1994).

twin boys, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world, and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and must go and live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are.²⁶

This quote helps us to identify the sources of our everyday mythical repertoire. Not surprisingly, they are the Bible, Greek and Latin classics, and Grimm's Fairy Tales. Since the best tidbits seem reserved for men, this renders unnecessary the obvious question of whether the female majority of the population wish to compose their identity from the leftovers. The scarcity of female models of personal identity – even accepting that MacIntyre's list is selective – must not be overlooked. This accounts for why feminists have taken to re-writing fairy tales. No doubt, feminism remains in negative relation to the culture from which it springs.

Angela Carter's artistic second sight enabled her to express this rudimentary conflict in a most original and thorough way. She managed to escape theoretical dryness by successfully presenting those political assumptions in artistic code, transfiguring the intellectual into the imaginative and artistic. She was a writer who knew in a political sense exactly what she was doing, even if the dense fabric of her prose pointed at rather aesthetic ambitions. In her introduction to the anthology of stories provocatively entitled *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*, she wrote:

Most of the variously characterized girls and women who inhabit these stories ... would seem much, much worse if men had invented them. They would be predatory, drunken hags; confidence tricksters; monstrously precocious children; liars and cheats; promiscuous heartbreakers. As it is, they are all presented as if they were perfectly normal. On the whole, women are kind to women.

Perhaps too kind.²⁷

It was not that she favoured women. She simply mocked the cultural stereotypes enhanced by art and literature. She reclaimed some of the ready-made female roles and subverted them towards progressive ends. She manipulated the effective mythologies of our societies so that their arbitrariness could no longer be taken for the natural order. In the *Guardian's* obituary of Angela Carter, Lorna Sage recognised in her "a writer who always demonstrates how vital counter-cultural impulses are to the very existence of any worthwhile tradition."²⁸

²⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1982), p.201.

²⁷ Angela Carter, Introduction to Angela Carter (ed.), *Wayward Girls and Wicked Women* (London: Virago, 1992), p.IX.

²⁸ Lorna Sage, 'The Soaring Imagination', *The Guardian*, 17 Feb.1992, p.37..

Surely, Angela Carter was not an artist who followed tradition; rather, she preferred to reshape it, and would break existing rules in order to forge new ones. All her writings, especially her versions of fairy tales, deal with social and artistic conventions, frequently mocking and sometimes adjusting them to new tasks. In spite of the scornful criticism directed at fairy tales in the 1970s for the genre's socially conventional happy endings, Carter strongly believed that the goal of fairy tales was not "a conservative one, but a utopian one, indeed a form of heroic optimism – as if to say: One day we might be happy, even if it won't last."²⁹

From this angle some of Carter's stories seem to have a strong didactic strain – they provide quite simple moral distinctions based on common sense or elementary justice. No matter how artistically complicated her stories, they remain basically educational. Their sophistication helps to tell an alternative story; their fantasy sustains revolutionary longings. Carter's stories encourage women to reject the narrow range of MacIntyre's 'imputed characters' and define their identities themselves. Thus, Carter's fiction cannot be separated from the general consciousness-raising trends and has to be perceived as a part of the process, providing an alternative 'effective mythology' for women.

Here the political content of Angela Carter's fiction meshes with similar trends in contemporary feminist reflection on culture and society, as well as on literature and language. All the main feminist theories coined in the 1970s point out that language both reflects and supports phallogocentric culture. Thus the main purpose of feminist literature lies in unmasking the falsity both in language and its products – e.g. images of women in literature or in advertising etc. Angela Carter's novels and short stories share this strategic purpose with all kinds of feminisms. Together with a brief demonstration of what connects her artistic practice with feminist theories of the 1970s, it will be worthwhile to examine in what aspects her fiction differs from them.

²⁹ Quoted after Marina Warner's introduction to *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 1992), p.XII.

1.3

ANGELA CARTER AND FEMINIST THEORIES OF THE 1970S

Before beginning this short comparison, I would like to repeat once again what has already been said – that women’s literature is perceived by feminist critics as a *literary subculture*, by analogy with literatures of ethnic, racial and sexual minorities. As Toril Moi explains:

[W]omen involved in campaigns against racism soon came to see that the values and strategies that contributed to keeping blacks in their place mirrored the values and strategies invoked to keep women subservient to men.³⁰

The logical consequence of such an observation for literary criticism is that it always has to take into consideration social and cultural contexts if it wants to understand fiction properly – a view shared unanimously by all factions of feminism regardless of their other, often profound, differences. One context clearly present in Carter’s own fiction is the exploitation of images of women within the phallogocentric culture; as a result she seems to be interested in women as signs or products of this culture, in women as words.

One trend in feminism which apparently shares its interests with Carter is called ‘Images of Women’ criticism, devoted to searching for female stereotypes in fiction and in the critical categories used by male critics reviewing women’s works – as exemplified by a collection of essays entitled *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, edited by Susan Koppelman Cornillon and published in 1972. These essays centre their attention on pointing out examples of female stereotypes in nineteenth and twentieth century prose in order to criticise their authors for creating ‘unreal’ female characters.³¹

Carter obviously shares their view that the whole patriarchal culture on all its levels – from mythology to narrative fiction to pornography – is overloaded with false images of women. However false these images are – as the passion and energy she puts into deconstructing them proves – their cultural place is *real*. The image of the Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* plays with its cultural stereotype as both primeval idol and castrating monster; thus drawing it to its limits by employing the stereotype’s natural “explosive tendency.”³² In

³⁰ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.21.

³¹ See especially: Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ‘The fiction of fiction’, in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed.), *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).

³² Ellmann, op.cit., p.131.

fact she utilises the same strategy in deconstructing and doing away with all the other images she selects for her work within the patriarchal culture – by playing with the motifs of Androgyne, Master, Automaton and probing the Predator-Prey dichotomy on which she believes sexual relationships have been founded, at least since Marquis de Sade. Carter lets these stereotypes explode, then re-forges them into vulgarised, comic, or grotesque forms (see chapter four dealing with *archetypomimetic* characters).

We can notice a clear difference here between what Carter finds to be *false* images of women (and men!), and what the disciples of ‘Images of Women’ school treat as such. For the latter, the criterion upon which they judge whether a given image is false or not is ‘reality’ and ‘experience’. They demand from a writer a faithful reproduction of the external reality which we all know from our everyday experience; thus, by comparing model and result, we see for ourselves whether the image is false. This sort of thinking must strike one not only as naive and simplistic, but also as inherently dangerous. Toril Moi accuses this critical school of taking an “‘ultra-realist’ position” and writes about “the deep realist bias of Anglo-American feminist criticism”³³, confirming both Lodge’s and Bergonzi’s observations about the powerful magnetism of realism for English authors, as quoted earlier in this chapter.

To complement the work of the ‘Images of Women’ school, the radical Marxist feminists demand exclusively strong and impressive female characters from the fiction of women writers, which potentially clashes with the concurrent demand for a realistic depiction of women’s experience. Elaine Showalter presents these views in this way:

[W]omen’s literature should dedicate itself to the forging of a new consciousness of oppression by developing cultural myths of women in struggle and women in revolution. The task of a radical women’s literature should be to replace the secondary and artificial images women receive from a male chauvinist society with authentic and primary identities.³⁴

As it has been pointed out already, Angela Carter’s fiction has very little to do with realistic modes of writing. Her interest in images of women springs from her fascination with mythology and art as tools of social repression of women in patriarchal society. As a writer she remains preoccupied with cultural reality and its products. Neither does she attempt to develop any positive mythology for women, and her characters – being *archetypomimetic* – simply cannot become role models for contemporary women. As a result Carter has been strongly criticised by radical feminists for her negligence of these matters. Paulina Palmer, for instance, claims that by following the feminist theory of gender current in the 1970s, Carter composes a positive picture of womanhood out of

³³ Moi, *op.cit.*, pp.45-47.

³⁴ Showalter, *op.cit.*, p.315.

undesirable, manly attributes.³⁵ The same critic, however, praises Carter for the main character of *Nights at the Circus*, finding in Fevvers the example of a positive heroine that women readers have certainly been waiting for. Nonetheless, Fevvers is also an *archetypomimetic* character whom nobody can emulate. The models for Carter's protagonists are archetypes, not real people.

Angela Carter's preoccupation with effective mythologies makes it tempting to confront her fiction with the anti-realist trends in feminism represented by the French theorists Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva – all three of whom construct their concepts on the foundations of psychoanalysis, modern linguistics and the philosophical notions of Jacques Derrida. The only disadvantage of referring to these concepts lies in the fact that they form highly sophisticated and elaborate systems in which the ideas of their authors and the discursive strategies they employ are equally important. There is not enough space here for a full accounting of these theories. Thus, their presentation is limited to pointing out only those ideas which are relevant in connection with Angela Carter's work.

Cixous, who shares with the other two critics mentioned above the conviction that literary language belongs to male writers, finds an effective way of breaking the prison-house of patriarchal discourse by proclaiming an alternative female language – her concept of *écriture féminine* establishes “the essential bond between feminine writing and mother as the source and origin of the voice to be heard in all female texts.”³⁶ This idea attempts to de-naturalise (in a Derridean sense) language – as a means which phallogocentrism uses to oppress and silence women – and break its authoritarian and order-enforcing character by subverting its omnipresent patriarchal schemes. These ‘binary’ schemes are patterns of oppositions that suggest a barely hidden positive/negative evaluation echoed respectively in the sexual dichotomy of Man/Woman and its variations – e.g. Father/Mother, Sun/Moon, Activity/Passivity, Logos/Pathos, Mind/Emotions, Culture/Nature etc.

Angela Carter also questions the binary oppositions upon which Western philosophy and literary *topoi* are founded. She does it through sudden role-reversals or through the means of double-drag; still, she stays as far as possible from *écriture féminine* as a means of artistic expression. Furthermore, as it has already been said, she perceives all mythologies as products of phallogocentric language, whereas Cixous constantly turns to biblical and mythological imagery in a serious manner, which in Moi's opinion “signals her investment in the world of myth: a world that, like the distant country of fairy tales is perceived as persuasively meaningful, as closure and unity.”³⁷

³⁵ Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction. Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory*, (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989).

³⁶ Moi, op.cit., p.114.

³⁷ Ibidem, p.116.

Another French critic, Nicole Ward Jouve, notices that in Carter's fiction "symbols ... are not allowed to signify, except ironically" and claims that both *The Passion of New Eve* and *The Sadeian Woman* can be rightly read as "counter-tracts to French theory of the seventies – Lacan, Cixous in particular."³⁸ I find it convincing that Carter could even have done it intentionally – Mother's speech in *The Passion of New Eve* sounds like a parody of Cixous's intrinsic style from *La Venue a l'écriture*. When Evelyn stands face to face with Mother, she says:

I see before me the fairest earth ripe for the finest seed. In the most pure womb of Mary, there was sown one whole grain of wheat, yet it is called a garden of wheat –

Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna! (*PNE*, 66)

I am the Great Parricide, I am the Castratrix of the Phallogocentric Universe, I am Mama, Mama, Mama! (*PNE*, 67)

The voice cast in Cixous's text as a feminine Moses and as the Pharaoh's daughter confesses:

The tears I shed at night! The waters of the world flow from my eyes ... I go to the banks of the Nile to gather the peoples abandoned in wicker baskets ... I am everywhere, my cosmic belly, I work on my world-wide unconscious, I throw death out, it comes back, we begin again, I am pregnant with beginnings.³⁹

Thus, Carter rejects Cixous's "imaginary utopia" (as Moi calls it), never letting herself be carried away on the waters of *feminine writing*. In this respect she appears to stand much closer to Luce Irigaray's concept of 'mimicry'.

A writer who in all her works of fiction enacts some form of deconstruction is entirely dependent on the discourses she intends to subvert; she has no choice – as Irigaray claims – but to copy male discourses, an act that becomes a form of parasitism. Carter, moreover, does not employ any kind of *feminine writing* – simply because she must be aware that it is only a part of yet another pair of binary oppositions: *écriture féminine* seems to exist only as the negative of phallogocentric discourse. She accepts or even takes advantage of the fact that if she writes in opposition to something (in order to subvert it), then obviously that 'something' influences her own writing. To maintain her autonomy, however, she chooses, similarly to Irigaray, to mime "the miming imposed on woman"⁴⁰, since she has no choice if she wants to be communicative. Unlike the author of *Speculum de l'autre femme*, however, Carter never allows her mimicry to fail her since her playing with the cultural debris of the patriarchy

³⁸ Nicole Ward Jouve, "Mother is a Figure of Speech", in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror. Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (London: Virago, 1994).

³⁹ Quoted after Toril Moi, op.cit, p.116.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p.140.

(its images, symbols, archetypes, motifs, topoi etc.) never ceases to mock the absurdities of phallogocentric heritage.

Though Irigaray's Derridean linguistic reflection maintains that writing outside phallogocentric discourse seems impossible, she coins a theory of '*le parler femme*' ('womanspeak') which, despite referring to *speaking* and not *writing* (the converse of *écriture féminine*), basically does not differ from Cixous's concept. This form of language appears spontaneously when women speak together, and disappears in the presence of men. Hence, Irigaray recommended forming all-female groups as a key condition in the march towards liberation. Yet she warned that any simple reversal of the existing order would lead to a return to phallogocentrism.⁴¹ In this light Beulah, Carter's under-desert headquarters for feminist guerrillas in *The Passion of New Eve*, can be interpreted as an allusion to that concept: Beulah's open militarism and hierarchical organisation – in a parodic sense – imitates the patriarchal order.

Much stronger similarities exist between Carter's attitude to language and the concepts of Julia Kristeva who, unlike Cixous and Irigaray, cannot be considered a purely feminist theorist. Kristeva claims in her early works that no signals of sex can be found in language because all meaning is contextual. Thus, *écriture féminine* or *le parler femme* exist only as intellectual constructs and cannot be detected in literary texts – here, it is worth recalling Virginia Woolf's theory of a 'woman's sentence', a style found also in Marcel Proust's novels. Kristeva speaks of a phenomenon which can be called 'the politics of sign' since she advocates reading a literary text through the study of its political, ideological and psychoanalytical articulations. Toril Moi explains:

It posits that we all use the same language but that we have different interests – and interests must here be taken to mean political and power-related interests which intersect in the sign.⁴²

This assumption is basic for a non-essentialist feminist analysis of language and seems to provide a theoretical background (if we seek one) for Angela Carter's artistic method. The crucial implication of the polysemic nature of sign lies in its *productivity* which accounts, in Kristeva's terms, for feminist discourse itself. According to her theory, language creates social relations (and not only reflects them): its users can take from a sign much more than somebody originally put into it. Carter's writing strategy springs out of this supposition – she pumps up a sign (e.g. an archetype) with every possible cultural meaning and lets it explode. Her job consists in demolishing cultural myths; and since those myths, almost without exception, have a patriarchal origin, she must be counted among the feminist writers.

Although Carter seems to share Kristeva's belief in the revolutionary power of language to subvert the phallogocentric order, her style does not rep-

⁴¹ Ibidem, p.144.

⁴² Ibidem, p.158.

resent an example of what for Kristeva epitomised a revolutionary form of writing which emerges when “the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defences of conventional social meaning.”⁴³ Kristeva sees in the language of Joyce, Lautremont and Mallarme the best examples of such a literary discourse based on the *semiotic*. It is easy to notice that Angela Carter, on the contrary, operates only within the *symbolic* order, deconstructing its fixed meanings, but making use of its machinery – in this respect she stands much closer to postmodernists who never search for any primeval rhythms either, except for parody’s sake. From this angle, Carter may appear to be a very ‘low-key’ feminist.

As we have seen, Angela Carter remains in polemical connection with all major schools of contemporary feminism. Sometimes, as in the case of Cixous, Carter seems to be as critical of their methods and the implications of their theories as she is of patriarchal mythologies. She turns out to be a writer with an innate allergy to all sorts of metanarratives, which places her in line together with postmodernists. Nevertheless, the political edge of her fiction protects her from being wholly incorporated into the postmodern camp.

Barbara Creed sees the main difference between feminism and postmodernism in their attitude toward the crisis of the legitimation of knowledge (as described by Lyotard):

Whereas feminism would attempt to explain that crisis ... in terms of the workings of patriarchal ideology and the oppression of women and other minority groups, postmodernism looks to other possible causes – particularly the West’s reliance on ideologies which posit universal truths – Humanism, History, Religion, Progress, etc. While feminism would argue that the common ideological position of all these ‘truths’ is that they are inherently patriarchal, postmodern theory ... would be reluctant to isolate a single, major determining factor.⁴⁴

Linda Hutcheon shares this point of view:

While feminisms may use postmodern parodic strategies of deconstruction, they never suffer from this confusion of political agenda, partly because they have a position and a ‘truth’ that offer ways of understanding aesthetic and social practices in the light of the production of – and challenge to – gender relations.⁴⁵

As her main example of this sort of involvement of the feminist with the postmodern, Hutcheon mentions Angela Carter, who develops postmodern strategies to deconstructive ends in order to “*begin* the move towards change (a move that is not, in itself, part of the postmodern).”⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, Carter’s

⁴³ Ibidem, p.11.

⁴⁴ Quoted after Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp.153-4.

⁴⁵ Hutcheon, op.cit., p.153.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p.149.

starting point is the cultural make-up of women that determines their position in society, which qualifies her as a feminist. On the other hand she attempts to deal with this problem by implementing a typically postmodern method – manipulating significance.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SYMBIOSIS WITH POSTMODERNISM

Angela Carter is often mentioned in the context of postmodernism.¹ Although we can clearly see the contradiction between the postmodern views of mythology and the political aims of women, it seems worthwhile to ponder a little further on the relationship between postmodernism and feminism. But first, it must be stated what is understood by postmodernism and which features comprise its meaning, as these are not self-evident.

The postmodern boom took place in the 1980s, when the term appeared to be so much in vogue that it slipped into every imaginable theoretical discussion. In 1987 one of the most prominent postmodern figures, Ihab Hassan, published his book entitled *The Postmodern Turn*, in which he ironically, yet with satisfaction, observed that:

Fastidious academics once shunned the word *postmodern* as they might shrink from the shadiest neologism. But now the term has become the shibboleth for tendencies in film, theatre, dance, music, art and architecture; in philosophy, theology, psychoanalysis and historiography; in new sciences, cybernetic technologies and various cultural lifestyles.²

Hassan's clear triumphalism was the result of a growing interest in the meaning of the term. This was more or less at the same time when postmodernism attracted universal attention in Britain and elsewhere in the West. So far it had been the speciality of North American universities, but in 1986/1987 it became a must for everyone interested in the latest trends in the arts. A series of

¹ Carter serves as a model example of the symbiosis of feminist themes and postmodern techniques in literature in Linda Hutcheon's books, eg. *Irony's Edge* or *The Politics of Postmodernism*. It is also worth mentioning in this context Robert Rawdon Wilson's and Walter Kendrick's essays (see bibliography). See also the essays by Susan Rubin Suleiman, Roz Kaveney and Hermion Lee, included in L.Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 1994).

² Quoted after Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p.1.

articles on postmodernism were published in the most influential quality papers (e.g. *The Guardian*). A symposium on postmodernism held in the Tate Gallery in 1987 attracted seven times more applicants than there were places.³

Some critics of the trend (usually from the left) interpret the message of postmodernism as the aftermath of the disillusionment of 1968 and a quickly growing overconsumption in the capitalist societies. Jean-Francois Lyotard, a pioneering philosopher of *postmodernism* in his book *The Postmodern Condition* (1977) defined the idea by contrast to *modernism* and found the crucial difference contained in the postmodern incredulity toward metanarratives (grand philosophical systems that used to legitimise knowledge and set directions for progress). He underlined the fact that the basis of the postmodern and postindustrial age is the fragmentation and specialisation of knowledge, instability, and a tendency to violate rules rather than follow them.⁴ This turn in the character of theoretical discourse has been accompanied by forms of art that expose their own incoherence, lack of integration, pluralism, eclecticism and, last but not least, egalitarianism.

Thus, in architecture, postmodernity means a reaction against the functionalism and austerity worshipped by the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe or against the International Style (Robert Venturi, James Sterling). It means heterogeneity, local character and mass culture. In painting it manifested itself in a return to figuration; in contemporary music its leading advertisers are John Zorn and the Kronos Quartet. Its corresponding counterparts in literature are associated with such names as Umberto Eco, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth who attempted to define the meaning of postmodernism in literature at the same time when Lyotard was analysing its philosophical content; Barth's essay "The Literature of Replenishment" was published in 1979.

These ultra-sophisticated artistic ideas received legitimacy from the works of philosophers rooted in the French school of poststructuralism: Giles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and their acolytes Jean-Francois Lyotard, Alaisdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, all of whom stressed the pluralistic character of reality and then questioned human ability to arrive at any objective account of that reality. The human subject was reduced to a welter of transindividual drives and desires and in consequence declared dead.

This major shift in philosophy and arts turned out to be a reflection of the transformations undergone by the affluent societies after the Second World War. The sociologists who formulated the theory of postindustrial society, provided a link between the recent aesthetic changes and a radical change in Western civilisation. Daniel Bell, in his book entitled *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, wrote about the pervasive 'sense of ending' in the West, which was

³ See: Callinicos, op.cit., p.2.

⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Kondycja postmodernistyczna*, trans. A.Taborska, *Literatura na Świecie* 8-9 (1988).

conspicuous in “the widespread use of the word *post* ... to define, as a combined form, the age into which we are moving.” The list of examples of such a compound is quite impressive: post-capitalist, post-bourgeois, post-civilised, post-collectivist, post-Christian, post-Protestant, post-literature, post-traditional, post-market society, post-scarcity, post-liberal.⁵ In fact, it is irrelevant to present all of Bell's list to notice the powerful proliferation of this linguistic device. Bell's term ‘sense of ending’ swiftly grasps the innate decadence of our times, frenetically deafened and camouflaged by an overabundance of possibilities. Nevertheless, it misses the gossip-like tone of many declarations of transition into a new era of ‘New Times’ founded on robotics, computers and post-Fordism.

While postmodernism cannot be defined in positive terms (and during such attempts inevitably exhibits its contradictory character), it easily coheres by taking as a negative point of reference the ideology of ‘Enlightenment’ and ‘Modernity’. What can be done, though, is a listing of features the postmodern stance inherits from modernism. It may seem that in this way the negative way of defining post- ... phenomena can be partly overcome, but such attempts may serve to demonstrate that postmodernism (at least in literature) is nothing more but a continuation of modernism – Alex Callinicos’s critique of Linda Hutcheon’s claims is a good example of such attitudes.⁶

Postmodern thinkers ardently despise the idea of the unity of reason, and reject the merit of consensus as a regulative device of discourse. As a result, they question the most essential humanist ideals of the Enlightenment and the modern age. Hostility toward such concepts as the autonomy of the individual and the use of Reason in the pursuit of freedom, justice and happiness has resulted from a contempt for metanarratives that have subdued all differences in the name of logical identity. Postmodernism demands superseding the monolithic discourses of Western civilisation by creating multiple ‘local narratives’ – each with its own particularity, specificity and limitations. Such concepts seem to prove a convergence between postmodernism and feminism with its consciousness of the fact that women have been deprived of their share in the project of “Enlightenment humanism ... , demonstrating how this tradition has betrayed itself by degenerating into an exclusivist male-centred, bourgeois, racist ideology that legitimates the material interests of a particular group at the expense of virtually the rest of humanity.”⁷

But this similarity is only superficial. Feminism, being a typically modern movement, does not reject the values and goals of modernity inherited from the Enlightenment, namely notions of truth, justice and equality. Analysing the

⁵ Quoted after Callinicos, op.cit., p.25.

⁶ Ibidem, p.15.

⁷ Marsha A.Hewitt, ‘Illusions of Freedom’, in R.Miliband and L.Panitch (ed.), *Socialist Register 1993. Real Problems, False Solutions*, (London: The Merlin Press, 1993), p.80.

implications of 'anti-Enlightenment polemic' instigated by postmodernism in relation to feminism, Marsha A. Hewitt states that "feminism exposes the false universalisms of abstract humanism so that a concrete humanism may emerge, thereby opening the possibilities of the performative enactment of Enlightenment ideals within the material conditions of life [F]eminism contributes to the political task of the reconstruction and transformation of the ideals, values and goals of modernism."⁸

In this sense feminism remains a revisionist movement within modernity, trying to pursue its goals here and now, down among the women. Obviously, such attachment to ideas of progress toward self-realisation or granting the subject autonomy and the ability for self-reflection, stands in conflict with the triumphant postmodern vision of the death of universal values such as subjectivity, reason or the humanist ideals of modernity that support or even give birth to metanarratives, at the same time limiting plurality. Feminist movement, however, cannot give up following along the lines of these ideals since its aim is emancipation of women which involves making them aware of the fact that their subjectivity is social rather than natural and absolute. This fundamental disagreement over principles has been straightforwardly articulated by Rita Felski in her article "Feminism, Postmodernism and the Critique of Modernity" in which she writes:

Rather than announcing the death of rationality, subjectivity, or history, feminist practices indicate that such concepts must be thought differently in relation to the interests and struggles of gender politics. The eschatological themes and motifs of exhaustion interspersed throughout much postmodernist thought seem in this context to have little relevance to the present concepts of the women's movement.⁹

Actually, there are many examples of feminists who share this anti-Enlightenment ideology with postmodernists, either overtly or unconsciously – Jane Flax and Judith Barker in the USA and Elizabeth Wilson in Britain. On the other hand, the connection between feminism and social revolution still has its fervent advocates, especially in Britain.

In a sense, Angela Carter belongs to this latter group, as her fantasies flicker with the revolutionary pursuit of turning the existing social order upside down. She set in practice Kant's famous saying: "Have the courage to use your understanding", the motto of the Enlightenment. Probably, as her stories tell, she was attracted by the utopian Enlightenment promise that sooner or later arbitrary authority would cease to exist. Still, there remains the problem of what her literature shares with the literature commonly defined as postmodern. To put it in a nutshell, their mutual ground is anti-realism and sophisticated games

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ Rita Felski, 'Feminism, Postmodernism and the Critique of Modernity', *Cultural Critique*, 13 (fall 1989), p.53.

played with other literary genres. However, their main difference lies in the fact that postmodernism praises innovation for its own sake, while Carter employs it for strictly pragmatic aims. Sabina Lovibond draws our attention to the fact that postmodernism “den[ies] that the replacement of one game by another can be evaluated according to any absolute standard (e.g. as being ‘progressive’ or the reverse, in the sense fixed by a teleological view of history).”¹⁰ For Carter as a feminist writer, such a claim borders on decadence.

Postmodern literature recognises human inability to grasp or reflect ‘objective reality’, let alone form or re-form it. It has no other aims except for itself – it accepts no social, political or moral responsibilities. Following its conviction that literature and criticism are dead, it exposes its own weakness and total exhaustion, quite often declaring itself dead and only artificially sustained. In a famous and extremely influential essay “The Literature of Exhaustion”¹¹, John Barth, a novelist and a critic, declares that literature has burned itself out, as it has nothing new or original to say and at present it can only repeat itself. Literature at the present stage only recycles motifs and techniques forged much earlier, creates no values and points out no directions. In consequence, postmodern literature has become a metaliterature, analysing the inner possibilities of literary genres. Thus, any postmodern text exists only in relation to other texts, imitating or parodying, but never transgressing, them. In this sense literature becomes a vanity fair for ‘intellectual’ intellectuals, turning its back on potential uninitiated readers.

Postmodern literature, declaring its nothingness and denying any possibility of progress, does not pretend to look for anything. In such a state of things, imitation and parody become a necessity, as the only available means for the existence of literature, as they form the only area of its experience. Michał Głowiński suggests a term ‘formal mimetism’ for literature’s dependence on other discourses.¹² Postmodern writers take this a step further and make a fetish out of it: they do not imitate other discourses (eg. scientific), but play with the discourses petrified in literary conventions. Metaphorically speaking, literature’s experience has been confined to the library, and this fact explains why Barth cannot overestimate Borges and his sophisticated concepts.

Additionally, meaning has been efficiently amputated from literature as a diseased organ and its space left for critics to sport in. Gerald Graff in his essay “The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough” sees in the blatant anti-rationalism of postmodern criticism and its concepts of open interpretation a congenial form of adaptation to quantitative demands of new professional-

¹⁰ Sabina Lovibond, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism’, *New Left Review*, 178 (Nov./Dec. 1989), p.7.

¹¹ John Barth, ‘Literatura wyczerpania’, trans. Jacek Wiśniewski, in Zbigniew Lewicki (ed.), *Nowa proza amerykańska* (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1983).

¹² Michał Głowiński, ‘Powieść a dziennik intymny’, in *Gry powieściowe* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1973).

ism.¹³ Lyotard observes that nowadays the main motives for intellectual activity are the fringe benefits from the “performance capabilities” of the intellectual who uses a “complex conceptual machinery” while there is no “metalanguage or metanarrative in which to formulate the final goal and correct use of that machinery.”¹⁴

It is curious how fashionable, despite the critical views like Graff's, this normative and reactionary ideology has become. The literature of exhaustion has received an energetic professional boost from criticism and philosophy that have provided undeniable arguments for its notorious solipsism. Northrop Frye prepared the ground by perceiving literature as a picnic to which the writer brings words and the reader meanings. Undoubtedly, by ‘reader’ he meant a professional critic or academician who could bring these meanings in the first place. The magic of powerful critical lingo and the cult of cultural erudition became so intoxicating that critics forgot to ask themselves the basic question as to whether texts could accept those meanings without indigestion. The further consequence of this highbrow banquet is a legitimacy of rebellion and anarchy: there are no regulatory norms anybody should respect as far as they remain constricted in the domain of aesthetics.

In this context, feminist literature, with its unfashionable claims for social change that are borrowed from the past, appears to be the last stronghold of traditionalism. Its stubborn dependence on materialist theory leaves it outside the game, because Marxism was singled out by MacIntyre as an example of exhausted political tradition (see *After Virtue*). The utopian idea of humanity moving towards universal emancipation was declared bankrupt by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* where he observed that “most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative” which “eliminated the communist alternative and valorised the individual enjoyment of goods and services.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, Angela Carter belongs, at least spiritually, to the movement that endows social history with meaning, and her works should be understood as claims for liberation. The fact that she chose to re-write or re-interpret, rather than imitate, popular myths, fairy tales and well-known literary motifs as a vehicle for re-creating meaning, puts her both in the ranks and in conflict with postmodernists.

In the previous chapter I have touched on Angela Carter's involvement in women's writing tradition (according to a narrow definition of the word) and its disagreement with postmodernism. Her subversiveness from the feminist perspective relates to the objective reality of the social, political and sexual oppression of women and cannot be confined to specifically literary problems.

¹³ Gerald Graff, ‘Mit przełomu postmodernistycznego’, trans. Grażyna Cendrowska, in Zbigniew Lewicki (ed.), op.cit., pp.56-96.

¹⁴ Lyotard, op.cit., p.52.

¹⁵ Ibidem, pp.41 & 38.

Only with this fact in mind can we proceed towards a detailed analysis and interpretation of her stories. But I hasten to add here that it is especially this “objective reality” that Carter’s stories question as an arbitrary construct of a patriarchal culture whose means for creating this ‘reality’ has been language as a medium of social communication. Language, which for an extended period of time has been working to naturalise the social reality of the patriarchal order, inevitably seems an object of suspicion to the critical mind of feminism which perceives its nature as “masculine and repressive.”¹⁶ Feminism of the last two decades has been speaking of the phallogocentric nature of language, and on this basis demands its deconstruction, offering an alternative between disrupting it from within or advocating *l’écriture féminine* – feminine language – supposedly open, polysemic, fluid, hysteric, and in consequence disruptive or even revolutionary. This sort of language, based on the semiotic (in Kristeva’s use of the term) should remain perforce marginal within the whole linguistic practice of society, quite like the position of women is marginal. On the other hand, Kristeva’s concept of the semiotic springs from her analyses of modernist avant-garde texts (not written by women at that), which makes it crucial to ask after Rita Felski whether the disruptive character of the semiotic really “constitute[s] a permanently revolutionary field”. Is it not as a matter of fact “reintegrated into a coherent symbolic system within the cultural institutions of contemporary society?”¹⁷

In this respect, Angela Carter appears to be the less deceived. She does not join in the project of *l’écriture féminine*, but attempts to demystify the mythical and symbolic domain of language, operating within its boundaries – she never creates symbols of her own, but instead uses the existing ones which, labelled ‘cultural heritage’, remain stored in synchronic order in the computer-like memory of our culture. Using them freely and combining them according to her own will, Carter creates unique presented worlds which I have decided to call *virtual*, having also in mind their emblematic character and lack of depth. Carter perceives the symbolic order as pivotal to cultural discourse, but questions its metaphysical character, presenting it as deprived of depth except for the pseudo-depth of its petrified meaning.

In Lacanian terms the symbolic order is defined as the Law of the Father, “a cultural system based upon the laws of symbolisation, prohibition and exchange”¹⁸ that grants itself universal authority. What Angela Carter does is probe it with a critical attitude, read and interpret it – something that no universal authority would accept. Reading the symbolic order is subversive activity par excellence.

¹⁶ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics. Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.36.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p.39.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p.97.

This is the point where Angela Carter turns out to be a postmodern writer. Like all true followers of the poststructuralist attitude to language and mythology, initiated by Roland Barthes, she believes in the primacy of a sceptical and self-reflexive discourse. Carter is well aware that as a writer she operates within a language reality which appears to be autonomous from the world. Contrary to the realists' belief, instead of representing 'the real', language projects, creates and reinforces the world. Those who accept the notion of the autonomy of language – and after Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Saussure and Derrida it would be almost foolhardy not to – understand that there is no possibility to transcend it in order to reach the world. If the realists believed in the transparency of language and worshipped it as a window through which we can observe 'the real' – and if the modernists tended toward equating fiction with vision, treating language as "iconic plentitude"¹⁹ – the postmodernists dramatise the awareness of fiction as *merely language*. Following this distinction, Alan Thiher proposes his own notion of the primary function of contemporary fiction: "to make certain that no form of fiction becomes naturalized."²⁰ In actuality, this is what Angela Carter does – in her stories she deprives the symbolic and mythical of their privileged position. Besides, she does it through typically postmodern means – by playing language games with various discourses, confronting them with one another, mixing and decontextualising (or recontextualising) them. Nevertheless, her feminist attitudes, for the reasons sketched above, cannot find full realisation within postmodern discourse, which might be defined as a welter of all possible discourses. As I pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, Angela Carter combines feminist aims (she tries and alters our ways of thinking about the roles men and women play in society) with postmodern strategies of writing (her scrutiny of the symbolic order, playing with myths and literary genres, and deconstructing of popular fairy tales). Nevertheless, I would not go as far as to discern some kind of unresolved tension in Angela Carter's writing which harms the overall effect. On the contrary, Carter's fiction may serve as an excellent example of possible symbiosis between feminisms and postmodernism – the notion presented also by Linda Hutcheon in her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

Robert Rawdon Wilson acknowledges this point too. The title of his article "SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In/Out/In The Postmodern Nexus"²¹ in fact draws the reader's attention to the problematic status of Carter's fiction as postmodern texts. Nonetheless, in his analysis and subsequent interpretation of "The Lady of the House of Love" seen in the light of postmodernist aesthetics,

¹⁹ Allan Thiher, *Words in Reflection. Modern Language Theory and Postmodern Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.120.

²⁰ Ibidem, p.152.

²¹ Robert Rawdon Wilson, 'SLIP PAGE: Angela Carter, In/Out/In the Postmodern Nexus', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 20/ 4 (Oct. 1989)

he starts by presenting the story as an example of the successful implementation of postmodern poetics. Writing with the clear intention of demonstrating that more than aesthetic games lurk under the surface of Carter's tale, Wilson begins by underscoring its most striking postmodern features: the artfulness and intertextuality of the story, its "allusive interplay of other texts" and "literary resonances", and its "stylistically self-conscious words with literary associations". In consequence Wilson defines it as a "heavily overcoded ... piece of fiction 'about' fiction."²²

As a matter of fact, all the stories included in *The Bloody Chamber* could be characterised in this way – their sophisticated artistry and overabundance of decorative language are probably the most striking feature of Carter's prose during a first reading. Using a highly self-conscious language which borrows from and reworks multiple discourses, Carter's intertextuality is a form of play: she quotes, misquotes, hints at, alludes to and reworks both concrete texts (e.g. well-known fairy tales) and the styles of certain writers or genres in general. For a full appreciation of "The Lady of the House of Love", as Wilson notes, one should best recall multiple stories of vampires, Romance writing in general and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" by Keats. Similarly, when reading "The Bloody Chamber" we have to rely on our earlier reading – the original tale of Bluebeard and his wives, Romance writing yet again, Marquis de Sade and pornographic literature, Colette, Huysmans and – why not? – Poe's "Annabel Lee", since it all happens "in the kingdom by the sea":

He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if we were stripping the leaves off an artichoke – but do not imagine much finesse about it; this artichoke was no particular treat for the diner nor was he yet in any greedy haste. He approached his familiar treat with a weary appetite. And when nothing but my scarlet, 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. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring (*BC*, 15).

As Carter herself explained in a letter quoted by Elaine Jordan, in "The Bloody Chamber" she wanted "a lush fin-de-siecle decor ... and a style that utilizes the heightened diction of the novelette to half-seduce the reader into this wicked, glamorous, fatal world."²³ It is worth underlining the writer's con-

²² Ibidem, pp.105-107.

