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Corporeal and Textual Performance as Ironic Confidence Trick in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

This paper examines performativity in its relation to textuality, corporeality and femininity in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). I wish to reveal parallel spectacular, seductive and tricky performances of bodies and texts. My reading of spectacular corporeal and textual performances focuses on the heroine, revealing how Fevvers' parading deconstructive performances of ideologically prescribed femininity, and its limiting representations, coincide with the narrative's spectacular revisions of literary genres and writing styles, identified by discursive technologies of power with femininity and thus conventionally canonized as sentimentally kitsch or incomprehensibly hysterical modes of writing. My gender sensitive, reader-response approach also highlights the bifocal pleasures, tender irony and sisterly burlesque of the self-mockingly silly and histrionic hysteric "feminine" textual performance in order to reveal that the conventional concepts of a domineering patriarchal language violently incorporating and domineering weaker *écriture féminine* are demythologized. My final aim is to examine how Fevvers' confidence trick unveils that there are other wor(l)ds available for daring women writers and readers alike.

Angela Carter has always been the performer *par excellence*: she is associated with a self-created authorial persona constantly *enacting* a fantastic being, a "spell-binder,"¹ a "Fairy Godmother," a "friendly witch," a "very good wizard,"² a ravishing yet funny grotesque figure, a loquacious "yarn-spinner, Mother Goose," a "wolf in Grandma's nightcap,"³ who never ceases to *perform* her verbal magic, writing play-

1. Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (London: Northcote House, 1994), p. 1.

2. See Margaret Atwood, J. G. Ballard, Salman Rushdie in Sarah Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh UP, 1997), p. 131.

3. Lorna Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (London: Virago, 1994), p. 2.

fully in a carnivalesque polyphonic, hybrid, in-between genre, melting fairy tale, demythologized myth, magic realism, surrealist fantasy, historiographic metafiction, rewritten female Gothic, *Bildungsroman*, eroticism, picaresque, poetry and nursery rhyme in a spellbinding, *spectacular* narrative.

In the following, my aim is to examine the Carterian performativity in its relation to textuality, corporeality and femininity in my favorite of Carter's original works, the 1984 *Nights at the Circus*,⁴ a novel called by Tamás Bényei a narrative of seduction, magic, play and primarily *spectacularity*.⁵ I wish to reveal parallel spectacular, seductive and tricky performances of bodies and texts by providing a complex analysis of the semioticized body in the text and of the subversively somatized text on the body.⁶ My reading of spectacular corporeal and textual performances focuses on the winged giantess aerialiste heroine, revealing how the grotesque Fevvers' parading deconstructive performances of ideologically prescribed femininity, of the normatively beautiful feminine body and its limiting representations coincide with the Carterian narrative's spectacular revisions of literary genres and writing styles, which are identified by discursive technologies of power with femininity, and are thus conventionally canonized as less valuable, that is, sentimentally kitsch or incomprehensibly hysterical modes of writing by silly lady novelists or raving mad women for a "lesser," laic female audience. My gender-sensitive, reader-response theoretical approach highlights – besides Fevvers' spectacular, subversive body – the bifocal pleasures, tender irony and sisterly burlesque of the subversively, (self-)ironic silly and histrionic hysteric "feminine" textual performance, in order to reveal that the conventional concepts of a domineering patriarchal language violently incorporating and domineering weaker *écriture féminine* are demythologized, as the journalist becoming clown-poet readily enters the carnivalesque grotesque narrative, laughing together with the confidence trickster winged aerialiste author. My final aim is to examine how Fevvers' confidence trick reveals that besides ideologically prescribed silence,⁷ superficiality, stereotypes and incomprehensibility, there are other wor(l)ds available for daring women writers and readers alike.

4. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1994).

5. Tamás Bényei, "Bohócok könyve: Angela Carter: *Esték a cirkuszban*," in *Apokrif iratok: Mágikus realista regényekről* (Debrecen: Kossuth, 1997), 299–351.

6. On the semioticization of the body and the somatization of the text see Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1993).

7. On feminine authorship and silence see Séllei Nóra, *Lánnyá válik, s írni kezd: 19. századi angol írónők* (Debrecen: Kossuth, 1999).

Parodic bodily performances, spectacular gender trouble

The picaresque *Nights at the Circus* narrates the magical adventures of Fevvers, the winged giantess, a born (or rather hatched) performer, trickster, trapeze artist, starring in the 1899 Grand Imperial Tour of Colonel Kearney's circus. Fevvers, the monstrous aerialiste with wings, incorporates all conventional tropes of mythical femininity, fusing freak and angel into one. Antagonistically, she acts out the "feathered frump" "cripple" (19), the "marvellous monster," the estranged "alien creature" (161), a giantess bound to Earth, with useless wings, her mutant bodily protuberances recalling the deformations of a hunchback, while simultaneously she also performs the role of the sexually threatening yet sublime aerialiste, the angelic winged wonder, a "fabulous bird-woman" (15) defying the laws of gravity in her graceful and erotic art on the trapeze. Fevvers becomes the "New Woman," who subverts the conventional, limiting concepts of femininity by enacting them all, without reserve, to the extreme, and thus embodying the carnivalesque grotesque defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as transgressive corporeality's potential of subverting systems, violating boundaries, and resisting closure by its ambiguous, open, changing, unfinished, irregular, heterogeneous, protruding, corporeal, and excessive performance⁸ that may also provide enough space for feminist authorial agency, female revision and winged women's words. Fevvers, an irregular, heterogeneous, changing grotesque being is the "Queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states" (81), her slogan "Is she fact or is she fiction?" underlines the polysemic nature of her performative, spectacular identity. Fevvers mocks the spectators' (the readers') epistemophilic, fetishistic gazes, she never provides a final answer to her being a fact or a fiction. Walser can merely ponder the paradox: "an authentic miracle must purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world (?)" (17), while Fevvers laughs at him (at us), adding ironically "Oh, Lizzie, the gentleman must know the truth!" (35). Fantastic and freak, Fevvers embodies the Kristevian subject in process/on trial⁹ balancing on a borderline in a grotesque body always becoming another, performing a carnivalesque subversion of the hierarchical social order, of the homogeneous subject, of transparent language and of conventional representations of femininity. She is simultaneously "Cockney sparrow" (41) and "tropical bird," cripple and celestial, vulgar and sublime, bird and woman, virgin and whore, giantess and aerialiste, the "anomaly" of univer-

8. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968).

9. Julia Kristeva, *La révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), p. 37.

sally feminine “symbolic Woman” (161) and singular, heterogeneous “a-woman”¹⁰ in her subjective corporeal reality, thus – playing on the subversive grotesque pregnant body – she can give birth to herself again and again anew.

Fevvers’ spectacular performances in Ma Nelson’s brothel and Madame Schreck’s Museum of Woman Monsters, her posing in *tableau vivant* as Cupid, “the sign of love,” as Winged Victory, “a perfect, active beauty . . . mutilated by history” (37), and as the castrating femme fatale Angel of Death, also carry ambivalent meanings. She repeats patriarchal stereotypical representations of women with a wink, via a “perverse dynamics of transgressive reinscription,”¹¹ a parody turned into politics, she performs à la Judith Butler a “gender trouble” with the aim to denaturalize the regulative fiction of a true gender identity, and to reveal the culturally constituted, ideologically-discursively reproduced, repetitive and overall performative aspect of gender, that is always already a “copy of the copy,”¹² and thus to provide in the long run an ironic critique of the ideology of representation limiting female identification. According to Butler and Fevvers, it is only within the (patriarchal) practices of repetitive signifying that alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, new possibilities of gender contesting the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms and subversions of substantive identity may become possible.¹³ Butler’s description of “doing gender trouble” is particularly fitting for Fevvers’ carnivalesque grotesque performance: “doing gender [she] repeat[s] and displace[s] through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which [her possibilities of doing gender] are mobilized.”¹⁴ Fevvers’ wings recall patriarchal topoi as the Victorian Angel in the House, defined uniquely in relation to man as subordinated wife and mother, the Muse exploited to inspire male creativity and muted herself, Fairies objected to the rape of the male gaze, as well as the winged statue of Nike of Samothrace, which simply lacks a head. However, realizing her performative possibilities for proliferating alternative gender configurations, she subverts these clichés of femininity from within: she acts out an angel in the house of suffragette whores, her sexual activity mocks the Victorian angel, yet she also challenges the stereotype of the whore, the

10. On Symbolic Woman and a-woman see Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), p. 124.

11. Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence. Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 33.

