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The Creative Writer as Critic: Angela Carter

The subject of the present paper is the relationship between fiction and criticism as reflected in Angela Carter's fictional and non-fictional writings. My point of departure is prompted by her non-fiction volume entitled *Expletives Deleted*, especially her reviews of Christina Stead's fiction.

First I should like to address the general problem of criticism written by creative artists. Before outlining my views, I should like to resort to great writers who were major critics at the same time, and whose suggestion and advice have always proved to be very helpful in (my) understanding of literature.

As Henry James puts it in his essay "The New Novel":

> The effect, if not the prime office, of criticism is to make our absorption and enjoyment of the things that feed the mind as aware of itself as possible, since that awareness quickens the mental demand, which then in turn wanders further and further to pasture.[1]

Apparently he marks the scope for the uses of criticism quite broadly and generously.

In "How It Strikes a Contemporary" Virginia Woolf remarks that the only advice the contemporary critic can give the common reader, who is rather sophisticated by average standards, is the following: to respect one's instincts, follow them, and "... rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the critical past."[2] She adds that it was not always so and goes on to say, "Reviewers we have but no critic; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge.... A great critic, they say, is the rarest of beings."[3]

Let me return to the initial problem and raise the question: to what extent does it promote our understanding of, say, fiction, if the creative writer publishes criticism as well? Upon first thought, one might argue, if criticism comes from the pen of the creative writer, so much the better. No doubt, it is a convenient source because it should be authentic, support one's argumentation and solidify the foundations underlying critical evaluations.

But what can we make of it, if the modern writer-critic flatly refuses to function as an authority, which is often the case, unlike the representatives of academic criticism? Or if he/she writes subversive criticism challenging the mainstream, or if he is very emotional by nature?

The fiction of Angela Carter already signals that she does not respect academic criticism, she also refuses to be intimidated by it. In her novels she inventively improvises

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1. James, Henry, *Essays on Literature: American Writers, English Writers*. Comp. by Leon Edel. (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 124.
2. Woolf, Virginia, "How It Strikes a Contemporary." *Common Reader*. First Series. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1948), 294.
3. *Ibid.*

on themes supplied by myth, fairy tales, and even criticism. Carter's sceptical attitude can be spotted in certain comments of Fevvers, the heroine of *Nights at the Circus*: "'Look, love,' I says to him, eventually, because I am not in the mood for literary criticism.'"[4] (Fevvers' occupation has nothing to do with literary criticism, she is a trapeze artiste.) In the same vein, no labels should be attached to Carter's fiction. A permanent interplay can be discovered between her fiction and non-fiction, in her novels the characters deconstruct and reconstruct themselves all the time.

In an interview, to the question how she felt about labels "neo-gothic" and "magic realism," she replied,

> I don't feel either abused or understood if these labels are applied to me. I know what "magic realism" means in painting, and I don't do that. I write fiction, that's all.[5]

The reply is evasive, there is no trace of noble indignation, she even amuses herself by making allusions to the label "magic realism" in her above-mentioned novel: "It could be said that, for all the peoples of the region [Siberia], there existed no difference between fact and fiction, instead a sort of magic realism."[6] Does that mean that Carter does not respond to criticism at all, her own critical views are unreliable, and she cannot be trusted as a critic? The answer is definitely 'no'. In her fiction she may indulge in metafictional games, but her criticism surely must be more serious.

A comparison of the careers of Angela Carter and Christina Stead produces the following data: Stead was born in Australia, lived from 1902 to 1983, was young in the thirties, wrote ten novels, published a volume of four novellas and a collection of short stories in her life-time. Carter was born in England, lived 52 years, the 60s were her formative years, she wrote 9 novels, 3 volumes of short stories and several volumes of non-fiction, and did a translation of Charles Perrault's *Fairy Tales*, which was also published.

Stead was equally at home in Britain, Europe, the USA and Australia; Carter remained rootless, she visited not only the USA but also Japan (where she lived for two years), and was somewhat infatuated with French and French literature. Christina Stead was mostly ignored by the critics in her life-time, Angela Carter was granted two prestigious literary prizes in the 1960s, but in the 1970s became, increasingly, an outsider.

For *Expletives Deleted* she selected several of her earlier non-fiction writings, including two enthusiastic reviews of Stead's *The Beauties and Furies* in 1983, and of *I'm Dying Laughing*, published posthumously, in 1987, combining the two subsequently under the title "Christina Stead." Carter was commissioned to do the reviewing of these books for Virago on both occasions. She may have written in a tone of great admiration for Stead because of the conventions of writing reviews — the reviewer has to bend over backwards to find merits in the work of art reviewed.