²³ Elaine Jordan, 'The Dangerous Edge', in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 1994), p.197

sciousness of her artistic purpose, but at the same time it is necessary to ask through what means she manages to create the atmosphere that she needs. In this respect, the fragment quoted above seems to serve as a good example.

The world presented in “The Bloody Chamber” mirrors fin-de-siecle art, not any social reality of that period. The decor comes from Carter’s experience and knowledge as an art connoisseur, thus filtrated through the prism of art. In *La Bas* Huysmans attempted to eliminate nature in favour of artificiality; here, the wedding night of a seventeen-year-old girl with her well-experienced husband (Colette’s Claudine comes to mind immediately) freezes into “a ritual from the brothel” (BC, 15) from a Rops’ etching. The artificiality of the image is dramatised by hints of de Sade (“she a lamb chop”, “my purchaser unwrapped his bargain”) which introduces history into the story – the history of the exploitation of women.

Carter makes the reader realise that in fact language (i.e. different discourses) shapes our understanding of what is real. Paradoxically, we gain access to the reality of the exploitation of women through Carter’s play with different symbols of culture. Though she understands intertextuality as a form of play, she limits its boundaries by crediting it with a specific role – the construction of interpretation. In Carter’s case, the play does not serve only the purpose of keeping the narrative ball rolling, but at its core remains something that Hutcheon calls “serious play”, “one that deconstructs and decenters patriarchal discourses.”²⁴

The stuffy atmosphere of decadence finds its apogee in the description of the Marquis’ secret room, the bloody chamber where the corpses of his mutilated wives remain hidden – the protagonist’s careful description of the objects there barely serves the demands of verisimilitude and, rather, asks the question whether it is possible to describe such a chamber of horrors in the first place. Carter is perfectly aware that anything she does has to send readers to their earlier reading, and that there is no escape from convention. As a result, she creates a marvellously luscious description of “that dreadful place” (BC, 28), which seduces us with its artistic finesse, overabundance, overcoding with semiotic reverberations, and phonetic elegance:

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 ...

[A]t the centre of the room lay a catafalque, a doomed, ominous bier of renaissance workmanship, surrounded by long white candles and, at its foot, an armful of the same lilies with which he had filled my bedroom, stowed in a four-foot-high jar glazed with a sombre Chinese red ...

²⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge* (London & New York:Routledge, 1994), p.32.

The opera singer lay, quite naked, under a thin sheet of very rare and precious linen, such as the princes of Italy used to shroud those whom they had poisoned ... he had embalmed her. On her throat I could see the blue imprint of his strangler's fingers. The cool, sad flame of the candles flickered on her white, closed eyelids. The worst thing was, the dead lips smiled.

Beyond the catafalque, in the middle of the shadows, a white, nacreous glimmer; as my eyes accustomed themselves to the gathering darkness, I at last – oh, horrors! – made out a skull ... this skull was strung up by a system of unseen cords, so that it appeared to hang, disembodied, in the still, heavy air, and it had been crowned with a wreath of white roses, and a veil of lace, the final image of the bride. (*BC*, 28-29)

Once again, the readers' role is to recognise the place as an emanation of a number of other places like those they have encountered in the books they have read – in this case, cheap horror fiction that produces kitsch through the means of high style.

In consequence the text becomes a sum total of all the earlier texts it utilises thematically and stylistically. Carter, typically for a postmodern writer, requires her readers to read through the lenses of other texts, just as she writes through various discourses. Such an attitude to a narrative text is a consequence of her recognition of language as fallen, insufficient, self-referential: only capable of articulating the world as cliché, platitude, banality. Most postmodern writers accept the fact that the language they use, instead of reflecting the real, generates an alternative, autonomous language reality which Jean Baudrillard calls “a hyperreal”, jampacked with displacements of ‘reality’²⁵. When we re-read Carter's description of the torture chamber, can we find any depth beyond the flat surface of her linguistic web? Indeed, the place appears to be a “museum of ... perversity”, where all “monstrous items” are “installed ... only for contemplation” (*BC*, 28). It is only this set of purposefully interwoven images and coded words that forces the reader to believe what the ‘real’ bloody chamber should look like.

The fragments quoted above are quite representative of what Carter does in the other stories coming within the scope of this work. Each description, for instance, of a house or castle (in “The Lady of the House of Love”, “The Bloody Chamber”, “Reflections”, the mansion and the castle in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Tristessa's house of glass in *The Passion of New Eve*, or even the derelict house in *Heroes and Villains*), strikes us with a lexical plethora of words overcoded with multifold cultural reverberations, as if language has slipped out of control and attempted to exhaust all symbolic meanings of the image. The same happens with characters – for this reason I have decided to label them as *archetypomimetic* since they seem to be only

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’, in Mark Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity Press-Basil Blackwell, 1988).

actualisations of all the possible meanings generated in the course of cultural history. The point is, however, that Carter is well-aware of what she is doing and invokes all those cultural echoes deliberately, to demonstrate the arbitrariness of meaning of character or symbolic space. The physical density of lexis – long sentences, chains of nouns accompanied by carefully selected adjectives – is reinforced by the fact that many words Carter uses are statistically rare, formal, archaic or borrowed from other languages. In consequence, the web of language refuses to be transparent or translucent, but manifests itself as opaque, impenetrable, even distorting.

A postmodern text uses intertextuality as a form of play not, as it used to be in the past, to pay homage or borrow some authority from well-recognised predecessors. Nowadays many writers use borrowings as part of their material, a fact which seemingly verges on linguistic decadence and gives much postmodern fiction its self-parodying quality. Carter, however, whose stories share this quality with other postmodern texts, employs this strategy not as a result of the exhaustion of narrative modes in general, but because she, being a feminist, perceives the fallen language as phallogocentric. If intertextual dialogism is a constant of all avant-garde (and its heir, postmodernism), Carter employs it for feminist purposes – to rework tyrannical discourses. She makes parody an act of emancipation – the core of her strategy of “answering back”.

When Linda Hutcheon discusses in her book entitled *A Theory of Parody* the case of John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* as an example of postmodern parody, she ponders whether artistic virtuosity is the only function of such parody. Her answer – that this type of parody has an ideological function (since it “directs the reader to the moral and social concerns of the novel”²⁶) – leads her to the more general conclusion that we can observe the “didacticism of much contemporary metafiction”²⁷, an observation relevant to Angela Carter’s fiction. Hutcheon mentions yet another important feature that differentiates Carter and Fowles from their modernist predecessors. She describes postmodernist modes as “more eclectic, egalitarian, and accessible” and their receiver as “a guided reader”²⁸ whose competence is doubted by the artist. Thus, the rules of the game are revealed very clearly – Angela Carter hardly leaves anything for the reader to search for, herself decoding and interpreting the meaning of the text.

Such texts, whose meaning depends on the reader’s guided decoding of allusions to other texts (reading the *right* discourses into the text), perforce become self-parodies. When a text self-consciously recognises itself as a language product both locked within and suspicious of the language, to use Saussure’s

²⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), p.91.

²⁷ Ibidem, p.91.

²⁸ Ibidem

contemptible formula, “a sclerotic collection of fixed syntagms”²⁹, then the text has no choice but to immerse itself in self-referentiality and undertake parodic language games. There is a certain promise in employing parody for such purposes – if it cannot completely destroy the language from within, it can “at least make it speak against itself.”³⁰ The former would equal the suicide of the text (and arguably Beckett’s novels are quite close to this state of ultimate exhaustion); the latter would generate a sort of a schizo-text. Is either appropriate in the case of narratives with feminist aims?

Perhaps it would be wiser to speak not of the self-parodying quality of the feminist text, but of its ironic edge, especially because of irony’s community-establishing nature. Linda Hutcheon in her book entitled *Irony’s Edge* even maintains that “the community enables irony to happen”³¹ which, as many other critics agree, is a result of the fact that irony works in an intersubjective way, giving rise to, to quote Wayne C.Booth’s term, “amiable communities” cemented by the pleasure of “finding and communing with kindred spirits”³², sometimes even generating closed groups which use irony as a sort of dialect among themselves. Moreover, ironic discourse, thanks to its doubleness, as Robert Scholes remarks – and this point seems to be especially relevant in discussion of Carter’s fiction – “can fight totalizing narratives.”³³ Terdiman goes even further, defining irony as “counter-discourse” which “has become a mainstay of oppositional theories that take on such hierarchies – be they based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality ...”³⁴

In this light it is difficult to exaggerate irony’s usefulness for contemporary feminist fiction. In fact Hutcheon discusses this phenomenon and brings in several points on irony’s potential alignment with feminism. Quoting several feminist critics, she mentions the feminist appraisal of “irony’s potential to destabilize” which in extreme cases makes it “a form of guerrilla warfare”³⁵, though generally “spring[ing] from a recognition of the socially constructed self as arbitrary and ... demand[ing] revision of values and conventions.”³⁶ As examples Hutcheon gives “feminist mythmaking ... the retelling of familiar folk narratives”³⁷ and mentions Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, Suniti Nma-

²⁹ Thiher, op.cit, p.148.

³⁰ Ibidem, p.145.

³¹ Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge*, op.cit., p.89.

³² Wayne Booth, *Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p.28.

³³ Robert Scholes, ‘Toward a Semiotics in Literature’, *Critical Enquiry* 4/1 (1982), p.117.

³⁴ Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter Discourse* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.12.

³⁵ Hutcheon, op.cit., p.32.

³⁶ Nancy Walker, *Feminist Alternatives*, (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p.4.

³⁷ Ibidem, p.32.

joshi's *Feminist Fables*, Margaret Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* and Laurie Anderson's *United States*.

Basically, feminist discourse makes use of two specific features of irony that make it an effective weapon when applied for political purposes. First, it is its "transideological nature ... that is exploited in order to recode into positive terms what patriarchal discourse reads as a negative."³⁸ Second, its "intimacy with the dominant discourses it contests" – which means using their own language when ironic meaning is conveyed – appears to be very clever since "it allows ironic discourse both to buy time (to be permitted and even listened to, even if not understood)"³⁹ and also "relativize [the dominant's] authority and stability."⁴⁰

Careful reading of Carter's fiction shows clearly that this is what she actually does: she recodes patriarchal negativity into the positive within feminist discourse, and remains in intimate relationship with the discourses she attempts to overthrow, both by assuming the form of universally accepted genres (fairy tale, Bildungsroman, Gothic story, memoir or novels of magical realism) and by apparently revitalising deeply European cultural archetypes, symbols, topoi or motifs.

Some critics have also observed that irony has become a cliché of contemporary culture. Perhaps this must be so, since irony's transideological nature functions as a sort of fuse – it does not allow an ironic discourse to become a dogma itself, paralleling the postmodern aversion to all totalising discourses. We also should not overlook the fact that irony points to the problematic nature of language – we could call it, drawing on Hutcheon's conclusions, *ambiguity with an edge* – since it results from the social and communicative exchange of language.

To make the most general claim, I would characterise Carter's stories as having an ironic disposition which springs from the difference between the surface and actual meanings of the stories. In the feminist versions of popular fairy tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber*, each story tells a tale of a young woman's gaining (usually sexual) experience. An innocent creature has to undergo a series of typically feminine experiences that lead to her maturing into a woman, which in traditional tales equals socialisation (read: accepting dependency on men). Carter's initially gullible heroines learn their lessons in a more clever way – they use their experience to become independent. However, this independence is also depicted with an ironic twist so that positive values cannot blunt the irony's edge with too much optimistic didacticism.

The little girl in "The Werewolf" who acts out Little Red Riding Hood's role goes to her sick grandmother only to discover that granny is a werewolf,

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Ibidem, p.30.

⁴⁰ Terdiman, op.cit., p.15.

and to call the mob who stone her to death. The last sentence of that story plays ironically with the sacramental ending “and they lived happily ever after”, changing it into: “Now the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered” (BC, 110). The crisp tone of this brief statement augments its moral ambiguity – this IS a happy ending (independence plus prosperity) – but it also suggests the beginning of the young girl’s new life with no ancestors teaching her what role she must play in society. In the first half of the story, Carter sketches the setting for the plot but her description of the hard living conditions of the woodsmen living in that northern country is pieced together from clichés and superstitions borrowed from folklore, literature and cinema:

Wreaths of garlic on the doors keep out the vampires. A blue-eyed child born feet first on the night of St John’s Eve will have second sight. When they discover a witch – some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbours’ do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death (BC, 108).

This fragment, like many more both in this and in other collections, is pure essence. All the obligatory elements are present here – garlic over the doors, second sight, a black cat, a witch with a supernumerary nipple. Carter erects a stage set that draws upon the reader’s recognition of the elements of every werewolf story – she lays bare all the tricks of her trade, demonstrating that the power to manipulate imagination lies in cleverly combining ready-made material. Carter deconstructs the very discourse itself: what Bettelheim presents as a potent tool in the psychological development of children, Carter demystifies as a language construct. Of course, there would be no point in reading Carter’s tales to children: the stories are directed at adult readers and make them realise that the fairy tales we grow up on are in one aspect language games played within the patriarchal discourse.

The first half of “The Werewolf” is told in the *praesens historicum* tense which underlines the tale’s constant time condition. Then, in the second half, a flesh-and-blood girl goes through the trials and tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood, but to the reader’s surprise she shows much independence. This half is told in the past tense to mark the point where Carter’s narrative breaks away from the petrified original. However, the unexpected role reversals spring from the fact that the girl has got her father’s knife – a symbol of patriarchal power – and is not afraid to use it. In the original story Riding Hood becomes the wolf’s victim because she minds her manners and does not know anything about wolves. In Carter’s version, “when she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on the beast” (BC, 109). She is a child that has never heard of fairy tales.

All the stories in the collection are clearly intentionally ironic. In the title tale, when her mother kills the Marquis, the narrator says:

We lead a quiet life ... I inherited, of course, enormous wealth but we have given most of it away to various charities. The castle is now a school for the blind (BC, 40)

“Mr and Mrs Lyon walk in the garden” (BC, 51), the brave girl in “The Company of Wolves” “sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (BC, 118), the Tiger’s Bride becomes a tigress herself and Puss-in-Boots, after giving good service to his master, settles down as a proud father. ‘All’s well that ends well’, ironises Carter, winking from the wings.

It seems clear that irony in Carter’s fiction remains interconnected with the problem of voice. It is not difficult to notice that, again typically of post-modern trends, her narratives represent examples of obsessive telling at the expense of showing. Although Carter also uses other modes of narration, they are marginal in the works discussed here and seem to be less useful for her purposes, with the exception of the third-person narrative passages in *The Nights at the Circus* that present Jack Walser’s point of view. Walser is a journalist who tries to solve the mystery of Fevvers’s wings and has *no story of his own to tell* – his labyrinthine journey depends entirely on Fevvers’s peregrinations. Carter does not grant Walser the fullness of voice, but instead uses the mode of the indirect interior monologue, in this way making a hierarchical distinction between him and Fevvers. It is significant that, as a result, woman’s experience turns out to be superior to man’s – it is *her story*, a subtle reversal of the rules of traditional Bildungsroman novel *Nights at the Circus* is modelled on. Thus, telling proves to be not only the most predominant narrative mode in Carter’s fiction, but also the most appropriate for her feminist purposes.

Both *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* are first-person narratives told by active participants in the events – Desiderio and Evelyn/Eve are protagonists who relate their adventures. Fevvers narrates a large part of *Nights at the Circus* in a voice whose ironic retelling of her life story is one of the strengths of the novel. The tour-de-force of *The Bloody Chamber* collection, a subversive version of the Bluebeard story, is told by the protagonist herself. The Beauty in “The Tiger’s Bride” and Figaro in “Puss-in-Boots” also enjoy the freedom of spinning their own tales. Quite naturally, three quasi-autobiographic Japanese stories included in *Fireworks* remain within this mode. Besides, we should not overlook the experiencing ‘I’ of the sinister negative world in “Reflections”.

In all the stories mentioned above, the protagonist also plays the role of the narrator whose experience has become much wider since she/he underwent all her/his adventures. This later, more experienced point of view comes close to the ideology of the implied author of the story. But can it be called ‘classic’ when “the protagonist-as-narrator reports things from the perceptual point of

view of his younger self” while “his ideology on the other hand tends to be that of his older self”?⁴¹

While reading Carter’s fiction we quickly notice the disparity between the protagonist-as-narrator’s point of view and the verbal expression of it. Despite youth, lack of education or experience (but never intelligence), the protagonists manage to verbalise their circumstances surprisingly well: for example, when Evelyn/Eve speaks of his/her *labyrinthine* journey, when Fevvers comments on the symbolic meandering of her nickname, or when the narrator of “The Bloody Chamber” describes her new surroundings in the castle. Here Carter clearly draws on the type of first-person novel of the 18th century like Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, in which Moll as the narrator of her story is much more eloquent and incisive than the character Moll ever was, especially in her childhood.

The conclusion I have been driving towards is that Carter pours irony into the gap between what Chatman calls the “second order or heterodiegetic conceptualizing *about* the story” and its opposite, “the first-order conceptualizing of a character within the story.”⁴² When Carter’s characters/narrators look back on the events they want to tell, they not only move from the level of perception to conception, but their conception enables the implied author to reflect on the historical, cultural and symbolic aspects of the exploitation of women. Therefore, Carter’s fiction may be called ‘forked-tongue fiction’.

As we know very well, only the narrator is granted speech in the story, while the implied author has to remain silent, and Carter’s fiction does not break this rule. On the other hand, we should not overlook the fact that the feminist impact of her stories and novels springs from the presence of a consciousness which is much larger than the narrator’s; it modulates the meaning of the narrative through the hyper-conscious use of language as a code that reinforces the patriarchal order. None of the protagonists of the first-person narratives discussed above has enough awareness of the cultural role of language to implement it in such a self-parodying way. This functions as if the narrator and the implied author were telling the same story simultaneously, word by word, with the presence of the latter’s voice making up for the deficiencies in the former. I would compare it to the effect achieved by Laurie Anderson with the help of Vocoder (an electronic device she uses to lower her voice an octave) when she is telling her version of the Adam and Eve story in *Home of the Brave* – a video film of her performance.

Such tactics enable Carter – especially in the case of *The Bloody Chamber* stories – to mimic the fabricated voices proffered by the original fairy tales. After all, the ironic attitude to language, a willingness to play with overcoded

⁴¹ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.158.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p.155.

words, the pleasure found in an overabundance of **lexis and symbolic meaning** of images and characters, as I attempted to **prove above in the discussion** of “The Lady of the House of Love” and “Bloody Chamber” are **typical of all narrators** in Angela Carter’s stories – hence my **claim that the voice of the critical feminist mind is audible throughout her fiction**.

Nevertheless, there are a few cases whose **idiosyncrasy makes me point them out**. Firstly, the ‘I’ that speaks in *The Passion of New Eve*: **in the first six chapters of the novel, the narrator is Evelyn, hence the narrating voice belongs to him; however, after he is castrated in Mother’s laboratory and becomes the New Eve, a new speaking ‘I’ appears – until the end of the story the narrating voice belongs to Eve. This sexual transformation brings about the change of the narrator’s experience. New Eve confesses:**

I KNOW NOTHING. I am tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman’s shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman. Now I am a being as mythic and monstrous as Mother herself; but I cannot bring myself to think of that. Eve remains wilfully in the state of innocence that precedes the fall (*PNE*, 83).

The question then reads: **is the story told by one or two different narrators?**

The opening sentence of chapter seven (“I know nothing”) assures us that, indeed, they are two. Yet Eve loves Tristessa with the **same fervent love as Evelyn**. She is also recognised by Leilah – so maybe they are a sort of yin and yang of the same narrator?

The important fact is that Evelyn and Eve have, as narrators, access to totally different worlds; their experiences are **incompatible**. As a result their attitude toward the exploitation of women **changes radically** – Evelyn-the lady killer turns into one of the victims. Nevertheless, **the language of the narratives remains the same, simply because behind both narrators hides a larger principle – the voice of the implied author. Is it not one of the distinguishing features of postmodern literature to have become a much more intentionally ideological act than in earlier artistic modes?**

Another interesting aspect of voice in Angela Carter’s fiction comes into light from reading “Puss-in-Boots” and *Nights at the Circus*. **In these two narratives Carter celebrates the narrator’s voice as speech – open, exploding into bawdy humour, sometimes shimmering with lyricism. This amalgam of street language and poetry proves to be an efficient critical tool for patriarchal discourse. Both narrators implement a sort of language which does not comply with the norm by celebrating its own marginality in the official linguistic circuit. While in her other books Carter deconstructs the phallogocentric discourse, in these two cases she finds an alternative to it. Although in “Puss-in-Boots” Carter plays with the traditional motif of an intelligent and clever servant (Figaro), in her version Figaro is “a tom, sirs, a ginger tom and proud of it”**

(BC, 68) who spins his tale of some cunning tricks he performs in his master's service:

I swing succinctly up the facade, forepaws on a curly cherub's pate, hindpaws on a stucco wreath, bring them up to meet your forepaws while, first paw forward, hup! on to the stone nymph's tit; left paw down a bit, the satyr's bum should do the trick. Nothing to it, once you know how, rococo's no problem. Acrobatics? Born to them; Puss can perform back somersault whilst holding aloft a glass of vino in his right paw and *never spill a drop*.

But, to my shame, the famous death-defying triple somersault en plein air, that is, in middle air, that is unsupported and without a safety net, I, Puss, have never yet attempted though often I have dashingly brought off the double tour, to the applause of all (BC, 69)

The thing this wise creature certainly does NOT advocate is moderation, and the language he uses well testifies to it. Figaro's narrative remains unofficial and marginal among more refined, respected discourses and is used for demolishing the puritan treatment of the theme of sex and love. Not surprisingly, Margaret Atwood perceives the story as a counterdiscourse to de Sade's "tragic style."⁴³ This may well be true, but when she writes that it is "above all a hymn to here-and-now common sensual pleasure, to ordinary human love, to slap-and-tickle delight ... available to all, tabby cats as well as young lads and lasses"⁴⁴, she could as well be referring to the discourse, since this sort of language is supposed to reduce the distance between the narrator and the reader, to establish a common ground for experiencing the world. This kind of language represents the trespassing of the unwritten laws of patriarchal discourse, that is: who can speak about what and in what words. This results in accepting disorder rather than mastering it.

Fevvers also speaks 'illegal', self-celebratory, sensual, auto-ironic language, like in "Puss-in-Boots" rooted in Cockney, the language of a clever though underdog class. Again, the narrative celebrates the pleasure of speaking, an act of *telling* as opposed to writing which loses all idiosyncrasies of voice:

Hatched; by whom, I do not know. Who *laid* me is as much a mystery to me, sir, as the nature of my conception, my father and my mother both utterly unknown to me, and, some would say, unknown to nature, what's more. But hatch out I did, and put in that basket of broken shells and straw in Whitechapel at the door of a certain *house*, know what I mean? (NC, 21)

The point of view shifts from Fevvers to Walser all the time throughout the novel, but only Fevvers is granted the fullness of voice manifested in the 'I' as the locus of her speech.

⁴³ Margaret Atwood, 'Running with the Tigers', in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror*, op.cit., p.127.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p.126.

In *Nights at the Circus* Carter introduces the element of unofficial language, rooted in speaking as opposed to writing which has much more esteem in Western culture. It seems that between *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus* Carter moves from the position of critically decontextualizing patriarchal language into creating its counter-discourse, an alternative way of telling the story. In *Fevvers*, Carter equates the female voice with the voice of the lower classes who wittily speak their minds.

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate Angela Carter's relationship with postmodernism. Being a feminist writer, she thus occupies an antagonistic position towards the postmodern distrust in metanarratives (feminist ideology included). Since Carter, like all feminists, seems to subscribe to the recognition of history's telos in the independence and equality of women, her fiction remains philosophically conflicted with postmodern demands of disengagement from any ideology. On the other hand, the ironic tone of Carter's fiction protects it from falling into extreme staunch feminist positions and makes it a model 'little narrative' rather than the totalising post-Hegelian narrative that postmodernism has always been disgusted with.

Obviously, this is a result of Carter's mistrust of language as a medium for social communication, the feature her stories share with the whole postmodern trend. They also have in common the didactic strain and celebration of *telling* and *voice* as the modes most appropriate for the 'little narratives' to communicate with the reader. The result is an opening-up of various discourses and playing within them language games that often enable us to deconstruct, decentre and decontextualize other, more oppressive, modes. This self-consciousness of Carter's narratives complies with postmodern efforts to produce individual counter-discourses, competitive with the official ones, and irony turns out to be an indispensable tool for achieving this purpose.

Perhaps Carter's fiction, if one wanted to pigeonhole it, could be included in the kind of postmodernism labelled by Barth 'the literature of replenishment', into which he includes Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Two features of this replenishment are worth noting concerning Carter's narratives. First, its most important characteristic is its synthesis of traditional storytelling with discursive self-consciousness and high artistry. Second, it mixes spheres which traditionally have been separated as belonging to high brow and low cultures by integrating the fantastic into sophisticated writing.

Mixing freely the supposedly real with the fantastic is yet another source of Carter's irony. For instance, both *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus* in certain passages offer entirely realistic depictions of living conditions in South America and Russia at the turn of the century, only to introduce there Houyhnhnms and a winged aerialiste respectively. This strategy is most successfully implemented by Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (as a digression, we might see it as more than coincidence that Carter sets the plot of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor*

Hoffman in an unidentified South American country – at some moments it resembles Macondo). Parallels between Carter and Calvino also turn out to be striking, especially if we think about his interest in fairy tales (*The Italian Fairy Tales*) and myths – like Carter, Calvino seems to be fascinated with the myth of labyrinth (*Invisible Cities*). He also strongly believed in interconnection between reality and fantasy; Marina Warner begins her introduction to *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* by quoting Calvino's remarks on similarities between a writer and the Shaman, both of whom search for knowledge.⁴⁵

The above discussion of Carter's relationship with postmodernism has been cursory rather than exhaustive – its aim limited to underscoring the importance of recognising the formal complexity of her fiction. This will provide a necessary point of departure for our investigation of the symbols and archetypes Carter (mis)uses in her narratives – since I perceive them as entirely language constructs, inherited from past emblems whose impact on women's position in society proved to be negative. I call them *virtual* because their ontological status is maintained only by language; thus, they can well turn into something completely different – their own antithesis – since their meaning, as I intend to prove in the next chapters, is always only potential.

⁴⁵ Marina Warner, 'Introduction', in Angela Carter (ed.), *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (London: Virago, 1992), p.IX.

CHAPTER THREE

THE VIRTUALITY OF SPACE: THE MYTH OF THE LABYRINTH

The most conspicuous feature of the world presented in Angela Carter's novels and stories is the labyrinthine character of the setting in which her plots develop and in which her protagonists have to act. No matter if a hero or a heroine are forced to cover immense distances in their wanderings (as in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve*) or they are doomed to imprisonment in the confined space symbolizing their own nature (as is the case with most of the stories), we can easily detect a certain passivity in their relation to the setting in which they are supposed to act. The protagonists very rarely have precise itineraries of their journeys and thus, as they advance in their peregrinations, they rarely manage to domesticate their surroundings. The routes they take are from their point of view usually chosen accidentally and appear to be totally unplanned, fortuitous and unpredictable.

It seems that in Angela Carter's narratives space leads the characters by its own obscure logic. We can find the most extreme example of such a case in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* where Desiderio, having obtained from the Minister the order to find and annihilate the demonic Doctor Hoffmann, at the very beginning of his quest is forced to give up his initial plans and lets himself be directed by the seemingly haphazard sequence of events. However, these events combine to form his labyrinthine ordeal. Meandering in the maze of surreal settings composed of symbolic mirages and hallucinations, Desiderio has to reach the centre of the labyrinth – Doctor Hoffman's abode. Similarly Evelyn in *The Passion of New Eve*, wanting to break free from the claustrophobic atmosphere of decaying New York, runs away into the desert which does not masquerade, even for a single moment, as a real space, but appears to be entirely symbolic from the very beginning and leads him according to its own rules which are unknown to him.

The most essential feature of the motif of a journey in Angela Carter's fiction is its ambiguous nature which can be expressed by the metaphoric for-

mulation: “chasing after, fleeing from”. These flights – which at the same time always represent a protagonist's frantic chase after his or her own self – take place in symbolic landscapes where succeeding stages of the journey correspond to deeper and deeper chambers of the labyrinth. Such a chain of adventures forms the complete ritual of initiation, or *rites de passages*. It is within the labyrinth that a protagonist reaches maturity and acquires knowledge about himself and the ways of the world. Having once entered the labyrinth, we will never be the same again, since it is always associated with metamorphosis; a labyrinth is a space of transformation, and stands for the transformation itself. In the case of Angela Carter's novels such transformations are usually to a certain extent ironic or demystifying, a concept made clear in Carter's treatment of the parable of the cave in *The Passion of New Eve*.

Her subversive treatment of mythical form is founded on the fact that all the labyrinthine peregrinations eventually turn out to be seemingly futile. When her protagonists complete their meandering journeys, when they reach the last stage of their search, the centre of the maze, they suddenly realize that no ontological mysteries have been unveiled to them, that they have not penetrated any deeper layers of existence, that they have never touched the unnamable. Instead they have been exposed to the mythical foundations of cultural experience.

At the end of her journey, in a cave by the sea, Eve undergoes a mysterious ritual of another birth, after which she states ironically: “I know, now, that Mother is a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness” (*PNE*, p.184). With this sentence she stresses the metaphorical and in consequence linguistic character of the human interpretation of experience. Carter alludes here to the opposition between the figures of speech that were defined by Cicero as *in verbis sunt* (“founded on words”) and which thus belong to the sphere of rhetoric, and a concept formulated by Vico who treated these figures less as ornaments and embellishments, but more as a necessary and constitutional means of expression in the ‘original’ speech which had been poetic by nature. I will comment on the archetypal status of Mother in the chapter on the protagonists of Angela Carter's stories, hence it seems enough to note here that Carter consequently finds the source of myth in the mystifying nature of language, as do the representatives of the post-structural school who have also analyzed and explained the nature of myth. One of them, Eric Gould writes:

The potentiality of myth must lie in the potentiality of language ...
We cannot deny the unconscious, yet in literature we only know archetypes and myths as language events.¹

¹ Eric Gould, *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.30.

Gould also quotes an interesting observation made by Gerard Genette:

[T]he metaphorical language is 'real' language while the non-figurative is a 'virtual' language ... for myth does acquire a status not as ornament ... but ... as metaphor actively trying to give itself the status of metonymy – that is the status of being most accurate.²

If we follow this line of thinking, we must accept that the intention to accurately express the world by means of metaphor signifies in fact the agreement that our knowledge will always be partial, relative, and – what is most important – interpretable.

Angela Carter seems to have begun with the same assumptions as she clearly understands myth as a language reality. She constructs her presented worlds from elements which have been functioning in the cultural tradition as metaphors (for her 'interpretations') of human reality. Myths, which traditionally are the means of explaining the universal order of things, are for her nothing more than narratives that attempt to naturalize patriarchal order by presenting as natural both dependence of women on men and superiority of the latter.

As a result, she manages to assemble a world which, if we accept that there exists some sort of reality *in statu nascendi* (i.e. existing outside or irrespective of human cognition), could be defined as fictional reality of the second kind. The first kind of fictional reality would be myths, symbols and archetypes understood by Jung as "the not interpretable primordial images, which dominate consciousness and give birth to an art or culture which lives in their shadow."³ Thus, such a reality consists of entirely cultural substance with all its social, historical and philosophical conditions, but in certain formulations (e.g. in the psychology of depth) is presented as the revelatory source of human divine essence. Since Angela Carter deconstructs and then re-forges the mythical order in her fiction, I opt for labelling her presented worlds as *virtual realities* which do not attempt to reflect the so called 'objective reality' of the given historical moment (as for instance veristic methods do), but congeal into concrete shapes from the debris of cultural reality; shapes which remain potential, simulatory and ontologically unstable, analogous to the virtual reality created by computers. Such a provocative artificiality is especially conspicuous in two spheres of the presented world: in the construction of space and characters.

The settings in Angela Carter's fiction have very little to do with geographical or topographic locations, or with physical spaces in general although in some of her stories we can quite precisely define the place and the time of action – in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* it is certainly a country in Latin America, then Africa; in *The Passion of New Eve* it is the USA approaching the 21st century; in *The Nights at the Circus* London, Petersburg and Siberia at the end of the 19th century; in several clearly autobio-

² Quoted after Gould, op.cit., p.55.

³ Quoted after Gould, op.cit., p.15.

graphical stories from *Fireworks* the narrator is an English woman in Japan of the early 1970s. Nevertheless, the settings instead of being realistic are in fact entirely imaginary or symbolic and it would be very peculiar to make an attempt to analyse their social or historical conditions.

Their construction is the result of Angela Carter's flirtation with literary tradition – stories based on the motif of travelling or search are usually set in exotic places, often unknown or mysterious. It makes it possible to augment the sense of protagonist's not-belonging and dramatises her/his search for knowledge, no matter whether this knowledge means some universal truth or self-discovery. Moreover, providing a reader with a handful of topographic information quickens the flow of the narrative when, for example, a protagonist covers such enormous distances with dizzying speed as in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, *The Passion of New Eve* or *Nights at the Circus*. In the case of *Heroes and Villains* and *The Bloody Chamber* even such a scarce amount of topographic data would seem utterly irrelevant. In the alternative versions of the traditional fairy tales we can find only basic information, not necessarily identical with the original; for instance, Bluebeard's castle is situated in Brittany, a dark forest is the setting of the stories based on *The Little Red Riding Hood* ("The Werewolf", "The Company of Wolves"), the Beauty comes with her gambling father to northern Italy from Russia ("The Tiger's Bride") or, in another version of this tale, lives in London ("The Courtship of Mr. Lyon"). Considering *Heroes and Villains* in which the plot is immersed in the reality of the world after a nuclear catastrophe, we must conclude that any kind of topographic precision would be senseless because of the dichotomic division of the presented world into the sphere of Professors and the sphere of Barbarians.

Thus, it is not topographic accuracy or providing readers with good bearings in the physicality of the presented space which constitutes the main force of Angela Carter's writing – on the contrary, all such information only makes for a better presentation of the topos of the journey and the gaining of experience, following (and to a certain extent parodying) the Enlightenment parabolic narratives. As Roz Kaveney puts it: "Novels modelled on *Candide* describe processes of education; this is what they have in common with picaresque novels, novels about rogues and why both tend towards that episodic structure."⁴ It seems impossible to overlook the essentially picaresque structure of Angela Carter's novels and to disregard the clear affiliations between her fiction and the novels like *Jacques Le Fataliste et Son Maitre*.

The spaces in Angela Carter's narratives are always symbolic. They are ready-made paraboles, the metaphors of space, the potent figures of human fate, and, last but not least, the products of culture, artifacts borrowed from the

⁴ Roz Kaveney, 'New New World Dreams: Angela Carter and Science Fiction', in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 1994), p.180.

property-room of literary motifs and symbols. In spite of the fact that they appear in Carter's novels and short stories as physical spaces, first of all they are figures of thought which belong to the sphere of the mind. It is difficult to say, however, whether we should treat them as purely psychological phantasmagoria of the human mind, although in a few cases they are no doubt presented as such.

I am prone to see them as the effect of a clash between demythologised space deprived of deeper meaning or superhuman *Geist* and the human mind naturally forced to search for meaning and perceive sense. Hence, the effect of this clash is space as a product of culture, i.e. not the one which 'exists objectively', but the one we think or speak about. This conclusion reminds one of an interesting remark made by Norman Holland, a psychoanalyst who expressed a similar idea:

The most sophisticated cultural experiences go on in a space which is neither inner psychic reality nor external reality They go on in a 'potential space' which both joins and separates the individual and the person or thing he thinks about.⁵

In Angela Carter's works this *potential* space is represented by symbolic spaces inherited from the treasury of European culture, the mythological spaces whose meaning is already present and does not need to be produced, and which as a result seem not to demand interpretation. Carter composes her worlds from the culturally current symbolic spaces and these well-trying 'back drops' which the 20th century inherited from myth, the wonderlands of medieval romance, folk tales and romantic ballads are the actual settings of her plots. Then, as we will see later, she deconstructs them and re-forges and re-interprets them in accordance with her subversive intentions.

As it was underlined at the beginning of this chapter, the most omnipresent topos of space in Angela Carter's fiction is the labyrinth – a desert, a cave, a forest, a city, a castle, a dark mansion or a curious room are all variations on the labyrinthine theme. This mythic figure involves a full set of associations and implications in the process of reading which to a certain extent mirrors the labyrinthine journey of the protagonist.

It seems that Carter selected this motif deliberately for two reasons. Firstly, the myth of the labyrinth is the most vital of all spacial myths. It has proved throughout history to be the most fecund for artistic imagination and appeared to express in the most impressive way the human condition in the universe. But secondly, what seems to be no less important is, as Głowiński puts it, that "it is the myth treating about the specifically designed and organised space This space equally *is* and *means*"⁶ and therefore cannot be perceived only as empirical. Additionally, the labyrinth is a space of estrangement and cannot be

⁵ Norman Holland, *Poems in Persons* (New York: Norton, 1973), p.151.

⁶ Michał Głowiński, 'Labirynt, przestrzeń obcości', in *Mity przebrane* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1994), p.131.

domesticated; it brings to mind an ominous and encircling confined space which is always closed, but not necessarily in the literal meaning of the word; I mean its negative symbolic sense as opposed to the symbolic openness of space (in the positive sense).⁷

Since the very beginning the myth of the labyrinth has been connected with wandering and its accompanying dangers. Głowiński, referring to a book by Guillemard,⁸ draws our attention to the fact that the protagonists who find themselves in a labyrinth have to carry on their journey not only for the sake of the development of the plot. The main reason why continuing forward seems so important is that the movement in the labyrinth is parallel to the movement of thoughts.