12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 31.

13. Butler, p. 145.

14. Butler, p. 31.

supernatural succubus, as her confidence trick is based on her claimed virginity. She continuously uses her heterogeneous body as a space for the narrative deconstruction of her identity, by technologies of the self working against Foucaultian technologies of power, she erases and rewrites traditional stories of femininity, weaving her own texts, becoming an author of her own. Fevvers is a self-parodic *and* self-made woman (de)constructing her patchwork wings by recycling the divine Leda and the Swan just as much as a lowly London pigeon. She flies by reweaving myths and gossip, art and craft, by relying subversively on the established knowledge of library books just as much as on Lizzie's innovative calculations, and on Baudelaire's albatross-artist. She is never what she seems to be, she performs *simulacra*, her repetition is a revision of icons of femininity and an embodiment of her multiple selves, constituting a part of her confidence trick, a subversive feminist tactic, revealing a liberating play of carnivalesque identities and narratives inspired by a heterogeneous body, rendering engendered, homogeneous identity "radically incredible."¹⁵

Paulina Palmer¹⁶ celebrates in *Nights at the Circus* Fevvers' feminist performance of identity, passing from coded mannequin to bird woman, and turning from the investigation of femininity as entrapping, regulatory fiction towards a subversive play with femininity, its mimesis and role reversals. Linda Hutcheon and Mary Russo¹⁷ highlight Fevvers' parodic feminization revealing a decentered politics of representation, and Russo goes further by claiming that the winged heroine "revamping spectacle" unveils how the cultural production conceals work, sweat and materiality via stylized spectacle, and how Fevvers enacts the grotesquely deformed female body as cultural construct in order to reclaim it and to rechart aeriality as a corporeal space of revisionary repetitions and new possibilities.

Fevvers' parodic enactments of femininity incite the subversive laughter of Butlerian gender trouble as they highlight that the original, authentic and real (gender, identity, language, hierarchy, etc.) are merely constituted themselves as effects in the social theatre of illusions. Her parodic performance embodies a feminist political tactic described by Carter in her "Notes from the Front Line," as a "questioning of the nature of [my] reality as a woman. How that social fiction of [my] 'femininity' was

15. Butler, p. 141.

16. See Paulina Palmer, "From Coded Mannequin to Bird Woman: Angela Carter's Magic Flight," in *Women Reading Women's Writing*, ed. Sue Roe (Sussex: Harvester, 1987), 179–205, pp. 197–201.

17. See Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1983); and Mary Russo, "Revamping Spectacle: Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*," in Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 1995), 159–183, pp. 177, 179.

created, by means outside [my] control, and palmed off on [me] as the real thing.”¹⁸ Fevvers performs her “authentic womanliness” as a socially constructed, represented, non-essential identity, recalling Butler’s drag, Sontag’s camp, Irigaray’s mimicry and Riviere’s masquerade¹⁹ (her irony substituting the anxiety of the latter). Her dress always appears theatricalized as cross-dressing, she displays all the compulsory markers of femininity excessively, almost in a hamming, buffoonish manner: “she batted her eyelids like a flirt. She lowered her voice to a whisper. . . her breath flavoured with champagne, warmed his cheek ‘I dye sir!’ ‘What?’ ‘My feathers, sir! I dye them!’ ” (25). Thus, with a difference, she seems to act out a “femininity” that is always already under a deconstructive line of erasure or in quotation marks. The carnivalesque excess of her self-ironic, playful performance of “becoming woman” shatters the “iron maiden of beauty myth”²⁰ and the illusory feminine body framed in it by the normative ideological technology of gender and body discipline working through representations perpetuating patriarchal (beauty) myths about women through a painfully paradoxical iconography of femininity to be carved onto the female flesh. Fevvers’ greasepaint in her dressing room does not reconstitute but rather deconstructs the conventionally beautiful femininity, as it demythologizes patriarchal images of the abject female or the ethereal feminine, and in “becoming women” puts emphasis on becoming, heterogeneity and revision.

Fevvers, a subversive seductress, defies the male gaze by taking advantage of her feminine “being-looked-at-ness”;²¹ to her slogan “LOOK AT ME!” she adds “Look! (but) Hands off!” (15) to provide a self-conscious metatext on her spectacular femininity in the voice of the ambiguous intacta-whore, who is an exhibitionist-voyeur as she finds pleasure in her female gaze as well. The giantess aerialiste’s eyes, the most grotesque

18. Angela Carter, “Notes from the Front Line,” in *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 69–77, p. 70.

19. See Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n’est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977); Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Routledge, 1989), 35–44; Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 105–119.

20. On the beauty myth see Naomi Wolf, *A szépség kultusza*, trans. Follárdt Natália (Debrecen: Csokonai, 1999).

21. On the “female gaze” see Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy *et al.* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 176–195; and Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robin R. Warhol *et al.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991), 432–443.

body parts in the Bakhtinian corporeal topography, gain an erotic investment and a feminist re-visionary potential:

She turned her immense eyes upon him, those eyes made for the stage . . . Walser felt the strangest sensation as if these eyes of the aerialiste were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction, so that he felt himself trembling as if he, too, stood on an unknown threshold.

(29, see 40, 48, 78, 87)

As Mary Russo claims, the grotesque body of the trapeze artist destabilizes gender by an ambiguous relation to the gaze: on the one hand her being objected to the scopophilia of the male spectator reinforces masculine power position, but on the other hand the voyeur is obliged to look upward, and is hence diminished, becoming “dwarfed, clownish or infantilized”²² due precisely to the gaze destined to master the woman as spectacle. Fevvers subverts her spectacularity to her own ends, ambiguous, ever-changing she can never be pinned down as a trophy of the male Collector, she resists the final meanings desired by journalist Walser aiming to decode her as a great humbug of the world. Fevvers looks back laughing and contemplates her being a spectacle with a wink.

The tender irony and sisterly burlesque of textual performance

Whereas Fevvers' femininity is clearly portrayed as a confidence trick, a spectacular parodic performance, a *mise-en-abyme* of stereotypical feminine beauty and gender roles with meta-reflexive, critical self-consciousness, it is less explicit that the traditionally feminine modes of writing; styles and genres (f)used in the narrative are also of a tenderly ironic, performative, spectacular, meta-reflexive nature. Several critics interpret *Nights at the Circus* as a postmodern sentimental love story. Pitying its limiting stereotypical feminine literary representation or praising its utopian feminist, recycled feminine potential, they think that the novel remains within the frames of the feminine romance tradition. Carolyn See describes the novel as an old-