There is just one slight snag, in her critical appreciation she mentions nearly all of Stead's significant books, but deliberately seems to ignore the novel entitled *Little Hotel*, which was published in 1974. Having read *Little Hotel*, I was really puzzled, and started to muse about the possible reason for this silence. The dates of the two reviews are 1983 and 1987, respectively; *Little Hotel* was published in 1974 and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, which, in my opinion, is indebted to *Little Hotel*, was published in 1984. One of the possible explanations is perhaps suggested by Ron Geering, who thinks that Stead's last two novels are very different from the former ones. The lack of an absolutely certain answer leads to a series of important related issues.

From the two reviews, especially the first one, it is clear that Angela Carter, fiction writer, was very personal and passionate in matters of literature, even though she was a

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4. Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. (London: Pan Books, 1984), 244.
5. Farzon, Alex R., "Interview." *European Messenger* Vol. 3 (1994), 21.
6. Carter, Angela, *op. cit.*, 260.

critic of fine perception and keen insight. A lot of problems she outlines are connected with the art of fiction, her own creative writing.

Virginia Woolf pointed out that for the modern writer there is no taboo with regard to the proper stuff and methods of fiction, and let me add here that reading fiction written by other (contemporary or ancient) writers, may, of course, result in changes in one's 'property box,' subjects, characters, plots, motifs and narrative methods alike. It is obvious that after receiving impressions, the critic should pass judgement and then compare. In criticism written by creative writers one of the phases referred to is often missing. The best way, however, to understand what the other novelist is doing is to write. In the case of "the common reader" it is a praiseworthy effort, in the case of the creative writer a significant experiment and test. Virginia Woolf warns us that at the second phase "... we are no longer the friends of the writer, but his judges..."[7] The best way then is to compare his work "with the greatest of its kind."[8] Unfortunately, "There is always a demon in us who whispers: 'I hate, I love..."[9] And only with the passing of time is it possible to make a judgement with some kind of control.

In the Introduction to *Expletives Deleted* this is precisely what Angela Carter seems to have done — she tried "to give a more balanced and objective overview[10] — deleting the instantaneous, impulsive reactions. That's why the volume is entitled *Expletives Deleted*. Yet the fact that Carter's criticism in the volume is passionately personal, cannot be questioned. In comparison, in her earlier criticism, where she did not control herself and was rather intuitive and self-defensive, the expletives are there all right, in "Notes from the Frontline," for example, she freely uses phrases which far exceed the spontaneity or informality being so characteristic of Woolf's reviews and essays. Carter's essay in the volume mentioned above abounds in expressions such as "dammit," "so what," "but all this bores me stiff" "pet fabulist," and "a lot of crap like that".[11] It is clear that here Carter wanted to subvert the genre of essay. She does not conceal her likes and dislikes, according to her, Plato is "the father of lie",[12] Baudelaire as a man even much worse. But even with expletives deleted, the fact that she is a vulnerable personality shows through her writing in a similar way, no matter what she writes.

The famous essays and reviews of Virginia Woolf collected in *The Common Reader* are allegedly "informal and personal in tone, suggestive rather than authoritative, and have an engaging air of spontaneity."[13] In the anthology cited it has also been pointed out that her *Letters* and *Diary* are "more informal and more revealing as a reliable source of her understanding."[14] There is a contradiction here, what is meant by "more revealing"? While in *The Common Reader* the greatness of Joyce's *Ulysses* is acknowledged somewhat reluctantly, in the *Diary*, where Woolf gives way to jealousy, it turns out that "Joyce is underbred, a queasy undergraduate scratching his pimples."[15]

Since letters and diaries are more personal, free of the responsibility and constraints of published criticism, the risk of misleading information and blunder is, in my opinion, greater. It is true, however, that much can be learnt about the writer's working methods, writing habits, personal relationships and everyday life from sources of

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7. Woolf, Virginia, "How Should One read a Book." *The Common Reader.* Second series. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1948), 267.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Op. cit.*, 268.
10. Carter, Angela, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings.* (London: Vintage, 1993), 1.
11. Carter, Angela, "Notes from the Frontline." In: *On Gender and Writing.* Ed. by Michelene Wandor. (London: Pandoras, 1983), 69-77.
12. *Op. cit.*, 75.
13. Abrams, M. H., *et al.*, (eds)., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature.* Vol. 2. New York: W.W. Norton, 1962, Fifth edition. 1987.
14. *Ibid.*
15. As cited in Batchelor, John, *Virginia Woolf.* (Cambridge: Union Press, 1991), 35.

this type.