Furthermore, in this myth a protagonist has to undergo a long trial, and all intermissions on his dangerous journey compose a chain of obstacles he has to surmount. No matter how difficult or even deadly these trials are, it does not mean that the labyrinthine wanderer must be annihilated. A triumph over the labyrinth means gaining spiritual wealth, finding the lost self or some kind of liberation. It is quite important to differentiate between a prison-like maze of mythology whose aim is to confine and control the movement of its inhabitant (i.e. Minotaur) and a more benign version of the labyrinth that lets the traveller pass through and acquire some deeper understanding, secret knowledge or freedom. As we already know the myth of the labyrinth is normally associated with the myths of initiation. Angela Carter frequently builds up on both associations, although, as always, she would do it in quite perverse way.

There is also another feature of the labyrinth which made it an attractive topos for Angela Carter. We must remember that the labyrinth is a space designed and constructed by the human mind and in this sense it appears to be a human being's intimate space, because, as Czesław Miłosz puts it, the labyrinth represents "anti-Nature."⁹

In Carter's works we can notice a subtle shift: the spaces belonging to the order of Nature (e.g. a desert, a forest) are always appropriated by or transformed into the order of culture – as a matter of fact a desert is the result of climatic processes and is uninhabitable and therefore utterly strange to people. But as a symbolic space (the labyrinth) it may be transfigured into a space of a trial.

In his book *Circles Without Centre* Enrico Garzilli quotes a philosophical interpretation of the myth of the labyrinth presented by Paul G.Kutz who claims that "it is the myth of all discovery – the guiding image of the courage of reason

⁷ Ibidem, p.138.

⁸ Ibidem, p.134.

⁹ Czesław Miłosz, *Widzenia nad Zatoką San Francisco* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1989), p.162.

to overcome fear, ignorance and superstition.”¹⁰ The possibility of conquering the unknown, implicitly present in the myth, is close to Angela Carter's way of thinking; she had never given up – following the Enlightenment ideals – didacticism and moralizing in positive sense of these somehow embarrassing words. She appears to suppose that the readers, accompanying her protagonists in their labyrinthine meandering, will eventually reject the temptation to yield to the irrational nature of the myth and will find their way out of the maze on their own.

In this light, we can perfectly understand why Paulina Palmer subscribes to Carter's definition of *The Passion of New Eve* as “an anti-mythic novel” and quotes her subsequent remark that the novel is “a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity”¹¹, which shows to what extent Angela Carter perceives the function of myths as instrumental.

Hence, Evelyn's/Eve's labyrinthine peregrinations become a pilgrimage from male ignorance to female tribulations to female self-consciousness. During this journey Evelyn/Eve undergoes a positive transformation, develops self-consciousness and breaks free from the metaphoric superego which a myth actually is. Discovery of the nature of women's experience turns into Evelyn's self-discovery and enables him the ultimate release from the maze. Besides, when Eve gives away to Mother the pendant with an ingot of alchemical gold (which means the release from the past), she is allowed, like Aeneas, to try to cross the Styx. Taking all these facts into consideration, we can assume that Carter maintains the traditional image of the labyrinth as such a kind of the human space that leads to self-knowledge.

Angela Carter had never attempted, as Andree Gide for instance, to write her own version of the myth of the labyrinth. Her fiction neither bears features of the maze obsession, as in the case of Borges (consider his stories like “The Immortal”, “The Library of Babel”, “The Circular Ruin” and many others), nor treats the myth only as a point of reference to the structure of her novels (see Garzilli's analyses of Beckett, Faulkner, Joyce and Lawrence).¹² Nevertheless, a careful reader can easily detect both in Carter's novels and stories the topos of the labyrinth in the shapes it took in literary tradition of the past and in modern times: a desert, a forest, a cave, a city, a castle or a dark mansion and a curious room. But Carter is interested in the myth of the labyrinth only as far as it lends itself to deconstruction and re-interpretation, in other words, as far as it reveals its cultural, and in consequence arbitrary, character.

¹⁰ Enrico Garzilli, *Circles without Center* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1972), pp.91-92.

¹¹ Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.17.

¹² Garzilli, op.cit.

It is not difficult to notice that such settings are traditionally symbolic and that they have always fascinated artists, including writers. When used in works of art these settings introduce associations or interrelations with either concrete works or poetics of a genre (e.g. the Gothic novel which is a striking influence), or even with a trend in a certain period in history of art; the Baroque is often referred to as “the labyrinthine epoch”,¹³ and the liaisons between Angela Carter's imagery and the aesthetics of the Baroque are indubitable, though neglected.

After these introductory considerations, it is time we advanced towards more detailed analysis of the settings of Angela Carter's works, with particular stress on their labyrinthine character.

3.1. THE DESERT

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, there to find, chimera of chimeras, there, in the ocean of sand, among the bleached rocks, of the untenanted part of the world. I thought I might find that most elusive of all chimeras, myself.

And so, in the end I did, although this self was a perfect stranger to me. (*PNE*, 38)

Evelyn says these words to himself on leaving New York, the city of decay, violence and rape. The desert, even in this initial fragment, reveals its symbolic character. It is described as “the waste heart of that vast country”, the metaphor of emptiness, the sphere of memory (hence “remind”). It appears to be enigmatic and ambiguous (“the arid zone”, “the ocean of sand”), it constitutes a territory of exile and escape, at the same time providing the opportunity for contemplation and searching for oneself (“the most elusive of chimeras”). Evelyn takes shelter in the desert, escaping from himself and the madness of the corrupted world, and hopes to find there “pure air and cleanliness”, “the primordial light” which “would purify” (*PNE*, 38) him. The desert means for him both threat and hope, refusal and promise of purification.

Evelyn takes refuge in the desert in the act of despair, as a result of fit of madness and bewilderment, fleeing from his guilty conscience (this is why he needs purification). Like Jesus in the New Testament, he goes to the desert to

¹³ Paolo Santarcangeli, *Księga labiryntu*, trans. Ignacy Bukowski (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1982), pp.40-41.

confront his unspecified visions, to overcome his temptations and weakness, to struggle with the devil in himself and eventually to escape from madness.

On the one hand, the desert is the land of miracles as in the case of the Jews who entered the Sinai in their exodus from Egypt. They entered the land where life was insupportable, where they should have died, but the divine intervention kept them alive. It is quite significant that the divine revelation was not given in the land of Israel, but in the desert, in a land belonging to no one. On the other hand, the desert is associated with mirages, hallucinations and insanity, threatening one's normal thinking. Moreover, we should not forget the other features of the desert as the land of the devil. In White Sands and Alamogordo in New Mexico the most intense and sophisticated weapons have been tested, hidden away from the eyes of the rest of the world. These infernal machines once launched would inevitably lead to destruction of our planet. Such images seem to be ingrained in people's thinking when the idea of the desert comes to mind.

The desert lures Evelyn with the promise of purification and regaining psychic balance. At the same time it keeps in store for him many surprises, most of which belong to the most extreme kind of human experience. The desert in Carter's novel is constructed like an intelligent organism. Mother – the impostor of 'the primordial Mother' – being the source of this intelligence, takes Evelyn to the desert's 'dehydrated womb', exercising total control over this ignorant traveller who concludes post factum that:

[O]ur destinations choose us, choose us before we are born. And exercise a magnetic attraction upon us, drawing us inexorably towards the source we have forgotten ... Descend lower; while the world, in time, goes forward and so presents us with the illusion of motion, though all our lives we move through the curvilinear galleries of the brain towards the core of the labyrinth within us. (*PNE*, 39)

Thus, Evelyn's journey takes place not only in the empirical space of the real desert. It turns out that much more important is penetration of his self, finding the Minotaur of his own ego and confronting not necessarily the monster, but something he does not know about himself and hence fears it. Evelyn's stubborn striving deep into the unconscious ("descend lower") to the very centre of the maze ("the core of the labyrinth within us") takes place in the symbolic space. Therefore, the language Angela Carter uses to create the image of the desert is strongly metaphoric, since its essence cannot be conveyed in the terms of verisimilitude.

On the other hand, the desert represents the sphere of death contrasted with the sphere of life, the territory of alienation and ultimate trials; this is why Evelyn calls it "the abode of enforced sterility, the dehydrated sea of infertility, the post-menopausal part of the earth" (*PNE*, 40), "the insane landscape of ... erratic structures", "this ancient and terrible place", "the architectless town" under "unfamiliar stars" (*PNE*, 42-43).

All these metaphoric attempts to depict accurately the nature of the desert reinforce the feelings of estrangement this paradoxical space evokes. In consequence, the desert appears to be the gate to hell, though it lacks the Danteian warning "Lasciate ogni speranza".

I am hopelessly lost in the middle of the desert, without map or guide or compass. The landscape unfurls around me like an old fan that has lost all its painted silk and left only the bare, yellowed sticks of antique ivory in a world in which, since I am alive, I have no business. The earth has been scalped, flayed; it is peopled only with echoes. (*PNE*, 41)

In the whole novel there are only a few passages in which Angela Carter made use of the *praesens historicum* tense. It is most conspicuous in chapter four, a very short and condensed introduction to the adventures in the desert, and in chapter eleven, in the fragment when Eve moves through the system of the caves. In both cases Carter describes a critical moment, a rite of passage; firstly, into death (the desert), then towards life (the cave). We could notice it in the fragment quoted above, but there is even more straightforward signal of dying in the same paragraph: "the air dries out my lungs. I gasp. There is no one, no one" (*PNE*, 41). The last sentence, with rhythmically repeated "no-one" signifies both the beginning of his hallucinations and the commencement of his journey in search for the self. In consequence, we cannot be sure whether all succeeding events do not happen only in the sphere of Evelyn's hallucinations.

Besides, we should note that the desert, whose appearance and atmosphere resemble a surrealistic painting, represents also Evelyn's interior landscape, the fact he is well aware of himself, since he states: "I have found the landscape that matches the landscape of my heart" (*PNE*, 41).

Thus, nothing in this picture of the desert seems to be real, everything comprises a multi-level metaphor of Evelyn's predicament; not only does it describe the circumstances in which he has found himself, but also anticipates the further events. The symbolic character of the desert is additionally augmented by underlining the antiquity of the place. But we must remember that on the level of interpretation it turns out to be symbolism a *rebours*, because the whole Evelyn's/Eve's journey parodies the myth of creation and the mechanisms of Bildungsroman.

Entering the desert represents passing from the outside to the inside, breaking into the magic circle, entering the maze – the closed space. One of the most noticeable features of the desert in *The Passion of New Eve* is the paradoxical contrast between its vastness and atmosphere of confinement and claustrophobia it generates.

Following these observations, we can treat the desert in Angela Carter's novel as the labyrinthine space which conceals many dangers and surprises, and forces the protagonist to undergo a series of trials and tribulations. Evelyn's/Eve's experience accumulates as he/she passes subsequent stages of the journey – Beulah (the underground fortress of Mother), the harem of tyrant

Zero, the night raid on Tristessa's house of glass, encounter with the Children's Crusade and finally penetration of the Californian cave by the sea. In this subchapter we will look closer at Beulah which represents the negative of the Cave. The other episodes will be referred to in the succeeding parts of this chapter.

The desert is by its nature a waste land, the negation of life, the un-earthly countryside and in consequence symbolizes infertility in the biological sense: nothing grows there and there are no animals. The only animal Evelyn/Eve encounters in his/her travels is a dying albatross, yet another signal of obliteration of the division into hallucinations and reality. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the killing of the albatross brings a curse on the crew of the ship. In *Passion of New Eve* the albatross is killed by a feminist guerrilla and this killing is a harbinger of catastrophe – in the end Beulah turns into ruin. But what is an albatross doing in the middle of the desert? The answer seems quite simple: it is Carter's cynical utilisation of the symbol; she provocatively addresses it to erudites who already know its meaning and who know the anecdote how Coleridge and Wordsworth were trying to think of a crime that could have brought the curse on the sailors – this is how profound symbols are born!

On the other hand, the desert in *The Passion of New Eve* appears to be the space of an intellectual trial which requires seclusion or even a certain degree of alienation. Similarly to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* where the idea of infusing life into dead matter is born in the university (the centre of civilization), but the act of creation and further events happen in almost total isolation, in *The Passion of New Eve* Beulah becomes an incubator for creating a perfect woman that in fact embodies the Platonic idea of androgyny. The desert represents the intellectual womb in which a nature-mocking birth of the New Eve becomes possible, the birth both forming an analogy to and standing as a parody of the creation of the New Man in *Frankenstein*. The site in which those insane experiments are conducted lies in perfect isolation from the world and embodies the space-negation of life.

At the same time Beulah symbolizes the victory over the mechanisms of the phallogocentric culture: when Evelyn at last arrives in Beulah he sees to his horror that "its emblem is a broken column" which "represented a stone cock with testicles, all complete, in a state of massive tumescence. But the cock was broken off clean in the middle" (*PNE*, 47). This is a proper symbol for the underground headquarters of the feminist guerillas waging a holy war against the phallogocentric world. Additionally, it draws attention to the intellectual character of the place in which "philosophy has dominion over the rocks" (*PNE*, 47). Beulah turns out to be a virtual space whose reality status depends on intellectual and magical concepts, similar to the concepts of alchemy:

Beulah is a profane place ... ts blueprint is a state of mind, has an unimpeachable quality of realism. But it is a triumph of science and hardly anything about it is natural, as if magic, there, masquerades as surgery in order to gain credence in a secular age (*PNE*, 48).

Thus Beulah does not exist in reality, but is the embodiment of mythicity, where Evelyn's memory plays the key role, because he states: "I am not sure I do not exaggerate its technological marvels ... or my shell-shocked memory has invented most of them, in order to soften the mythic vengeance on me there" (*PNE*, 49-50).

The artificiality of Beulah and its self-contradictory character may be also derived from the fact that this underground abode of the Earth Mothers is a form of expansion of its ruler: "Holy Mother whose fingers are scalpels excavated the concentric descending spheres of Beulah ... – a chtonic deity, a presence always present in the shaping structure of dream. She is a holy woman, it is a profane place" (*PNE*, 47).

Hidden deep under the sands of the desert, Beulah stands for the desert's centre – hence the permanent comparisons to a womb; Evelyn's transformation into Eve takes place there. The centre is always the destination of the labyrinthine journey. But Beulah turns out to be a false centre since the womb of the desert, despite its oxymoronic connotations, is nothing more but a marvel of technology that eventually fails to solve the paradox how the waste land can become the source of life. Apparently Beulah is a spacial metaphor of Mother and therefore must be identical with her grotesque appearance and her insane dreams of the alternative androgynic mythology. What is more, the inhumanity of Beulah and the instant repetition of recorded slogans (an effective way of indoctrination) echo Huxley's dystopian vision in *The Brave New World*. After all, Huxley himself, explaining that his book is not chiefly about "the advancement of science as such", writes that it is about "the advancement of science as it affects human individuals."¹⁴

In the end Beulah remains only a part of a bigger labyrinth and instead of promised freedom it intensifies the sense of imprisonment and claustrophobia. In consequence Evelyn, who has been transformed into Eve by now, still identifies with his male nature and decides to run away. Furthermore, Beulah represents in the novel the negative of the Cave and as we will see later in this chapter, the Cave plays an important part in Eve's metamorphosis.

Being a masterpiece of technology, Beulah paradoxically remains an unrealised myth which will never come true. It is a big ruse which in spite of its mechanical perfection cannot be more than imitation, mimicry, and in fact a parody of the primordial forces of nature. The room in which Evelyn comes over as Eve after the dreadful operation "was quite round, as if it had been blown out, like bubble gum, inflated under the earth, its walls were of tough, synthetic integument with an unnatural sheen upon it that troubled me to see, it was so slick, so lifeless. Everything in the room had a curiously artificial quality" (*PNE*, 49).

¹⁴ Aldous Huxley, Foreword to *Brave New World. Brave New World Revisited* (London: Chatto&Windus, 1987), p.8.

The room was “also covered with a shiny, plastic substance. It was very cool, yet I could not hear the hum of air-conditioning” (*PNE*, 50), and its insidious artificiality reminded Evelyn of “a science fiction chapel” which only augmented his feeling of estrangement that was accompanied by noticing “the inhuman silence of the inner earth”. Furthermore, Evelyn experiences a sudden fit of anguish as his total isolation and alienation dawns on him: “the cool, clean room with its hygienically enforced tranquillity invited me to panic because I'd grown used to disorder and feared order as much as it were inimical” (*PNE*, 51). The quality of the feeling is purely negative and Evelyn finds himself horror-struck; the place is pervaded by imminence of something unknown yet extremely feared. It seems to him a psychological torture chamber or a waiting room for sentenced to death since “the darkness and silence around me were as intense as a lapse of being” (*PNE*, 51).

At that critical moment when Evelyn finds himself helplessly awaiting an execution, the environment changes its character:

[T]he room had grown imperceptibly warmer ... the darkness changed its colour, a rosy light began to suffuse the room ... The temperature increased until it was at blood heat A woman's voice said: NOW YOU ARE AT THE PLACE OF BIRTH. A gong clanged a harp ... reverberated again and again NOW YOU ARE AT THE PLACE OF BIRTH ... very softly, a lulling chorus like the distant sound of the sea. I realised the warm, red place in which I lay was a simulacrum of the womb (*PNE*, 52).

In this perfect isolation, far away from the ‘real’ world, Evelyn becomes an object of a mad scientist’s experiment who offered him another birth. It is interesting to note that Evelyn is all the time well aware of his reactions and tries to use his common sense thinking to analyze his situation. Unlike for instance the characters of Gothic fiction Evelyn, when confronted with the incredible, tries to find a logical explanation of the strange phenomena:

The walls were sealed tight upon us and it was oppressively warm. In spite of the almost shocking cleanness, the steely walls, the artificial light, it seemed to me these walls must be sealed tight upon enormous secrets. I wondered whether or not I'd stumbled into some government establishment, a place where they trained agents ... had my synthetic broth been dosed with hallucinogens? Was I being subjected to some form of psychological testing? I tried to hold on to these threads of reason; yet however hard I struggled to reconcile this strangeness with those more familiar to me, the synthetic apparatus of mystery that dominated this place ... inexorably exerted upon me all the compulsion of authentic mystery. In spite of myself, in spite of the blatant spuriousity of my surroundings, they sucked me down, crudely seduced me into a form of belief (*PNE*, 57).

Perhaps this desert, since the nuclear tests they had performed here, somewhere in the vastness, spawned mutations of being – perpe-

trated hitherto unguessable modes of humanity, in which life parodied myth, or became it (*PNE*, 77).

His journey downwards towards his destiny takes an obtrusive shape of penetrating a labyrinth: "It was like a trip into the labyrinth of the inner ear"; "a tracing of the mazes of the brain itself"; "the deepest eye of this spiral"; and somewhat comical remark, concerning what is going to happen to him: "I am Ariadne in the maze" (*PNE*, 56-57). We can clearly see that Carter manages to build a precise simile in which the journey towards the centre of the labyrinth is depicted as the journey into the core of the brain which is of course the brain of the mad woman. At this point the simulacrum of the womb and the deranged brain become inseparable. The place of transgression must be one and the other at the same time. Thus, Carter seems to question or even ridicule the Jungian concept of the deepest springs of life, the primordial womb, the source of all creation and points out that it is only a masquerade behind which we can find some sort or another of cultural paradigm with its intention to pass itself off as the natural order. This is why Evelyn cannot express his horrible experience in other ways than by calling up the ready-made comparisons forming the cultural code. He says: "I had reached journey's end as a man. I knew, then, that I was among the Mothers; I experienced the pure terror of Faust" (*PNE*, 60).

Inability to formulate some kind of personal truth of the individual experience and constant dependence in these matters on cultural clichés makes Evelyn a pathetic figure who becomes gradually deprived of individuality. Even his castration, instead of being a personal tragedy, is carried out mainly in symbolic order in which "the phallocratic thrust" will be halted "so that the world could ripen in female space without the mortal interventions of male time" (*PNE*, 77).

As we have seen, Beulah is less a female guerilla headquarters hidden under the desert and more the symbolic womb of the symbolic desert. Its emblematic broken phallus seen by Evelyn on his arrival in the mysterious place foreshadows his fate. Later, when he realizes that the room in which he is locked imitates the womb, he understands that his worst unconscious fears are coming true. The overpowering feeling of confinement will never leave him: the symbolic imprisonment in the female space under the ground may be understood as a presage of what is going to happen later – the literal imprisonment in the female body, in the "fructifying female space" (*PNE*, 68) which Mother excavates inside him. Thus, we can agree that the desert is on the metaphorical level the mirror image of Evelyn's state of mind and a symbolic device that prepares the development of the plot. In its grotesque shape the desert stands for the subverted male fantasy in which the master of the harem turns into a terrified victim of a vengeful horde of cruel women. In this sense the setting does not reflect the reality, but represents a potentiality of mythical order driven to its grotesque extreme.

Creating such meticulous interplay between the particular plot and the mythic order, Carter reserves for herself the position of the mad scientist who concocts the impossible and lets it come true by means of fantasy. No critic would try to find hints of 'objective' reality in her settings, the desert among them. Their exclusive role is to deconstruct and reinterpret the cultural reality. They are constructed as potent metaphorical figures which paradoxically function as metonymy since they precisely correspond to the cultural reality. Such settings can be defined as virtual, not metaphorical, since they do not describe the reality in poetical terms but form its alternatives, simulate or generate new, potential realities.

As it has already been pointed out, the underground city of Beulah functions as a grotesque antithesis of the Cave, one of the most potent images associated with the female space. In the next part of this chapter we will concentrate on the role it plays in *The Passion of New Eve*.

3.2. THE CAVE

The cave also has mythological connotations, always evoking the topos of the labyrinthine journey. It can be connected with the wandering of a soul, symbolize the entrance to another world or return to life. The cave, as all potent symbols is multidimensional and presents many ambiguous and even contradictory meanings. It is often identified with a vestibule of hell – in German the words 'hell' ('Holle') and 'cave' ('Hohle') have mutual etymology – or the dwellings of spiteful spirits and wild animals.

For Plato the cave was the parable of inadequacy of human perception – his Cave-dweller was a prisoner who saw shadows instead of things, but, as Helen Diner pointed out, Plato's "earth gullet" at the end of *The Republic* constitutes the parable of reincarnation, so, in a sense, represents the place of birth.¹⁵ Freud thought of the cave as of the representation of a female space, a womb-like enclosure, being derived, as a symbol, from similarity to woman's cave-shaped anatomy. Hence Gilbert and Gubar may observe that a woman can become "a prisoner of her own nature."¹⁶ Finally, Simone de Beauvoir saw in the cave a potentially political metaphor of the social imprisonment of women.

On the other hand, the Cave is often perceived as a symbol of the womb, a safe place where one comes from and to which one is drawn by the half-

¹⁵ Helen Diner, *Mothers and Amazons* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), p.6..

¹⁶ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.94.

conscious yearning for annihilation (**Magna Mater cult**). It is also *yoni*, the female sexual organ, a shrine of pleasure and self-destruction.

Beulah, as we have already seen, represents the negative of the cave. Its ostentatious artificiality, sterility and pedantic order altogether form contradiction to the force of nature. As a labyrinth it corresponds to the insane mind of its creator (Mother) who also plays the part of Minotaur. But the intellectual provenance of the maze enables Eve to escape from it (“I knew the plan of the labyrinth now” (PNE, 81) and to leave for good the spurious womb of her artificial birth (“For I am not natural, you know – even though, if you cut me, I will bleed” (PNE, 50). Thus Eve sets off on her irreversible journey through the maze of new experience, the journey that leads her to another cave in which she must face the primordial forces and be born again.

The arrival to the cave by the sea means completion of Eve's journey as it means the stage of self-confrontation, reaching the centre of the labyrinth and full understanding. This is the place where “time is running back on itself” (PNE, 183), the secret and sacred place through which Eve is “inching” her way “towards the beginning and the end of time” (PNE, 185) in order to meet the true self which was lost at the moment of her making. Additionally, Eve looks for consolation and deeper understanding of the story she happens to be a part of.

The journey Eve undertakes through the system of the caves turns out to be a journey in time as Eve becomes the witness of the process of evolution. Her supposed pilgrimage to the mysterious shrine of the beginning of all creation bears resemblance to a scientific exploration of the anatomy of archetype.

Carter again refers to Mary Shelley, this time to the fictionalized introduction to *The Last Man*, in which Shelley tells a story how she, together with her male companion visited “the gloomy cavern of the Cumean Sibyl.” It happened quite by chance as the native guides could not find the way to the cave, but when left alone, Mary and her companion (Percy Shelley, no doubt) got lost and groping in the darkness finally came across the mysterious place. At first they did not even realize where they had arrived, but after a while her companion “exclaimed ‘This is the Sibyl's cave; these are sibylline leaves!’” Mary Shelley continues her account by the following statement:

On examination, we found that all the leaves, bark, and other substances were traced with written characters. What appeared to us more astonishing, was that these writings were expressed in various languages We could make out little by the dim light, but they seemed to contain prophecies, detailed relations of events but lately passed; names ... and often exclamations of exultation or woe ... were traced on their thin scant pages We made a hasty selection of such of the leaves, whose writing one, at least of us could understand, and then ... bade adieu to the dim hy-paethric cavern.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mary Shelley, ‘Author’s Introduction’ to *The Last Man* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985), pp.2-3.

Quoting fragments from Mary Shelley's introduction, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar derive several original and hence worth noting conclusions, out of which I would like to mention only two since I consider them relevant to the topos of the cave in *The Passion of New Eve*.

The first one is a seemingly obvious observation that "the woman may be the cave, but ... it is the man who knows the cave, who analyses its meaning."¹⁸ The other relates to the coded message:

The specifically sexual texture of these sibylline documents, these scattered leaves and leavings, adds to their profound importance for women. Working on leaves, bark and "white, filmy substance", the Sybill literally wrote, and wrote upon the Book of Nature. She had, in other words, a goddess's power of maternal creativity, the sexual/artistic strength that is the female equivalent of the male potential for literary paternity.¹⁹

On the one hand, such distinctions reinforce the old-fashioned, paternalistic dualism between man identified with mind, culture and science, and woman identified with body, nature and intuition. On the other hand, however, they – deliberately or not – underline the fact that everything which comprises some meaning demands interpretation. Furthermore, the Sibyl's message had been written in "various languages" upon "the Book of Nature"; hence her prophecies reveal themselves as a text and as such they cannot deny their own linguistic character.

Angela Carter expresses herself very clearly in this matter. She goes directly for the creative archetype. Jouve rightly points out that while Jung claims that everybody has to come to terms with the Mother in them, Carter opposes such a nebulous concept saying that "Mother is a figure of speech" (*PNE*, 184).²⁰

Some feminist theorists and critics also make the topos of the cave the central point of reference of their reflection on the female mythology. Helen Diner for instance tries to interpret the symbolism of the cave in positive, yet metaphysical terms, as she writes that "all knowledge of Fate comes from the female depths; none of the surface powers know it. Whoever wants to know about Fate must go down to the woman", meaning the mythical Gaea-Tellus, the Great Weaver who weaves "the world tapestry out of genesis and demise in her antechambers of the mysteries of transformation."²¹

In this light the journey to the female depths becomes a must for the female artist since it is undertaken not in order to face the demons of darkness (as in the case of the traditional male hero), but in order to find herself in the laby-

¹⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, op.cit., p.96.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p.97.

²⁰ Nicole Ward Jouve, 'Mother is a Figure of Speech', in Lorna Sage (ed.), op.cit., pp.150-152.

²¹ Diner, op.cit., pp.16-18.

rinthine caverns of the forgotten past. Adrienne Rich called it the journey into “the cratered night of female memory” whose aim is “to revitalize the darkness, to retrieve what has been lost, to regenerate, reconceive, and give birth.”²²

All the parts which constitute the meaning of this mythical descent are also present in Eve's wandering through “the living rock ... to rendezvous with my maker.” Eve's vain journey to the centre consists of three stages which together serve as a parody of mythical journeys to the Underworld.

When she folds herself “into the interstice of rock”, Eve experiences entirely unpleasant feelings of physical and psychical discomfort:

I went ... the freezing little stream, my skin scored and grazed by the cruel embrace of the rock that kneaded my tender nipples unmercifully and bruised and jarred my knees and elbows. My hair snared on the little outcroppings Every movement necessitated the most extreme exertion; I was soon drenched with sweat. The passage was choked, airless, dank, and a faint reek of rotten eggs hovered above the sulphurated streamlet (*PNE*, 179-180).

The most conspicuous feature of the mythic place is its obtrusive claustrophobic atmosphere which immediately results in “a lowering of the spirits” (*PNE*, 180). This, in turn, provokes the narrator's ironic comment whose bitter sobriety instantly destroys the romanticism of the journey: “Mother has inserted herself in the most hermetic of fall-out shelters. She clearly plotted to survive the holocaust” (*PNE*, 180).

The shrine quickly loses its mythical character as Eve's level-headed and deliberately incongruous observations systematically denounce the actual character of the mythical place, hidden behind the traditional make-up. The most appalling feature of the place is that it turns out to be absolutely empty, uninhabited cave: “however hard I push against the rock, I seem to get no closer to Mother” (*PNE*, 180).

Subsequently Carter makes Eve clutch at a straw – the metaphor of the Sibylline Cave as the Book of Nature, but this time also with no avail:

The rocks between which I am pressed as between the pages of a gigantic book seem to me to be composed of silence; I am pressed between the leaves of a book of silence. This book has been emphatically closed. (*PNE*, 180)

Carter points out that it is not the incomprehensible arcane language which makes the book inaccessible, but the fact that it “has been emphatically closed”, meaning dead, empty, meaningless. What Eve encounters further on her way is the logical consequence of the overpowering disillusion with the myth. After she leaves the interstice and enters a large cave, she can see “a naked bulb dangling from the high ceiling” and finds a clean towel “hung over the back of a chair standing beside the pool on a floor of clean, dry, packed sand”

²² Gilbert and Gubar, op.cit., p.99.

(*PNE*, 181). The masterly gravity of the following sentence introduces the atmosphere of boudoir triviality: “The chair was straight-backed and rush-seated, in the style of the godly and austere Shakers. So she brought her furniture with her, has she?” (*PNE*, 181).

Despite being disappointed with the inhospitality of nature and the worldly furnishing of the initial cave, Eve moves forward through the next corridor which happens to be “wider and lower”, so she has to “crawl against the gentle current of the stream” like in the foetal waters, fearing the danger of drowning: “What an assault course! Death by pressing, death by drowning!” (*PNE*, 181); this exclamation seems to be a subtle parody of T.S.Eliot, just to remind us that we are on the course of exploring a myth.

The humorous tone Eve uses once in a while is a part and parcel of Carter’s strategy in dealing with myths – for T.S.Eliot it would be suicidal, but not for Carter since she repetively pierces the myths with irony: in the case of Beulah by exposing the technological make-up of this pseudo-mythical space, and in this case by making a link between the cave as the symbol of the womb and a midwife’s room in a maternity clinic.

The second cave turned out to be smaller and “almost filled by water that was now at blood heat, emitting a faint steam and a scarcely tolerable stench of sulphur. And this cave was filled with a familiar, dim, red light for which I could perceive no source” (*PNE*, 181-182). Undoubtedly Eve entered a simulacrum of a womb. She found there three objects reminding her of her past: “a glossy publicity still of Tristessa at the height of her beauty”, a glass flask of a “strange, swan-necked shape” similar to that seen in the laboratory of Baroslav, the Czech alchemist, and a mystery object wrapped in paper which turned out to be a pendant, “the ingot of alchemical gold I’d given Leilah in the darkness and confusion of the city” (*PNE*, 182-183).

All the three objects form a symbolic chain of memorable and tormenting experience of lost love and friendship. They make Eve's ordeal psychologically meaningful, although, instead of giving consolation, they provoke a fit of blind anger, grief and sorrow. Thus, the second cavern uncovers its obscured air of revisited past, and although at the first glance we could think it was designed to play a cruel joke on Eve, it eventually offers a subversive reconciliation as the three objects demonstrate their magical qualities. When Eve tears into pieces Tristessa's signed photograph, she notices to her surprise “a red stain, blood ... on the cloth where the photograph had been.” This cheap, melodramatic trick seems to cool her down again. The flask, in turn, drives this process even further as it contains “a sweet, clean scent of pine”, the smell of the remotest past, which enables the reversal of time in which Eve is also involved. But again she does not encounter any god-like being; instead of some metaphysical manifestation of the primordial force, she notices the physical evidence of the early history of humanity, “rude shapes of bison and huge-helmed stag scrawled on

the walls in faded pigments which ... grew brighter, their outlines firmer” (*PNE*, 183).

The cave reveals itself as a perfect simulatory device which generates the virtual reality of the cradle of the human race and as such it fails, because eventually Eve travels back in time not into the mythical past, as it must have been plotted, but into the historical past, and she arrives not in “the cratered night of female memory” but in a Lascaux or a Combe d'Arc.

The pendant brings yet another attempt to enclose Eve within the mythical order of things, and when she slipped the necklace over her head she thought she “might need something with which to pay the fatal ferryman” (*PNE*, 183). This semi-ironic remark reminds the readers where they are – according to a Roman legend, the Cumean Sibyl showed Aeneas into the underground world of the dead.

The final passage Eve took when she resumed her journey was “wide enough ... to walk through, like a human being, not creep like a spider or splash like an amphibian” which means that she put on her human appearance back with jocular relief. But the eventual part of her ordeal becomes as incredible as it seems logically proper. The cavern undergoes a somewhat surrealistic metamorphosis and this time not only does it perfectly imitate the womb, but it possesses a blatant quality of surrealistic art.²³

This new passage ... grew warmer and warmer: the walls dripped with a moisture more viscid, more clinging than water My hand stretched before me was drenched ... with bloody dew.

The rock has softened and changed its substance; the textures under my enquiring fingers were soft and yielding Now the dew felt like slime; this slime coated me. The walls of this passage shuddered and sighed at first almost imperceptibly, so that I mistook it for my own breathing. But their pulsations exert greater and greater pressure on me, draw me inward.

Walls of meat and slimy velvet.

Inward.

A visceral yet perfectly rhythmic agitation ripples the walls, which ingest me. (*PNE*, 184)

The sensuous description of “the warm meat of the insides of the earth” (*PNE*, 184) provokingly exhibits the biological attributes of a womb – as a result the idea of the womb turns into a reproductive organ. But by reversing the process of giving birth, Carter achieves the surrealistic effect – she points at the explicit insatiability of the cave, which is depicted as a monstrous carnivorous organ (“the walls which ingest me”), the grotesque sexual desire machine. However, instead of feeling scared, Eve retains balance by observing that “Mother is a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness”

²³ See Krystyna Janicka, *Surrealizm* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1985), p.205.

(PNE, 184) and this is exactly why her body, as physically absent, cannot be accessible.

During the rest of her journey Eve marvels at the multiplicity of life as she becomes a witness of the birth of the American continent. The cave transforms into a hemispherical screen on which she can see how “rivers neatly roll up on themselves like spools of film and turn in on to their own sources. The ... drops of the Mississippi, the Ohio, the Hudson, tremble on a blade of grass” (PNE, 185). And when the reversal of time comes to the standstill, when everything returns back into the amniotic sea, the source of life, time starts anew and finally Eve joins in the process of evolution and is given birth again:

The walls of meat expelled me. Without a cry, I fell into a darkness like the antithesis of light, an immensity of darkness, the final cave through which now marched, animating the darkness, the parade of the great apes, which wound me back on the spool of time that now wound up. My shaggy breast, my great, carved brow with the germ of a brain behind it. I have forgotten how I picked up a stone and shattered a nut with it. The sound of the sea becomes omnipresent, the sea, which washes away all memory and retains it.

I have come home.

The destination of all journeys is their beginning.

I have not come home. (PNE, 186)

This fragment appears to be a confession of the ultimate futility of the mythical search, and the next paragraph concisely formulates the ironic coda to it:

Speleological apotheosis of Tiresias – Mother, having borne her, now abandons her daughter forever. (PNE, 186)

There is also a striking contrast between the claustrophobic confinement of the cave and the infinitude of the open space, between darkness of the last cavern and the light of the setting sun when Eve completes her labyrinthine journey to the Underworld. But despite her regained freedom, Eve still feels imprisoned, this time by the cave inside her, because she suspects she may have been made pregnant by Tristessa. In this light the ambiguity of the last sentence of the novel cannot be resolved since it is not clear if Eve means the place where she will be born again or the place where she will give birth, or both. Upon this basis, Roz Kaveney called *The Passion of New Eve* “a novel of open discourse”²⁴ since it does not offer any clear solutions.

Moreover, the commented above “Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth” (PNE, 191) yet again turns the mythical order upside down. On the one hand, it evokes the last line of Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (“Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead”) and sounds like its “weird echo”, as Jouve puts it.²⁵ On the other

²⁴ Kaveney, op.cit., p.183.

²⁵ Jouve, op.cit., p.159.

hand it interchanges male and female roles (since ocean is traditionally male) in order to question the myth on the linguistic ground.