22. Russo, p. 171.

fashioned romance,²³ while in Sarah Gamble's view the novel with an idyllic happy ending is "absolutely serious in maintaining the desirability and the perils of romantic love," and in stressing the need for "authentic emotion to be had in the world outside the circus," whereas according to Andrzej Gasiorek, the novel "envisages the closing of the last century as the opening of a brave new feminist world,"²⁴ and Magali Cornier Michael claims that its rewritten femininity seriously combines didactic material realist feminism with utopian feminism.²⁵ Although the former two interpretations seem rather simplistic and the latter may look like over-politicized programme readings, unlike Beth A. Boehm, I would not call them misreadings – in Boehm's exact words "failures to employ the interpretive strategies the author has imagined to be available to the reader."²⁶ After the Barthesian death of the author, in a pantextual deconstructive era of self-disseminating meanings and inevitable misreadings, in my view, the concept of "misreading" as a standard of value has lost its validity, and – regarding any process of significance that, instead of closing, opens up the free play of multiple meanings of a text – it is better to avoid the patriarchal binary hierarchization between good and bad, laic and elite, feminine and feminist readings. Recalling my first reading of *Nights at the Circus*, in the late 1990s, in my early twenties, I remember having found pleasure in reading the novel – which I found somehow similar to my former favorite, Carter's short-story, "The Company of Wolves" – as the celebration of a blissful reunion of violent binary gender oppositions, a common initiation into the paradisiac realm of shared sexual pleasures, in the spirit of Eastern philosophy of the Foucauldian *ars erotica*. I do not think that the enthusiasm of my past, romantic reception of the novel is a less valuable readerly experience, even less an interpretative failure, as compared to my present, perhaps less naïve, and critically more self-conscious, feminist re-reading. Elaborating on Susan Rubin Suleiman's concept of bifocal vision, I would like to call these two different readerly gazes, looking alike for textual pleasure with a shared scopophilic curiosity, bifocal and myopic readerly point of view. Suleiman – fusing Gertrude Stein's bipolar beauty-constitutions, and compressing Roland Barthes's readerly

23. Beth A. Boehm, "Feminist Metafiction and Androcentric Reading Strategies: Angela Carter's Reconstructed Reader in *Nights at the Circus*," in *Critical Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsay Tucker (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 191–206, p. 198.

24. Sarah Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh UP, 1997), p. 162.

25. Magali Cornier Michael, "Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*: An Engaged Feminism Subversive Postmodern Strategies," in *Critical Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsay Tucker (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 207–227.

26. Boehm, p. 193.

pleasure of *studium* and jouissance of *punctum* into one gaze – defines bifocal vision as a view combining a restful, classicizing contemplation of a reassuring aesthetic ideal and a restless, contemporary struggle with and against an inventive, irritating, witty alternative anti-aesthetic.²⁷ Speaking of contemporary women's writing's body-texts, I think that bifocal vision implies a parallel perception of the restful feminine literary tradition and of (its) restless, ironic, feminist metatext, that is, a simultaneous reading of the ideologically prescribed, engendering, disciplining text of "femininity" *written on the body* and of the self-conscious feminist, daring, other voices, the poetic, political, playful subversive (*re*)writings from the heterogeneous body. Whereas the myopic reader's sedentary satisfaction means to under-stand calmly the literary work within its own *episteme*, its own prison house of fixed representation, the bifocal vision is an open double-take performed by a reader willing to come face to face with her own unmasked self mirrored in the window through which she watches the textual landscape passing by in a figurative literary journey, it is a revision by a nomadic reader willing to err, to deviate, to wander, to *run* risks, and to fly with the text. The theoretical premises of bifocality coincide with the Carterian narrative, which is always an excessive, spectacular, risky performance; as Carter puts it in a literary theoretical comment: "We travel along the thread of the narrative like high-wire artists. That is our life."²⁸ Thus both author and reader may be identified with the high-wire artist; accordingly, to me it seems feasible to identify the implied author of *Nights at the Circus* with the winged aerialiste, Fevvers; however, I do not think that the ideal reader, or, in Boehm's words, the "authorial audience," must necessarily be a risk-taking rope-dancer. The bird-woman trapeze artist's performance may provide unique amusement from the direct bodily closeness of the myopic perspective, as seen from the theatre-box's first row by the ravished, naïve, laic spectator, spellbound by the identification, and it may just as much enchant from the bird's-eye view distance of the critically self-conscious, professional gaze, constituting the elite view of the expert voyeur, connoisseur of acrobatic arts, specific weight of female bodies and the nature of gravity; but it also carries charms of its own, when viewed from an in-between space of "now you see it, now you don't," allowing for the bifocal pleasures of self-reflection along with identification. One should note that before becoming a reader performing a bifocal (*re*)vision one is always already a myopic reader, one must pass through the stage of ideologically prescribed feminine

27. Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1994), p. 147.

28. Angela Carter, *Expletives Deleted* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 2.

reading in order to provide a subversive feminist reading (which will inherently incorporate the feminine reading). The ambiguous, revisionary feminist-feminine bifocal perspective reflects the paradox of parodic metafiction that has to invoke the very ideology it aims to subvert.

The Carterian “demythologizing business” reweaves fossilized (patriarchal) myths into innovative (feminist) texts, refills old bottles with new wine “especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode,”²⁹ dissects conventionally limiting representations of femininity to revive a new woman, a neither monster nor angel (or ironically both?!), female Frankenstein, a self-made winged freak writing a text of her own, reconstructed from bits and pieces of the lesser genres, despised styles, silly themes of a marginalized feminine literary tradition. By feminine literary tradition I mean here any piece of (but especially initial attempts at) women’s writing that is in a phallogocentric logic biologically determined, by patriarchal literary institutions canonized and through ideologically governed interpretive strategies conventionally decoded as sentimental, kitsch, expressively confessional, incomprehensible hysterical, odd modes of popular writing, speaking up in the compulsory prescribed feminine voice of the submissive angel or the screaming mad-woman. Carter is a woman writer situated in a tradition of nineteenth century fellow female writers labeled as silly and sentimental and of modernist women artists with voices coined irrational and hysteric, she has to speak from a position located in a patriarchal society (some reproach her staying within a heterosexual scenario in which her heroines remain women, self-consciously but still feminine), thus one lens of her bifocal view always focuses on already ideologically feminized literature, while the other looks for possibilities of re-vision. My aim is to disentangle the subversive meta-text weaved upon debilitating narratives of the phallogocentric master-text of patriarchal canon and its feminimized mistress-text by submissively silly lady novelists or incomprehensible, mad women writers, constructed by canonization’s engendering ideological technology. I will trace the irony of a text performing – like Fevvers’ spectacular body – clichés of femininity, in order to reveal the confidence trick, to read the difference in the deconstructive feminist, mocking repetition of the feminine voice.

While Linda Hutcheon quotes *Nights at the Circus* as a *par excellence* example of postmodern parody, Lorna Sage highlights the pastiche nature of Carter’s text “littered with quotations and allusions,” and Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton stress “the carnivalesque fun, the mordant wit, the biting irony that turn

29. Angela Carter, “Notes,” p. 69 and p. 71.

Shakespeare into a burlesque and bring Sade into the feminist bedroom [being] very much part of a serious intellectual stand that Carter took on Western culture,"³⁰ I prefer to refer to Carter's subversive repetition of the feminine literary tradition as a tender irony, a knowing, metatextual, sisterly burlesque laughter shared with women writers of the mimed feminine literary tradition in a comic text that is also a dialogic, intertextual *hommage* to the pioneers of women's literature bound by patriarchal limits. As Sarolta Marinovich-Resch notes, parody in women's writing is not necessarily a crude joke, a disgracing, trivializing, ridiculizing caricature at the expense of the imitated text, but rather, contrarily, it challenges women's literary norms to renew and renovate, not to discredit them. Thus, it may ensure, from its shifting, dialogic, satiric perspective, a swipe at literary and social patriarchy by a parodic defence of reading and writing by women.³¹

Although Butler, Hutcheon and Marinovich-Resch use the term "parody" with reference to subversive, metafictional rewriting (of narratives of femininity), as for me, instead of parody – which I feel somewhat closer to the scornful and contemptible, maliciously diminishing and derogatory, sometimes narcissistic "tendentious wit" of caricature, satire and sarcasm – I find the concept of "irony" – that is, a deliberate dissembling or hiding of the actual case not to deceive but to achieve special, usually humorous rhetorical or artistic effects³² – more adequate to characterize the Carterian textual performance for several reasons. Firstly, irony's mocking self-understatement matches the buffoonish masked spectacle of self, while the ironic reversal equals the grotesque inversions recurrent in the text. Secondly, the ironic perception implies the bifocal perspective's interpretive pleasures, recalling, in Wayne C. Booth's view, the optical illusion of the famous figure used by Wittgenstein and Gombrich, on which you see either a rabbit or a duck, as the figure clicks back and forth in the process of recognition and reconstruction, surpassing the naïve pleasure of a single view (seeing only one figure), whereas our attention focuses on the trickiness of the process and our awareness of duplicity provides delights of ambiguity and results in the greatest intellectual and artistic achievement: "learning

30. Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics and The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1988), p. 61 and p. 101; Sage, *Flesh and the Mirror*; Joseph Bristow & Trev Lynn Broughton, "Introduction," in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. Joseph Bristow & Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), p. 8.

31. Sarolta Marinovich-Resch, "Interrogating the Iconography of the Female Gothic: The Parody of the Female Gothic," in *The Iconography of the Fantastic*, ed. Attila Kiss *et al.* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2002), 257–269.

32. M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 97.

how to say both-and, not either-or, when we see that people and works of art are too complex for true or false tests.”³³ Thirdly, the more tender “irony conveys an implicit *compliment* to the intelligence of readers”³⁴ invited to play with the text and realize other meanings and metatextual levels, implying the tribute to all women attempting at the pen. And most importantly irony’s harmless humor – although subtle, coded, and capable of remaining hidden – achieves its fullest effect when the tender ironic intention, the sisterly burlesque, the female grotesque fusing democratic solidarity with carnivalesque mockery, and the laughter provoked are *shared* by past and present authors and readers alike in a *communal* pleasure of laughing *with* instead of laughing *at* others and oneself. Therefore, in the case of Carterian narrative, the (self-)ironic textual performance incites a subversive and feminist laughter that signifies complicity, alliance, a shared wink, a common wisdom, and mutual healing.

A silly novel by an ironic lady novelist

On its first reading, *Nights at the Circus* certainly recalls the stereotypical romance plot, well known from popular feminine literature or Hollywood movie-scenarios: a simple, rational young man meets an enigmatic, unreachable, fantastic female star, their mutual attraction promises a reassuring romantic reunion, yet – according to the obligatory detour of the Brooksonian plot,³⁵ in order to guarantee the maximal pleasure of the text – they have to have several adventures, affront evil adversaries aiming to separate them, and surmount innumerable obstacles and misunderstandings, including their own blindness before the hero can solve the waiting heroine’s secret, save her for the final nth time, and thus their love can finally be fulfilled in compulsory, socially sanctioned marriage and they can be each other’s and live happily ever after. However, the close reader of Carter’s text surely reveals how the traditional feminine romance plot, referred to by Gilbert and Gubar as “the Pamela plot,”³⁶ is multiply subverted: it is the apparently immature young man who is repeatedly somehow saved (from the tiger, the Strongman, the clowns, and the Sha-

33. Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1974), p. 128.

34. Abrams, p. 97.

35. Peter Brooks, “Freud’s Masterplot: A Model for Narrative,” in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1984), 90–112.

36. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), p. 69.

man), healed, cared for by the seemingly much wiser heroine, who in her grotesque corporeal reality is not in the least way an ideal, immaculate, subordinate feminine woman, moreover her enigma cannot be solved, and her victorious laughter at their final reunion makes the hero wonder whether it is not *he* who is the butt of *her* joke. *Nights at the Circus* rewrites the traditional feminine *Künstlerroman*, as its heroine is always already a (woman) writer gifted with creative imagination from the beginning and speaking up in the polyphonic voice of (two Scheherezades, Fevvers and Lizzie) the authoress who has always been, in the fashion of Deleuze and Guattari, a legion. The feminine *Bildungsroman* is also subverted by its self-proliferation in the vertiginous multiplication of embedded life-narratives of marginalized creatures (Fanny Four Eyes, Sleeping Beauty, Wiltshire Wonder, Albert/Albertina, Cobwebs and Toussaint from the Museum of Woman Monsters, Mignon, Princess of Abyssinia from the Circus, Olga from the Panopticon) with whom the heroine feels solidarity and whose sister-texts are embedded in her cross-genre historical, picaresque, *Bildungsroman* novel, ironically made to be recorded by a rational journalist, a male *auktor* becoming “the amanuensis of all those whose tales we’ve yet to tell him, the histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been” (285), and whose authoritative pen is ironically directed by the oral, private, half-magic, half-real autofiction of the stereotypically silly and hysteric female writer, who nevertheless self-consciously aims at a subversive canon de/reformation. Conventional feminine romance’s idealization, moralizing, and hierarchical gender structure are repeated ironically only to be subverted: the heroine is heavenly sublime yet also abject grotesque, she is angelic yet always a woman on top, myths (femininity, motherhood, 21, 283; marriage, 21, 39, 46, 230, 280, 281, 282; nature, 61; normality, 220; Christianity, 176, 239; humanity, 110; law, 211) are mockingly demythologized, norms and values are questioned in a carnivalesque shifting tone in which kitsch sentimental exaltation (of traditional romance values) turns into overplayed hysteric excess transformed into a subversively (self-)ironic metatext commenting on the novel’s own silly, happy ending, demythologizing feminine romance and radical utopian feminism alike:

“The Prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon’s lair is always forced to marry her, whether they’ve taken a liking to one another or not. That’s the custom. And I don’t doubt that custom will apply to the trapeze artist who rescues the clown. The name of this custom is a “happy ending.”’

‘Marriage,’ repeated Fevvers, in a murmur of awed distaste. But after a moment, she perked up.

‘Oh, but Liz – think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he’ll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not to expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over to my safekeeping, and I will transform him. . . I’ll sit on him. I’ll hatch him out, I’ll make a new man of him. I’ll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we’ll march hand in hand into the New Century –’

Lizzie detected a note of rising hysteria in the girl’s voice.

(281)

Fevvers’ language and style certainly recall that of the popular feminine romances’ heroines whom their authors intend to characterize – in George Eliot’s ironic words – by a “general propensity to make speeches, and to rhapsodize at some length,” a unique gift of “amazingly eloquent” and “amazingly witty” conversations, the linguistic genius of a “polking polyglot, a Creuzer in crinoline,” picking up foreign languages “with the same aerial facility that the butterfly sips nectar,” the creativity of a “superior authoress, whose pen moves in a quick decided manner when she is composing” lofty monologues in a philosophical, moralizing yet enthusiastic, high-spirited, wildly romantic “Ossianic fashion,” fascinating and silencing even men.³⁷ George Eliot, an elite, rational, severe critic of “silly novels by lady novelists,” labels their feminine style annoyingly affected, emotive, sentimental, banal, superficial, hypocritical, hysteric, hyperbolic and talkative, thus reinforcing all the clichés of the stereotypical concept of feminine discourse.³⁸ The patriarchally conventional idea of silly feminine style is oftentimes associated with the engendered concept of kitsch, that is – in Abraham A. Moles’ definition – (also) dysfunctional, rationally inadequate, superficial, excessive, capricious, sensory totalitarian, yet popular, mediocre and comfortably comprehensible.³⁹ Accordingly, at first sight of the winged aerialiste the male gaze of Walser immediately interprets her as the *par excellence* embodi-

37. George Eliot, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” in *Anthology of British Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, ed. Dale Spender & Janet Todd (London: Pandora, 1985), 518–535, pp. 518, 520 and 522.