To sum up these deliberations, it is worth underlining that the topos of the cave had been the central issue for the women of letters for long before Angela Carter. It had become the most accurate, though manifold parable of women's position in the world and turned out to be a fertile ground for generating interpretations. Northrop Frye claims that a revolutionary mother-goddess myth which is an anti-hierarchical myth of equality of all creatures has been since the Romantic period the principal myth of women's power and dignity.²⁶

Therefore it is not surprising that Angela Carter chose the cave as the destination of labyrinthine wanderings of her androgynous protagonist. But, since she liked indulging herself in subversive modes of thinking, she thoroughly refashioned the myth so that it could not work according to its programming. Her inventiveness reshaped it into a self-deconstructive mechanism which, by gradual self questioning, brought annihilation upon itself. And in this case Carter's method is very simple: she decided to ignore the mythical possibilities of the cave and explore its geological/biological dimensions instead. And, unlike the Great Patricide, she did not botch the job.

3.3. THE FOREST

Like the desert and the cave, the forest also belongs to the category of the labyrinthine spaces in Angela Carter's works.

Traditionally, the forest symbolizes the female principle and stands for darkness, the unconscious, mystery, isolation from the world and innocence. Like the cave, it is the first home of primeval people. It gives shelter to hermits and recluses who seek for an ideal place for ascetic refuge and meditation, but also lures lovers who want to meet in secret.

But in fact the nature of the forest is ambiguous. On the negative side, the forest represents the dwelling of outlaws and supernatural beings or evil powers like sorcerers, ghosts, demons, werewolves, gnoms, trolls, hobgoblins and other malicious spirits; it can be even presented as the domain of the devil himself.

It is enough to mention here the most popular and well-known examples from the European cultural circle, like the legend of Robin Hood, St. Hubert, Tristan and Isolde, Persifal, and such influential *oeuvres* as *The Divine Com-*

²⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, op.cit., p.99.

edy: *The Inferno*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and many works by Goethe, Schiller and a great number of other romantic poets.

Angela Carter uses the motif of the forest as the place for initiation ritual which consists of several stages – reaching the goal requires undergoing a severe test, shedding illusions and gaining maturity. As a digression, it seems worth noting that the way Carter shifts from the real to the mythical is reminiscent of the similar shifts in early medieval literature of northern Europe. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may serve as a good example: there is a sudden plunge from reality into the world of magic, from the frozen forest to the castle of the wizard.

Choosing the forest as a proper setting for a few of her stories, Angela Carter decided to build up on these associations and, as a result, to set her plots in the ostentatiously symbolic space. Furthermore, it should be noted that the forests she created belong to the second category – they are always dangerous areas where the protagonists lose their way and are confronted with wild or evil forces dwelling there. On entering the forest, the characters find themselves imprisoned inside the magic circle and do not know which way to take to get out of it. But they never despair, because despite the dreamlike, or even nightmarish, appearance and aura of the place, they are fascinated by it and cannot resist the need of exploring it deeper and deeper. It seems that some sort of truth they expect to find at the core of the forest is much more important for them than their own safety.

In Angela Carter's fiction, the forest seduces the traveller and invites them to explore the unknown, to look for the forbidden fruit, promising a reward. This reward is self-consciousness.

The explorations of the forest in Carter's fiction always have strongly sexual character. They are undertaken either on the verge of puberty (e.g. in stories like "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest", "Master", "The Company of Wolves") or at the moment of mid-life crisis ("The Erl-King", "Reflections"). Besides, similarly to the desert and the cave, the forest is pervaded by claustrophobic atmosphere and, like the former two spaces, forms a maze in which the protagonist has to undergo an ordeal. In all Angela Carter's stories set in the forest, the protagonists are menaced with death, and only by killing the oppressor they manage to save their life.

Thus, the forest represents the sexual battlefield where one of the antagonists is the victim and the other the executioner, "the devoured" and "the devourer". Needless to say, in Carter's stories it is a woman, traditionally perceived in our culture as a victim, who has to kill in order to break the spell. In Carter's stories the forest stands for the area where taboos are broken, the wilderness in which deadly confrontations take place. These confrontations happen of course in a symbolic order and to make it clear, Carter deliberately uses a shift from reality into mythicity.

The forest in which the narrator of "The Erl-King" takes a walk on a rainy autumn afternoon is initially described as a normal, although magnificent, forest "of late October when withered blackberries dangled like their own dour spooks on the discoloured brambles. There were crisp husks of beechmast and cast acorn cups underfoot in the russet slime of dead bracken where the rains of equinox had so soaked the earth that the cold oozed up ... lancinating cold of the approach of winter" (BC, 84)

As the description develops, the autumn forest becomes a gloomy and vicious place whose abundant life forms are presented at the stage of agony: "Now the stark elders have an anorexic look ... there is a haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being" (BC, 84).

The atmosphere of dying is enhanced by "a sickroom hush" and in the next paragraph penetrating the forest turns into the labyrinthine journey against the narrator's will as "the woods enclose ... the woods swallow you up. There is no way through the wood any more, this wood has reverted to its original privacy. Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out" (BC, 84). The forest unexpectedly turns out to be impenetrable space of mystery that jealously guards its secrets. The reader, together with the narrator, is drawn into a dangerous wandering, left at the mercy of the unknown, imprisoned in the alien landscapes pervaded by the sense of despair and terror: "The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt round for the way out" (BC, 85).

The forest in "The Erl-King" obviously represents the unconscious, but because of its connotations with Goethe's ballad and the tale about Little Red Riding Hood, it seems to be the *cultural* unconscious. The journey undertaken in the forest is not a real stroll, but an imaginary quest for self-identity. Hence, the dark area stands for the labyrinth whose penetration is the condition of maturity, which means the ability to see and judge critically.

The forest in "The Erl-King" has an obsessively labyrinthine character and generates an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia. The most representative and concise fragment evoking the sense of confinement appears together with the shift in narration from the third-person to the first, which forces the general to become personal:

The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood changed endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually receded before me. It is easy to lose yourself in these woods. ... I thought that nobody was in the wood but me. (BC, 85)

We can find a similar theme of the imaginary forest which stands for the labyrinth leading to self-discovery in several other stories, for example in three stories that appeared in *Fireworks*: "Reflections", "Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest" and "Master".

The male narrator of “Reflections” takes a walk in “the spring-enchanted wood” (*BC*, 81) and as a result of finding a sea shell hidden in the long grass, he is forced into the ultimate confrontation with the unconscious (symbolized here as the reversed world beyond the mirror). Thus, the dilapidating house belonging to the androgynic weaver represents the next stage of the labyrinth of which the forest is the first circle. It is worth noting here that “the whorls of the shell went the wrong way. The spirals reversed. It looked like the mirror image of a shell ...; in this world it could not exist outside a mirror” (*FW*, 83). Thus, it becomes clear that the shell depicts the pattern of the labyrinth and points at its centre – the mirror, which introduces the motif of self-discovery.

In “Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest” self-discovery equals initiation through incestuous love as two children of the botanist Dubois undertake a categorically forbidden exploration in search of a mythic tree at the very core of the forest. They want to reach the central part of the valley, “the navel of the forest” (*FW*, 53) and their intrepid journey leads to breaking a few taboos – the children decide, against the order of their community, to penetrate the valley, then they agree they should not tell anyone what they have seen there, and in consequence, as under the magic spell, fall in incestuous love.

Like in “The Erl-King”, reaching the centre of the labyrinth means trespassing cultural taboo, discovering the unknown and confrontation with it, which leads to self-discovery, but at the same time endangers the cultural order of the society. Hence, just before the children kiss, Madeline gives Emile a juicy apple of the mysterious tree, the gesture signifying the original sin.

In “Master”, however, self-discovery is reached through identification with the profound mythic sense of belonging to the traditional community. But this happens only because the girl from the jungle who has been purchased by the bloodthirsty sadistic hunter, gradually perceives herself as one of his animal victims. As she accompanies him in his mad hunt “always more deeply into the forest” (*FW*, 75), leaving their Ariadna thread – “a gross trail of carnage behind them” (*FW*, 77) – she begins to understand that she belongs to “the clan of jaguar” and turns into the beast of prey herself. In this story, the jungle phantoms of slaughtered beasts enable the heroine to break through the socially and racially imposed taboo of being a prey, as a woman, and as a black.

For the reasons mentioned at the beginning of this sub-chapter, Angela Carter uses the topos of the forest as a potent vehicle of her artistic vision (especially because of the sexual symbolism of the place) – penetrating to the very core of the forest leads to sexual awakening or maturity of her characters.

In the stories based on the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, the forest loses much of its labyrinthine character so conspicuous elsewhere in Angela Carter's works, but still keeps its malign enchantment and the mysterious aura of a wicked place. The girl sent by her mother to take food and wine to her granny

is warned not to stray from the path, as if if she did so, the forest would become a maze:

You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are. Step between the portals of the great pines where the shaggy branches tangle about you, trapping the unwary traveller in nets as if the vegetation itself were in a plot with the wolves who live there, as though the wicked trees go fishing on behalf of their friends ... (BC, 111)

Again, as in the case of the other so far mentioned stories, Carter underscores the motif of puberty and innocence for which the walk through the winter forest is a challenge. Furthermore, the forest is again presented as a closed system which “closed upon her like a pair of jaws” (BC, 114).

Thus, we have seen clearly that Carter's image of the forest is founded on the motif of imprisonment and claustrophobia. But this pervading sense of confinement emerges not only from the fact that the woods “enclose”, “swallow you up” or “trap you” in symbolic order. Carter creates the haunting aura of the woods on the level of description where both images and the language reach a high extent of density. The ingenuous, metaphoric, “jeweled” language²⁷ she uses in descriptive sections adds up to the maze-like complexity of her stories.

3.4. CASTLES, MANSIONS AND HOUSES

Angela Carter's stories and novels are replete with castles, mansions and houses which belong to the primary motifs in the sphere of spatial symbolism. These settings not only create a specific aura pervaded with uneasy tensions, but also place Carter's works in the context of Gothic fiction. Their function is to provide a gloomy atmosphere of isolation, necessary for presenting the characters who, as it often happens in Gothic novels, are identified with a house, castle or another building.²⁸

But, like in the case of other settings, Carter seems to be interested in the cultural potential of the places of absolute privacy and seclusion. In all these castles, mansions and houses their owners exercise unrestrained freedom which leads to abnormality, vice and crime. In most cases, they are shrines of abasement of women – either as their prisons (eg. “The Lady of the House of Love”, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” or the Mansion of Midnight in *The Infernal De-*

²⁷ This term was originally used in reference to the style of *fin de siècle* literature by Susan J. Navarette in her essay entitled ‘The Soul of the Plot: The Aesthetics of Fin de Siecle Literature of Horror’, in George Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (eds.), *Styles of Creation* (Athens and London: Georgia University Press, 1992), p. 89.

²⁸ Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 101.

sire *Machines of Doctor Hoffman*) or both prisons and torture chambers (e.g. the castle in “The Bloody Chamber”, the House of Tyrant Zero in *The Passion of New Eve*, or the House of Anonymity in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*). As such, they can be interpreted as virtual constructs of male murderous erotic fantasies – here Carter turns out to be a ‘true’ feminist (we should remember about the polarization of her world into “the devourers” and “the devoured” which is discussed in the next chapter).

Nevertheless, it was not an awestruck fascination which pushed Angela Carter to such frequent visits in those secluded regions. Her passion for overthrowing myths nowhere manifests itself more strongly than in her artistic treatment of the motif of the isolated dwellings. The fact that almost all these sinister buildings tumble down in the end (at least symbolically) should be regarded as a proof of Carter's subversive intentions. It would be too simple to find in her proclivity for destruction only the propeller of the action. There are certainly more profound targets behind it.

The sinister settings reflect the state of mind, the conditioned cultural consciousness, hence, in symbolic order, their collapse represents the dilapidation of the whole cultural formula founded on victimization of women – we should remember that Carter is a fervent critic of the Marquis de Sade (see “Predator-Prey Dichotomy” in the next chapter).

It seems to be meaningful that Angela Carter does not exploit the positive dimensions of the symbols of a castle, mansion or house, in spite of their equally widespread use in European art. In her works, they never appear as safe, harmonious places where one finds peace and warmth. Quite the opposite, their most striking characteristic is the atmosphere of decadence and claustrophobia, which permeate them with ominous aura of haunted places, quite like the houses in Gothic fiction. Moreover, these features link them to the topos of labyrinth, which is often accompanied by the sense of confinement.

These spaces, similarly to the others in Angela Carter's fiction, function as simulatory devices in cultural experiments. Hence, they are not real even within the limits of the fictional worlds. Their dilapidation reflects the deconstruction of the cultural myth. I would like to present a number of examples from Angela Carter's works, which fully explain her method of dealing with the Gothic heritage through revisiting the murky chambers of the unconscious.

In the novels and short stories discussed in this work the motif of a castle appears twice – in the version of Bluebeard fairy tale entitled “The Bloody Chamber” and in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. In both cases the castles can be identified with their owners and serve to make them appear massive, threatening and engulfing.²⁹ As Elizabeth MacAndrew shows

²⁹ MacAndrew, op.cit., p.101.

in her book *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* it was a frequent practice in Gothic fiction to identify the villain with the castle or house.³⁰

Carter's Bluebeard, a connoisseur of pornography and aristocratic butcher, owns a castle on the Atlantic coast. The castle is situated far away from any human settlements in a pastel landscape of sea, sand and sky, "a landscape with all the deliquescent harmonies of Debussy" (BC, 13). Thus, through these references to painting and music the castle appears as almost imaginary, dream-like place. The heroine's first impression is subtly enhanced in the following more detailed description:

And, ah! His castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing 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, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place! (BC, 13)

The description portrays the castle as unreal, mysterious building created by the atmosphere of the place, a ghost half-castle, half-ship. Its isolation becomes nearly perfect since it is cut off even from the land. But the apparent melancholic aura of the site is accompanied by more ominous covert meaning. The turrets, the spiked gate, the casements remind us that the building is an unconquerable fortress, a perfect hideaway for a villain, and even more perfect prison for his victims. Due to the sentimental education of Bluebeard's young bride the passage also conveys the image of a mermaid emerging from the waves in the everlasting wake, waiting for her drowned lover. But this metaphor should not mislead the readers – the monstrous castle represents Bluebeard himself.

Even though the castle provides all necessary comforts of aristocratic life (there are even gold taps in the bathroom), inside it is also full of the sound of the sea and "stippled with refracted light from the waves (BC, 13). In the manner of all Gothic castles, its walls are crowded with the portraits of Bluebeard's ancestors, and the library is full of leatherbound volumes of pornography.

The castle has also its mysteries – it stands on a system of dungeons converted to wine cellars, but the most secret place is Bluebeard's den, "a little room at the foot of the west tower, behind the still room, at the end of a dark little corridor full of horrid cobwebs" (BC, 21). Since the very moment the bride heard of this hideaway, she was attracted by this forbidden place. Her search takes a shape of a labyrinthine journey through narrow, dusty, unlit passages hung with Venetian tapestries replete with mythological subjects. Her down-

³⁰ Ibidem.

ward journey into the darkest site of the castle turns out to be a pilgrimage to hell. Symbolically, this descent to hell means expedition into the insane mind of the castle's proprietor:

For some reason, it grew very warm ... I could no longer hear the sound of the sea.

A long, a winding corridor, as if I were in the viscera of the castle; and this corridor led to a door of worm-eaten oak, low, round-topped, barred with black iron. (*BC*, 27)

Nevertheless, the ironic tone of the whole story achieved by overabundance of Gothic elements and modernist decorum prevents the reader from taking the story for granted. The castle is an ominous place only because a long tradition of Gothic fiction has made it so, and eventually it turned out to be not such a perfect prison.

Similarly, Doctor Hoffman's abode serves as a symbol of his invincibility. The castle – once referred to as *Das Schloss*, as if for Kafkaesque connotations – or rather a walled fort hidden in the high mountains loses its mythical ominous character as soon as Desiderio arrives in the place:

The castle stood with its back up against a cliff. The battlements hinted at Hoffman's Teutonic heritage; he had built himself a Wagnerian castle like a romantic memory in stone ... it was not really a castle, only a country house built after the style of a castle. (*IDMDH*, 196-197)

What is more, the mansion is surrounded by the garden in style of Disneyland, full of marvels of blatant artificiality. And again, as in the case of Bluebeard's castle, it does not tumble down at the moment of its owner's death. So much for the mythicity of the place, Carter seems to say. In her stories all castles appear as mythical and ominous places only because the rules of Gothic fiction present them as such and because they are legendary sites – in fact Desiderio is the first intruder in Doctor Hoffman's abode, like the heroine of "The Bloody Chamber" is the first survivor in Bluebeard's castle. As a result, in both cases the spell must be broken.

In this respect, neither of the castles can equal with Tristessa's hideaway in the desert in *The Passion of New Eve*. Although it appears to be only a house embodying the Hollywood dream, a symbol of illusion in reality, its meaning is more profound. Creating this fortress of glass in the middle of the desert, this mausoleum of shadows, Angela Carter alludes to the motif of the Revolving Castle (Caer Sidi) or the Castle of Glass from the Celtic legends, which was situated in the other world (Annwn). Even the boldest couldn't get into the castle since it had no entrance and it was spinning round very fast. Inside the castle contained a great number of fountains gushing out with wine and inside it there was no death or illness.³¹

³¹ See Władysław Kopaliński. *Słownik symboli* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1990), p.486.

Invaded in the dead of night by Zero and his lot, Tristessa's house took its revenge by spinning faster and faster, and this way not letting them out. Being forsaken by its owner the house of glass spat out one by one the girls from Zero's harem and finally gave up its ghost burying Zero underneath.

The image of a house destruction observed from a distance in *The Passion of New Eve* had its predecessor in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* when Desiderio and the Count fled from the House of Anonymity, the temple of sado-masochistic debauchery, which "had turned to earth and fire in the awesome, elemental transmutation" (*IDMDH*, 139). Although the description of the destruction of the House of Anonymity was built upon the biblical account of the annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah in the rain of fire and brimstone, in both cases the collapse signifies the end of the myth of negative freedom.

A few critics have underlined Angela Carter's passion for ruins. Roz Kaveney interprets it in the light of the genre of the post-apocalyptic novel as "speaking, a moralised landscape."³² Patrick Parrinder makes an original observation of the use of, what he called, 'landscape gardening' in *Heroes and Villains* whose fragment alluded (in Parrinder's opinion perhaps unconsciously) to the art of creating ruined gardens in the eighteenth century England – yet another affinity with the Gothic.³³ The fragment quoted by Parrinder reads as follows:

Before her she saw a beautiful valley of lush pasture around a wide river hemmed with flowering reeds. On the other bank of this river ... there lay a house of a kind Marianne had never seen before ... The house was a gigantic memory of rotten stone, a compilation of innumerable forgotten styles now given some green unity by the devouring web of creeper, fur of moss and fungoid growth of rot. Wholly abandoned to decay, baroque stonework of the late Jacobean period, Gothic turrets murmurous with birds and pathetic elegance of Palladian pillared facades weathered indiscriminately together towards irreducible rubble. The forest perched upon the tumbled roofs in the shapes of yellow and purple weeds rooted in the gapped tiles ... The windows gaped or sprouted internal foliage, as if the forest were as well already camped inside, the gathering strength for a green eruption which would one day burst the walls sky high ... Upon the balustrade of the terrace were many pocked and armless statues in robes, or nude and garlanded. These looked like the petrified survivors of a malign *fete-champetre* ended long ago, in a catastrophe. (*HV*, 31-32)

Later, Angela Carter almost obsessively returned to the motif of a house in a state of dereliction, which helped her to create spooky atmosphere in her stories and make parallels to well-known literary motifs. Again, the houses reflected the state of heart and mind of their owners.

³² Kaveney, op.cit., p.177.

³³ Patrick Parrinder, 'Landscapes of British Science Fiction', in George Slusser and Eric S.Rabkin (eds.), op.cit., p.198.

In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* the Mansion of Midnight housing the beautiful somnambulist, seems almost devoured by the surrounding garden which “was destroying it at its arborescent leisure” (*IDMDH*, 51). The beautiful queen of the vampires in “The Lady of the House of Love” lives in a place which looks like “part manor house, part fortified farmhouse, immense, rambling, a dilapidated eagle's nest” which reminded the young English traveller of “childhood tales on winter evenings” (*BC*, 98). The lodging of the Androgynic weaver in “Reflections” appears drowned in the overgrown wild garden and itself is “an ancient, tumbledown place with a look of oracular blindness in windows” and with lichened roof; “there was a short, crumbling flight of steps that led to a weathered front door, ajar like the door of a witch's house” (*FW*, 85). In “The Tiger's Bride”, when the gambler's daughter arrives in the house of her new master she sees “an acreage of half-derelict facades of sheer, red brick, the vast man-trap, the megalomaniac citadel of his palazzo” (*BC*, 57).

We can find in these fragments the echoes of the Gothic architectural follies like Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill and William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey; hence, it becomes obvious that Carter's passion is for picturesque ruins, which find their mirror reflection in a tacky sophistication of her style.

The ruinous houses have also Gothic insides, which are dark and gloomy rooms where “closely barred shutters and heavy velvet curtains keep out every leak of natural light” and whose walls “are hung with black satin, embroidered with tears of pearl” (*BC*, 94). There are “drawing rooms with worn Persian rugs on the floor and walls hung with a once crimson brocaded paper ... now faded and figured with damp and mould” (*IDMDH*, 52) or country house halls “with dark stained floorboards” where “a sweet, rank smell of damp and decay filled the house” (*FW*, 86). They sometimes look like uninhabited places: “The gaping doors and broken windows let the wind in everywhere ... all the furniture was under dust sheets, the chandeliers bundled up in cloth, pictures taken from their hooks ...” (*BC*, 57)

The dereliction of the houses may also be perceived as Carter's way to subvert the tradition of the fairy tale where the interiors are opulent, shiny and impressively rich. Inside her houses we encounter the pervasive labyrinthine sense of claustrophobia. The interiors of the derelict mansions are crammed with antique furniture, covered with dust, they lack sunlight and fresh air. They are spheres of chaos. In the extreme case, Tristessa's house of glass is presented as “spinning, transparent labyrinth” (*PNE*, 116) with a hall of coffins containing waxworks of Hollywood movie stars. The prison-like character of these places is enhanced by repletion of mirrors and other reflecting devices, which MacAndrew lists as another characteristic feature of Gothic stories.³⁴

³⁴ MacAndrew, op.cit., p.213-223.

The pretentiousness of the Gothic decorum used in provocative manner matches perfectly the overabundance of language used in the descriptive passages. Carter purposefully plays her games with both imagery and style, and this represents a parallel labyrinthine journey undergone by the reader. It is tempting to compare Carter's syntax to a labyrinth since it is strikingly complex, meandering and clotted with sophisticated artistry of rare vocabulary (see the remarks on Carter's style in chapter two).

The only exception among these murky dwelling-places is the mansion belonging to Mr Lyon. In contrast to the other abodes in Carter's stories, it beams with light and cleanliness. It resembles a house of a wealthy country gentleman and possesses all its comforts and luxuries. Mr Lyons's house also symbolizes its owner – this time his good-heartedness and gentleness – yet, in the end it turns out to be a prison as well, in spite of its apparent contrast to the labyrinthine draughty house of Milord in the other version of “Beauty and the Beast”, “The Tigers Bride”.

3.5. THE CITY

Amidst the most frequent symbolic spatial constructions in Angela Carter's works, we find a potent image of the city. In the twentieth century literature the city has univocally taken the shape of a labyrinthine space – the shift from pastoral, late-Romantic poetry to the poetry of the Modernists that includes the new urban setting (best represented by T.S.Eliot's ‘unreal city’) seems to be indicative in this respect. But it should also be emphasized that a city was already perceived as a mythical space in the nineteenth century when the most common setting of the literature of manners shifted from the country to the city, the change that produced Charles Dickens – his Victorian London is undoubtedly a mythical space. Michał Głowiński states that the city is the main labyrinth of the contemporary novel.³⁵ It belongs to the category of confined spaces with no way out and in extreme cases becomes identified with prison. With the exception of utopian novels, a city has always been depicted as crowded and cramped space, the domain of chaos, which in consequence makes it unfriendly, dangerous or even inhuman. As a result, spatial order subordinated to the rules of literary mimesis plays a marginal role even in such pedantic visions of the city as in Joyce's *Ulysses*. Most of all, a city exposes its symbolic dimension.

³⁵ Głowiński, op.cit., p.161.

The twentieth century novels are replete with the motif of, often purposeless, wandering about the city – its narrow streets, squares, passages, underground tunnels, sewers etc. All these labyrinthine journeys are purposeless because contemporary cities lack the centre, and according to Roland Barthes's observation, in the western metaphysics “the centre is the place of truth.”³⁶ Obviously, most European cities have concentric structure, but in the vision expressed in modern literature, their centres do not differ from their other parts.

Angela Carter's vision of the city underscores its prison-like features. The effect of hopeless confinement is strengthened by the fact that her cities are presented in the state of war. Being spheres of destruction, riots, danger and decay, they contain no places of safety and warmth – Carter's apocalyptic vision is total, it gives no hope. Even if the barricaded house in “Elegy for a Freelance”, the Minister's cabinet or double-locked doors in *The Passion of New Eve* offer an illusion of safety and privacy, the protagonists either have to leave them and experience the violence of the outside world (like Desiderio and Evelyn) or violence creeps into those false oases of peace (like in “Elegy for a Freelance”). Nevertheless, we should remember that in Carter's fiction the city represents only one stage of her protagonists' labyrinthine peregrinations.

In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* Doctor Hoffman begins his Reality War in the capital and the initial chapter of the novel entitled “The City Under the Siege” presents a city whose labyrinthine character becomes conspicuous in metaphors like: “the city as an existential crossword puzzle” (*IDMDH*, 25) or “the arbitrary realm of dream” (*IDMDH*, 18). Initially, it is “a solid, drab, yet not unfriendly city” (*IDMDH*, 15) with the centre topographically recognisable by the Cathedral. In the course of the war it undergoes a series of changes and becomes a product of pure fantasy, a triumph of surrealist imagination and anarchy:

Hardly anything remained the same for more than one second and the city was no longer the conscious production of humanity. (*IDMDH*, 18)

The symbolic and actual fall of the city comes when Doctor Hoffman detonates the Cathedral which “expired in a blaze of melodious fireworks” (*IDMDH*, 29). Since the city loses its symbol of resistance, it falls prey to chaos and becomes a surrealistic work of art with direct allusions to paintings by Max Ernst and Paul Delvaux, a virtual reality composed of illusions, shadows and *trompe l'oeil* effects. This ontological instability deprives the city of any sense of direction. It seems to be a phenomenal labyrinth with a claim to consciousness and as such it forms a hellish image of a prison of senses. On the other hand, the city represents the centre itself, because after assassinating Doctor Hoffman, Desiderio returns to “the smoking ruins of a familiar city” (*IDMDH*, 221).

³⁶ Ibidem, p.171.

Like the City Under the Siege, New York in *The Passion of New Eve* and London in "Elegy for a Freelance" are scenes of violent terrorism, but this time on political grounds. In both cases they are cities pervaded by chaos, closed zones of moral and cultural degeneration.

London is presented on the edge of a civil war, at a moment before the barricades went up. It possesses the beauty of a doomed place and the narrator confesses:

A feverish, hysterical glamour played over the wasting city ... Towers of steel and glass ... like the architecture of the Third Reich ... looked as if they were intended to be most beautiful in ruins ... The city had never looked more beautiful ... and I was the innocent slave of bourgeois aesthetics that always sees an elegiac charm in decay. (*FW*, 106)

Similarly, New York in *The Passion of New Eve* is portrayed as a city overwhelmed by racial conflicts and riots provoked by feminist guerrillas, where rats proliferate at the same speed as violent crimes. The omnipresent decadence changes it into a city of chaos, the hellish underworld, a prison and tomb:

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. (*PNE*, 11)

Ironically, this cauldron of chaos was designed by the human mind as a utopian model of harmony and functionalism, 'a city of visible reason' (*PNE*, 16); it is worth reminding here of Lewis Mumford's formula that a city is 'the greatest human work of art'. In Carter's novel it stands for its own contradiction: "It was, then, an alchemical city. It was chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night" (*PNE*, 16).

The most noticeable feature of Carter's New York is lack of light and overpowering smell of decay. It resembles a jungle and like in a jungle, there is no law or safety – danger lurks everywhere. This city of suffocation, where no human feelings are present any more, takes a form of a labyrinth that eventually becomes a pattern of death:

So she led me deep into the geometric labyrinth of the heart of the city, into an arid world of ruins and abandoned construction sites, the metropolitan heart that did not beat any more. (*PNE*, 21)

New York and London in Carter's works are embodiments of, to use Italo Calvino's formula, "the city of the rat"³⁷, the areas of brutal competition to survive, spheres of madness and disorder where only ruins are inhabited:

I was living high up in an attic ... Most of the windows in the other houses round the square were boarded up and planks were nailed across the doors, but they were not uninhabited. Although all these houses

³⁷ Italo Calvino, *Niewidzialne miasta*, tłum. Alina Kreisberg (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1975), p.119.

were waiting to be pulled down, they contained a handful of small, scarcely licit households whose members crept in and out through secret entries, lived by candlelight, slept upon the filthy mattresses the dossers who lived there before them had used and made stews from vegetable picked out of the greengrocer's garbage cans and butcher's bones begged for dogs, that did not exist. (*FW*, 103)

These rotten cities have no links with the outer world. They compose isolated zones, similar to Orano gnawed by plague epidemic in Albert Camus's *La Peste*.

Both in Carter's New York and London walking into the street equals risking life – it is worth noting that in the latter case the narrator never leaves by herself the derelict house where she squats with other freelance terrorists. In the decaying cities overwhelmed by chaos, one finds relative security only behind the barred doors of cheap rented rooms. This motif adds up to the general sense of isolation and claustrophobia, and underlines the lack of even basic human relations.

Not only the narrator of “Elegy for a Freelance” and Evelyn in *The Passion of New Eve* live in dirty, cockroach ridden, foul smelling, cramped rented rooms. In two short stories from *Fireworks* the female narrators spend nights in rented rooms or cheap hotels in Tokyo, which augments the sense of their loneliness and rootlessness.

The city rooms are totally depersonalised places, deprived of cosiness, not suited to living:

It was a mean room and the windows overlooked a parking lot with a freeway beyond it, so that the paper walls shuddered with the reverberations of the infernal clamour of the traffic. There was a sluggish electric fan with dead flies caught in the spokes and a single strip of neon overhead lit us (*FW*, 69)

Thus, the cities in Angela Carter's works have mainly metaphoric function. They appear as dominant figures of imprisonment, as endemic areas of violence and dehumanisation, domains of chaos, decaying social organisms. They are depicted as molochs thriving on social conflicts and as such metaphoric figures they lose nearly any topographic features of real New York, London or Tokyo.

Even Tokyo in almost autobiographical stories “A Souvenir of Japan” and “Flesh and the Mirror” from *Fireworks* is depicted as an imaginary place, unreal city, a dreamlike product of fantasy in which one should always be on one's guard. In “A Souvenir of Japan” Tokyo becomes an unfamiliar and unfriendly sphere of alienation, a symbol of inhospitability, a projection of the narrator's sense of isolation in the unbelievably foreign surrounding, which also

takes the shape of a labyrinth – Carter draws on the connection between halls of mirrors and labyrinths, which is well-known in history of culture:³⁸

But, as if in celebration of the thing they feared, they seemed to have made the entire city into a cold hall of mirrors which continually proliferated whole galleries of constantly changing appearances, all marvellous but none tangible. If they did not lock up the real looking glasses, it would be hard to tell what was real and what was not. Even buildings one had taken for substantial had a trick of disappearing overnight. (*FW*, 9)

It seems indisputable that in the case of Tokyo its foreign character contributes to the atmosphere of alienation much more than familiar and well-known (both to the writer and the reader) cities like London or New York. The narrator of “Flesh and the Mirror” confesses that in Tokyo she has lost any sense of belonging since she has found herself in a city “designed to suit not one of my European expectations”, in a city which “presents the foreigner with a mode of life that seems to him to have the enigmatic transparency, the indecipherable clarity, of dream” (*FW*, 62). Therefore she tries to “rebuild the city according to the blueprint of ... [her] imagination” (*FW*, 63).

Nevertheless, the attempts to familiarize, or one should say to tame the alien space, also turn out to be to no avail since they do not bring consolation, but, through associations, provoke uneasiness and discomfort, as for instance “mysteriously deserted, Piranesi perspectives of the station” (*FW*, 8) or the streets like “expressionist perspectives” (*FW*, 62); such metaphors equal the city with work of art and at the same time evoke metaphysical terrors associated with them.

These and many other descriptive fragments serve to evoke the overpowering sense of claustrophobia. In consequence, Tokyo stands for prison in a double sense – firstly, as a real maze constructed to the pattern unintelligible to European mind, and secondly, as a projection of the narrator's alienation. Like the other cities in Angela Carter's works, Tokyo constitutes an entirely negative space, a labyrinth filled with the atmosphere of menace and corruption, where it is too easy to lose one's self.

³⁸ Mieczysław Wallis, *Dzieje zwierciadła* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1973).

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ARCHETYPOMIMETIC CHARACTERS

Daedalus' labyrinth would not be itself if there were no Minotaur hiding in its dark centre. The link between the monster and the very architectural pattern of his abode seems to be a necessary and central part of the myth, indispensable to its philosophical meaning.

In general, most literary settings (even those on faraway planets) happen to be inhabited, which proves what importance writers attach to characters, especially in relation to space. Russian semiotist Jurij Lotman underlined the connection between characters in a story and the different types of space in which they have to act. Yet, the problem remains open whether it is space which defines character or whether characters expound the symbolic meaning of space.

In the case of Angela Carter's fiction it is next to impossible to separate the labyrinthine habitats from the archetypal nature of their dwellers. For instance, in *The Passion of New Eve*, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the desert symbolizes barrenness and hence points to the same feature in Mother (Mother in the desert is the Barren Mother). But surely it is only because of the traditional connection between earth and mother (as the sources of life) that this symbolic message becomes intelligible.

Some readers find Angela Carter's treatment of characters annoying or even disturbing. They also complain of the 'lack of depth', 'artificiality', and 'non-human nature' of her fictional personages. It seems that there must be something particular in Angela Carter's protagonists that makes them unsatisfactory or deficient in the eyes of those readers. But it may as well mean that they attach great importance to the characters of the story or even that they bring particular preconceived notions about the 'character of characters' to the reading process – the realist tradition that has quite successfully been functioning since *Moll Flanders* still determines expectations of many readers. My discussion of characters in Angela Carter's fiction aims both at defining particularities or even idiosyncrasies in the construction of her characters, and at

trying to depict what literary taboos and reading habits are overthrown by such a way of constructing fictional personae.

Though any exhaustive discussion of the theory of character in diachronic order does not come within the scope of this work, it seems that even a cursory outline of both historical and contemporary concepts of literary character provide a vital context to Carter's creative attitude toward her protagonists, especially that, as we have already seen, her fictions tend to transgress all given artistic truths and modes. Furthermore, only by comparison with tradition the novelty can be appreciated.

Helene Cixous half-ironically points out:

'[C]haracter' occupies a privileged position in the novel or the play: without 'character', passive or active, no text. He is the major agent of the work, at the centre of a stage that is commanded by his presence, his story, his interest. Upon his 'life' depends the life of the text – so they say. This is why he should not be too mortal.¹

Character has always been central to reflections on literature. In ancient tradition a character was perceived as a functional propellant of the plot, since plot was the ultimate purpose of tragedy. Also English writers have always understood the importance of characters to the story. In this context it is worth mentioning character studies in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the theory of *humours* and its influence on creation of literary characters, the notion of *microcosmos*, character studies in the 17th century essays and collections of types that left their mark on Elizabethan pamphlet.

The emergence of modern individualism brought radical changes in the treatment of literary characters. In the 18th century the stress shifted from *types* toward individuals, a trend that contributed to the development of the novel. As early as in 1722 Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* commenced the realistic tradition whose influence is still present in our own outlooks on literary characters. However, Defoe's 'individual characters' serve as examples of educational and cognitive value. The next step towards a recognition of the interconnection between fictional character and the living people it imitates was made by Hegel who granted it with inner life and acknowledged its richness. Henryk Markiewicz calls this process "consecration of literary character"² who is still required to be individualized and to a certain extent exemplary, though best done in a subtle, unobtrusive way.

The tradition of Great Realism on the one hand deepened the psychological dimensions of literary characters, but on the other hand treated them functionally as devices to reveal some objective truth about society and the human

¹ Helene Cixous, 'The Character of "Character"', *New Literary History*, Vol.5, number 2 (winter 1974), p.386.

² Henryk Markiewicz, 'Postać literacka', in *Wymiar dzieła literackiego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), p.146.

psyche – the character was unquestionably perceived as a product of society or the author's social observation. Northrop Frye observes that the novelist constructs characters “wearing their personae or social ranks” within “the framework of stable society.”³

Paradoxically, the constant endeavour to attain perfection in depicting human nature in fiction effected an erosion of consistency of literary character – arguably, since Dostoyevsky we have observed the process of reduction, relativisation, disintegration and degradation of the literary hero⁴, motivated by acknowledgement of the fact that human nature is contradictory rather than consistent. Modernist fiction, so much influenced by Freud's psychoanalysis, made of the character a welter of conflicting emotions rooted in sexual complexes. The stress was put on the complexity of the character's inner life, her/his thoughts, feelings and emotions. The access to the human psyche was guaranteed by predominant techniques of the interior monologue and stream of consciousness, the techniques that appeared to be the most effective modes of presenting the character in the novels of James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson or Virginia Woolf. This revisionist strain within the mainstream novel attempts to abolish old-fashioned convictions that, as John Bayley puts it, “characters are invariably there to be *used*, either for amusement ... or for exemplary purposes ... or as a combination of both.”⁵

Jerzy Peterkiewicz sums it up as follows:

Subjected to such a process of valuation over a period of time, the [characters] put on weight in significance, look more solid and more integrated than their actual appearance in the text would warrant. We therefore credit them with a three-dimensional verisimilitude, although they are phantoms clothed only with words.⁶

In the second half of the twentieth century attitudes toward the creation of literary characters have still tended to be regulative, although we cannot speak of any unanimity among writers and theorists, especially since postmodernism has devalued the very notion of intellectual truth. Two very distinct and polarized views of literary character are worth mentioning at this stage of discussion: first, the formalist-structuralist theory; and second, as represented by Helene Cixous, the post-Lacanian psychoanalytical concept of literary character.

The Russian formalists (e.g. Propp, Tomashevsky) and the French structuralists influenced by them (e.g. Todorov, Greimas) who perceived literary

³ Northrop Frye, ‘The Four Forms of Fiction’, in Philip Stevick (ed.), *The Theory of the Novel*, (New York: The Free Press, 1967).

⁴ Markiewicz, op.cit., p.147.

⁵ John Bayley, ‘Character and Consciousness’, *New Literary History*, Vol.5, number 2 (winter 1974), p.228.

⁶ Jerzy Peterkiewicz, ‘Cast in Glass and Shadow’, *New Literary History*, Vol.5, number 2 (winter 1974), p.353.

characters as language constructs (i.e. “phantoms clothed only with words”) and reflected on their construction as on elements of artistic work and functional parts of structure, formulated the conception of *actantiel* which meant that characters should be conceived as *actants* (participants) and not as real beings. The structuralist theory of character appeared to be in conflict with the expectations of the reading public – a view advocated by Seymour Chatman when he writes: “what seems fundamental to the modern fictional character, what gives him the particular kind of realistic illusion acceptable to modern taste, is precisely heterogeneity or even scatter in his personality.”⁷ Chatman stipulates that “the understanding of character – our chief pleasure in reading modern fiction – depends, and depends radically ... on outside knowledge.”⁸ On the other hand, dropping one kind of pleasure of reading, the pleasure of recognition of verisimilar characters, does not necessarily imply total lack of any sort of pleasure; pleasure of surprise that results from innovation may prove to be even more rewarding.

Nevertheless, the exemplary material Chatman chooses to illustrate his point with belongs to the literary period before the radical reduction of the character (in the shape of *nouveau roman*) and before the declaration of ‘the death of the hero’. Angela Carter belongs to the artistic generation which had to confront this problem and solve it individually – in fact it meant no less than another ‘death of God’.

In the thought-provoking introduction to her essay “The Character of ‘Character’” Helene Cixous asks the question whether the “hero” or “character”, “the captor of the imaginary” is really dead. Her answer reads ‘no’, because she discovers he is only “unmasked ... denounced, returned to his reality as simulacrum, brought back to the mask as mask.”⁹

According to her concept, the traditional literary character is a “porteparole of sense”, “the decipherable human sign”, “a cog in the literary machinery”, and as such is declared to be lifeless as a marionette. In order to stimulate it to life Cixous postulates acknowledging the unconscious in the literary character, because, to quote her once again, “‘I’ is more than one.”¹⁰ Her protest is directed against the psychological function of social conditioning played by traditional character since its concept “organizes recognition” and “patronizes meaning”.

By definition, a “character”, preconceived or created by an author is to be *figured out*, understood, read: he is presented, offered up to interpretation, with the prospect of a traditional reading that seeks its satisfac-

⁷ Seymour Chatman, ‘On the Formalist-Structuralist Theory of Character’, *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 2 (1972), p.61.

⁸ Ibidem, p.78. See also: Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p.119.

⁹ Cixous, op.cit, p.387.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p.385.

tion at the level of a potential identification with such and such a “personage”.¹¹

And again:

Character is the product of repression of subjectivity, and ... the handling of literary scenes is done under the aegis of masterdom, of the conscious, which conventionalizes, evaluates, and codes so as to conform to set types, according to cultural demand ...¹²

This conflict, so radically expressed by Cixous, must also have been a problem for Angela Carter whose enormous artistic consciousness, cultural erudition and feminist attitudes require her to question and abandon the traditional elements of the presented world. As in the case of Carter's labyrinthine spaces, her protagonists appear to be literary characters of the third level, where the first is the level of real people, the second of conventionalized (e.g. symbolic or archetypal) images, and the third of the image OF the image or the convention which I propose to call *virtual* as there is no direct connection between it and real human beings. To put it in a simpler manner: at the roots of all Angela Carter's characters lie not real people, but archetypes, images or symbols.

In all previously discussed theories the literary character was perceived as an anthropomimetic construct whose indirect characterization should, or at least can, be interpreted in the categories of personality – this is what Chatman suggests when he describes character as a “paradigm of traits.”¹³ These categories, however, seem to be thoroughly irrelevant to the analysis of virtual characters who should be seen in the light of literary tradition and analyzed comparatively or genetically.

Thus, the basic assumption on which further discussion in this chapter is based reads: we do not treat Angela Carter's protagonists as anthropomimetic characters, but as *archetypomimetic figures*. Since the term is a new idea for better understanding of Angela Carter's fiction, I am going to use it in a broad sense, not to fall into the trap of reductionism.

By *archetypomimetic figures* I mean such characters that are modelled not on real humans (as their anthropomimetic counterparts), but on symbolic figures or archetypes that are common currency in our culture. Without this new term my analysis of types of characters in Angela Carter's fiction would seem odd or even false, since there would be this tacit traditional assumption that all literary characters are anthropomimetic. In such a case, Carter's protagonists would appear curiously flawed and, as a result, unsuccessful. When perceived as *archetypomimetic*, they turn out to be original and innovative constructs, the novelty in the literary treatment of the character.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, p.384.

¹³ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, op.cit., pp.126-131.

Since archetypal characters are mythical casts of cultural roles, Carter, beginning from the same assumptions as Cisoux, tries in an artistic way to 'unmask' the hero – it is impossible to identify with any of her protagonists. Like structuralists she reduces her characters to the role of actants whose basic dichotomy is of 'Hero vs Adversary' – all her fictions present the conflict of power, a conflict emerging from the gender polarization of the human world.

Archetypes prove to be efficient vehicles for these gender power-games, because they underline the universality of the conflict. Situated on the abstract level archetypes 'annex' particular people who become prone to behave in accordance with the archetypal pattern inculcated into the collective unconscious. Even Jewel and Marianne from *Heroes and Villains*, apparently characters made of flesh, become subject to the symbolic roles of strong and weak respectively, thus losing their individual features. However, there is an interesting role swap and in the end Marianne gains full control over Jewel – such role reversals are very characteristic of Carter's fiction in the 1970s.

Despite falling into archetypal roles, Carter's protagonists remain dynamic since they possess the ability of metamorphosis, especially the underdogs, which in most cases means women. It seems to be a reflection of a conviction commonly shared among feminists that social stereotypes of women have often been reinforced by archetypes and have strongly influenced the images of women in literature (Milton's Eve often serves as an example).¹⁴

Angela Carter attempts to break the stereotypes by experimenting with their source, namely archetypes. She succeeds in rousing her heroines from what Linda Ray Pratt called "Edenic innocence", according to which "ignorance was a virtue in a woman, and ... departure from a pre-lapsarian mould was an unacceptable moral, social, and sexual role."¹⁵

Carter's protagonists usually undergo a labyrinthine journey which results in self-discovery. Quite logically, the novels take the form of the Bildungsroman, the genre showing human beings in the process of becoming and gaining control of their lives, in the case of women by throwing off conditioning and social roles, which means here oppressive archetypal patterns. In *The Passion of New Eve*, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and short stories like "The Bloody Chamber", "The Tiger's Bride", "Reflections" and "Flesh and the Mirror", to take only the most conspicuous examples, the protagonists manage to awaken from their pre-lapsarian state, though at the price of disillusionment. Here Carter does not appear so optimistic as many feminist critics would like her to be.

¹⁴ Mary Anne Ferguson, *Images of Women in Literature*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1973), pp.4-5.

¹⁵ Linda Ray Pratt, 'The Abuse of Eve by the New World Adam', in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed.), *Images of Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), p.170.

Nevertheless, using the Bildungsroman – “the novel of apprenticeship” whose main feature is its “dynamic of struggle”¹⁶ – Carter may be perceived as a neo-feminist writer. Ellen Morgan, explaining the meaning of her term, wrote: “her story in this period of transition is the story of an education, of a coming to consciousness and a subsequent development of self and search for authenticity, of rebellion and resolution.”¹⁷

In Angela Carter's fiction, however, it is not only women who need to undergo transformation in order to arrive at full personhood. Desiderio is one example, Evelyn/Eve is another – the latter is even more fascinating, since the most essential prerequisite of Evelyn's gaining humanity is his spell of experience as a woman (Eve).

Both *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* may be called Candide-like novels: they are simulated autobiographies, told as first person narrative by the main character of the story who experiences many dangers and unusual adventures. This form derives from the 16th century picaresque novel which put at the centre of the narrative a picaresque – “a rootless, unattached individual who must secure his own survival and psychological well-being in a society which openly espouses traditional ideals, while actually sanctioning the most dehumanizing modes of behavior.”¹⁸ It is interesting to note that four hundred years later a feminist writer uses the genre for the same, namely political, purpose of advocating freedom from social constrictions.

Richard Bjornson in his book *The Picaresque Hero in European Tradition* underscores two main features of picaresque as a genre – a pseudoautobiographical perspective and the panorama of representative types which leads to an overview of the conditions of human life. As Bjornson puts it:

Picaresque heroes wander from place to place and traverse various social milieux, they encounter many different people, and by momentarily focusing upon these secondary characters, the author can depict a cross section of manners, morals and idiosyncrasies.¹⁹

Both Desiderio and Evelyn/Eve in their travels observe many exotic societies or social circles whose common ground is the low social position of women. During his peregrinations through hallucinatory countryside, Desiderio has to hide away among the River People who inhabit the region of the Amazonian jungle. The chapter begins like an ethnological sketch, outlining the historical and economic conditions of the tribe's life, some basic information

¹⁶ Ellen Morgan, ‘Humanbecoming: Form & Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel’, in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed.), op.cit., p.188.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p.183.

¹⁸ Richard Bjornson, *The Picaresque Hero in European Fiction* (Madison and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), p.6.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p.8.

about their language and a brief overview of their social stratification. The River People's women have the universal duties of women in all patriarchal societies – cooking, bringing up children, sewing and providing sexual services. They also have to wear traditional clothes, together with uniformed “maquillage” and hairdo. This precisely defined costume makes them grotesque caricatures of womanhood and turns them sexually undesirable to European taste:

Mama's costume was universal among the women. It gave them a top-heavy appearance, as if they would not fall down when you pushed but only rock to and fro. I realized that, though I had sometimes seen the dark barges moving slowly along the river, I had never seen this characteristic shape of a woman on deck and later I learned the women were all ordered below whenever they reached a place of any size. (*IDMDH*, 72)

Later I found that all the women moved in this same, stereotyped way, like benign automata, so what with that and their musical box speech, it was quite possible they were not fully human and, to a certain extent, understand what had produced the prejudices of Jesuits. (*IDMDH*, 73)

Thus, as it often happens in (not only feminist) literature, uncomfortable clothes become a sign of social immobility and submission to men, turning women into almost inanimate objects whose virtue is loyalty and passivity.

The cosmogony of the River People is a pagan distortion of the biblical myth of Eve and the Snake. A young girl touches a snake, which is forbidden in her tribe, and she conceives of its venom. The snake who grows up in her belly teaches her what fire is and how to toast food over a flame. But she does not tell her secret to her father and brothers who finally find out about the snake dwelling inside her and, wanting to learn to kindle fire, eventually rip her stomach open, kill the snake, eat it and thus possess the trick. The myth, based on the mutilation of a disloyal woman, gives rise to the custom for mothers of young girls to coax their daughters' clitorises from babyhood until they become long as snakes. Desiderio decides that it must have been an equivalent of the circumcision ceremonies among males, but authorial intention was, I believe, a distorted and grotesque depiction of the biblical myth.

Desiderio's position as an explorer of exotic countries is precisely defined as Gulliver-like in the chapter called “Lost in Nebulous Time”, which openly serves satirical purposes. Here Desiderio and Albertina arrive in the society of intelligent centaurs, a reference to Swift's Houyhnhnms. Even though Swift himself seems to be uneasy about his hero's misanthropy, Gulliver gullibly praises the social order of the country of intelligent horses. In Carter's version, the description of the social organization serves purely dystopian aims, because the rules and myths on which that society is founded cannot be perceived as ideal – quite the contrary, since it represents a grotesque reflection of human society.

The centaurs “respected the virile principle and reviled the female one” (*IDMDH*, 180), “they believed women were born only to suffer” (*IDMDH*, 172). The Books of the Sacred Stallion which contain the centaurs’ cosmogony is equivalent to the Bible, the cantor sings and dances the myth of “the horse who penetrated to the shades to retrieve his dead friend” (*IDMDH*, 174). However, unlike Gulliver’s perfect creatures, “because they were men, they had many words to describe conditions of deceit; they were not Houyhnhnms” (*IDMDH*, 187). In order to express their contempt for women they ritually gang-rape Albertina and make their womenfolk caress Desiderio, which is intended to humiliate the mares. After one of the centaurs learns that Albertina is Desiderio’s mate – “therefore [his] property” (*IDMDH*, 182) – he cries and whips himself to express his regret and shame.

Carter is careful not to let the story slip into the realm of fantasy and therefore defines the ontological status of the centaurs as “not fabulous beasts” but “entirely mythic” (*IDMDH*, 183) creatures. Furthermore, they appear to be possessed by archetype in a Jungian sense since “each mare was the embodiment of the archetypal Bridal Mare as she cleaned the Celestial Stables; Even if the Bridal Mare was only a penitent sinner, still she was essential to the Sacred Horse’s passion” (*IDMDH*, 183).

The most degrading portrayal of the social position of women appears in one horrifying fragment of *The Passion of New Eve* – in the episodes taking place in tyrant Zero’s harem. This impotent sadistic maniacal figure forces his seven wives to occupy a social position lower than his pigs. Zero deprives them of their individuality by having their hair cut and teeth extracted, which in a symbolic sense means divesting them of all their strength – their female beauty and the castratory device which teeth may turn into. This grotesque misogynist incarnate exploits his harem both in a sexual and economic sense – each of the girls has her one day in the week when she spends the night with her master, and all seven spend three summer months in Los Angeles “peddling their asses ... in order to save enough money to keep Zero and his familiar [the pigs] throughout the winter” (*PNE*, 98). Obviously, it is Carter’s grotesque metaphor of sexual and economic exploitation of women.

The image of women as defenceless victims of sadistic sexual hunger appeared earlier in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, first as sexual toys out of sadistic fantasies in the House of Anonymity section, and next in the chapter called “The Coast of Africa” as the mutilated wives of the Kurtz – like figure of a dreadful chieftain:

Many bore the bleeding marks of gigantic bites in their breasts and buttocks. Some had a nipple missing, most were minus one or several toes and fingers. One girl had a ruby set in the socket in place of a lost eyeball. (*IDMDH*, 158)

All the women in this tribe are subjected to mad experiments whose purpose is doing away with the traditional notions of the female figure and de-

priving them of sexual pleasure which might be a threat to patriarchy. The chieftain explains it as follows:

Tear this notion of the mother from your hearts. Vengeful as nature herself, she loves her children only in order to devour them better ... Not one of my callipygian soldiery but has earned her rank by devouring alive, first gnawing limb from limb and sucking the marrow from its bones, her first-born child ... They have passed far beyond all human feeling.

And, since my early researches soon showed me that the extent of a woman's feelings was directly related to her capacity for feeling during the sexual act, I and my surgeons take the precaution of brutally excising clitoris of every girl child ... Therefore, I am proud to say that not a single one of my harem ... has ever experienced the most fleeting ecstasy, or even the slightest pleasure, while in my arms ... So our womenfolk are entirely cold and respond only to cruelty and abuse. (*IDMDH*, 160-161)

The only way out of this vicious circle of phallogocentric brutality seems to be through the creation of a utopian 'world without men', a matriarchal social structure which affirms femaleness. It is worth underlining that Carter's depiction of the underground headquarters of feminist guerillas in its purely dystopian form does not differ from mythology – also in Ancient times the Amazons were presented as cruel, bellicose and promiscuous. In this sense the Amazons from Beulah cultivate traditionally feminine values, preparing themselves for military conflict with the patriarchy.

However, their commander, Mother, appears no less appalling, grotesque and even comic than the mad chieftain in "The Coast of Africa". In fact, the whole organization of Beulah corresponds to the stereotypical portrayals of matriarchy in science fiction, as characterized by Joanna Russ – it resembles a community of social insects and relies for its future on the improvement of the possibilities of biological engineering.²⁰

Slightly digressing, it is worth pointing out here that Carter takes obvious pleasure in describing groups of people as sects (religion and militarism come in her stories together). She often creates them both for aesthetic reasons and as actants with a single act to perform – the Acrobats of Desire, who excel themselves in juggling with their own eyeballs and other parts of the body, appear to gang rape Desiderio; the mad fundamentalist child soldiers come out of nowhere only to kill Tristessa, thus denying Eve her happiness. In both cases they function as suppliers of female experience to male protagonists. They are a comic "inferno device ... which would have been less effective at greater length."²¹

²⁰ Joanna Russ, 'The Image of Women in Science Fiction', in Susan Koppelman Cornillon (ed.), op.cit., p.87.

²¹ Roz Kaveney, 'New New World Dreams: Angela Carter and Science Fiction', in Lorna Sage (ed), *Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 1994), p.181..

Depiction of women as a class subjected to sexual and economic exploitation is a constant theme in Angela Carter's fiction – the stories from *Fireworks*, like “The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter”, “The Loves of Lady Purple” and “Master” present different aspects of the same old tale, but all these stories, and especially the fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber*, employ the theme for subversive ends, looking for the possibility to transcend the victim role – the sequence called “Predator-Prey Dichotomy” examines this problem in detail.

In the narratives mentioned above, Carter presents women as the lowest caste in patriarchal society, hence the striking lack of any psychological insight; her interest concentrates not on individual human beings and the mental conflicts involved in being a woman, but on the image of an archetypal woman in a pre-lapsarian state, obedient to patriarchy and submissively accepting the role in which phallogocentric script casts her. Evelyn after becoming Eve observes:

Although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but, then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitation. (PNE, 101)

Thus, let me repeat, Carter takes an interest in woman as emblem, the carrier of archetypal roles borrowed from the treasury of cultural – especially literary – heritage. But as the five sections which follow these introductory comments and assumptions will demonstrate, she portrays also male roles as limitations of humanity. She deliberately reduces her protagonists to the level of cultural signs, creating not life-like people but *archetypomimetic* characters. In consequence they fall into well-defined cultural categories, but also remain dynamic as a result of their potential for metamorphosis.

It is worth noting here that hardly any of Carter's characters have proper names. They are either nameless ‘I’s, or fairy tale-like figures who serve as examples, or who bear their functions as identity marks (e.g. Dr Hoffman, The Minister, Mother, Master, Lady Purple), or their names come as tell-tale signs of their symbolic meaning or fate (e.g. Evelyn/Eve, Leilah/Lilith, Tristessa, Desiderio, Albertina, Sophia).

The concept of the character as a reflection of social roles corresponds to Luce Irigaray's notion of ‘femininity as masquerade’ which embraces women's endeavour to participate in man's desire. On the basis of this analogy a feminist critic Paulina Palmer accuses Carter of adopting “a masculine point of view” and depicting “the masque of femininity from the outside, describing with obvious pleasure the exotic costumes and make-up Leilah and Tristessa use to seduce men.”²² For Palmer, the evolution of Carter's female protagonists leads them to this kind of androgyny which springs from perceiving masculinity as a norm.

²² Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.22.

The only apparent attempt at looking into woman's psychology is undertaken in three hardly fictionalized, not to say autobiographical, stories from *Fireworks*: "A Souvenir of Japan", "The Smile of Winter" and "Flesh and the Mirror" where the dream-like, alien aura of Japan corresponds with the estrangement of the female narrator. Lorna Sage in her mini-monograph of Angela Carter points at the connection between the image of Japan in the *Fireworks* stories and in Roland Barthes' book *Empire of Signs* in which he reveals a culture that despises depth, where "the inside no longer commands the outside."²³ The all-encompassing strangeness of the place forces the narrator to look at herself with the intention of finding out whether her own image complies with her self. But what she finds is again an emblem, a sign, a self deprived of the unconscious:

I had never been so absolutely the mysterious other. I had become a kind of phoenix, a fabulous beast; I was an outlandish jewel ... I often felt like a female impersonator.

In the department store there was a rack of dresses labelled: 'For Young and Cute Girls Only'. When I looked at them, I was gross as Glumdalclitch. I wore men's sandals because they were the only kind that fitted me and, even so, I had to take the largest size. My pink cheeks, blue eyes and blatant yellow hair made of me, in the visual orchestration of this city ... an instrument which played upon an alien scale. (*FW*, 7)

In Angela Carter's stories the characters often have to confront their reflections in mirrors or other reflecting devices, quite often someone else's eyes. In the story called "Flesh and the Mirror" which is about, as Lorna Sage puts it, "sex minus words, class, character, with a wandering stranger"²⁴, the narrator confesses:

The magic mirror presented me with a hitherto unconsidered notion of myself as I. Without any intentions of mine, I had been defined by the action reflected in the mirror ... I was the subject of the sentence written on the mirror ... Nothing kept me from the fact, the act, I had been precipitated into knowledge of the real conditions of living. (*FW*, 64-65)

In the context of an alien culture the I has to recognize itself, as if repeating the child's recognition of its own separateness (in Lacan's concept the awareness of the I is formed by the mirror images of the self):

Women and mirror are in complicity with one another to evade the action I/she performs that she/I cannot watch, the action with which I break out of the mirror, with which I assume my appearance. But *this* mirror refused to conspire with me, it was like the first mirror I'd ever seen. (*FW*, 65)

A mirror may enable us to perceive our selves in a new light as products of a particular history, as partly artificial *objects* – a process which should lead

²³ Quoted after Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p.26.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p.27.

to self-recognition. Paradoxically, these uncharacteristic *Fireworks* stories arrive at the same conclusion as all of Carter's other fictions – a search for the self must involve discarding the mythical role we are used to playing.

Before we move to more specific discussion of Carter's *archetypomimetic* characters, it needs to be stated that as a result of Carter's intention to make us perceive them as emblems, they are depicted mainly through the form of direct, rather than indirect presentation, usually through description. Having pointed out that Angela Carter's characters are *archetypomimetic figures* who reflect the social roles played by both men and women in society, I am going to present five sections focusing on particular archetypes and the chances the characters have to transcend them.

4.1. FEMININITY AS A CONSTRUCT: FLIGHT TO OR FROM ANDROGYNY?

Paulina Palmer in her critical overview of the ideological implications of *The Passion of New Eve* wrote:

Carter, accepting the feminist perspective on gender current in the early 1970s, identifies it with undesirable attributes such as dependence, passivity, masochism and a propensity for maternal 'smothering'. The female characters in her novel seek to liberate themselves from these qualities and achieve a mode of behaviour which is supposedly androgynous. In actual fact, it is not so. It is composed of attributes which are predominantly 'masculine' and instrumental.²⁵

There are two points worth noting in Palmer's remark. First, she drives the reader's attention to the fact that 'androgynous' in Carter's work equals 'masculine' by freeing woman from her feminine attributes and turning her into an independent and active subject. Second, that androgyny as a state between, or even beyond, the sexes is something desirable for women, while becoming 'androgynous men' represents a threat to feminine values.

Indeed, the concept of *true* androgyny, i.e. "full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements"²⁶, seems to be attractive, but as the example of Virginia Woolf shows, it is utterly utopian. Elaine Showalter's discussion of Woolf's concept of androgyny expressed in *A Room of One's Own* depicts it as a form of escapism into another kind of self-discipline or even repression. Serene androgyny proved to be an unrealizable

²⁵ Palmer, *op.cit.*, p.16.

²⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1979), p.263.

myth, a painful utopia. Yet Carter's concept of androgyny seems to derive from the much lighter, even playful, treatment of the myth in Woolf's *Orlando*. Nonetheless, in her fiction Carter presents androgyny as a mystification, while regarding the concept of androgyny as necessary for the full development of self-knowledge.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, the key novel as far as the theme of androgyny goes, there are three quasi-androgynous figures whose nature denounces androgyny as a mystification by linking it to the construction of femininity as masquerade. All three – Eve, Tristessa and Leilah are in fact epitomes of the triumph of culture over nature, desire over reality.

New Eve, the mother-to-be of future womankind, is in fact only the result of a surgical operation on Evelyn, and she is well aware of this:

The plastic surgery turned me into my own diminutive, Eve, the shortened form of Evelyn, this artificial changeling, the Tiresias of Southern California. (*PNE*, 71)

As an androgynous figure Evelyn/Eve does not stand as an example of perfect harmony and serenity, but rather as a grotesque embodiment of the Platonic dichotomy of mind and body – the consciousness of a man (Evelyn) still resides in the biological form of a woman (Eve). As a result, the hermaphrodite appears to be a woman who is a deficient man, an unnatural hybrid between maleness and femaleness.

But the actual point that Carter makes in *The Passion of New Eve* is that sex is a fundamental component of identity, especially when it affects one's destiny. If we compare the scene when Evelyn sees himself for the first time as Eve with its counterpart in *Orlando*, we can note a striking difference – where Woolf does not acknowledge sex as the basis of identity, Carter perceives it as the powerful dominant.

Orlando:

Orlando has become a woman – there is no doubt about it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory ... her memory ... went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle.²⁷

In *The Passion of New Eve* Evelyn says:

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 abstraction of femininity to me ... I looked again and saw I bore a strong family resemblance to myself ...

They had turned me into the *Playboy* center fold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head. I had

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, (London: Penguin, 1992), p.133.

become my own masturbatory fantasy. And – how can I put it – the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself. (*PNE*, 74-75)

I know nothing. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. (*PNE*, 83)

Both Woolf and Carter wrote their novels at times when there was a great fascination with androgyny perceived in the light of the phenomena and determination of sexuality and sexual identities. The difference, however, is striking – while for Orlando femininity equals opening up, for Evelyn it means the end; in his case the possibility of ‘fuller experience of humanity’ sounds like an ironic cliché.

For Orlando the change of sex comes as something natural, even awaited; for Evelyn it arrives as a nightmare – depriving him of a sense of direction and self-recognition (“Eve was a creature without memory ... an amnesiac ... she had nothing to remember” (*PNE*, 78)). It seems that Orlando is well-prepared to be a woman since it does not mean becoming different, while Eve has to undergo the long process of learning her new role.

Thus, in Evelyn/Eve's case the metamorphosis into a woman consists of two separate stages – biological transformation through emasculation and plastic surgery, and, a subsequent stage of inculcation of traditionally female attributes. In Beulah Eve is subjected to the psycho-programming which involves watching videos showing what patriarchy has made of women (both Tristessa's films which demonstrate “every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity” (*PNE*, 71) and films inculcating the beauty and pleasures of motherhood – especially the desire to nurture which women are expected to possess). But the key element in her development into a full feminine form is the streetwise knowledge of feminine experience gained in Zero's harem, and later with Tristessa in the desert and in the cave by the sea.

Incarcerated in Zero's harem Eve learns “savage apprenticeship in womanhood” (*PNE*, 107) – dependence, masochism, passivity, inferiority and fear. In Tristessa's embraces she tastes sexual pleasure and love. In the cave by the sea she goes through the ordeal of confrontation with Mother. It is easy to note that Eve's becoming a whole woman results from her sexual experience. Kathleen Cioffi points out that the heroine in the feminist Bildungsroman searches for her psychological self through the establishment of her sexual identity.²⁸ In the end Eve finds her new identity and accepts it – she refuses Leilah's offer to turn her back into a man: Evelyn's genitals, prudently stored in a portable refrigerator, are flung into the sea.

Like other Carter protagonists, Eve is a marionette in her puppet theatre and serves to depict the concept of androgyny as a mythical ruse. Its mystificatory character is best presented in the marvellous mock-wedding ceremony of

²⁸ Kathleen Cioffi, ‘Types of Feminist Fantasy and Science Fiction’, in Jane B. Weedman (ed.), *Women Worldwalkers* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Technical Press, 1985), p.90-91.

Eve and Tristessa arranged by Zero who **makes Eve appear as the groom and Tristessa as the bride**. Eve who sees herself as in “double drag”, observes:

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 Rosalind in Elizabethan Arden. In the desert, we played out an arid pastoral. (PNE, 132)

Again, the ceremony, in a satirical mode draws on the scene in *Orlando* when Orlando and her eventual husband identify one another cross-sexually: “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ ... ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’”²⁹ finds its reflection in Eve's statement that “it was a double wedding – both were the bride, both the groom in this ceremony” (PNE, 135).

The figures of Eve and Tristessa demonstrate how sex-role behaviour and apparel determine one's gender. Eve's fear of being disclosed as an artificial woman raises Zero's suspicions because she begins to behave “too much like a woman” (PNE, 101). Similarly, he hates Tristessa because he perceives her as the Queen of Dykes who has stolen his masculine powers, while in fact Tristessa is a drag queen successfully passing for years as the epitome of romantic female suffering.

In Tristessa's case there is even no need for anatomical surgery or psychological conditioning; in fact, Leilah's mother who, as a plastic surgeon, found him “too much of a woman, already, for the good of the sex” and who was struck by what seemed to her “the awfully ineradicable quality of his maleness” (PNE, 173) denied him the operation. With the help of make-up, dress and cinema magic Tristessa managed the act of self-creation. Once again androgyny, the symbol of perfection and alchemical unity of contradictory elements, appears to be founded on mystification. Tristessa's ontological status remains doubtful since as a woman she is only a celluloid shadow.

“There is a danger today that the shadow may become a thing completely detached from the living body, running faster and faster, but also away from the light. Television and the cinema fabricate a reality of shadows for daily consumption, and the psyche feeds on them ...”³⁰, writes Jerzy Peterkiewicz, and his general idea perfectly describes Tristessa's case: her entire existence is based only on his desire to appear feminine accompanied by the expectations of the cinema audience for whose male part Tristessa is the object of sexual desire. In his off-screen life hermaphroditic Tristessa remains a pathetic figure with “his cock stuck in his asshole so that he himself formed the uroborus, the perfect circle, the vicious circle, the dead end” (PNE, 173). In his self creation Tristessa went as far as to replace his past with artificial memories of her life modelled on Marilyn Monroe's biography of misery. In consequence Tristessa

²⁹ Woolf, op.cit., p.240.

³⁰ Peterkiewicz, op.cit., p.360.

joins the line of what Carter called, in *The Sadeian Woman*, “the Beautiful Blonde Clowns, Jean Harlow, Judy Holliday, Jayne Mansfield, a sisterhood of unfortunate J's” (*SW*, 69) who lead a ghost-like existence, being icons of femininity rather than real women. Her explanation of what she labelled in the same book as “the Monroe syndrome” provides a perfect characterization of Tristessa:

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: men would rather have slept with her rather than sleep with her. She is most arousing as a memory or as a masturbatory fantasy. If she perceives herself as something else, the contradictions of her situation will destroy her. (*SW*, 70)

Despite being compared to Tiresias, the figures of Eve and Tristessa turn out to be in fact more transvestite than androgynous. Such male to female transsexualism is perceived by radical feminists (e.g. Palmer) as a threat to women's liberation since it produces anomalous hybrids “created by a patriarchal culture with the aim of usurping woman's place and power.”³¹

The androgynous character of Leilah does not follow the same pattern. When Evelyn encounters her for the first time at night in a decaying New York, she appears as the personification of wild sexual pleasure, thus more the *image* of a sexually desirable object than a real woman:

She had on a pair of black, patent leather shoes with straps around the ankles, fetishistic heels six inches high and, in all the heat and paranoia of summer, an immense coat of red fox was slung around her shoulders ... This coat revealed only a hem of a dark blue, white coin-dotted dress that hardly covered her. Her hair was a furze-bush, a la Africaine, and she had bright purple lipstick on her mouth ... I saw her dress was a sleeveless, vestigial shirt-waist and she had unbuttoned the front to flaunt small, high, pointed breasts on which the nipples, painted bright purple to match her mouth, stuck out a full half-inch from the flesh. (*PNE*, 19-20)

Leilah represents the very essence of Evelyn's desire. She is entirely constructed – of make-up, costume and gestures. She is something wild that asks to be tamed, a ‘dark continent’ to be explored and colonized:

a strange, bird-like creature, plumed with furs, not a flying thing, nor a running thing, nor a creeping thing, not flesh nor fowl, some in-between thing ... the lorelei of the gleaming river of traffic. (*PNE*, 20-22)

This exotic model of sexual allure and apparent narcissism seduces Evelyn as an esoteric figure, while in fact she is a young prostitute complying with the demands of the male gaze which makes a woman an object to be investigated. The dichotomy of observer-observed corresponds to the dualism of

³¹ Palmer, op.cit., pp.19-20.

predator-prey discussed in a subsequent section. **Radical feminists claim** that in a patriarchal society, looking functions as a crucial aspect of sexual behaviour because it brings domination and subordination into sexual relationships.

Angela Carter goes even further. She puts the reader in the position of voyeur while demonstrating the artificiality of the object of his desire. Together with Evelyn we witness the process of Leilah's dressing up in front of the mirror and then we realize that as an embodiment of male sexual fantasies she becomes self-alienated. Besides, Leila's self-alienation appears ambiguous – does she get unwillingly alienated from her true self or is she a deliberate alienator who enjoys her masquerade and in fact dresses to kill? In the light of later events, especially Eve's encounter with Leilah in California, the latter seems more plausible. Nevertheless, like Eve and Tristessa, Leilah remains only a symbol, an emblem, an archetypomimetic phantom:

Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she didn't seem to me to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah ... a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror When at last she assumed the darkly luminous appearance of Lily-in-the-mirror, she became her; everyday Leilah disappeared immediately ...; the mirror bestowed a grace upon her, now she was her own mistress.

I never knew a girl more a slave to style. (*PNE*, 28-31)

As Lily-in-the-mirror Leilah becomes a quasi-automaton, her femaleness becomes a complete masquerade, a sort of robotitude in which she acts out a part from the patriarchal script, but the catch is that the script was written by Mother. Leilah, the submissive vamp, who almost bleeds to death after the abortion (another hoax), turns out to be Mother's daughter, a feminist fighter who possesses the masculine instrumental qualities, such as independence, leadership, and a capacity for action and aggression. Her transformation from submissive object of sexual desire into self-reliant guerrilla is reinforced by clarification of the symbolic meaning of her name – Leilah was a slightly masked form of Lilith. In this way, through androgynous metamorphosis, Leilah becomes a whole human being, an independent subject called Lilith.

Androgynous characters appeared in Carter's fiction long before *The Passion of New Eve*, but were never employed so intricately for such overtly political purposes. There is Honeybuzzard in *Shadow Dance* and the hermaphroditic weaver in "Reflections" (*Fireworks*). Albertina, Doctor Hoffman's daughter is arguably a cross between her traditional casting as an automaton and an androgyne.

Albertina, the object of Desiderio's desire, who discreetly leads him to her father's castle (a reflection of Franz's love for Doctor Coppelius' automaton daughter in E.T.A.Hoffmann's "The Sandman"), is also her father's agent, am-

bassador and generalissimo in his army. She often disappears in the novel to be found at the least expected moment (e.g. when hidden under bandages, pretending to be the Erotic Traveller's valet whom he then buggers, thinking her to be a boy).

Albertina appears in double drag, thus possessing fully hermaphroditic visual qualities but her androgynism functions in the novel as persuasive proof of the potentiality of desire:

His skin was like polished brass, at once greenish and yellowish, his eyelids were vestigial and his cheekbones unusually high. Luxuriantly glossy hair so black it was purplish in colour made of his head almost too heavy a helmet to be supported by the slender column of his neck and his blunt-lipped, sensual mouth was also purplish in colour ... Around his eyes which were as hieratically brown and uncommunicative as those the Ancient Egyptians painted on their sarcophagi, were thick bands of solid gold cosmetic and the nails on his long hands were enamelled dark crimson, to match the nails on his similarly elegant feet, which were fully exposed by sandals consisting of mere gold thongs ... I think he was the most beautiful human being I have ever seen – considered, that is, solely, as an object, a construction of flesh, skin, bone and fabric ... (*IDMDH*, 32)

By contrast, “Reflections” depicts a hermaphrodite as a repellent, grotesque hybrid who hinders the female narrator's coming to self-recognition and therefore must be destroyed:

The crippled being who lay in it [the Bath chair] had the most regal cast of chin and mouth imaginable and the proud, sad air of the king of a rainy country. One of her profiles was that of a beautiful woman, the other that of a beautiful man ... (*FW*, 87)

The lace negligee she wore fell back from her soft, pale breasts that were, each one, tipped by nipples of deep, dark pink, with the whorled crenellations of raspberries, and then she shifted her loins a little to display, savage and barbaric in their rude, red-purple repose, the phallic insignia of maleness. (*FW*, 89)

Both Albertina and the hermaphrodite in “Reflections” are presented not as living creatures but as animated objects. In general, Carter tends to “thingify” her protagonists – she is less interested in who they are than in what they represent.