38. On stereotypical concepts of feminine discourse see Marina Yaguello, *Les mots et les femmes: Essai d’approche socio-linguistique de la condition féminine* (Paris: Payot, 1987); Louise O. Vasvari, “A női kultúra más, mint a férfi kultúra? Avagy mit tud a feminista nyelvtudomány?” *Esztertáska* (2003); <<http://www.nextwave.hu/esztertaska/vasvari.htm>> (Accessed on 31st March 2004).

39. Abraham A. Moles, *A giccs: A boldogság művészete*, trans. Orosz Magdolna, Albert Sándor (Budapest: Háttér, 1996).

ment of femininity, synonymous with kitsch ("On the stage of Alhambra, when the curtain went up, there she was, prone in a feathery heap . . . behind tinsel bars . . . how kitsch," 14). However, Fevvers' reader has to realize that for the bird-woman, her being "a bird in a gilded cage" is, via an ironic excess staged as a spectacle with a wink, turning silly, submissive femininity (and frightening, female freak), as well as her languages, her ideologically available discursive self-representations into a subversive, metareflexive, carnivalesque grotesque performance. As the excessive overflow, the maniac accumulation of the too dense and overplayed clichés of kitsch, commonplaces of feminine style in Fevvers' pathetic, prophetic, poetic utterances suggest, the stereotypically silly feminine language is merely staged, in a spectacular performance with a finale of brief, mockingly disillusioning remarks, implicit (self-)ironic metatextual comments of the polyphonic woman writer, demythologizing from a bifocal perspective, denaturalizing, deconstructing via a playfully borderline (both silly and self-ironic), balancing aerialiste-discourse the ideologically gendered concepts of feminine (or phallogocentric) language:

'And once the world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! All the women will have wings, the same as I. This young woman in my arms, whom we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it, she will tear off her mind forg'd manacles, will rise up and fly away. The dolls' house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed –'

'It's going to be more complicated than that,' interpolated Lizzie. . .

But her daughter swept on, regardless, as if intoxicated with vision.

'On that bright day when I am no more a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact – then he will slap down his notebooks, bear witness to me and my prophetic role. Think of him, Lizzie, as one who carries the evidence –'

'Cushie-cushie-coo,' said Lizzie to the restless baby.

(285-286)

Fevvers' excessive spectacular performance of the silliest, "most feminine" texts of the popular feminine romance tradition signals a contemporary woman writer's tender irony on her own located position belonging to an ideologically constituted tradition of always already femininized subjectivity and literature, as well as her simultaneous deconstructive feminist gesture of performing femininity's debilitating

discursive (self-)representations with a difference, from a revisionary, metareflexive, bifocal perspective, aiming to subvert from within that which has been marginalized from within. The aerialiste, discovering an enabling parallel between feminine kitsch and subversive grotesque body-text, is able to produce her own excessive, antagonistic, mockingly sublime and vulgar, kitsch and grotesque, feminist (meta-)feminine, popular, pleasurable carnivalesque text. The kitsch-work provided with a self-conscious metaperspective is close to the carnivalesque by simultaneously, bifocally considering the limit and its transgression, while on the other hand, as Moles highlights, its delirious expenditure also approaches the surrealist text-flow. Thus the (excessive romance of the mock) silly lady novelist is replaced by a (just as much self-ironic) visionary hysteric, the mad woman, the model writer of surrealists (venerated in Breton's and Aragon's manifesto), the other stereotypical trope of the woman writer in the patriarchal canon, whose "much madness" carries the "divinest sense" à la Dickinson, via a carnivalesque imbroglia's subversive creativity.

A carnivalesque histrionic hysteric text

Hysteria, an ideologically engendered, biologically determined "female malady," refers to psychic conflicts finding their symbolic expression manifested in corporeal symptoms, resulting in a text written from the semiotized body. But in patriarchal readings the somatized text produced fails to be interpreted as an independent narrative of self-expression. The hysteric body-text – along with the considerable corpus of "feminine" writings affiliated with it – is primarily associated with bodily reality, being governed by the wandering womb, repressed excessive sexual desires, demonic drives, it is reduced to the level of indecipherable, invaluable delirious ravings, irrational frenzies, sub-representational, phobic and phantasmic association streams. Identified with pathological corporeality, women's symptomatic writing conventionally can only be solved by a male psychoanalyst-reader, who, in the process of healing meaning-fixation, unveils, objectifies, reads, writes and erases her and her mad writing on/from her body alike. The patriarchal cure of the madwoman (as propagated by Hippocrates as well as Freud) wants to eliminate the symptom distinctly marking her body by re-engendering and re-interpellating her into the socially prescribed feminine subject position, through the resurrection of her "natural" willingness to marry, to submit to masculine desires, to return the kiss of Herr K., to discipline and shut her body and thus end her madness, her body writing, and successfully become a "real" woman; that is, feminine, normal(ized), submissive, silent, unmarked and non-writing.

Nights at the Circus is set in 1899, an era when Charcot's possessed patients are displayed in the Salpêtrière hospital (1889), when Anna O's malady and her "talking cure" are made public by Breuer (1895), when the disclosure of Dora's case brings fame to Freud (1901). It is the golden age of silenced madwomen giving birth to a legitimate male scientific discourse inspired by their hysteric body-text that becomes the hidden other text, with a metaphor "the madwoman in the attic" of psychoanalysis. In fact, the mock-historical novel claims that Fevvers, a model of Lautrec and all surrealists, a fiancée of Alfred Jarry, and a friend of Willy and Colette, "in Vienna . . . deformed the dreams of that entire generation who would immediately commit themselves wholeheartedly to psychoanalysis" (11); and, consequently, a true (simulating) daughter of her times, Fevvers apparently embodies several hysterical symptoms so as to stage adequately her patriarchal era's pathologized woman becoming a public spectacle. In Madame Schreck's museum of woman monsters – uncannily recalling Charcot's "museum of living pathology"⁴⁰ at Salpêtrière – as in other stages of her career, she acts out the hysteric, "readily appear[ing] to be an arch simulator, deceiver, and seductress,"⁴¹ performing simulacra of pathologic femininity. In the hysterical scenario, her theatrical(ized) emotional crisis are paroxysmal symptoms, her winged hunchback walk is abnormal movement due to psychosomatic partial paralysis, her aerialiste balancing and somersaults are abnormal motor movements and convulsions, her wings are phantasmic bodily protuberances or hysterogenic zones, her recurring spreading of her (pseudo)wings is a hysterical conversion, a neurotic defense mechanism against repressed anxiety. Fevvers' performance of femininity enacts a *par excellence* example of hysterical personality: she is egocentric, histrionic, emotionally unstable, a pathologically excessive, "hyper-feminine" yet "unreal" woman, embodying sublime transcendental femininity tainted with grotesque corporeality. On the other hand, Fevvers is also the New Woman of the new century, who refuses to be silenced by reviving a stereotypical trope of woman writer – much more dangerous than the submissive angel and her silly text – that of the madwoman speaking her subversive (m)other-tongues. Fevvers' storyteller persona indeed recalls the hysteric patient talking herself out in a disorganized speech to the analyst-audience making notes of her mental creations, yet Walser is a mere scribe directed by her voice, there is no need for his healing, corrective psychoanalysis, Fevvers' narrative bears independent pleasures of its own. Fevvers completely

40. Elizabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998), p. 174.

41. Bronfen, p. x.

rejects the hysterical symptoms of aphonia, aphasia and amnesia, it is the “note of rising hysteria in [her] voice” (281), the vibration of her utterances, the movement of her rhythmic, antagonistic (highbrow and Cockney, sublime and grotesque, kitsch and hysteric, corporeal and aerial), excessive, passionate, periodic overflowing sentences, “infecting” the Carterian text, that mimes hysteric convulsions and performs a pantomime creating a histrionic hysteric style – a corporeally convulsive *yet* highly verbal, even “oververbalized,” ironic text of the “wondering womb.” Fevvers, the arch-simulator, stages herself in a spasmodic text as a riddle in constant spectacular self-deconstructive metamorphosis, a hysteric sham, dragging the subject in process from the dressing room to sea, sky, earth and even the wonderland behind the mirror, a nomadic subject’s journey, almost too fast to follow:

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* (52, my emphasis).