Despite the purely aesthetic pleasure which Carter clearly takes from describing in black-humour mode these fantastic hybrids, she also gives them certain functions to perform. In her world polarized by sexual power, confrontation with the archetype of Androgyne is as necessary for her protagonists on their way to self-knowledge as is confrontation with the Great Mother.

4.2. THE MOTHER-FIGURE

The figure of mother has always been, for obvious reasons, deeply rooted in all cultures in the world. As Magna Mater, Cybele, Rea or Demeter she symbolizes spring, fertility, good harvest, and even guarantees the happiness of family life. She is a life-giving goddess (Demeter), associated with vegetation, earth and its fecundity. According to Hesiod's *Theogony* Gaea was not created by some god, as the Bible presents it, but appeared after Chaos by herself, becoming the very first and most potent force of life.

Erich Fromm presented in *The Forgotten Language* an unconventional critical interpretation of the Oedipus myth by attempting to read the myth in the light of the conflict between patriarchal and matriarchal cultures. Quoting Bachofen, Fromm treats the latter as the original social system of Ancient Greece. Also Ernst Cassirer in *An Essay On Man*, while summarizing the stages of Greek religion, speaks of life as undivided in the sense of unhierarchical prior to the conquest of the Olympian gods. The guarantee of this harmony and equality of life was Gaea-Tellus, the primordial goddess, the very source of life. As history has unfolded, however, a negative aspect of the Great Mother has prevailed.

Some female goddesses (called Mothers) are mentioned in Plutarch's *The Life of Marcellus*, which served as a source of inspiration for Goethe – in the second part of *Faust* he introduced a group of mysterious, awesome beings called Mothers who, as Mephistopheles explains, reign in solitude and around whom space or time do not exist. The apparent calmness with which Faust reacts to this explanation only underscores the enormous existential dread that he experiences. Obviously, his fear mingled with expectation springs from the fact that he faces a mystery, standing in front of unknown, primordial forces. Thus, the goddess of fertility may inspire the dismay and apprehension which emanate from Mother's negative aspect (she is a threat to patriarchal order, a rebel, a murderess – e.g. Lilith who preferred punishment to patriarchal marriage³²) and make her appear as a monster, e.g. in the shape of Circe, Delilah, Kali, Lamia, Lilith, Medea, Medusa, Salome, Scylla, Sphinx, Milton's Eve or Errorr from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* – “most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdain” – and many, many others.

It must be underscored that this negative aspect is valid only within the boundaries of patriarchal culture. According to Simone de Beauvoir a woman

³² See: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp.35-36.

in the phallogocentric world has been made to stand for “all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death.”³³ At the same time the mother-goddess myth sustains women's power and dignity; what is more, being anti-hierarchical, it threatens the patriarchal order. It is crucial to underline here the dichotomy that exists in patriarchal societies between the powerful mother and powerless women. Mother embodies the threat to patriarchy since she possesses power beyond the reach of men.

We should also clearly distinguish between Mother as archetype and biological mothers, the bearers of our existence. Jung demanded from his readers separation between the image of Mother, celebrated and feared in all human cultures and those human beings called mothers. According to Jung, the archetype of self for a woman always includes the chthonic Mother, whether or not the woman has any children. This separation turns out to be basic for understanding the deconstructive operations which Angela Carter applies to the Mother archetype in *The Passion of New Eve*.

Feminist theory and practice towards motherhood provide another interesting point of reference for Carter's interpretation of it. The 1970s were dominated by views that underscored the oppressive aspects of motherhood and perceived the figure of mother as a tool of patriarchy since this is the mother who socializes children into traditional gender roles. Hence there exists strong resentment and hostility towards, what Adrienne Rich calls, “the institution of motherhood.” Paulina Palmer attributes those negative attitudes, in her opinion wrong and unjust, to the ‘blaming the mother’ school of thought promoted in the 1950s and 1960s by Laing and his fellow psychiatrists who spoke of “the unhappy, insecure, cold, but possessive mother.”³⁴ It also left its mark in the literature of the 1970s which excelled in “caricatured portrayals of the mother drawn from the daughter's resentful viewpoint”³⁵, novels written in that decade (e.g. Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, or Piercey's *The High Cost of Living*) often depict the mother as monster – the vampirish mother, neurotic mother, destructive mother, “inculcator of restrictive codes of femininity.”³⁶

On the other hand, some theorists, such as Irigaray, have tried to construct a positive image of woman out of qualities regarded in phallogocentric societies as unacceptable. She points out that a male-defined culture creates a contradictory image of a woman – as ‘a void’ or ‘an empty receptacle’ who simultaneously possesses a potential for evil, which in the eyes of feminists makes her a positive threat to the patriarchy. Adrienne Rich points out that,

³³ Ibidem, p.34.

³⁴ Quoted after Palmer, op.cit., p.163.

³⁵ Ibidem, p.162.

³⁶ Ibidem.

paradoxically, mother is given an almost superhuman power of control, of influence, and of life-support in a patriarchal culture. Such a superhuman figure has been defined in psychoanalytical terms as 'the phallic mother', an infant's projection of the omnipotent mother, capable of everything, possessing every desirable attribute. Obviously, such a concept refers to the fantasy image of the Mother.

Like most of Angela Carter's characters, Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* is a fantastic figure, an idea rather than a real person, the embodiment of the archetype of the Great Mother. We usually recognize archetypes when they are actualized in artistic creation, then thanks to our collective unconscious (inherited memories of mankind's collective past, as Jung defined it) which resides in a latent state in our 'personal' unconscious, we are able to recollect their emotional significance.

The trick with Carter's use of archetypes is that she prevents us from *recollecting* the meaning, instead forcing us to *read* it. In order to make it possible for us to read it, Carter fills it up with allusions and references to such an extent that the archetypes, overloaded with meaning, become grotesques. This tactic enables Carter to present the archetypes as products of culture. As Irigaray demonstrates in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, the Platonic antithesis *logos* (masculinity)/ *matter* (femininity) defines woman as the material base on which man erects his intellectual and cultural constructs.³⁷ Carter not only presents the Mother archetype as a patriarchal construct, but also intensifies its arbitrariness. Consequently, the archetype she re-creates is a virtual figure sewn together, like Frankenstein's monster, from grafts taken from cultural myths.

Accusing Carter of failure to portray a positive representation of femininity in *The Passion of New Eve*, Paulina Palmer defines the figure of Mother in the novel as "a parodic portrait of matriarchal superwoman ... a grotesque parody of the maternal, modelled on Freud's and Laing's chauvinistic paradigms."³⁸ Palmer directs her criticism to the fact that Carter does not acknowledge the value of matriarchy by promoting positive feminine attitudes.

Actually, Carter's presentation of the underground city of Beulah and Mother reigning there, proves that she does not support the world-without-men utopia nor yearn for the lost Atlantis of matriarchy. Additionally, Palmer's criticism of *The Passion of New Eve* as presenting the masque of femininity from the outside, i.e. from a masculine viewpoint, also proves somewhat mis-addressed since the novel explores Mother as yet another masque of femininity within patriarchal culture. Carter is interested in constructing a sign woman, a virtual figure which exists only as a result of an outside observer's will to confront it. But what is this virtual Mother like?

³⁷ Quoted after Palmer, *ibidem*, p.169.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp.18-19.

Having been captured in the desert by an armed girl-guerilla and brought to Beulah, the underground headquarters of Mother (see “The Cave” in the previous chapter), Evelyn is escorted through the labyrinthine corridors to Mother, or as Evelyn puts it to “the Minotaur at the heart of the maze” (*PNE*, 58), which means that he still thinks of himself as a ‘hero’. But his first glimpse of her makes him aware that he is in front of a primordial force, his fate and destiny:

She had been waiting for me all my life, I knew it the moment that I saw her; but nothing in my life had hinted she might always have been, with her menacing immobility of a Hindu statue. One glance assured me she was sacred. She had been human once; and now she had made herself into this. This!

Mother has made symbolism a concrete fact.

She is the hand-carved figurehead of her own, self-constructed theology.

And when I saw her, I knew I had come home. (*PNE*, 58)

Through the work of the collective unconscious, Evelyn is able to recognize the unknown – to *recollect* it. His latent desire to return to the womb, to Mother, has almost come true.

Mother is not human, she is the embodiment of potentiality, a symbol made into a concrete cultural fact we can precisely read. In Evelyn's collective memory the myth of Gaea revives, hence stress is put on self-creation and the usurpation of power: “The great, black, self-anointed, self-appointed prophetess, the self-created god-head” (*PNE*, 58); “She was personified and self-fulfilling fertility” (*PNE*, 59). Besides, Mother stands for mystery, some inaccessible truth, the most important answer to all questions, “the destination of all men” (*PNE*, 59), the possibility of transformation or annihilation; she is a promise and refusal at the same time, contradiction incarnate, thus anti-logos. Her most striking feature however is her enormously gross body which seems to be fascinating and threatening simultaneously:

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 the Highgate Cemetery; her face and 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 like the false beard Queen Hatshepsut of the Two Kingdoms had worn. She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow – she possessed two tiers of nipples, the result ... of a strenuous programme of grafting, so that ... she could suckle four babies at one time. And how gigantic her limbs were! 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, wrinkled like the skin of a black olive, rucked like a Greek peasant's goatskin bottle, looked as rich as though it might contain within itself the source of a marvellous, dark, revivifying river, as if she herself were the only oasis in the desert and her crack the source of all the life-giving water of the world. (*PNE*, 59)

In the above block description of the goddess of fertility, archetype become flesh, we can observe Carter's playful attitude toward the myth. She ironically mingles antiquity – Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece – with modernity (in the comic similes to Marx's bust and figures on pediments in a people's republic). In this perfectly sketched fragment, Mother appears as the personification of Nature herself – breasted like a sow, with hands like giant fig leaves and bull's neck, with skin of black olive. The giantess is also equated with earth as “the only oasis in the desert” and as “the source of all the life-giving water in the world.”

But additionally, she seems to be artificial – with the statue's head she becomes an object of art, product of that “strenuous programme of grafting”, “mythological artefact” who “reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form as an emblem, as an example” (PNE, 60). When she opens her “oracular mouth” (PNE, 61) and speaks, Evelyn observes that she was “all Mahler in her intonation” (PNE, 63), and her voice “like an orchestra composed entirely of cellos” (PNE, 60). She presents herself surrounded by ancient music of gong and harp, basked in “an aureole of golden light”, engulfed by a choral litany chanted in her praise which compares her to the ancient Matriarchal Goddesses. Carter's description of the ritual is a parody – its blatant pathos generates a grotesque atmosphere. Also her being the only oasis in the desert seems to be problematic since there is no proof, only declarations, of her fertility. On the contrary, her desperate clinging to (artificial) biological engineering rather points at the opposite.

Nicole Ward Jouve comments on the figure of Mother in *The Passion of New Eve* as follows:

Though outwardly she conforms to the Matriarchal Goddess pattern of ... pre-Minoan variety (she's black, archaic-looking and sports tiers of breasts), though she behaves like a Freudian little boy's worst fantasy, she's also a cosmetic surgeon and mad futurist dictator.³⁹

It is evident that Evelyn feels like a little boy in front of her – first by displaying a frightened fascination and enchantment at the size of her body (“What arms! Like girders. Like aqueducts” (PNE, 63); “her huge back and great haunches, ... her gigantic front, ... its ponderous declivities” (61); “she was twice my size” (PNE, 65); second, because she treats him like a child; and third, by finding himself absolutely sexually powerless: “Before this overwhelming woman, the instrument that dangled from my belly was useless” (PNE, 60).

Marilyn R. Mumford, in an essay on images of men and women in science fiction illustrations makes a very interesting point when she gives the answer to the question she herself asks: What do men most fear in women? Her

³⁹ Nicole Ward Jouve, “Mother is a Figure of Speech”, in Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror*, op.cit., p.156.

answer is quite convincing, since she claims that men fear that they will have to copulate with a being whose sexual appetite outstrips their own, “since the worst sin a man can commit in a macho society is not want sex with a woman.”⁴⁰ Thus, Evelyn before being raped makes this tragic (though in the context actually comic) confession that he “had reached journey's end as a man” and “experienced the pure terror of Faust” (*PNE*, 60). A male's worst unconscious fears must have come true when he “caught one glimpse of her gaping vagina” which “looked like the crater of a volcano on the point of eruption” (*PNE*, 64).

After raping Evelyn, Mother turns into the incarnation of the fearsome Phrygian nature goddess Cybele who, as Frazer recorded in *The Golden Bough*, was celebrated by ritual self-emasculatation of her novices. Mother-Cybele conducts the operation by herself with the help of an obsidian knife, closing this sequence of Evelyn's nightmarish ordeal.

In the fragment quoted above, Nicole Ward Jouve describes Mother as a cosmetic surgeon and mad futurist dictator. In this sense, Mother turns out to be a female version of a mad scientist – in her attempt to create a perfect Eve by castrating Evelyn she acts like Frankenstein, who also dared to steal from Nature the knowledge of life secrets by “dabbling in the dirt”: like him she eventually fails.

Nonetheless, it does not mean that Mother has not had female predecessors in literature. They were of course witches, to name only Vathek's mother Carathis in Beckford's *Vathek*, Caliban's witch-mother Sycorax, or Sade's monstrous Durand in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*.

As we have already seen, Angela Carter presents Mother as a symbol, an emblem, a sign, an archetype overflowing with significance which demands to be read and interpreted. Eve, at the end of her labyrinthine peregrinations which parody mythical journeys to the Underworld, finds out that “Mother is a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness” (184), i.e. Mother exists only as potentiality, as a being accessible only in the virtual reality of patriarchal narrative.

This archetypal figure ultimately turns out to be the biological mother of Leilah. Later, as an old woman, she loses her sight, has a nervous breakdown, and waits for the end of her days drinking and singing to herself on the beach – a quite harmless, repulsive old hag who, despite being described by Carter with some ironic tenderness, is finally forsaken by her daughter.

The figure of mother appears also in a few other stories by Carter, but nowhere does it have the polemical impact of the revised archetype from *The Passion of New Eve*. In the other stories mothers usually conform to the rules of the genre – for instance they are quite often dead, a frequent motif in fairy tales.

⁴⁰ Marilyn R. Mumford, ‘The Brass Brasserie: Sexual Dimorphism in Science Fiction Illustration’ in Jane B. Weedman (ed.), *Women Worldwalkers*, op.cit., p.201.

In Carter's versions of the **Beauty and the Beast** tale (“The Tiger's Bride” and “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”) the young heroines are **half-orphans** (i.e. motherless), and have to comply with the **rules of the patriarchal world** – they simply become means of repairing their fathers' financial position. The absence of their mothers is significant, because it means that the daughters have no support from more experienced women when they really need it. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, although Desiderio's prostitute mother has been dead for a long time, the fact that she conceived her son with an Indian saves his life because he finds shelter among the **River People**.

Also the siblings in “Penetrating to the **Heart of the Forest**” and in “Executioner's Beautiful Daughter” have no mother, and in *Heroes and Villains* Marianne's mother dies in sorrow after her son's death. In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Albertina's dead mother lies embalmed on the sofa in Doctor Hoffman's castle – both shocking and kitschy motif rooted, as many other motifs in this novel, in surrealism.

Mother as a sexual terrorist appears in “The Snow Child”, the story based on the Snow White fairy tale in which Carter exposes the Oedipal conflict between Mother and Daughter – see the clear and concise interpretation of the story by Patricia Duncker.⁴¹

Some critics have pointed out that Angela Carter does not present positive examples of the mother/daughter bond, thus following the pattern of breakdown of understanding between mother and daughter promoted in phallogocratic culture. Nonetheless, “The Bloody Chamber”, a story based on Perrault's tale of Bluebeard, does provide an example of a mother who shows empathy.

The mother in this story, when she hears her daughter crying over the phone and saying that she has golden bath taps, understands what is going to happen. Although in the original story the girl's brothers come to the rescue of the unfortunate bride, in Carter's version, mother herself rushes on horseback to rescue her daughter and kills the murderous Marquis with a single shot from her husband's service revolver. At the moment of confronting Bluebeard, the mother looks like Medusa, yet another female monster, who is, however, in this tale, victorious.

But what a woman she is! – “On her eighteenth birthday, my mother had disposed of a man-eating tiger that had ravaged the villages in the hills north of Hanoi” (BC, 40), says the narrator by way of explanation. Thus, the positive bond between mother and daughter is possible in Carter's fiction, but only if mother manages to transcend the archetypal role (including its negative aspects) mythologically established in patriarchy and/or takes over the exclusive preserve of the man (swift action, horses, hunting, a revolver etc.), that is when she replaces the father figure.

⁴¹ Patricia Duncker, ‘Re-Imagining The Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers’, *Literature and History: A Journal For the Humanities*, 10/1 (spring 1984), p.7.

If Mother as a mythic figure is doomed to failure in Carter's world, how does her male counterpart – The Great Sage, The Master – do in the theatre of overthrown myths?

4.3. THE MASTER

In the above comments on the figure of Mother, I mentioned that as a futuristic dictator and a plastic surgeon, she embodies the female equivalent of the archetypal male Mad Scientist figure. But even casual readers must realize that in many of Angela Carter's fictional works they encounter a demonic male character whose roots can be found in the myth of Faust – a man whose hunger for knowledge leads him to failure and despair. Like Goethe's mythical hero they cannot stop themselves from pursuing their desire, continuing their experiments and investigations obsessively, as if they were mad or possessed.

Elizabeth MacAndrew in her comments on Mad Scientists perceives them as “violators of Mother Earth and her secrets”⁴³ by the means of intellect. She indicates that such characters as Doctor Frankenstein, Rappaccini, Aymler, and Doctor Coppelius are obviously consumed with a desire for illicit knowledge and unable to relinquish their ambition to wrest secrets from Nature and in this way defy the gods. In consequence their share is a bitter end. There is also Prospero among traditional master figures who endeavour to possess the secrets of nature, but his case seems exceptional. This omnipotent patriarchal sorcerer who exercises absolute control over his island by means of power taken from his books does not overreach himself and does not deserve the fall. Unlike the other masters mentioned above, Prospero controls himself, not only the cosmic powers – in accordance with patriarchal rules, he restores order, not abolishes it.

All of Carter's male archetypal figures crave absolute power, putting aside whatever moral issues arise – as if in the belief that a pure mind stands outside morality. Maria Janion in her presentation of the Faustian myth⁴⁴ mentions Alain Besançon who, reflecting on the issue of modern freedom, refers to Kierkegaard's notion that people can be divided not into those who commit evil and those who do not (because everybody does), but into those who *accept* the difference between good and evil and those who repudiate or disfigure it. The

⁴³ Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p.179.

⁴⁴ Maria Janion, ‘Pełnia Fausta czyli tragedia antropologiczna’, in *Wobec zła* (Chotomów: Verba, 1989), p.171.

main male figures in Angela Carter's stories serve as embodiments of the allures of moral relativism.

In this sense they can be perceived as the progeny of Gothic villains, since, like their literary ancestors, they are symbolic figures, a fact which MacAndrew underlines in her discussion of Gothic characters. She also draws our attention to the fact that the method of presenting Gothic villains serves to demonstrate "not frail humans, but the nature of human frailty. They appear ... to reproduce evil, madness, and torment located in the human mind."⁴⁵ As a literary figure, a Gothic villain exists as a cross between the mimetic characters of the realistic social novel and mythic characters of fantasy. As MacAndrew demonstrates, the features of the former kind of hero are designed to elicit sympathy and understanding towards the Gothic villain, while those of the latter provide their symbolic power.

Angela Carter deleted as much as possible any resemblance to mimetic characters. Like in other cases, the archetypical villains and mad scientists have no psychological life – they represent the essence of their desire for power. Carter pushes them toward allegory, they become *personifications* of vileness which is why, unlike Gothic villains, they cannot be pitied. They do not seem to suffer 'the torments of the damned while committing their nefarious deeds'⁴⁶ and do not battle with themselves to commit them like their old-fashioned predecessors. Again, they have obtained only virtual existence and are only what they stand for.

On the other hand, two of Carter's characters, namely Doctor Hoffman and The Count/Erotic Traveller have their own doubles and together form a sort of balance to each other – they are the Minister and the black pimp of New Orleans respectively, just as Donally (an analogous figure in *Heroes and Villains*) has Marianne's father for his negative. Other characters of this kind – the tyrant Zero, the huntsman in "Master", and the executioner in "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter" – function without such counterparts. Counterpart or no, though, all are merely types.

The diabolical Doctor Hoffman is a mad scientist who dreams of freeing the world from restrictions of reality by creating an alternative, immaterial virtual reality consisting of anarchic images and phantoms that encroach on the realm of nature and common sense. He appears as a descendant of the Gothic villains – his private work-room is described as "half Rottwang's laboratory in Laing's *Metropolis*", "the cabinet of Dr Caligari", "the laboratory of a dilettante aristocrat of the late seventeenth century who dabbled in natural philosophy and tried his hand at necromancy" (*IDMDH*, 205).

⁴⁵ MacAndrew, op.cit, p.81.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p.82.

Lorna Sage in her concise monograph of Angela Carter precisely describes the Doctor in terms of his symbolic significance:

The Doctor is ... the most deadly of Carter's puppet-masters: he is the great patriarchal Forbidder turned Permitter, the one who sets the libido 'free' – a most depressing figure, because he points to the recognition that there's no world *outside* power-games ... here we are again, in the Gothic mode, with the mad scientist.⁴⁷

Since, as many critics have observed, Angela Carter's fictions of the 1970s are literally armed with ideas, her characters' basic function is to enable her to express them. Doctor Hoffman does not represent an exception here, hence he is a parody of a literary hero. His resemblance to mimetic characters turns out to be a big ruse: as a virtual being he cannot be more than a compilation of cultural meanings.

Doctor Hoffman's name and his quasi-incestuous relationship with his daughter point to the literary model of this madman – Doctor Coppelius, a manufacturer of eyes and magical instruments of sight, from E.T.A.Hoffmann's story "The Sandman" (the motif of voyeurism reappears throughout the novel; in the chapter called "The Acrobats of Desire" eyes are used as juggling objects) – Desiderio even speaks of "the looking glasses of her [Albertina's] eyes" (*IDMDH*, 202). Furthermore, Hoffman (spelled with one 'n') is also the name of the inventor of LSD, and although Carter claimed she was not aware of the LSD Hoffman when she created her visionary character, such a connection perfectly accounts for the 'drug' aura of the novel.⁴⁸

Doctor Hoffman is absent for the most part of the novel, but the effects of his scientific magic, although immaterial, are palpable and form his monstrous image. On the other hand, his appearance stands in contrast to his appalling mind. When Desiderio eventually meets the doctor in his castle, he stands in front of a perfect gentleman:

He was grey-faced, grey-haired and grey-eyed. He wore a handsomely tailored dark suit and his hands were exquisitely manicured ... He was so quiet, so grey, so calm and he had just said something entirely meaningless in a voice of perfect, restrained reason. (*IDMDH*, 198-9)

Doctor Hoffman turns out to be the Great Patriarch, the embodiment of Jung's archetype of the Great Sage, the very representation and effigy of patriarchy, with "his quietness, his almost quiescence ... a willed concentration of thought that, if exploited, might indeed rule the world" (*IDMDH*, 200).

He was a grey ghost sitting in a striped coat at a very elegant table and yet he was also Prospero – though, ironically enough, one could not judge the Prospero effect in his own castle That was the source of my

⁴⁷ Sage, op.cit., p.35.

⁴⁸ See Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'The Fate of the Surrealist Imagination in the Society of the Spectacle', in Lorna Sage (ed.), op.cit., p.104.

bitter disappointment. I had wanted this house to be a palace dedicated only to wonder. (*IDMDH*, 200)

As a monstrous figure chasing shadows of his evil-possessed mind, Doctor Hoffman disappoints, just like his mythic castle turns out to be utter disappointment (see “The Castle” in the previous chapter). In presenting this character Carter broke a very important rule of Gothic fiction – the villain must not be shown at minor, everyday tasks like eating and chatting at the table, let alone stroking calmly his dead wife's hand, or his effect will be lost. Carter deliberately emphasizes Doctor Hoffman's ordinariness for ideological reasons – so that her attack on the patriarchy is stronger. Thus Prospero's patriarchal order is attacked through Doctor Hoffman's figure. Indeed, like Prospero in *Prospero's Books* (Peter Greenaway's film adaptation of *The Tempest*) Doctor Hoffman concocts the scripts for the deeds and emotions of all characters in the novel – in actual fact Desiderio does not find him, but Hoffman himself brings him into the castle.

Frankenstein and other mad scientists in Gothic fiction represent the conflict between vice and virtue: they are often good at heart, but cannot resist their craving for forbidden fruit. Carter plays with this dichotomy in an ironic mode. She depicts Doctor Hoffman as a good father, loyal husband (even beyond the grave) and classic gentleman. Even his psychoerotic experiments lose their obviously immoral character – Doctor Hoffman intends, like Prometheus, to free the world, to become a Saviour breaking the chains of reality. His adversary in the Reality War, the Minister, whose assumptions about order are actually as monstrous as the Doctor's, is only another aspect of the same force. Carter makes use of the ancient conflict between Dionysus and Apollo, apparently the battle between Desire and Reason, but actually a patriarchal struggle for absolute power. In consequence, the novel conveys a pessimistic vision of the absolute moral relativism inherent in the patriarchal order itself.

The original figure of the mad scientist as a social mythographer in Angela Carter's fiction is Donally from *Heroes and Villains*. Though he is not so complex and grotesque a figure as Doctor Hoffman, Donally also represents patriarchal power. He is a professor who has deserted his social class in order to become a prophet of a new order. There is an obvious parallel between Donally, Doctor Hoffman and Mother who, as Elaine Jordan put it, “work on the borderline between technology and deliberate construction of communal myths. They all want to make belief, value and reality the same, and the same for all.”⁴⁹

Another villain figure in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, the Count, or The Erotic Traveller, seems to Desiderio to be “some bizarre emanation of the Doctor” (*IDMDH*, 144). In fact, this appallingly grotesque figure is to a certain extent modelled on the historical Marquis de Sade, both through his philosophy of life and biographical facts. However, Desiderio

⁴⁹ Elaine Jordan, ‘The Dangerous Edge’, in Lorna Sage (ed.), op.cit., p.207.

is not aware of the parallels with de Sade. Carter leaves these traces in the text for the eye of an attentive reader.

The Count says: "I was sentenced to death *in absentia* by the judiciary of Provence, my body was executed in effigy in the town square of Aix" (*IDMDH*, 127), which is a fact from de Sade's life. Like the Divine Marquis, the Count is a megalomaniac consumed by unnatural lusts for which he constructs his own philosophical system of transcending through desire, clearly resembling the libertine doctrine:

I have devoted my life to the humiliation and exaltation of the flesh, I am an artist; my material is flesh; my medium is destruction; and my aspiration is nature. (*IDMDH*, 126)

He craves to be watched and acknowledged; everything he does is grotesquely appalling in its cruelty and unnaturality as if he lived in a permanent attempt to demonstrate his unique monstrosity:

[H]e had a passionate conviction he was the only significant personage in the world. He was the emperor of the inverted megalomaniacs but he had subjected his personality to a most rigorous discipline of stylisation He had scarcely an element of realism and yet he was quite real. (*IDMDH*, 123)

Again, the most obvious quality of the Count as a literary figure is his virtuality.

The Count is a slave of his desires who, like all Carter's characters, is no more than a clockwork puppet. In the passages depicting his appearance, the reader finds out that the Count is not so much fearsome as comic, that he stands, as if in disguise, as a parodic emblem of his own type. In contrast to his desire to be unique, he is a typical and even stereotypical monster or villain whose nature is reflected in his apparel:

He wore a black cloak with many layers of capes on the shoulders and a top-hat from which trailers of black crepe depended at the back. He was ready for any funeral and he carried a cane tipped with a silver ball that looked as if it could kill. His diabolical elegance could not have existed without his terrible emaciation; he wore his dandyism in his very bones ... and never made a single movement that was not a gaunt but riveting work of art. (*IDMDH*, 122)

I saw his curiously pointed teeth ... exactly the fangs with which tradition credits vampires. (*IDMDH*, 123)

He was like a corpse animated only by a demonic intellectual will. (*IDMDH*, 126)

During their visit to the House of Anonymity the Count and Desiderio are handed special costumes:

Black tights made in such a way that, once we put them on, our genitals remained exposed in their entirety, testicles and all ... Then the maid handed us hood-like masks which went right over our heads, concealing

them ... our heads were changed into featureless, elongated, pinkish, rounded towers. The only indentations of these convex surfaces of pink cardboard were two slits, to look through. These masks or hoods completed our costumes which were unaesthetic, priapic and totally obliterated our faces and our self-respect; the garb grossly emphasized our manhoods while utterly denying our humanity. (*IDMDH*, 130)

In this masterly fragment Carter manages to render the voyeur into an object of contemplation. The comic grotesqueness of their costumes reinforces the degradation of the voyeurs, but also reduces them to the level of objects. Interestingly enough, the Count reminds Desiderio of the Minister and in this sense forms another link between the Minister and Doctor Hoffman. Furthermore, being represented as a sexual object whose emblem is exposed genitalia has been, in cultural tradition, a dubious female privilege, especially in pornographic literature. Carter makes subversive use of this well-established practice.

As we can easily notice, Carter tends to describe her characters as works of art, depriving them of individuality. The Count represents a hybrid between the Gothic villain and an automaton, another model favoured by Carter.

Like the Erotic Traveller, Zero is one of the most repellent and comic figures among Carter's characters. He is a misogynist and a poet, a one-eyed male chauvinist and self-anointed prophet indulging himself in violent sexual practices with his harem girls, howling and dancing his poetry in the desert, deafening himself with Wagner and obsessively searching for Tristessa's secret abode. Zero has only one leg, which according to Peter L.Hays's research symbolizes castration.⁵⁰

This symbolic hint together with Zero's totally negative name and the fact that none of his harem wives has a child by him make him a sign of patriarchal impotence masked in violence and cruelty. Zero is an entirely pathetic figure whose blind hatred of lesbianism hardly disguises his fear of being revealed as impotent and whose desire to keep a harem forces him to turn a blind eye on what his flock do at night.

Roz Kaveney, in an essay on the connections of Carter's narratives to science fiction, calls Zero "a complex piece of satire" and perceives him in the light of the violent and misogynistic strain of science fiction which largely developed after the novel was written. Kaveney observes that:

Zero is an unholy cross between the macho litterateur and Charles Manson, on whose domestic manners Zero's treatment of his harem is presumably based. And Manson, of course, found a congenial reflection of his ideas in the actions of the messiah of a previous Heinlein novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Peter L.Hays, *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1971).

⁵¹ Kaveney, op.cit., pp.181-182.

Thus, Zero represents the most brutal aspect of patriarchal culture. Being a lame, half-blind, impotent sadist he stands as its grotesque embodiment – both an archetype and a scarecrow.

There still remains one more character partly modelled on the Gothic villain – the protagonist of the title story in *The Bloody Chamber* collection. But Carter's Bluebeard draws our attention to the dichotomy of traditional sexual roles, hence he will be commented upon in the succeeding section.

4.4. THE PREDATOR-PREY DICHOTOMY

Bluebeard is another character with no proper name, a fact that points at his entirely functional meaning. The story of Bluebeard and his murderous deeds, unlike the other tales on which the stories in the collection were modelled, was not originally a folk tale, but an original story written by Charles Perrault who intended to create the figure of a male exercising tyranny within his marriage.

Nonetheless, the mythical bloodthirsty husband figure has its historical predecessor in Gilles de Rais, a Breton aristocrat living in the 15th century, notorious for his practices in necromancy and child murder. Despite the fact that his victims were mainly boys and he had been married only once to a woman who outlived him, in local folklore de Rais is claimed to have given rise to the legend of Bluebeard. The other candidate for the monstrous role is Comorre the Cursed, also a native of Brittany, who lived around 500 AD. He became infamous for murdering his pregnant wives, the last of whom was supposedly beheaded.⁵²

Unlike Perrault, Carter seems to have been less interested in conveying the moral message of the well-known tale, as in the aspect of inequality in traditional sexual relationships. While Bluebeard stands for the butcher, his innocent virgin wife embodies his meat.

Readers do not mistake the roles in the story and know exactly what is going to happen since the traditional predator-prey arrangement is clearly defined from the very beginning. The protagonists act out their parts with unhurried precision – the girl allows the Marquis to corrupt her with his wealth and social position, then learns about her husband's proclivity towards pornography. Simultaneously, the setting prepares her for her fate – the remote castle, the ominous atmosphere of the place, the paintings on the walls which contain

⁵² Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

scenes of the mutilation of women – everything in the story is a tell-tale indication of the predictable end.

What is actually original and provoking in Angela Carter's version of the tale, is her clear intention to re-write the story in the light of Marquis de Sade's philosophy of dominance-submission dialectics. In her critical interpretation of de Sade's literary and philosophical output, Carter observes:

The strong abuse, exploit and meatify the weak, says Sade. They must and will devour their natural prey. The primal condition of man cannot be modified in any way; it is eat or be eaten. (*SW*, 140)

De Sade's concept of sexual relationships is founded on the cult of dominance and cruelty. In his dichotomy the only categories of sexual roles are predator and prey, master and slave, executioner and victim, devourer and devoured. Killing is the necessary condition of pleasure. In patriarchal social conditions this division corresponds to the biological division of the human race. Obviously, Carter is well aware of this since she writes:

To be the object of desire is to be defined in the passive case.

To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman. (*SW*, 77)

Margaret Atwood observes that most of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* contain the theme of the meat and the eater.⁵³ Furthermore, to make this distinction clearer, the latter is always depicted as a carnivorous beast, either in a literal or metaphorical sense: a lion, a tiger, a wolf.

Thus, Minski-like⁵⁴ Bluebeard possesses a few feline features: "leonine shape of ... head", "dark mane" and moves "as softly as if all his shoes had soles of velvet" (*BC*, 8). He also appears to be "a huge man, an enormous man" (*BC*, 12), and at the moment when he is shot "he roared out aloud ... with fury" like a fighting lion.

There are also other features that make this figure inhuman and symbolic at the same time – the Marquis has a "strange, heavy, almost waxen face" which "seemed ... like a mask as if his real face ... lay underneath the mask" (*BC*, 8-9) and his eyes are "dark and motionless as those eyes the ancient Egyptians painted upon their sarcophagi" (*BC*, 12). Additionally, he reminded his young bride of a lily since she saw him as a man who "possessed ... that strange, ominous calm of a sentient vegetable, like one of those cobra-headed, funeral lilies" (*BC*, 9).

Obviously, all these tricks of description aim at depriving Bluebeard of individuality and depicting him as a phallic emblem of beastly patriarchal predator. In the last scene of the bloody tale the Marquis "stood stock-still ... , the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs" (*BC*, 40).

⁵³ Margaret Atwood, 'Running with the Tigers', in Lorna Sage (ed.), op.cit., p.122.

⁵⁴ Minski is a cannibal giant in de Sade's *Juliette*.

Interestingly enough, these are not the unfortunate bride's brothers who kill him, but her mother. As pointed out above, "The Bloody Chamber" is the only example of a positive relationship between mother and daughter in Angela Carter's fiction of the 1970s.

The other side of the story is, however, that Carter takes obvious pleasure in role-reversal (hence so many hybrids among her protagonists) and declares that "the notion of universality of human experience is a confidence trick" (*SW*, 12). In consequence, the mother in "The Bloody Chamber" appears to be the beast of prey herself when she gallops to save her daughter, who proudly says:

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane. (*BC*, 39)

According to Bruno Bettelheim, in most folk tales of Western culture an animal hero is a man who can be saved only by a woman's love, which means that traditionally only women were expected to change their attitude toward the sphere of sex.⁵⁵ In psychoanalytical terms, the beastly shape represents the 'id' – the uncontrolled sexual drive which must be tempered by virginal innocence and defenceless submission. The most popular fairy tale of this category is Beauty and the Beast.

The Bloody Chamber contains two stories based on the Beauty and the Beast theme – "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" – which rework the classic plot to contradictory ends. Neither of them, however, breaks the rule that the beast stands for male sexuality. Not surprisingly, both make use of the fact that Beauty is treated as a commodity whose market value saves her father, in Carter's version, from bankruptcy.

The sex-ridden fairy tales of *The Bloody Chamber* playfully employ de Sade's "lamb-and-tiger dichotomy", as Margaret Atwood labels it, alluding to Carter's aphoristic statement in "The Tiger's Bride":

The tiger will never lie down with the lamb. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers. (*BC*, 64)

As in the libertine concept this means that women are not necessarily doomed to the role of meat; they can choose freely whether they want to become beasts or prey in a social and sexual sense. In her discussion of the link between Carter and de Sade in their treatments of sexual roles, Atwood writes:

For de Sade, women can escape sacrificial lambhood (the 'natural' condition of women, as exemplified by Justine and defined by men) only by adopting tigerhood (the role of the predatory aggressor, the 'natural' role of men, as exemplified by Juliette and also defined by men). In order to escape victimisation, women have to divest themselves of the trappings of conventional womanhood.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Bruno Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne*, trans. Danuta Danek (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1985), p.214.

⁵⁶ Atwood, op.cit., p.119.

It is quite obvious that Carter subscribes to the Divine Marquis' equation of sex acts with power games. However, again as a result of her understanding of libertine philosophy (in the conclusion to *The Sadeian Woman* she writes: "It is in ... [the libertine's] holy terror of love that we find ... the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women" (*SW*, 150)), she contradicts his claims, especially the logical symmetry of the polarization of the world. Since all of Carter's protagonists represent ideas (here: social roles of the eaten and the eater) and their creator "celebrates relativity and metamorphosis"⁵⁷ they cannot, under her critical pen, obtain the status of universalia. Praising transformation, Carter lets love in.