Fevvers pushed back her chair, rose up on tiptoe and lifted towards the ceiling a face which suddenly bore an expression of the most heavenly beatitude, face of an angel in a Sunday school picture-book, a remarkable transformation. She crossed her arms on her massive bust and the bulge in the back of her satin dressing-gown began to heave and bubble. Cracks appeared in the old satin. Everything appeared to be about to burst out and take off. But the loose curls quivering on top of her high-piled chignon already brushed a stray drifting cobweb from the smoke discoloured ceiling. . . (42)

Fevvers appears as the histrionic hysteric, constantly winking at the audience in a joyously destabilizing fit of a convulsive text: “Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?” (290). Her paroxysmal discourse throbbing, pulsing, beating on the page, reflects how her irrational performance, her consciously convulsive, aerial grotesque movements mock reason and tradition and shock the skeptic, down-to-earth spectator:

She gathered herself together, rose up on tiptoe and gave a mighty shrug, in order to raise her shoulders. Then she brought down her elbows, so that the tips of her pin feathers of each wing met in the air above her headdress, At the first crescendo, she jumped.

Yes, jumped. Jumped up to catch the dangling trapeze, jumped up some thirty feet in a single, heavy bound, transfixed the while upon the arching white sword of the limelight. The invisible wire that must have hauled her up remained invisible. She caught hold of the trapeze with one hand. Her wings throbbed, pulsed, then whirred, buzzed and at last began to beat steadily on the air they disturbed so much that the pages of Walser's notebook ruffled over and he temporarily lost his place, had to scramble to find it again, almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box.

(16)

Through a feminist revision of the female malady (propagated by Gilbert and Gubar, Cixous and Clément, Elizabeth Bronfen, Elaine Showalter and Dianne Hunter among others),⁴² hysteria becomes a textual engine carrying subversive discursive potentials addressed against patriarchal thought and its phallogocentric representation. Fevvers identifies with the revolutionary hysteric who rejects the homogenous cultural identity, the silent or superficial symbolization offered to her, who tries to translate herself into another idiom by transforming her cultural discontent into somatic manifestation, projecting her dis-ease and (des)ire upon her body and converting this symptomatic bodily transcription into a somatized verbal language of her own, testing the limits of body, identity and symbolic representation alike. Fevvers' histrionic performance acts out the hysteric, described by Dianne Hunter as a "multilingual being," cleverly manipulating discourse, finding her own voice, and creating her stimulating, sympathetic listener audience.⁴³ As Gilbert and Gubar claim, the display of the madwoman's monstrous autonomy signals the female impulse to refuse to be killed into silence, to escape social and literary confinement through strategic re-definitions of self. The language of the hysteric, of Fevvers, reveals simultaneously the vulnerability of symbolic representation and identity, speaking the infected other tongues of the silly lady novelist and the raving madwoman, identifying with the repressed other and acting out femininity to the ex-

42. See Bronfen; Gilbert and Gubar; Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La jeune née* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1975); Dianne Hunter, "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy et al. (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 257–277; and Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

43. Hunter, p. 268.

tremes signifies miming symptoms of other dis-eases and staging the performative quality of syndromes of female maladies, in order to “negotiate the interface between mimesis, imagination, representation and deception”⁴⁴ and to reveal the hysteric’s subversive ability to “invent, exaggerate, and repeat all the various absurdities of which a disordered imagination is capable,”⁴⁵ that is to simulate, fascinate, distress, fool, seduce and overall to subvert. Thus what Elizabeth Bronfen calls hysteria’s grand fallacy recalls Butler’s parodic performance of (pathologized) gender in a subversive spectacle producing a repetition with a *différance*, and a political meta-text in a voice of its own – in the pervasive way Fevvers does in her spectacular histrionic hysteric narrative-performance. Ironically, Fevvers’ excessive performance of femininity coincides with what Stephen Heath calls the hysteric’s failed masquerade, missing her identity as a Woman, that is, not playing the game of being or not having the phallus, not playing the game of accepting the phallus as a supreme signifier of an impossible identity.⁴⁶

In Fevvers’ interpretation, hysteria is a *commedia dell’arte* performance,⁴⁷ a carnivalesque subversion authored by the spectacularly grotesque hysterical body. Allon White claims that the hysteric discourse signifies an impossible, isolated, insane attempt at the private, phobic (re)articulation of a repressed, marginalized, fragmented carnival practice and its lost communal, regenerative pleasures.⁴⁸ However, the excessive narrative of the both winged and armed aerialiste has it both ways: instead of the broken fragments of a carnival debris or debilitating hysteria, the text embraces total carnivalesque celebration and unlimited hysteric festival within the cathartic sphere of the circus. The text performs the clownism phase of hysterical attacks, imitating animals and circus scenes in a compulsion to repeat, accompanied by the craziest capers, somersaults and grimaces.⁴⁹

44. Bronfen, p. 105.

45. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 139.

46. Stephen Heath, “Joan Riviere and the Masquerade,” in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Routledge, 1989), 45–61, p. 51.

47. See Bice Benvenuto, “A hisztéria: komédia. . . *dell’arte*,” in *Freud titokzatos tárgya: Pszichoanalízis és női szexualitás* (Budapest: Új Mandátum, 1997), 209–225.

48. Allon White, “Hysteria and the end of carnival: Festivity and bourgeois neurosis,” in *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, ed. Nancy Armstrong, Leonard Tennenhouse (London: Routledge, 1989), 157–170.

49. On clownism see White, p. 159.

The birdwoman's narrative flight is that of Cixous and Clément's newly born woman who can "fly and flee into a new heaven and new earth of her own invention"⁵⁰ in her heterogeneous text combining hysteric convulsions, witches' flights, mad tarantella and vertiginous rope dance, with acrobatic somersaults, grotesque contortions, clownesque grimaces and overall spasmodic fits of laughter – all out-maneuvering the symbolic order, in a histrionic hysteric festival of metamorphosis providing pleasures of a Feverish text.

"A series of inside stories of the exotic, of the marvellous, of laughter and tears and thrills and all"

The feverish narrative performance staged in *Nights at the Circus* cunningly surpasses the traditionally restricted carnival and mild revolution associated with the conventional misreading of *écriture féminine*, which enables merely a "subversion from within" a patriarchal representational system that stays immobile on the whole and contains all attempts at subversion. In Carter's novel *Fevvers'* mock-sentimental and histrionic hysteric, carnivalesque grotesque language gradually embraces, engulfs and overflows the intentionally patriarchal narrative authored by the skeptic, rational, pragmatic journalist, Walser. As Paul Mags claims, Carterian women put men through every circus hoop they themselves have jumped, from beneath their false eyelashes flashing alarmingly and seductively all of the vertiginous possibilities of the postmodern text,⁵¹ and over all the lure of women's writing. Although the intra-textual author in the novel is Walser who, after his interview with *Fevvers* (Book 1), decides to write as an incognito correspondent a "series of inside stories of the exotic, of the marvellous, of laughter and tears and thrills and all" (90) "invit[ing all readers] to spend a few nights at the circus" with him (91), he does not have a direct voice of his own. Instead, *Fevvers'* first person singular, autobiographical narrative voice and an omniscient, mocking, metatextual narrative voice take turns at weaving the text and eliciting its implied author, a grotesque winged aerialiste. Thus, as I will reveal in the following, woman's voice takes over to let female malady's Dickinsonian "infection in the sentence breed" in *Nights at the Circus*, a confidence trick challenging

50. Cixous-Clément, p. xiv.

51. Paul Mags, "Boys keep swinging: Angela Carter and the subject of men," in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. Joseph Bristow & Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), 184–198, p. 185.

the engendering of canonization, a piece of women's writing posing ironically as if authored by a man invited to waltz with and *as* women.

The verbally talented Walser (9), fond of "cataclysmic shocks because he loved to hear his bones rattle" (10), readily subjects himself to Fevvers' performance, unaware that her narrative would change his story. As if a premonition, her first spreading her wings disturbs the air "so much that the pages of Walser's notebook [ruffle] over and he temporarily los[es] his place" (16). Walser acts like a member of the spellbound audience identifying with the actress, his reactions mime those of the winged star, he is becoming increasingly irrational, hysterical (feels composure almost displaced, 16), sketchily emotional and sentimental (feels "more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel," 40). He simulates all symptoms of the aerial grotesque being, writing on his body the hysterical text of iterated difference: his clown-grimaces at little Ivan repeat Fevvers' terrifying, fascinating effect on him, his wounded shoulder prophesies Fevvers' broken wing, and most importantly, his typing, "flying fingers" (97) embody her subversive corporeal performance and narrative flight. Walser's personality-change coincides with the transformation of his language influenced by the two confidence-trickster Scheherezades directing his pen and destabilizing his subject, dismembering him via their remembering: "The hand that followed their dictations across the page obediently as a little dog no longer felt as if it belonged to him. It flapped at the hinge of the wrist" (78). The infection in the sentence spreads fast: when Fevvers interrupting Walser's report writes in his notebook with a "*fine, firm, flowing Italic hand*" (my emphasis), on reading it Walser immediately exclaims "Good God" in fittingly alliterating, emotional, excessive words (78). On his joining the circus, Walser, the pragmatic, rational journalist is replaced by Walser, the grotesque clown who performs in a masquerade not only a newly acquired, self-deconstructive, heterogeneous identity but also a virtuoso linguistic play, a meta-reflexive, mocking, hyperbolic, catachrestic, polyphonic, unlimited, carnivalesque flow of silly kitsch and insane hysteric artifice of *écriture féminine*, a verbal drag, a laughing text matching the spectacular feverish narrative of the beloved winged woman:

Yes! Built as St Petersburg was at the whim of a tyrant who wanted his memory of Venice to take form again in stone on a marshy shore at the end of the world under the most inhospitable of skies, this city, put together, brick by brick by poets, charlatans, adventurers and crazed priests, by slaves, by exiles, this city bears that Prince's name, which is the same name as the saint who holds the keys of heaven. . . St Peters-

burg, a city built of hubris, imagination, and desire. . . its boulevards of peach and vanilla stucco dissolve in mists of autumn. . . in the sugar syrup of nostalgia, acquiring the elaboration of artifice, I am inventing an imaginary City as I go along. Towards such a city the baboushka's pig now trots (96-97).

Walser reread his copy. The city precipitated him towards hyperbole, never before had he bandied about so many adjectives. Walser-the-clown, it seemed, could juggle with the dictionary with a zest that would have abashed Walser-the-foreign-correspondent. He chuckled. . . (98)

While Fevvers' native town is London, the home of the confidence trick, and with St Paul's Cathedral resembling a half-breasted Amazon, grotesque like Fevvers, the place of Walser's rebirth is St Petersburg, the home of the famous Russian circus, "a city stuck with lice and pearls, impenetrably concealed behind a strange alphabet, a beautiful, rancid, illegible city" (98), apt to inspire a linguistic turn, eliciting Walser's other writing and opening the gates to the heavenly bliss of a pleasurable text with a touch of irony. Walser's textual metamorphosis is directed by Fevvers. The once self-confident, rational journalist falls for the winged giantess, who dictates to him, stuffs a handful of cold cream in his mouth to silence him (143), seduces him with her narrative and makes him realize in a state of mental tumult that he has been duped, turned into a *real* clown and that with a broken heart and arm "he cannot write or type" (145). The journalist's disillusioned recognition of his being deprived of his pen and profession in the middle of the novel (Book 2, chapter 6) is followed by the most poetic, carnivalesque passages on the circus, a subversive text authored perhaps by Walser, the feverish clown, infected by the grotesque aerialiste's narrative:

Brisk, bright, wintry morning, under a sky that mimics a bell of blue glass so well it looks as if it would ring out glad tidings at the lightest blow of a fingernail. A thick rime of frost everywhere, giving things a festive, tinsel trim. The rare Northern sunlight makes up in brilliance for what it lacks in warmth, like certain nervous temperaments. . . . Amid laughter, horse-play and snatches of song, rosy-cheeked, whistling stable-boys stamp their feet, blow their fingers, dash hither and thither with bales of hay and oats on their shoulders, sacks of vegetables for the elephants, hands of bananas for the apes, or heave stomach-churning pitchforkfuls of dung on to a stack of soiled straw. . . . A lugubrious gypsy strays into the courtyard to add the wailing of his fiddle to the clatter of boot-heels on cobbles, the

babel of tongues, the perpetual, soft jangle as the elephants within the building agitate their chains, the sound that reminds the Colonel, always with a shock of pleasure, of the outrageous daring of his entire enterprise.

(146)

The pragmatic reporter gives birth to the clown poet to depart from homogeneous, disciplined subject position and compensatory phallogocentric representation, and experience the vertiginous sense of limitless freedom of the grotesque being (41, 103), “the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and, indeed, with the *language* which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of burlesque” (103). Throughout his illuminating journey with the circus, a Siberian train-crash turns Walser from ecstatic clown into a permanently delirious Shaman’s disciple, a concussed, amnesiac, aphasiac *apprentice sorcier*, who speaks hysterically in tongues, considers the fragments of his English an astral discourse, babbles beating his drum and duly deepens his familiarity with the language of the other so that when Fevvers finds him, he is ready for the interview. After his apprenticeship in the highest forms of confidence trick, having waltzed with the giantess winged aerialiste, screamed with the clowns and raved with the Shaman, Walser, at the end of the novel, can make conclude that all his life, as the text, happened to him in the third person, with his watching but not living it, and can utter “I” for the first time in the text: “and now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again” (294). The rebirth of the patriarchal word starts with sharing the novel’s final subversive female voice, that is, the “spiralling tornado of Fevvers’ laughter” (295).

As Beth A. Boehm also highlights, Walser is the reconstructed reader who abandons his androcentric worldview and masculinized bias or normalized technologies of reading and interpretive conventions, and with his final-opening questions, “What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?” (291), reenacts the beginning of the narrative. This time, Walser, whom Fevvers “takes under her wings” in Paul Mags terms, appears as an appreciative, cooperative, Barthesian writerly reader, prepared to make love and jouissance with the text. The reliability of the narrative voice, the credibility of the story are mockingly questioned, the reader’s expectations and the transparency of representation are playfully destabilized as Walser, the *reader* of Fevvers’ indecipherable body, is invited to dance, to waltz with the text. Walser, as the waltzing reader, is curious and suspicious, surmising the ambiguous, multi-layered polysemy of Fevvers’ performance, her narrative of self as either/both hoax or/and miracle, and is ready to take the alternative textual entry of the active co-producer of changing, plural meanings in a narrative that is seduction, spectacle and

a comic play in one. The cruel, voyeuristic collector Grand Duke – the old-fashioned, archetypal masculine reader seeking to consume a single, final, phallic meaning of a stable work that can be mastered – can interpret Fevvers' slogan "Only a bird in a gilded cage" only literally and thus threatens to entrap Fevvers in the form of a miniaturized artificial bird in the cage of stereotypical femininity, doomed to silence, silly small-talk or insanity. On the other hand, the *homo ludens* reader waltzing with the narrative realizes the winking, ironic, metatextual, merry side of the winged woman's narrative as well, and is ready to fly with her text. Thus the conventional concepts of a domineering patriarchal language violently incorporating and domineering weaker *écriture féminine* are demythologized, as the journalist becoming clown-poet readily enters the carnivalesque grotesque narrative, laughing together with the confidence trickster winged aerialiste author.