As in the classic fairy tale, the beastly appearance dissolves when Mr Lyon is approached with love:

When her lips touched the meat-hook claws, they drew back into their pads and she saw how he had always kept his fists clenched ... Her tears fell on his face like snow and, under their soft transformation, the bones showed through the pelt, the flesh through the wide, tawny brow. And then it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the hand-somest of all the beasts. (*BC*, 51)

Thus, his leonine shape serves only to make him fearsome and loathsome to a virgin young woman, and symbolizes the nature of his sex. The transformation into a man (an affluent gentleman, an equivalent of the prince) is kept in the mode of the traditional tale; but its mild tone is subtly questioned by the tiny tinge of irony present in the fragment – doesn't this taming of the beast by an innocent creature sound rather melodramatic?

The subsequent story, "The Tiger's Bride" exemplifies an entirely different version of the predator-prey theme. The latter story is told in first-person, which makes it more a story of experience than "The Courtship of Mr Lyon".

The narrator of the story opens it vehemently with a brutal statement: "My father lost me to the Beast at cards" (*BC*, 51). From the very start, as a motherless girl brought up in the severe conditions of the North, she is perfectly aware of the inhumanity of Milord and perceives him as a "two-dimensional ... carnival figure made of papier mâché and crêpe hair" (*BC*, 53). Indeed, the typically Carterish description of La Bestia portrays him both as beast and tacky inanimate object, a work of naive art:

There is a crude clumsiness about his outlines ... he has an odd air of self-imposed restraint, as if fighting a battle with himself to remain upright when he would rather drop down on all fours ... [O]nly 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. Oh, yes, a beautiful face, but one with too much formal symmetry of

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p.122.

feature to be entirely human ... He wears a wig, too, false hair tied at the nape with a bow, a wig of the kind you see in old-fashioned portraits. 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. (*BC*, 53)

This story appears to be more in de Sade's strain since Milord *is* the beast – killer, devourer, predator – masking himself casually as a human being. Additionally, the brutal meaning of the girl's naked body is stated overtly – the contract between the Beast and her father allows him to see her naked “to the cold, white meat of contract” (*BC*, 66). After she shows him her “white skin” and “red nipples” (*BC*, 64), she is free to return to her father, but since she is “so unused to [her] own skin that to take off all [her] clothes involved a kind of flaying” (*BC*, 66), she decides to stay with the tiger, despite the “most archaic of fears, fear of devourment” (*BC*, 67). In consequence, by evoking the power of love, the transformation goes the other way round than in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”:

He dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. He will lick the skin off me!

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and tickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (*BC*, 67)

Similarly, in “Wolf-Alice”, the wolf-girl, led by instinctive maternal love, licks the wound of the werewolf Duke and as she does so, his reflection gradually reappears in the mirror. In “The Company of Wolves” another virgin girl, modelled on Little Red Riding Hood, meets a young man in the forest and they bet for a kiss who will reach her grandma's house first. The girl is described as “an unbroken egg sealed vessel” who “has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut up tight with a plug of membrane” (*BC*, 114) and the man is a hunter who later turns into a wolf, so there can be no mistake what roles they stand for. Confronted with the wolf in her grandma's house the girl, similarly to the tiger's bride, sensibly refuses stereotyping – “she knew she was nobody's meat” (*BC*, 118) – and gives him the kiss she owes. “See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed between the paws of the tender wolf”; nothing daunted, says Carter, the meat-devourer games are for those afraid of love.

Nonetheless, there are several stories, clearly experimenting with this predator-prey dichotomy, in which the transformed girl kills her oppressor. In “The Erl-King”, the mythical woodland male spirit with eyes that “can eat you up” (*BC*, 86), “the tender butcher who showed ... how the price of flesh is love” (*BC*, 87) who keeps cages full of young girls turned into birds, is eventually strangled by his would-be victim. In “The Werewolf” another Riding Hood-like girl kills her grandma who appeared to be a wolf. In “Master” (*Fireworks*), an obsessed animal killer buys a pubescent “brown meat” (*FW*, 74), a daughter of

a tribe worshipping the jaguar. In the end **the girl herself changes** into a jaguar, but just before her transformation is complete, she manages to shoot him with his own gun:

His prey had shot the hunter, but she could no longer hold the gun. Her brown and amber dappled sides rippled like water as she trotted across the clearing to worry the clothing of the corpse with her teeth. But soon she grew bored and bounded away. (*FW*, 79)

Quite interestingly, in this early attempt at using the eater-eaten dichotomy, the oppressor does not appear as an animal figure.

In Carter's interpretation of de Sade's dialectics, the stereotypical roles are transgressable or even may be refused on the grounds of love. Her animal figures, however, emblematically correspond to the social and sexual positions of the participants in cultural power games.

How far does Carter go in advocating the reversal of traditional sexual roles? Is her automaton, another figure symbolizing female imprisonment in her social role, able to trespass the limits of her script?

4.5. THE AUTOMATON

In spite of the fact that, as we have already seen, Angela Carter demonstratively imposes severe restrictions on all her protagonists' freedom by constructing them as emblems of ideas rather than autonomous beings, we can find a separate category of automaton in her fiction. It was as early as in her first novel, *Shadow Dance* published in 1966, that Carter began to explore the automaton motif, which received a really mature form in the 1970s.

The figure of automaton recurs in several of the stories discussed in this dissertation, with the most fully developed figures in "The Loves of Lady Purple", "The Tiger's Bride", "The Lady of the House of Love", and in a few episodes of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, mainly in the chapter entitled "The Erotic Traveller". Additionally, Albertina – the Doctor's daughter and his deadly decoy – is a character reflecting E.T.A.Hoffmann's Olympia (Coppelius' automaton-daughter); however, being also an androgynous figure, Albertina redefines the original character.

The automaton is a grotesque figure, a variation of a monster, an incongruous being both horrifying and comic, but its most conspicuous feature in ontological terms seems to be that it is a cross between a living creature and an

inanimate object. Wolfgang Kayser writes in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*:

The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it. Amongst the most persistent of motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, automata, and their faces frozen into masks.⁵⁸

The most widely known and popular 'living doll' is Olympia, the beautiful automaton made by Doctor Coppelius in "The Sandman" by E.T.A.Hoffmann. Despite her immaculate beauty, Olympia turns out to be a pernicious marionette in the hands of her master/father, a girl with glassy eyes, a clockwork seductress who brings to a bad end those who fall in love with her. As an object of unrelenting passion and desire, the figure of Olympia was discussed by Freud in his essay called "The Uncanny."⁵⁹

For Angela Carter, as for Freud, the living doll phenomenon stands for the ambiguity of beauty which includes both challenge and threat, but for her it also reflects the attitude toward women as objects in a male dominated culture. The desirable passivity of a sexual toy is part of male sexual fantasy, but in consequence it deprives any carnal relationship of humanity (always founded on subjectivity) and leads to destruction. Angela Carter reworks the Freudian concept – of the beautiful woman with whom men fall disastrously in love – for feminist ends and demonstrates how omnipresent is the tendency to turn a young girl into a fetishised object of male desire.

From the patriarchal point of view, the most valuable feature of this kind of automaton is its passivity and obedience. Angela Carter deals directly with it in "The Tiger's Bride" where a marvellous machine-maid who rolls on tiny wheels and has a musical box in place of her heart, is a "clockwork twin" (BC, 60) of the protagonist. Before the girl turns into a tigress, she strips herself of her clothes, which metaphorically means refusing the roles of obedient daughter and sex object. She declares her independence when she says:

I will dress her [the automaton-maid] in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter. (BC, 65)

One story entirely based on the motif of a living doll, is "The Loves of Lady Purple" included in the 1974 collection *Fireworks*. In this story the narrator describes a puppet show entitled "The Loves of Lady Purple. The Notorious Amours of Lady Purple the Shameless Oriental Venus", whose star is a life-like marionette manipulated with love by an old master puppeteer called the Professor. The show puts before the public the story of Lady Purple's vile career. But the puppet turns out to be more than an inanimate doll – *she* is a medium through which the Professor reveals his passions.

⁵⁸ Quoted after MacAndrew, op.cit., p.159.

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (eds.), *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998), pp.154-168.

The doll herself looks like a **perfect masterpiece of art**:

She was the 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, joined 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 of deep, dark, slumberous colours – profound pinks, crimson and the vibrating purple with which she was synonymous, a purple the colour of blood in a love suicide. (*FW*, 26)

This exotic and bizarre figure however, has a very curious feature:

[H]er actions were not so much an imitation as a distillation and intensification of those of a born woman and so she could become the quintessence of eroticism, for no woman born would have dared to be so blatantly seductive. (*FW*, 27)

“In the iconography of the melodrama”, the narrator explains, “Lady Purple stood for passion and all her movements were calculations in an angular geometry of sexuality” (*FW*, 27).

Yet, the most curious fact about this marvel of a puppeteer's craft is that, according to the Professor's own words, the marionette actually was “the petrification of a universal whore”, “the only surviving relic of the shameless Oriental Venus herself” (*FW*, 28), which changes her ontological status from impersonation to that of zombie.

During her life as a prostitute she exercised practices which could make de Sade himself shudder with pleasure:

Booted, in leather, she became a mistress of the whip Subsequently, she graduated in the mysteries of the torture chamber, where she thoroughly researched all manner of ingenious mechanical devices. She utilized a baroque apparatus of funnel, humiliation, syringe, thumbscrew, contempt and spiritual anguish (*FW*, 31)

This Juliette's diligent disciple became “the image of irresistible evil”, and following her murderous instincts “visited men like a plague” and left them “clothed in rags held together with the discharge of their sores ... tottering noseless forward” (*FW*, 31). Writing quite seriously though with characteristic subversity about the ‘economy of a whore’, Carter points out that if her business prospers, the whore “may ruin men, like any other successful entrepreneur” (*SW*, 58). The parallel between such theoretical assumption and the deeds of Lady Purple is striking.

Carter utilizes kitschy imagery for earnest ends. In such fragments, exploding with irony, she builds up the very impersonation of Freud's uncanny *femme fatale* who exchanges clap for dough in the free market manner.

The seemingly perfect relationship between Lady Purple and her master is founded in fact on the complete dependence of the puppet. The Professor exercises total control over his marionette – only in his hands does she become alive, with him even speaking for her – and exploits her economically. Isn't the Professor as a matter of fact her pimp making his living out of her sexual skills?

In his loving care she remains the icon of her deplorable past. But old habits die hard, says Carter: in the parody of the Frog Prince kiss of life, Lady Purple drains him with her vampire teeth, burns his theatre, and disappears in the direction of the pleasure quarters.

Furthermore, in this early treatment of the living doll theme (the story must have been written before *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*), Carter leaves open the question of the ontological status of the automaton, since she writes about Lady Purple:

[S]he 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? (*FW*, 38)

The image of prostitute as inanimate object of desire appears both in “The Loves of Lady Purple” and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* where it functions as an untransformable figure of passivity. Unlike the Oriental Venus, the other prostitutes are depicted in a group, losing any individual features and becoming a metaphor for the condition of women in a patriarchal society. The prostitutes are entirely reified in these presentations; they appear as blatantly packed consumer goods, comfortably arranged for the benefit of customers:

Along the streets, the women for sale, the mannequins of desire, were displayed in wicker cages so that potential customers could saunter past inspecting them at leisure. These exalted prostitutes sat motionless as idols. Upon their real features were painted symbolic abstractions of the various aspects of allure and the fantastic elaboration of their dress hinted it covered a different kind of skin. The cork heels of their shoes were so high they could not walk but only totter and the sashes round their waists were of brocade so stiff the movements of the arms were cramped and scant so they presented attitudes of physical unease ... Therefore the gestures of these *hetaerae* were as stylised as if they had been clockwork. (*FW*, 30)

This fragment describing puppet-prostitutes lacks any direct hints at their erotic features – in fact they are emanations of male perversity: they are locked in cages as wild animals or women-birds in “The Erl-King”. Moreover, they appear to be automatons because of their clothes which, on the other hand, are

stereotypically womanly – covering the **body**, they promise erotic pleasures, and restrict movements. This kind of **woman's dress** turns out to be her prison.

In *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* the Erotic Traveller and Desiderio visit a **libertine brothel (The House of Anonymity)** whose main attraction is the Bestial room featuring **living creatures turned into furniture**:

[M]onkeys were living candelabra; they clutched black candles in their paws, wedged in the coiled kinks on their tails

At both ends of the sofas, flamboyantly gothic arm-rests, were the gigantically maned heads of ... lions The serviceable armchairs were brown bears who squatted on their haunches The occasional tables ran about, yelping obsequiously; they were toadying hyenas and on their brindled backs were strapped silver trays The ... floorboards were scattered with vivid pelts of jaguars that stirred and grumbled underfoot (IDMDH, 130-131)

But the only creatures kept in cages are prostitutes staged in the most degrading and violated poses, depersonalised objects of perversive desire, mutilated half-animals, half-women totally deprived of subjectivity – nameless, faceless mutes exposing their vaginas for corrupted customers:

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. (IDMDH, 132)

The libidinous images all bared their sexual parts with a defiant absence of provocation that was not bred of innocence, for in their primitive simplicity the dozen orifices were shockingly made manifest, the ugly, undeniable, insatiable nether mouths of archaic and shameless, anonymous Aphrodite herself. (IDMDH, 133)

We can easily notice that this description totally lacks the eroticism which is supplanted by pornography, and pornography, in Carter's understanding, degrades the viewer more than the object of his voyeurism. In fact, Carter even provides her own moral commentary in the choice of words, e.g. "sinister", "abominable", "primitive", "ugly", "shameless". As a result, Desiderio perceives himself as "only a totem of carnality", and the Count as "the Pope of the profane, officiating at an ultimate sacrament, the self-ordained, omnipotent, consecrated man-phallus himself" (IDMDH, 133).

The episode in the House of Anonymity has its literary source again in de Sade. In her peregrinations around Europe, Juliette, together with her entourage, is captured by the cannibal giant Minski in whose castle all furniture are women – tables, chairs, sofas, sideboards are made of the living flesh of mutilated girls. Thus, Minski, as Carter observes in *The Sadeian Woman*, "reduced women to their final use function" (SW, 94). In political terms depersonalisation is the core of pornography.

Nevertheless, there is more to it than that in the artistic sense. The horrendous scenes of sexual violence perpetrated on women portrayed as passive

objects seem to be variations on the theme exploited by Surrealist painters whose art unquestionably plays with male voyeuristic fantasies. Susan Robin Suleiman in her essay on elements of Surrealist imagination in Angela Carter's works compares her peepshow displays, described in detail by Desiderio in earlier parts of the novel, with surrealist paintings. One of the displays called "Everyone knows what the night is for" exhibits the headless trunk of a woman with a knife in her belly. Suleiman associates it with Marcel Duchamp's installation called *Etant donne* ("Given that") exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which shows a similarly mutilated female figure. What is more, Duchamp's work also puts the viewer in the position of voyeur; in Suleiman's account "installed in its own dark room, *Etant donne* requires that the viewer glue an eye to a peephole in order to see the scene."⁶⁰

Automatons and simulacra, as figures of grotesque, generate strong associations with characters of Gothic fiction. In "The Lady of the House of Love", Carter, who frequently uses Gothic imagery for parodic and satirical purposes, ironically plays with the figure of a young vampirella who, quite like the loyal daughter in "The Tiger's Bride", appears to be an obedient descendant of the vile stock of Vlad the Impaler.

The Queen of Vampires is also described as an automaton:

[She is] so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity ... Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness. (*BC*, 94)

Even the young cyclist, who finally sets her free, sees at the moment of weakness that:

[S]he is like a doll ... a ventriloquist's doll ... a great, ingenuous piece of clockwork ... [S]he might be an automaton, made of white velvet and black fur ... (*BC*, 102)

The vampirella wears her appearance like a costume and she seems to be unhappy with the part she plays as Dracula's descendant:

Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror – except her horrible reluctance for her role. (*BC*, 95)

This state of inner discontent makes her ready for transformation in the manner of the predator-prey metamorphosis. In the ironic role-reversal, the power of the cyclist's virginity enables him to break the spell and let her become human, though at the price of her death.

As we have seen above, Angela Carter uses the figure of automaton not solely as a literary motif which places her fiction in the context of literary tradition, but as a vehicle to discuss certain female roles in patriarchal society – daughter, prostitute, *femme fatale*. Simulacra represent female passivity and

⁶⁰ Suleiman, op.cit., p.114.

obedience – the ‘natural’ state of women in a male-dominated culture. Through critical play with de Sade, Freud and Hoffmann, Carter undermines the foundations of this culture and deprives her automatons of the assumption of (unchangeable) reality. As virtual figures, i.e. potential social roles, they stand for what they actually are – submissive marionettes in the patriarchy's butchering hands.

FEVVERS: THE VIRTUAL AERIALISTE

Angela Carter's eighth novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) is perceived by some – especially feminist – critics as a turning point in her literary career. They claim that in this novel Carter for the first time presented, in the character of a marvellous aerialiste, an unequivocally positive image of woman.¹

Fevvers appeals to feminist critics as an independent heroine, full of strength and energy in pursuing her goals. She also challenges classic images of the “traditional” heroine as either a defenceless ignoramus or an experienced fallen woman. Though she is a fantastic creature, with her artificially dyed wings, no navel, and a suspicion that she had been hatched out of an egg, Fevvers manages to retain full humanity – she simply acts in the same way as a male adventure novel hero does. Fevver's literal and metaphorical physicality and stamina, illustrated in the fortunes and misfortunes of her life, defy the mental and social taboos concerning women, taboos incurred in the phallogocentric world.

Nights at the Circus has also been called a watershed in Carter's literary development because of a clear change of the means of expression. Marina Warner observes in the novel a shift in Carter's characteristic style of humour, as she puts it “from a gorgeous, phantasmagoric eloquence of excess and voluptuousness, rooted in the work of the Symbolists, in Baudelaire and in Poe ... to a more particularly British savoury brand of bawdy, out of *Wife of Bath* and *Falstaff* to pantomime, music hall, and *Spitting Image*.”²

¹ For instance Paulina Palmer, Ricarda Schmidt and Nicole Ward Jouve underline Carter's new treatment of the themes of womanhood and motherhood in *Nights at the Circus* (see the bibliography for the titles of their essays). Also see pages referring to *NC* in the essays by Roz Kaveney, Elaine Jordan, Marina Warner, Isobel Armstrong and Hermione Lee, all included in: Lorna Sage (ed.), *Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 1994).

² Marina Warner, ‘Angela Carter: Bottle Blond, Double Drag’, in Lorna Sage (ed.) *Flesh and the Mirror* (London: Virago, 1994), p.247.

Nevertheless this transformation enriches Carter's poetical palette rather than ending her earlier period of fascination with the Gothic. *Nights at the Circus* boils with motifs and symbols known from Carter's previous novels, such as depiction of space as labyrinth or grotesque personae of archetypomimetic nature. On the other hand, the somewhat coarse sort of humour the novel is full of, has its precedent in the dazzling ribaldry of Carter's version of "Puss-in-Boots" from the 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber*.

Nights at the Circus is different from other novels discussed here in one more aspect – the time of the action is precisely defined here. Fevvers's story is set at the eve of the 20th century, when the previous century is fading away and the forthcoming one brings in a lot of hopes and expectations. By introducing a concrete historical moment into her novel, Carter manages to confront these expectations, and she does it through Fevvers who represents (ironically of course) The New Woman, the woman who will be able to fly and who will become independent in the 20th century. Carter ironically mocks such foolish hopes by contrasting them with the material conditions of life women lead in different parts of the world – first by depicting the sexual exploitation of women in London, then by presenting the House of Correction – "scientific establishment for the study of female criminals" (NC, 211) – modelled on Bentham's Panopticon.³ Furthermore, the fact that Fevvers as the New Woman has got wings ties her to the long tradition of winged goddesses and other volatile female creatures from patriarchal mythologies.

In her childhood Fevvers is exploited in Ma Nelson's brothel not as a prostitute, but as a living statue of the Winged Victory, like the living models in shopping displays nowadays. She plays the part of an *objet d'art*, a totally immobile figure of heroic antiquity posed there for the pleasure of a connoisseur's eye. At the same time the fact that the wings are real remains hidden so that, as Fevvers puts it "I was spared the indignity of curiosity" (NC, 32), but actually, for the high-brow clientele, well-read in classical antiquity, the threatening meaning of the living Winged Victory should be clear:

Every night, I mimicked the Winged Victory in the drawing-room niche and was the cynosure of all eyes but Nelson made it known that those shining golden wings of mine were stuck over a hump with a strong adhesive and did not belong to me at all. (NC, 32)

Moreover, Fevvers poses as the model of the statue of *Nike of Samothrace*, though she has both arms and head, all complete. Ma Nelson goes even further and, taking the role of the forgotten sculptor, puts into those huge regained hands a sword. Thus, Fevvers really becomes the guardian of the ship, "the spiritual flagship of her fleet, as if a virgin with a weapon was the fittest guardian angel for a houseful of whores" (NC, 38). Here the irony of the am-

³ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Wolność* (Kraków: Znak, 1995).

biguous meaning of the symbol reveals itself, which Fevvers naively explains like this:

Yet it may be that a *large woman* with a *sword* is not the best advertisement for a brothel. For, slow but sure, trade fell off from my fourteenth birthday on. (NC, 38)

It is easy to guess that such a statue must have raised the question whose victory it is and what the castratory device (i.e. the sword, although pointed downwards), means in that kind of place. Since the very beginning, Fevvers's life has been the evolution of her symbolic meaning.

Fevvers claims that she is a changeling forsaken on the threshold of Ma Nelson's brothel, found there wrapped in straw and sleeping among broken eggshells – alluding to Christ's birth, no doubt (her future is to become the saviour of womankind), but also – by using the typical fairytale motif of an orphan and a birdie as well – pointing at Christian Andersen's "Ugly Duckling" tale:

When I was a baby you could have distinguished me in a crowd of foundlings only by just this little bit of down, of yellow fluff, on my back, on top of my both shoulderblades. Just like the fluff on a chick it was. (NC, 12)

Moreover, her very name is not really a proper one, but a tell-tale fairytale name, given to her when the girls who find her comment: "Looks like the little thing's going to sprout Fevvers!" (NC, 12), a cockney pronunciation of the word 'feathers'. Additionally, the fact that she *is* a bird makes of her an emblematic girl, since *bird* also functions as one of the words used for a woman. Yet, her Christian name (Sophia) hints at her wisdom and ability to use reason, even though in a streetwise manner.

Later however, Fevvers finds the answer to the question of her origin over the mantelpiece in Ma Nelson's house on the canvas whose subject is the mythical Leda and the Swan. Obviously, this discovery is made as a result of Fevvers's unquenched vanity, but at the same time it presents her as a *product* of mythology that has slipped out of control. The actual implications of the discovery go even further – the possibility of her being the fruit of this famous love scene again serves a subversive end: it means that Fevvers traces back her history and finds out that she must be the fruit of *rape*, which automatically makes her unclean and consequently fallen. Not surprisingly, after she "spreads", Fevvers remains consumed with the question whether she can fly – and we should remember that one of the best-known feminist novels is Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*. Quite in accordance with the patriarchal rules, she receives a hard object lesson – her first secret attempt to soar ends with a *fall* from a mantelpiece, an event that clearly parodies the story of Eve whose curiosity brought her to fall:

I climbed up and stood where Father time had stood and, like a man about to hang himself, I kicked away the chair so that I would not be tempted to jump down upon it.

What a long way down the floor looked! It was only a few feet below, you understand, no great distance in itself – yet it yawned before me like a chasm, and, indeed, you might say that this gulf now before me represented the grand abyss, the poignant divide, that would henceforth separate me from common humanity. (NC, 29)

Thus her first endeavour to fly leads to the inevitable fall:

Like Lucifer, I fell. Down, down, down I tumbled, bang with a bump on the Persian rug below me, flat on my face among these blooms and beasts that never graced no natural forest, those creatures of dream and abstraction not unlike myself ... And then I knew I was not ready to bear on my back the great burden of my unnaturalness. (NC, 30)

None the less, Fevvers learns to fly in the end, but not in secret. Actually, she succeeds only thanks to her level-minded foster mother Lizzie – a suffragette and Marxist who always solves problems by using rational thinking. They both observe little pigeons and how their mother teaches them to fly, but it is Lizzie who calculates Fevvers's ability to soar, taking into account her size and weight. Two crucial points are made in this scene. Firstly, the mother-daughter bond is established between Lizzie and Fevvers: "I learnt, first, as the birds do, from the birds", and Lizzie "although she was flightless herself ... took ... upon herself the role of bird-mother" (NC, 30-31). Secondly, this bond forms a light, yet profound, parody of the Icarus myth – Lizzie playing the role of mother-engineer who wants to set herself and her daughter free, but unlike Daedalus – having learnt from his tragic history – making mathematically certain that her daughter will not meet Icarus' tragic end. Besides, Fevvers has undergone her mock-fall already, as Lucifera – the fall tied her (both in literal and metaphorical sense) to earth. Fevvers received an object lesson about the law of gravity, and learnt not to chase the chimera of her desires, but instead to think practically, the lesson Icarus also had learnt, though in a traditionally manlike, heroic way.

In spite of certain similarities between Lizzie and Mother from *The Passion of New Eve* (both think and act towards overthrowing the existing status quo and establishing a new order founded on the emancipation or even dominance of women; although the former is a pragmatist, and the other a mythographer, both share the ambition of social engineering), Fevvers's foster mother is not a grotesque (an emblematic female monster). Quite the contrary, her support and sober, though sometimes a bit sarcastic, supervision of her winged child makes her a truly caring mother, full of patience and understanding – a real guardian angel of a somewhat hot-headed aerialiste. Additionally, their relationship has something sexual about it, generating a slight aura of incest or even lesbian attachment around itself – Lizzie seems to be enormously jealous of Jack Walsler.

Not surprisingly, most feminist critics have praised Carter's new treatment of the motherhood theme, finding in it her true departure from the limits

of thinking through the prism of patriarchal categories. Doubtless, Lizzie has nothing in common with the negative concept of mother as inculcator of the woman's role in the phallogocentric world, but stands for a mother who encourages her daughter to disobey and defy it. In *Nights at the Circus* Carter seems to accept motherhood as a positive means for enhancing proper feminist values and needs, at the same time acknowledging "the disruptive threat"⁴ which motherhood poses to the phallogocentric social order. Unlike Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*, Lizzie remains a truly positive character throughout the whole novel, accepting even the fact that Fevvers rebels against her. Arguably, there might be a connection between Carter's own motherhood (in 1983 her son was born) and *Nights at the Circus*, but Jouve, after pointing it out, hastens to add that "Carter kept her life too carefully away from her writing ... to want to trespass."⁵

Nevertheless, despite her ability to fly, Fevvers has not finished her education at this point. Having gained at Ma Nelson's the reputation of the Virgin Whore – a pun referring to Tertullian's famous remark about the dichotomy of woman that a woman is a temple built on a sewer – she sells herself to Madame Schreck's house of monsters, a sinister Kensington den for the most affluent fiendish patrons.

At Madame Schreck's Fevvers finds herself imprisoned among human hybrids and in this way she experiences what it means to be denied humanity. Once again, in a fashion similar to Ma Nelson's brothel, her task consists in posing as a living statue in the "chamber of imaginary horrors" (*NC*, 70). This time, however, she does not work alone, but forms a kind of perverse partnership with a girl called the Sleeping Beauty who lives in a state of intermittent coma:

The Sleeping Beauty lay stark naked on a marble slab and I stood at her head, full spread. I am the tombstone angel. I am the Angel of Death (*NC*, 70).

Carter's deliberate setting of these two women together as complementary parts of a tableau whose purpose is to raise sexual desire, points at two interesting aspects of woman as a symbol in the phallogocentric world. First, the ideal condition for a woman in such a world is immobility, passivity and drowsiness verging on the state of death, a motif which introduces the theme of the living doll, but this time more of Poe's than E.T.A. Hoffmann's provenance:

She would have been about twenty-one when I first knew her, pretty as a picture, although a mite emaciated. Her female flow grew less and less the time she slept but her hair kept on growing, until it was as long as she was herself. The Beauty's fingernails kept on growing too

⁴ Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.108.

⁵ Nicole Ward Jouve, "Mother is a Figure of Speech", in Lorna Sage (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.163.

Because the Sleeping Beauty's face had grown so thin, her eyes were especially prominent, and her closed eyelids were dark as the underskins of mushrooms and must have grown very heavy during those long, slumbering years ... (NC, 63-64)

This description, no doubt deliberately modelled on Poe, points directly at the Sleeping Beauty's feminine features – hair, nails, eyes and menstruation. The fact that at twenty-one her menses have dried up makes of her a living corpse (growing hair and nails), a figure attempting to comply with the patriarchal ideal of chastity – which has always regarded menstruation as something unclean, repellent or even monstrous, and, like most female physiological functions, a serious threat to its logoc-based anti-nature foundations.⁶

The fairy-tale Sleeping Beauty has not got her own story to tell, she only waits in lethargy for her prince to come and wake her up with a kiss. As a descendant of the cloistered virgins, she remains immured within her chamber which Carter interprets as a crypt. The Sleeping Beauty leads a life without any external events; her world is entirely identical with the reality of her dreams. In the Sleeping Beauty episode Carter exposes the fact that in actual life the prince never comes – another case of Carter's knack of introducing an imaginative alteration of the established story – but the Beauty, programmed in her role, has no choice but to play it – ironically, she ends up in an elitist bagnio among other natural curiosa.

Fevvers can be interpreted as playing the role of her counterpart – after all, she poses as the Beauty's partner in the chamber of horrors. There is a striking – and consequently comic – contrast between them: While the Beauty is fragile, delicate and defenceless, Fevvers is “a big girl”, “twice as large as life”, “the giantess”. At the same time we should remember that, as Gilbert and Gubar put it, “repeatedly, throughout most male literature, a sweet heroine inside the house ... is opposed to a vicious bitch outside.”⁷ And Fevvers is a woman of the world.

Simultaneously, as a winged circus artist Fevvers may be read as a parody of the nineteenth century concept of the Angel in the House, a model for a Victorian lady, locked in her household, who possesses those “eternally feminine” virtues of – let me quote Gilbert and Gubar again – “modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness”⁸ – all the modes of mannerliness which easy-going and foul-mouthed Fevvers lacks. She is set against the Sleeping Beauty because she defies the role of an art object and as a result of the Angel in the House. Unlike the Sleeping Beauty, the Cockney Venus refuses to become a pale, passive, fragile female-

⁶ See footnote 30 to chapter one in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.653.

⁷ Ibidem, p.29.

⁸ Ibidem, p.23.

doll who 'kills' herself into the porcelain immobility of the dead and obediently accepts the role of an automaton. Quite the contrary, Fevvers's element turns out to be the excess and unrestrained freedom that challenges the European cult of ladylike fragility, delicateness and (sexual) innocence whose most representative emblems are Snow White and the Sleeping Beauty.

The story of Mignon has a similar function. It provides a counterbalance to Fevvers's independence and strong-mindedness. Mignon, like her literary model and namesake from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, undergoes as a child a spell of physical and psychological mistreatment. Carter's Mignon becomes in the end an assistant of Herr M., a gimcrack medium who casts her in the roles of ghosts of late female relatives of his mournful clients, and keeps her as his virtual slave (she even has no warm clothes to go out in). She ends up as the Ape-Man's woman whom he intermittently beats. Mignon means in French 'delicate, fragile', and her physical constitution reflects the literal meaning of her name. In the brutal world of poverty she epitomises a true-born victim who has no choice but to bear physical violence and sexual harassment; just another painted bird. All she wants is to escape beating and to please, either with her innocent manner or her sweet, angelic voice. She also, in a childish manner, has a sweet tooth. While the Sleeping Beauty remains hopelessly isolated from the world, poised in passive innocence, Mignon's case consists of the essentially negative experience of the outside world – her journey through life forms a chain of endless misery.

Carter contrasts Fevvers with both the Sleeping Beauty and Mignon. Nevertheless they have their femaleness in common. In all these three cases the discovery of sexuality provides a breakthrough in their lives, although in thoroughly different ways. For the Sleeping Beauty the end of childhood forces her to refuse to acknowledge and accept her femaleness which Fevvers-the narrator states openly when saying that "one morning in her fourteenth year, the very day her menses started, she never wakened" (*NC*, 63). At the same age Mignon discovers that by using her sex she can make a little bit of money to get by: "she thieved a bit and tossed off nervous boys in back alleys for a few coppers, and let them put it into her against dreary walls for a few coppers more" (*NC*, 131). The age of fourteen proves significant also in Fevvers' life – in a comic manner, the spreading of her wings takes place at the time when "my, pardon me, woman's bleeding started up along with the beginnings of great goings on in, as you might put it, the bosom department" (*NC*, 23). In her case, however, this moment brings the hope and promise of a great future:

[A]s my titties swelled before, so these feathered appendages of mine swelled behind until, one morning in my fourteenth year ... as the friendly sound of Bow Bells came in through the window while the winter sun shone coolly down on that great city outside, which, had I but known it, would one day be at my feet (*NC*, 24)

For Fevvers womanhood comes together with the development of wings (symbolic of full humanity). It opens a new chapter in her life while in the cases of Mignon and the Sleeping Beauty it closes their freedom; since that moment they have either to abide by the rules of the phallographic reality, losing dignity (like Mignon) or to refuse the world and hide away from it at the price of not living at all (like the Sleeping Beauty). All the same, the first alternative still carries some hope – Mignon finally finds her happiness in a lesbian relationship with the lion tamer, which signifies a form of rebellion against society. Fevvers grows up to become an emblem of feminine rebellion, though, paradoxically, this process is accelerated by the capitalist market mechanisms which work to fit her into the system. At the peak of her popularity a phenomenon called in the papers ‘Fevvermania’ breaks out in London:

Everywhere you saw her picture; the shops were crammed with ‘Fevvers’ garters, stockings, fans, cigars, shaving soap ... She even lent it to a brand of baking powder; if you added a spoonful of the stuff, up in the air went your sponge cake, just as she did. (NC, 8)

The Winged Victory who, as Marina Warner reminds us, together with all the other traditional allegories in patriarchal culture, belongs to everybody (e.g. in 1911 she was put on the bonnet of Rolls-Royces in the form of the Silver Lady; earlier she became a logo for Votes for Women and was used as a cigar label⁹), this time decides to fly on her own. Fevvers is, like many of Angela Carter’s characters, what is called in this book a *virtual figure* and what Lorna Sage describes as “a symbol come to life as a character.”¹⁰

As a symbol, Fevvers revises her own provenance and reinterprets its meaning. The first signal of this process is the curious name she becomes known by – the Cockney Venus. It is easy to notice that ‘Cockney’ and ‘Venus’ do not go together very well and make us think immediately about such literary figures as Moll Flanders – the woman who uses her charms for playing dishonest tricks. The nickname itself seems to be oxymoronic because a Cockney is not only a person born in the East End of London, but somebody who happens to be streetwise, cunning, quick-witted and more than a mite foul-mouthed. Who has ever seen or heard of a streetwise, cunning, quick-witted and foul-mouthed Venus? Moreover, Fevvers’s bodily charms do not necessarily comply with the classical rules of harmony – she is a huge, buxom girl with disproportionately short legs who comments self-ironically:

My legs do not tally with the upper part of my body from the point of view of pure aesthetics, d’you see. Were I to be a true copy of Venus, one built on my scale ought to have legs like tree-trunks, sir; this flimsy little underpinnings of mine have more than once buckled up under the top-heavy distribution of weight upon my torso, have let me down with

⁹ See Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p.48.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

a bump and left me sprawling ... I'm not tip-top where walking is concerned, sir, more *tip-up*. Any bird of my dimensions would have little short legs it could tuck up under itself and so make of itself a flying wedge to pierce the air, but old spindle shanks here ain't fitted out like neither bird nor woman down below. (*NC*, 41)

Obviously, any “flimsy little underpinnings” cannot serve as a goddess’s divine legs. Neither can they be “like tree-trunks”. The fact that Fevvers’s body seems disproportionate “from the point of view of pure aesthetics” means that her anatomy has refused to conform to the norms of female beauty in the patriarchal society. Unlike Mignon, and especially the Sleeping Beauty, her body cannot be perceived as an *object d’art*, the fact which in the phallogocratic world means an offence against the norm. In European artistic tradition a woman is either beautiful (proportionate, fragile, delicate, child-like) or monstrous (big, heavy, physiological, old). The sign of female ugliness is located in her nether (genital) parts that remain hidden and in this way the monster, assuming an angelic shape, may deceive and ensnare men.¹¹ Fevvers’s deformity of legs puts her in the long line of female monsters – from Error in Spencer’s *The Faerie Queene* through Sidney’s Cecropia, Shakespeare’s Goneril and Regan, Milton’s Sin to the degenerate women of Swift’s satirical poems and the giantesses of *Gulliver’s Travels*.

In the previous chapter I interpreted the figure of Mother from *The Passion of New Eve* as a descendant of the witches from earlier literary periods. Unlike Mother, however, Fevvers is not grotesque and in consequence she cannot repel; on the contrary, she must awaken in the reader feelings of affinity and warmth. In this way Carter demonstrates that the whole concept of female monstrosity is relative and relevant only within the realm of patriarchy. While Mother was modelled on essentially negative images of woman in tradition, Fevvers is programmed to avoid being defined in phallogocentric terms. Carter brings forth the aerialiste’s physiology in order to enhance her humanity, to give her an indispensable gravity.

At Madame Schreck’s Fevvers is defined as a curiosity, a hybrid half-bird/half-woman, but on the level of interpretation she functions as a physical manifestation of male sexual fantasies, exactly like the Sleeping Beauty, Fanny Four-Eyes, the Human Eel (earlier the Living Skeleton), the tiny Wiltshire Wonder, Cobwebs and the androgynous Albert/Albertina. All these deformed creatures have unhappy biographies, but remain – like Fevvers – kind at heart and good-natured. They also sympathise with one another. Furthermore, they understand that being cast as exhibits in Madame Schreck’s museum, they remain protected from the cruelty of the world – similar to Ashley Montana’s the Elephant Man with “a study in human dignity” as subtitle. In those episodes

¹¹ Gilbert and Gubar, op.cit., p.30.

Carter challenges the whole concept of monstrosity and the norm that sanctions it. Fevvers expresses it as follows:

[I]t was those fine gentlemen who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones, not we. For what is "natural" or "unnatural", sir? The mould in which the human form is cast is exceedingly fragile. Give it the slightest tap with your fingers and it breaks. And God alone knows why, Mr Walsler, but the men who came to Madame Schreck's were one and all quite remarkable for their ugliness; their faces suggested that he who cast the human form in the first place did not have his mind on the job. (NC, 61)

The arbitrariness of the cultural interpretation of physical abnormality is dazzlingly parodied in the episode set in Mr Rosencreutz's Gothic mansion. He hires Fevvers for a mammoth sum of money for the night of April thirtieth to play the role of May Queen for him. He also plans a ritual sacrifice, but Fevvers manages to fly away.

Mr Rosencreutz is an indecently rich aristocrat who wears round his neck a medallion made of solid gold with a phallus – as Fevvers observes – "in the condition known in heraldry as *rampant*, and there were little wings attached to the bollocks thereof" (NC, 70). Through this symbol Mr Rosencreutz joins in the line of Zero-like patriarchal maniacs who in *Night at the Circus* are identified with the power of the state – Mr Rosencreutz delivers the most impressive speech against Votes for Women in Parliament; another maniac is the Tsar of Russia. However, Fevvers cracks him immediately through means of semiotic analysis:

The penis, represented by itself, aspires upwards, represented by the wings, but is dragged downwards, represented by the twinning stem, by the female part, represented by the rose. H'm. This is some kind of heretical possibly Manichean version of neo-Platonic Rosicrucianism, thinks I to myself; tread carefully, girlie! (NC, 77)

Addressing Fevvers, the host uses a number of female goddesses' names. He greets her with emphatic exclamation:

Welcome, Azrael ... Azrael, Azrail, Ashriel, Azriel, Azrarily, Gabriel; dark angel of many names. (NC, 75)

During the evening he calls her many other names, such as Proserpine, Flora, Venus Pandemos, Arioriph, Venus Achamatoth, and Sophia, makes her play the part of Lady Godiva and hints at yoni, the female part, which he identifies with "absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down, where terror rules" (NC, 77).

Like all misogynists, he is afraid of femaleness to the point of panic. The ritual murder he plans to commit on Fevvers would symbolise the victory of the male principle over the female one, whose negative depiction we find in the figure of Mother in *The Passion of New Eve*. But while the grotesque Mother of

that dystopian novel self-defines herself in hieratic terms – e.g. “I am the Great Parricide, I am the Castatrix of the Phallogocentric Universe” (*PNE*, 67) – Fevvers wriggles away from definitions directed at her from the outside. Mr Rosencreutz speaks a sort of ceremonial mumbo-jumbo flowing freely from the core of his (strongly Jungian) erudition. Fevvers, on the contrary, keeps her level-headedness, enjoying the bath, the wine and luxury of the household. This contrast, rooted in comedy, enables her to fly away since she remains immune to all his attempts to cast her in a traditional female role, to pin her down with definition. But she is in it only for the money, which makes all the difference. Jack Walser, an up-and-coming Californian journalist, by travelling together with the circus, learns slowly how tough and cunning Fevvers is.

Walser parallels both Desiderio and Evelyn since, like them, he leads a life full of adventure and travel. Like those earlier male protagonists, Walser undergoes a transformation during his most important journey. It is particularly interesting to compare him with Desiderio, the main hero of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*. Walser, too, chases his life’s desire, Fevvers, who, quite like Albertina, leads him towards her, transforming him in the process. Both Desiderio and Walser are – only apparently – active characters. In actual fact, they are led by the much stronger women who have chosen them for lovers. They have both undergone a gang rape – Desiderio by the Acrobats of Desire, Walser in a “bedouin tent beside the Damascus road” (*NC*, 10). He also, again like Albertina’s beloved, in a sense chases his chimera – Albertina comes to Desiderio in sleep as a black swan (sic!); again, note the similarity – Fevvers, who is also called Helen of the High Wire, talks of her origins as the fruit of a swan’s passion. Walser’s problem is that Fevvers appears to him within the fantastic world of the circus. Although her physicality remains beyond question, Walser cracks his mind over her ontological status: “Is she fact, or is she fiction?”, he asks himself. His professional suspiciousness, together with the practical disposition of his mind, makes him (again quite like Desiderio) unaffected by fantasy – he becomes interested in Fevvers as an object – the topic of the interview in the series entitled “Great Humbugs of the World”. Similar to Minister’s special agent, Walser sets off on his journey in order to ‘kill’ the object of his interest – he plans to unmask Fevvers, discover the truth of her nature and pin her down either as a fabulous bird-woman or a confidence trickster. But while Desiderio really murders Albertina, Jack Walser undergoes a metamorphosis himself – he is, in a metaphorical sense, hatched by her. This motif in Carter’s novels deliberately points at the well-established European cultural dichotomy of woman as one who gives life and man as one who takes life away.

Trying to solve the mystery of Fevvers’s wings, Walser gathers rational arguments – he reasons that if the aerialiste is really half-bird, by the laws of evolution she should not have arms since “the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, or ... arms Now, wings without arms is *one* impossi-

ble thing; but wings *with* arms is the impossible made doubly unlikely – the impossible squared” (NC, 15). Watching Fevvers’s performance, he notes in his notebook that she “tries too damn’ hard” (NC, 16) and has to put a lot of effort in overcoming “physical ungainliness in flight caused, perhaps, by absence of tail, the rudder of the flying bird” (NC, 17). Finally, told by Fevvers in her dressing room that she was hatched from an egg he “smiled to himself ... as he remembered his flutter of conviction that seeing is believing – what about her belly button?” (NC, 17). Considering these anatomical cues which contradict common sense, Walser tries from another end; he turns over in his mind the possibility whether she could be a man in disguise. Next, he seriously begins to play with an idea that Fevvers might be an automaton:

Her face, in its Brobdingnanian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival-ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships. (NC, 35)

[W]ho or where in all this business was the Svengali who turned the girl into a piece of artifice, who had made of her a marvellous machine and equipped her with her story? (NC, 29)

What Walser does not (because he cannot) take into account is that Fevvers is a symbol who has become a character, something the reader learns from the London part of the novel. It does not mean that the reader is given more information about Fevvers or that she conceals some important facts from him. It is simply that the reader can, or even is forced to, read the story of Fevvers’s life through the prism of literary and cultural connections, or even through the lens of feminist criticism. In this sense, those who know the feminist theories of the 1970s know more about Fevvers’s genealogy than Walser does. In such a case his whole reasoning is good for nothing. Nevertheless, he perceives the paradox of his own thinking:

For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman ... have to pretend she was an artificial one?

[I]n a secular age, an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world. (NC, 17)

In the world built on the rules of magic realism in which Fevvers acts, anything can happen, for fantasy and realism intertwine into a harmonious whole. But creation of such a world does not usually serve for overthrowing symbols. Carter’s genuine invention is to use it as a means of feminist iconoclasm. The whole of Fevvers’s journey – from the East End through Petersburg to Siberia – depicts her progress towards full humanity and only under this condition into full femininity. On her way, she changes masks, costumes and sundry roles tailored for “her” throughout the long patriarchal tradition. Both as a bird and as a woman she has to be classified and interpreted; as a human being she can enjoy freedom. As Isobel Armstrong notices “other women in the novel are locked into display and the necessity to pose as a representation of

someone else's ideas about women's role or function."¹² The difference lies in the fact that Fevvers lives, being a professional artist, through carnival, masquerade, entertainment, spectacle and truly enjoys assuming poses and being on display. She is a positive parody of the concept of woman as a spectacle; like, for instance, the black dancer Leilah from *The Passion of New Eve* Fevvers 'constructs' herself for the eyes of the audience:

My feathers, sir! I dye them! Don't think I bore such gaudy colours from puberty! I commenced to dye my feathers at the start of my public career on the trapeze, in order to simulate more perfectly the tropic bird. In my white girlhood and earliest years, I kept my natural colour. Which is a kind of blonde, only a little darker than the hair on my head, more the colour of my private ahem parts. (NC, 25)

Unlike Leilah, however, Fevvers herself points out this masquerade so that the reader cannot occupy the point of view identified with the male gaze, but simply learns from the artist herself about one of the tricks of her trade. As a result, Fevvers makes her own use of the fact that she is a spectacle; her credo becomes "LOOK AT ME!" (NC, 15):

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.

She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off! (NC, 15)

In this way Fevvers imposes her own importance on the outside world, she self-constructs herself as *the star*, but all the same remains independent. And what seems to be most important, she produces herself according to her own image of woman – therefore she never becomes a "masturbatory fantasy", "the *Playboy* center fold" (PNE, 75), like Eve. In the course of the novel, the reader realises that Fevvers maintains her autonomy despite so many people and occurrences which could deprive her of it. Her philosophy of life can be reduced to a basic statement of autonomy: 'I am' and 'I want', desires utterly forbidden to a love story heroine.

'I am' and 'I want' are neatly interlaced in her unquenched appetite, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Fevvers is greedy – she craves money and comfort, enjoys eating and drinking, and finds clearly erotic pleasure in satisfying her bodily needs – the effect is augmented by her yawns, burps, farts and even her strong smell. During the interview she gives to Jack Walser, they drain glass after glass of champagne, and she sends the call-boy to the pie shop to bring them "hot meat pies with a glutinous ladleful of eel gravy on each; a Fujiyama of mashed potatoes; a swamp of dried peas cooked up again and served swimming in greenish liquor" (NC, 22). Similarly, when she arrives in

¹² Isobel Armstrong, 'Woolf by the Lake, Woolf at the Circus: Carter and Tradition', in Lorna Sage (ed.), op.cit., p.271.

Mr Rosencreutz's Gothic household, she notices with delight that "a very substantial meal has arrived in the reception room below while I'm having my wash and brush up – salad, and cheese, and a cold bird" (NC, 77), and although she declares herself to be very fastidious about her diet ("I won't touch a morsel of chicken, or duck, or guineafowl and so on, not wanting to play cannibal" (NC, 77)), on this occasion, because she feels enormously hungry and a bit uneasy, she makes an exception to the habit: "this time, in my extremity, I whisper a prayer for forgiveness to my feathery forebears and tuck in. And there's a very decent bottle of claret, to wash it down" (NC, 77). Not surprisingly, Fevvers turns out to be much more interested in gobbling up than in the spiritual food Mr Rosencreutz tries to feed her with, which leads to some comic effects of popular theatre:

"Flora!" he cries. "Quick spirit of the awakening world! Winged, and aspiring upwards! Flora; Azrael; Venus Pandemos! These are but a few of the many names with which I might honour my goddess, but, tonight, I shall call you 'Flora', very often, for do you not know what night it is, Flora?"

I try a dollop of his excellent Stilton, pondering as I savour it the baroque eclecticism of his mythology.

"April thirtieth," I says, suspicious lest this turns out to be another riddle. (NC, 77)

It seems that her appetite, as though by a trick of magic, protects her from becoming food herself – like all Carter's heroines (as demonstrated in the previous chapter), she is nobody's meat. It is worth noting that in "The Lady of the House of Love" appears a young English soldier who cannot become a vampire's victim simply because he is too rational to admit the possibility of the vampire's existence, and in the end his rationalism prevails over the supernatural. Nonetheless, Fevvers comes close to turning into 'meat' in the Grand Duke's palace in Petersburg, where she notices "a table laid for an intimate supper. Little glasses for vodka, funnels for champagne and, in the middle, something to make her gasp: herself, in ice. And life size!" (NC, 186) The Grand Duke hints at its symbolic meaning by inviting Fevvers to feel comfortable in the following words: "May you melt in the warmth of my house just as *she* melts" (NC, 186). But Fevvers, of course prefers to eat, not melt, and despite the sinister atmosphere of the palace and the ominous fact the Grand Duke knows her Christian name, Sophia, she "enjoyed caviare, which she preferred to eat with a soup spoon" (NC, 187). In Fevvers's case eating appears to be a kind of a magical trick that saves her from every oppression – by eating she resists the powers of the devourer. No wonder that the most critical situation she finds herself in takes place in Siberia after the train by which she travels is blown up and the party have nothing to eat.

It is a well-known psychological reaction, true not only of women, that food helps to overcome stress – but fat women are not accepted in Western

culture. For feminists the female body has also become a political issue: since the 1960s extreme slenderness has been promoted by the media and the fashion industry as the ideal image of feminine beauty. During the 1970s and 1980s many women writers took as the subject matter of their novels the themes of anorexia and fatness, e.g. Sue Roe's *Estella*, *Her Expectations*, Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, Fay Weldon's *Fat Woman's Joke* and *Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, and such representative stories as Pager's "Agoraphobia" and Burford's "Dreaming the Sky Down". Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* should be read in this context.

Anorexia has been interpreted twofold. First, as the female subject's effort to conform to the image of feminine beauty promoted by the media. Second, as a form of unconscious protest against being identified primarily with the flesh, as an attempt to erase all signs of sex.¹³ As Rosalind Coward observes, the anorexic shape is a version of the adolescent body; it conveys an impression of dependency and powerlessness, and in consequence becomes attractive to men since it is totally unthreatening.¹⁴ In this light putting on weight ceases to be regarded as a sign of self-indulgence and physical weakness, but as a "purposeful act", "a directed conscious and unconscious challenge to sex-role stereotyping and the culturally defined experience of womanhood."¹⁵

There is no doubt that the figure of Fevvers challenges the patriarchal ideal of beauty as fragility in Western Europe at the end of this millennium. Again, comparison to Mignon provides a significant example. When Mignon takes off her clothes so that she can take a bath, Fevvers, looking at her thoroughly bruised body, sees the body of a child:

[T]he beating had beaten her back, almost, into the appearance of childhood, for her little shoulderblades stuck up at acute angles, she had no breasts and was almost hairless but for a little flaxen tuft on her mound. (NC, 130)

Simultaneously, to be large, fat and strong equals not to be beaten, but to be a beast of prey:

Fevvers yawned with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier, and then she stretched herself suddenly and hugely, extending every muscle as a cat does, until it seemed she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk. As she raised her arms, Walser confronted by stubbled, thickly powdered armpits, felt faint; God! she could easily crush him to death in her huge arms, although he was a big man with the strength of Californian sunshine distilled in his limbs. (NC, 52)

¹³ Kim Chernin, *Womansize: the Tyranny of Slenderness* (London: Women's Press, 1983), p.65.

¹⁴ Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: women's sexuality today* (London: Paladin, 1984), p.41.

¹⁵ Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (London: Hamlyn, 1984), pp.96-99.

The size of Fevvers's body signifies her independence: "I only knew my body was the limitless freedom" (NC, 42). Nevertheless, in spite of her enormous size, she remains attractive. In this respect she may be perceived as an ironic reflection of misogynist images of women, example of which we find in Swift's female monsters whose physiology and physicality he dreaded so much (e.g. when he exclaims in horror in one of his poems: "Caelia, Caelia, Caelia shits!"). To make a parallel to Swift's 'another stinking creature', Fevvers farts, belches and roars with laughter, in Walser's presence at that! Like the anti-heroines of Swift's poems which examine the role deception plays in the creation of femininity ("A Beautiful Young Nymph", "The Progress of Beauty"), Fevvers, with Lizzie's help, deconstructs her scenic self in the course of the interview, but (unlike Swift's prostitute who removes her wig, her crystal eye and her teeth before going to bed) when "the greasepaint floated off Fevvers's face ... [she] reappeared, flushed, to peer at herself eagerly in the mirror as if pleased and surprised to find herself again so robustly rose-cheeked and shiny-eyed" (NC, 18).

As a big woman she also brings to mind Mother from *The Passion of New Eve*. However, in that novel the enormous size of Mother's body serves to evoke the image of a grotesque, here its function seems to be to establish Fevvers's humanity; while Mother seemed artificial, Fevvers is natural; while Mother was a parody of a cruel monster, Fevvers appears to be a gentle giantess; while Mother was mad, Fevvers bursts with common sense. Her size seems to have one more, comic aspect – if Frankenstein's monster was a huge creature made of dead bodies, Fevvers is in fact a huge creature made of dead myths.

Furthermore, the whole episode in Fevvers's dressing room draws on Molly Bloom's room, full of darkness and disorder. At the moment when Walser wants to put away his glass, he accidentally dislodges:

[A] noisy torrent of concealed *billet doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes' nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black, that introduced a powerful note of stale feet Perhaps the stockings had descended in order to make common cause with the other elaborately intimate garments, wormy with ribbons, carious with lace ... that she hurled round the room apparently at random A large pair of frilly drawers, evidently fallen where they had light-heartedly been tossed, draped some object, clock or marble bust or funerary urn The room, in all, was a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor. (NC, 9)

On the other hand, despite the fact that both of them are artists, there seem to be two essential differences between Fevvers and Molly Bloom. Molly lies in her cave-like chamber waiting for her husband's homecoming (entertaining herself with her lover, true), while Fevvers is no Penelope, but a free, independent, active woman – she does not wait for anything and anybody, but acts. Additionally, Molly Bloom's thoughts, given in a stream of consciousness, appear chaotic. Fevvers tells her stories more in the mode of Sche-

herezade or the Wife of Bath, speaking from her own experience, and, what is most important, her tale aims to be both entertaining and didactic.

What is more, Fevvers's life story parodies the traditional history of a female orphan whose ultimate goal and endpoint of her development within patriarchal society is marriage. In this respect, *Nights at the Circus* turns out to be a typical example of a so-called feminist self-discovery narrative whose defining feature is, according to Rita Felski, "a recognition and rejection of the ideological basis of the traditional script of heterosexual romance characterised by female passivity, dependence and subordination."¹⁶ Such texts deliberately try to establish alternative solutions, one of which is, as Felski points out, the motif of all-female community, offering "an alternative form of intimacy grounded in gender identification."¹⁷

There are three examples of such communities in *Nights at the Circus*: Ma Nelson's brothel, Madame Schreck's Museum and Siberian panopticon-prison for women. All these three communities are formed by the outsiders – prostitutes, biological curiosa and women who murdered their husbands respectively, and are contrasted with patriarchal world. Despite being places commonly associated with perversion, vice and corruption, Carter presents them – somewhat ironically – as oases of gentleness, loyalty and warmth. Nonetheless, they also differ significantly from each other – while the dwellers of Madame Schreck's museum have no choice but to accept their fate and acquiesce in being sexually exploited, the Siberian women-prisoners rebel against the inhuman institution in which they have been locked and eventually form a group of feminist outlaws who decide that they "need no more fathers" (NC, 221). From the point of view of Fevvers's development, the most important of the three places is Ma Nelson's brothel, the place where she spends her most formative years.

Indeed, Fevvers's first household is a model example of all-female community. In Ma Nelson's brothel Sophia/Fevvers learns such virtues as friendship, loyalty, and economic independence, but concurrently practices an ironic and slightly contemptible attitude towards men. Her recollections of childhood picture her home in the hues of an idyllic Arcadia, which is a typical ironic feminist strategy – to reverse the negative (brothel) into a positive (Arcadia):

Let me tell you that it was a wholly female world within Ma Nelson's door. Even the dog who guarded it was a bitch and all the cats were females, one or the other of 'em always in kitten, or newly given birth, so that a sub-text of fertility underwrote the glittering sterility of the pleasure of the flesh available within the academy. Life within those walls was governed by a sweet and loving reason. I never saw a single blow exchanged between any of the sisterhood who reared me, nor heard a cross

¹⁶ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.129.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p.132.

word or a voice raised in anger. Until the hour of eight ... the girls kept to their rooms and the benign silence might be interrupted only by the staccato rattle of the typewriter as Grace practised her stenography or the lyric ripple of the flute upon which Esmeralda was proving to be something of a virtuoso. (NC, 39)

In “the academy” Fevvers learns not only sensitivity and practicality, but the place also awakes her political awareness. Her foster mother, Lizzie, is a Marxist and an activist of the suffragette movement, who supports the issue of Votes for Women, the action whose emblem, as I have mentioned above, was the Winged Victory. In spite of this feminist atmosphere, those ‘sisters’ with whom the wealthy patrons fall in love, get married and leave Ma Nelson’s flagship. Fevvers herself, unlike Lizzie, also has not got manphobia, but does not behave in accordance with the romantic pattern of courtship where the woman should remain passive and give up the initiative to her beloved. She acknowledges her sexuality very early in life and makes active use of it. When she falls in love with Walser, she does not languish for him, but cunningly leads him towards herself; when she loses him in Siberia, she searches the wilderness to get him back. On the other hand, Fevvers fools Walser when she tells him that she is the “only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world” (NC, 294), but she takes her lies light-heartedly, laughing when confessing it to her regained lover:

“To think I really fooled you!” she marvelled. “It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence.” (NC, 295)

Nights at the Circus is Angela Carter’s fourth novel modelled on the Bildungsroman which is called in other words the novel of apprenticeship. The classic examples of the genre usually depict the childhood and early adulthood of the male protagonist on his way to maturity. Fevvers, having a model in Moll Flanders, seems to be a true picaro – her development takes place in the most controversial (from the point of view of the educational novel) surroundings – brothels, circus, hotels, Gothic houses of the wealthy of this world, the Siberian wilderness. Carter’s choice of these settings augments her heroine’s mobility, instability and impetus toward the future. In consequence, the apprenticeship novel merges with the picaresque with its love for adventure and danger. The former makes the novel didactic, the latter entertaining.

In the amusing role-reversal mode, Fevvers represents experience and as such leads Jack Walser, who stands for innocence, towards maturity and initiation. He metamorphoses from the daydreaming Californian lad, whose life’s desire is to run away with a circus, into a man with ironic distance from himself. This motif, as I have pointed out in the above discussion, revises Desiderio’s peregrinations in search of Albertina; therefore, unlike the protagonist of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Jack Walser does not lose his beloved – there is no demonic Father who, like Prospero, writes a script for his daughter.

Fevvers spins her own script, using language which stands in contrast to the kind of polite speech allowed to women in a patriarchal society. Her language is sensual, but not of Molly Bloom's variety; it does not attempt to reveal the unconscious depths of our personality, but is firmly rooted in the spoken language of the East End (which, of course, is still a convention). Fevvers speaks with a Cockney voice, full of colloquialisms, bawdy humour and matter-of-factness, which enables her to stand on firm ground. By using this sort of language Fevvers challenges the established social order and as a result teases and probes the world. Her way of speaking becomes a manifestation of what Marina Warner calls "heroic optimism"¹⁸, which according to Bakhtin's theory is a result of 'Easter laughter' – the sort of medieval laughter that is both blasphemous and permitted, since it brings people closer to the truth. The main source of such laughter is folklore, the low culture of the simple people as opposed to the high-brow culture of the privileged. *Nights at the Circus* ends with Fevvers's laughing the happy end of the story:

The spiralling tornado of Fevvers's 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. (NC, 295)

The atmosphere of carnival, which Fevvers generates around herself (spectacle, laughter, blasphemous speech) helps her to establish a critical distance towards the world and in consequence to transcend the social roles in which the patriarchal order casts her. In fact, as pointed out above, Fevvers-the-winged-woman is a product of that order whose whole story illustrates her progress towards full humanity, setting herself free from the cage of her own symbolism, overcoming the fear of flying. The true subversion of Fevvers lies not in her potency to destroy the patriarchal myth of the Winged Female Creature, but in her ability to force her independence upon the world, to reinvent herself, to produce herself as a *woman*. Like Frankenstein's monster Fevvers represents the patriarchal idea that has slipped out of control. She is the most fully realised virtual character in Angela Carter's works, remaining a version of the heroines of some earlier stories, who also manage to transcend their cultural position.

At the very beginning of this chapter I quoted Marina Warner who claims that *Nights at the Circus* marks a shift in Carter's poetics and outlook, initiating a new chapter in her writing, that springs from the English tradition of bawdy humour and what might be called a 'Falstaffian' attitude toward the world. Although many stories written by Angela Carter during the eighties seem to confirm this observation (e.g. "Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", "Kitchen Child" from the *Black Venus* collection, her last novel *Wise Children* and especially 'In Pantoland', published in the posthumous collection *American Ghosts & Old World Wonders*) the main motifs and

¹⁸ Warner, op.cit., p.254.

topoi remain unchanged – they are versions of and variations on those developed in the seventies.

Like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *The Passion of New Eve* (and their predecessor *Heroes and Villains*) *Nights at the Circus* uses the topos of the labyrinthine journey, which despite its physical aspect, represents the journey towards self-discovery, always underscored by counterpoising travelling and homecoming. In consequence some critics treat them as a trilogy, with *Heroes and Villains* as the “lead-in” and *Nights at the Circus* as the “more optimistic and benign conclusion.”¹⁹

The labyrinthine peregrinations take Fevvers through a chain of Gothic settings – dark sinister ‘bloody chambers’ full of modernist decor (e.g. Mr Rosencreutz’s household, the Grand Duke’s palace, madame Schreck’s ‘house of imaginary horrors’) that convey feelings of claustrophobia and imprisonment. There is, as in all Carter’s novels, also a wide, endlessly open space – this time the Siberian wilderness. It is worth noting that Fevvers’s journey from civilisation to the cold north-east of Asia resembles the chase of Victor Frankenstein after his ‘demon’ which takes place in the infinite maze of the Arctic.

During her adventurous peregrinations the winged aerialiste meets a long line of fantastic figures, half-beasts, half-humans (the persona in Madame Schreck’s bagnio), archetype-possessed butchers (Bluebeard-like figures of Mr Rosencreuz and the Grand Duke), and their prey (the Sleeping Beauty, Mignon); another, after Donally and Mother, social mythographer (Shaman), experience-gaining Young Fools (Walser, the Escapee), feminist guerrillas (the ex-panopticon women prisoners who declare that they need “no more fathers” (NC, 221), quite like the soldieresses of Beulah). The clowns perform a trick known from Carter’s earlier works – they turn out to be an effective magical plot device when by performing their dance they change the course of events – similarly, in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* the Acrobats of Desire generate so much eroto-energy that it brings down a landslide which results in destruction of the peep-show, “the greatest single weapon in his [Doctor Hoffman’s] armoury” (IDMDH, 120). Again, all these characters must be perceived as *archetypomimetic*.

To sum it all up, *Nights at the Circus*, despite being called a watershed in Angela Carter’s literary career is a logical sequel to her earlier works and may be regarded as a milestone in her ideological development and artistic maturity. Like all her novels and short stories, at least since *Heroes and Villains* onwards (with the exception of *Love* which belongs thematically to the sixties) Angela Carter’s eighth novel uses a set of well-established patriarchal motifs and themes which she treats as a point of departure in her revisionistic quest.

¹⁹ Elaine Jordan, ‘The Dangerous Edge’, in Lorna Sage (ed.), op.cit., p.196.

CONCLUSION

Angela Carter once said: “I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the new wine makes the old bottles explode.”¹ In so saying, she spoke both as a feminist and a postmodernist, two roles that in her case must be initially separated to be eventually brought together. The ‘old bottles’ she spoke of were, on the one hand, roles forced upon women and gender relations in a patriarchal society, and on the other, literary motifs, symbols and myths inherited from the past. By the ‘new wine’ she meant her own art, drawing our attention to the original and thought-provoking quality of her prose, whose pressure ‘explodes’ those roles and forms.

This work clarifies to what extent Angela Carter can be regarded as a feminist, and in what sense we can classify her as a postmodernist without abusing either term. The keystone of my argument is the presentation of Carter’s deconstructive method of dealing with what is – in her opinion – the inherently patriarchal cultural heritage of Western society. Carter’s method springs from the assumption that our culture is an arbitrary construct that maintains the patriarchal order, so its foundations (archetypes, myths, symbols and topoi) should not be treated as absolute, but can be de-constructed, re-interpreted and filled up with utterly new meanings. Carter’s critical exploitation of some components of this heritage proves that it is already overloaded with often contradictory meanings, and thus cannot be masked as given and natural; quite the opposite, it must be accepted as an artificial (and thus susceptible to interpretation) product of the human mind. By drawing upon the computer concept of *virtual reality*, my original definition of the *virtuality* of the presented world in Angela Carter’s fiction helps to clarify her method.

This work is also an attempt to shift critical attention from the ideological side of Angela Carter’s fiction to the poetics of her works and demonstrate that these two ostensibly conflicting areas can be brought together. My work demonstrates how Carter’s feminist attitudes and the subversive use she makes of the patriarchal culture affect the presented world of her novels and short stories. Only if we keep these two spheres firmly in sight can we fully appreciate Carter’s intellectual ingenuity and recognise the artistic originality that makes her one of the foremost English writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century.

¹ Angela Carter, ‘Notes From the Frontline’, in Michelene Wendor (ed.), *On Gender and Writing* (London: Pandora Press, 1983), p.69.

Critics writing on Carter usually stress two features of her fiction: its feminist purposes (it serves as a weapon in the continuing fight for the cultural liberation of women) and its artistic originality (Carter is often praised for her erudition, her original employment of different literary genres, and her masterly use of various discourses and styles). As a result, critics pigeonhole her either as a feminist or a postmodernist, often treating the two positions as mutually exclusive. My view, however, is similar to an option represented by Linda Hutcheon² who, instead of perceiving feminism and postmodernism as ideological adversaries, treats them as potential allies in their attempts to deconstruct and reshape our culture. Here feminism and postmodernism go hand in hand since both accuse the existing cultural order of being restrictive or even oppressive to modern women and men. They both pay special attention to the question of how the patriarchal culture is reflected in its products, its art amongst them.

Although Angela Carter's works should be perceived in the context of the women's writing tradition understood as a literary subculture, her relationship with feminism remains problematic. To many she appears to be a very 'low-key' feminist since she never fell into any major school of contemporary feminisms. She has weathered attacks by radical feminists for the content of her fiction (e.g. negative images of women in *The Passion of New Eve*)³ or for wrong alliances (her subversive fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber* were founded on the libertine philosophy of de Sade).⁴ Carter's approach to the main feminist theories current in the 1970s (i.e. 'Images of Women' criticism, Helene Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, Julia Kristeva's notion of *the semiotic*, and Luce Irigaray's ideas of 'mimicry' and 'women-only communities') turns out to be polemical or even adverse.

It should be stressed that the ironic quality that permeates her fiction inevitably distances her from staunch feminist positions. Carter's irony, together with her mistrust of language as a medium for social communication, places her more certainly within the postmodern trend rather than within the feminisms of the 1970s. Unlike the latter, she takes no interest in creating (or discovering) some kind of female language, antagonistic to the present (i.e. patriarchal) language and inaccessible to men. Carter prefers operating within the existing language in order to deconstruct, decentre and decontextualise its more oppressive modes. Her purpose is to produce individual counter-discourses, competitive with the official ones. Such an attitude to language and its constructs qualifies her as a postmodernist.

² Linda Hutcheon, 'Postmodernism and Feminisms', *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 142-167.

³ Paulina Palmer, 'Femininity and its Construction', *Contemporary Women's Fiction*, (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 16-22.

⁴ Patricia Duncker, 'Re-Imagining The Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers', *Literature and History: A Journal for the Humanities*, 10/1 (spring 1984), 3-14.

In talking about Angela Carter's alliance with postmodernism, I mean the kind of postmodernism which John Barth labelled as 'the literature of replenishment' and whose main representatives are Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Carter's fiction shares two important features with their narratives. First, the synthesis of traditional storytelling (based on celebration of the voice) with discursive self-awareness and sophisticated artistry. Second, the intermingling of the fantastic and the historical, spheres traditionally separated as belonging to different levels of culture.

Thus, Angela Carter can be called either a postmodernist with a feminist 'truth' or a feminist with a postmodern philosophy of writing. But neither label explains in what respects her fiction is unique and original.

Carter's originality lies in her approach to the European cultural heritage that manifests itself in art and literature. This approach is deconstructive in its core. At first glance, the reader may have the impression that Carter makes totally indiscriminate use of European literary tradition – as if to show off her erudition. Her fiction is literally littered with hints and allusions to other books and works of art. Yet such a heterogeneous range of contexts draws our attention to the problem of the functioning of cultural tradition. Carter's fiction demonstrates that the holistic concept of tradition (e.g. T.S.Eliot's) is only a prevailing myth: our cultural heritage is overcoded with arbitrary – often mutually exclusive – meanings, and as such, turns out to be inherently self-contradictory. Some readers also complain about Carter's authorial comments which explain her sources before the reader has a chance to do so, making things more (even "too") accessible and spoiling the game. Here Carter refutes a strong conviction that reading is exclusively for those initiated into the secrets of literature, the privileged ones. Instead of cultivating this elitist notion of art, she demystifies it by manipulating its constructive elements – archetypes, symbols, topoi and motifs – and using them as subject matter in her narrative experiments whose purpose is to check whether their meanings are indisputable or can be re-negotiated. Clearly, her dexterity at manipulating both form and content makes her a force not to be ignored.

Two terms of my coinage: the *virtuality* of the presented worlds and *arche-typomimetic* characters explain how her deconstructive method works. They have proved to be indispensable tools for understanding the full phenomenon of Carter's originality and inventiveness.

The analogy with the *virtual reality* produced by a computer – whose most important feature is that in fact it does not imitate any objectively existing reality but actually takes its place – enables us to see that Carter treats culture as a usurpation of reality, a simulation (as described by Jean Baudrillard⁵). Her presented worlds are pasted together from the debris of the past – a set of sym-

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in Mark Poster (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: Polity Press-Basil Blackwell, 1988), 166-184.

bols and motifs well known from art and literature, a series of quotations and allusions to various literary texts and works of art. The components of her presented worlds bring into her stories their own established, and frequently conflicting, meanings. Now Carter reads them anew and re-interprets them. As a result, all these elements appear to support a culture which victimises women or at least makes them dependent on the roles forced on them in the patriarchal world.

Two elements of Angela Carter's presented world are especially interesting for analysis from this perspective: space and character. Upon close examination it turns out that space in her fiction always takes the form of a labyrinth. Carter chooses the topos of the labyrinth for her deconstructive games for at least two reasons. Firstly, it is the most impressive metaphor of the human condition in the universe. Secondly, it has always been connected with the motif of wandering and gaining experience. The labyrinthine peregrinations of Carter's protagonists allow them to witness or experience different aspects of women's condition in the patriarchal world, with the emphasis on their powerless position as prisoners and victims. But when Carter revamps the rules and lets her female protagonists become active participants of the plot (a role traditionally reserved for men), their experience of the labyrinth turns out to be liberating. Moreover, Carter exploits yet another aspect of the myth of the labyrinth – the fact that it offers her readers a chance to overcome the ignorance and superstition concerning gender relations in our culture. Her narratives invite us to consider the constrictive nature of the traditional readings of the myth and to discover its hidden subversive possibilities.

Similarly, the reader finds out that the archetypal roles imposed upon both men and women, and whose source is art and literature, serve to sustain the dominance of the former and to keep the latter 'in their place'. Here Carter concentrates on the cultural conditioning founded on archetypes as the exclusive blueprints of possible gender roles. Since, at least according to Jung, archetypes are accessible to us mainly through art and literature, Carter chooses to deconstruct several well-established personal archetypes that have widespread currency in Western culture.

Furthermore, Carter's *archetypomimetic* characters challenge all previous concepts of literary character, the concepts which find their fullest formulation in the demands of realism. Just as her spaces do not reflect 'objective reality', her characters must not be taken as imitations of 'real people'. Seen from that point of view, they would seem sloppy, two-dimensional and artificial since they have no psychological depth. Carter deliberately reduces her protagonists to the level of cultural signs because it enables her to inquire into their meaning and social function. She presents archetypes in a political context, as patriarchal instruments of power. But what is equally important, she incites the subversive possibilities for transgression concealed within 'archetypal' gender roles.

Critics usually perceive Angela Carter's *oeuvre* as consisting of three separate stages. Analysis of her novels and short stories in terms of their poetics enables us to see her output as a continuum. Her eighth novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) was, immediately after its publication, recognised as an important step in her literary career – for many it was the best Carter novel so far. For some, it was a turning point in her writing. Nevertheless, *Nights at the Circus* is full of the motifs, symbols and themes familiar from Carter's previous novels and short stories, and employs the same deconstructive method she had developed in her early works. Thus, rather than marking a decisive change in direction for Carter, it rather marks a decisive continuation – perhaps even a culmination – of the same battles she had initiated in her earlier writings.

Carter is thus *sui generis* – a feminist postmodernist AND a postmodern feminist, transcending all attempts at 'traditional' classification. The question remains open as to whether her simultaneous deconstruction and utilisation of the elements of cultural heritage and virtuality will lead future writers into similar areas of exploration, or whether she will remain a unique voice of the late 20th century.

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