The portrait of the artist as a grotesque winged aerialiste

The grotesque Fevvers' carnivalesque life narrative (constituting the first part of the novel) is told to Walser, the young reporter, interpellated as a waltzing reader to be seduced by the winged giantess and her midget stepmother, intruding in each other's voice, commenting on, and complementing each other in a polyphony like a grotesque twin-set of "two Scheherezades, both impacting a thousand stories into the single night" (40), weaving the dialogic, dissonant text, thus embodying the polyphonic, subversive woman *writer*. The waltzing reader certainly notes that Fevvers' slogan "Is she fact or is she fiction?" is also a self-reflexive question of the implied author and that the description of Fevvers' ambivalent voice is a metatextual comment on Carter's playfully subversive text, a spectacular, seducing, enchanting, excessive and ecstatic narrative of the aerialiste writer:

... her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife. Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with, it comprised discords, her scale contained twelve tones. Her voice, with its warped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's. Yet such a voice could almost have had its source not within her throat but in some ingenious mechanism or other behind the canvas screen, voice of a fake medium at a seance (43).

The cheerful narrative is a confidence trick, as the cavernous and celestial, musical and disharmonious, homely and *unheimlich*, siren- and fishwife-like voice of the

winged aerialiste turns out to be the very voice of the laughing woman writer, newly-being-born (hatched?) in her subversive text.

The aerialiste persona of the artist balances among the lines of numerous critics: according to Sarah Gamble, Fevvers' final laughter is a metafictional comment in the form of an *aerial double somersault*, in James Brockway's view, the winged woman *walks the tightrope* on discourse, while Paulina Palmer looks forward to see where the future *flight of fiction* would take her, and Mary Russo argues that the portrait of the artist as a young mannequin ends with Winged Victory keen on learning how to *fly in a high flying rhetoric* (my emphasis).⁵² For me, the grotesque aerialiste, the winged freak supported by a midget stepmother personifies the woman writer located in a marginalized female literary tradition of sister-texts, lacking anxieties of influence or of authorship, writing from within yet subversively against the phallogocentric language of patriarchal literary institution and canon, providing in the "voice of a fake medium" a parody of essentialist and exclusive phallic language and *écriture féminine* alike, from her unstable, heterogeneous, yet solid, located position.

Ironically, a double of the aerialiste implied author is personified by the baboushka, a deeply embedded female narrator, whose voice opens the second part, entitled *Petersburg*, as well as Walser's report on his nights at the circus. The baboushka's humble bow, her genuflection, her hands "slowly part[ing] and com[ing] together again just as slowly, in a hypnotically reiterated gesture that was as if she were about to join her hands in prayer" and starting to part before touching (95) repeat the movements of a ropedancer (though slowed down excessively in a grotesque way). Her never finished tale, her "constantly repeated interruption of [action and sentence] sequences" are interpreted by the unhatched Walser as the drama of the dignified hopelessness of a wretched old woman. Nevertheless, the baboushka's repeatedly restarted, unfinished tale, told to grandson Little Ivan on the little pig, succeeds in marking both Walser's narrative ("I am inventing an imaginary city as I go along. Towards such a city, the baboushka's pig now trots," 97) and influencing the flow of the novel (introducing the porcine assistant Sybil into the text: "If one pig trotted off to St Petersburg to pray, another less pious worker travelled to Petersburg for fun and profit between silk sheets in a first class *wagon lit*," 98). The "*infinite incompleteness*" (Carter's emphasis) of the baboushka's work, suggesting that "woman's work is never done" (95), recalls the aerialiste's gravity-defying ropedancing mid-air in the sense that it highlights the infinite possibilities of women's

52. Gamble, p. 169; Palmer, p. 201; Russo, p. 170.

writing resisting final meanings for a pleasurable, challenging, creative balancing in-between inter-texts.

The aerialiste-text, as Fevvers' voice, balances on the thin dividing line between sublime and ridiculous, revealing poetic clichés, archaic diction, lofty tone, histrionic style, sentimental topos and sublime narrative – conventionally regarded as features of feminine literature – as mere mannerisms, semantically incongruous with the brute materiality of corporeal reality, of a-woman's presence. Since, as Lindsey Tucker also notes, Fevvers and Carter's text, "both grand and vulgar," revels not only in the sloppy second-hands of intertextuality and in the smells of carnival, but also in "many representations of physicality"⁵³ – paradoxically abject corporeality's unspeakable presence is repeatedly re-presented in shallow clichés of the sublime that nevertheless turn, via their excessive accumulation, deeply poetic, only to transform self-ironically into a ridiculous commonplace again in a textual trick-flow constantly duping the reader.

The enchanted audience balances on in-between borderlines, floats with the magical(-realistic) waves of the narrative, flies with the breezes and breaths of the text, as the winged aerialiste defies gravity, a primary trauma preceding symbolization, and thus can re-experience the preverbal, paradisiac, free-floating intrauterine bodily space of the Kristevan, threatening yet tempting, sublime and abject, maternal *chora*,⁵⁴ an omnipresent otherness subverting symbolization, and becoming the engine of the revolutionary poetic language of the aerialiste authoring the vertiginous text. According to Paul Bouissac, semiotician of the circus quoted by Russo, the air is a space of negotiation for the aerialiste, less of an angel in the house than a working girl in the air, which highlights her normally concealed corporeality amidst simulated spectacle and in the air, defying gravity, negotiates space from which alternative representative spaces for heterogeneous, somersaulting identities may be articulated.⁵⁵ Hélène Cixous, elaborating on Mauss and Lévi-Strauss, identifies the women in the circus – "carnies, drifters, jugglers and acrobats" – with the subversively speaking sorceress, hysteric, neurotic, ecstatic, and outsider, afflicted with a dangerous yet productive symbolic mobility, affecting the very structure whose lacunae it reflects, simulating imaginary transitions, embodying unrealizable compromises, incompatible syntheses, subversive configurations of a return to the other

53. Lindsey Tucker, "Introduction," in *Critical Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsay Tucker (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 1–23. p. 2.

54. See Kristeva, pp. 22–30.

55. Russo, p. 176.

wor(l)ds of childhood.⁵⁶ Accordingly, the grotesque winged aerialiste embodies Cixous's newly born woman writer, creating her subversive text(ure) by fusing translinguistic, giggling child play, *unheimlich* witchcraft of Lizzie's household magic, hysterically excessive writing from/on the body, risky borderline rope-dance and revisionary flight of a birdwoman into her ironically playful *Nights at the Circus*.

Strangely, the sublime aerialiste image of the woman writer coincides with Carter's grotesque, self-ironic authorial persona, as this yarn spinning, tall-tale-telling wolf in grandma's clothing uncannily recalls – in a typically Carterian excessive catachresis – the fantastic freak Fevvers, the writing winged woman, “her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood's grandmother. [as] She kisses her free hand to all. [and] She folds up her quivering *wings* with a number of shivers, moues and grimaces as if she were putting away a naughty *book*” (18) (my emphasis). *Nights at the Circus*'s narrative is constituted (and constantly self-deconstructed) as a spectacular performance, a tricky play, a subversive seduction, a “naughty book” flying with the quivering wings of the giantess aerialiste Fevvers, embodying the grotesque, winged, wayward woman-writer w(e)aving her whim, transgressive body-text.

56. Cixous & Clément, p. 7.