It is well-known that for the creative writer writing reviews has its financial benefits, for Woolf this activity was also a kind of holiday, a kind a therapy, perhaps the same may be true of Angela Carter, sometimes she directly contacted the publishers and asked for a commission to review, if she particularly liked a work of art.

Angela Carter's criticism seems to be impulsive and excessively personal, it seems to be governed by emotions, nevertheless it reflects very keen and fine perception. (A far more detached critic with an outgoing personality and a personal touch is Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands*.)

I am aware of the dangers of making generalizations, but it seems to me that in our days there is a definite shift towards a much more personal, impulsive, unconsidered, "uncensored," and capricious criticism on the part of creative writers, and that there is a definite interaction between their works of art and their criticism. The ground is becoming especially dangerous when works of contemporary writer are being explored.

So how should one react? One should be very cautious at taking most (or all) of the unconsidered comments made by the writer-critic at face value, and check in other sources provided by the writer (in fiction, biography or poetry written by the author in question), or elsewhere.

So Angela Carter ignored *Little Hotel*. In this case, one must have a close look at her novels, and see, if she really ignored it. In *Nights at the Circus* I have come upon several elements which may have been the result of an indirect influence of the whole of Christina Stead's fictional world (for this world is consistent and unique), but there are elements that Carter must have borrowed wholesale from *Little Hotel*.

To mention some of these: 1. at the level of structure the writer approaches the psychology of the characters by collecting them in a closed little society, it is the Swiss-Touring Hotel in Stead's novels, and the brothel, Madame Schreck's institution, or the travelling circus in Carter's book; 2. at the level of characters: the figures of the Mayor of B., the Admiral, Luisa and Lina in *Little Hotel*, their counterparts being the figures of Colonel Kearney, the capitalist entrepreneur, Ma Nelson (wearing an admiral's uniform and a sword by her side), and Grig and Grog, the musical clowns, in *Nights at the Circus*; 3. the female characters of Stead are deaf, partly deaf or pretend to be deaf as a rule; the "eloquent" servantman in Madame Schreck's institution in Carter's novel was born with no mouth; 4. at the level of language and communication: the funny way Luisa uses Italian and English alternately reminds one of Fevvers' hilarious internationalism with languages, furthermore Mayor B. writing his messages on the hotel towels, and Carter's Grand Duke writing Fevvers' name with vodka bottles; 5. several references are made to the circus in Stead's novel; Mayor B., who receives letters addressed to Mayor A., is a "circus number," and later, "You could run a whole circus with just one number like that!"[16] Also Hotel Swiss-Touring puts up artists of the local night club, the Toucan.

Naturally Brian McHale's explanation that "representations of circuses, fairs, sideshows and amusement parks often function as residual indications of the context of postmodernist fiction"[17] may account for the similarity (John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margerita*, and Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffman* are given as illustrations), but with her brilliant and unique talent for improvisation, this hint may have been sufficient to make her entitle the book *Nights at the Circus*.

We can say that silences and omissions can be very revealing in the investigation of creative writers' criticism. Apart from keeping silent about *Little Hotel*, Angela Carter as a creative writer is a keen observer of Christina Stead's fiction, even though her criticism is emotion-based. She notices things that might come in useful for her own fiction, at the same time she gives an excellent general overview of the other writer's *oeuvre*.

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16. Stead, Christina, *Little Hotel*. (N.p.: Griffin Press, Sirius edition, 1988), 29.
17. McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*. (London: Routledge, 1987), 174.

According to Carter, Stead is not a naturalist or social realist as other critics state, but a novelist concerned with the human condition. Carter highlights the most characteristic feature of Stead's fiction, her relentlessness, detachment, or "lack of pity."[18] As to her use of fictional techniques she fully realizes that in Stead's story-telling language is only a tool. Carter appreciates Stead's peculiar expressionism as well.

Finally, I should like to remark that Carter cannot get rid of her emotion-based attitude. From the review we learn that Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* is a far lesser novel than Stead's *Cotter's England* without getting any explanation. Carter also proclaims that Dreiser is a bad writer, "an incompetent practitioner of applied linguistics" and Borges a good one, who "...constructs metaphysical alternative worlds based on the Word."[19] She states her opinions as facts without making further comments.

The emotions, the demon are here again, but can we blame Angela Carter? Even though she fails to mention her indebtedness to *Little Hotel*, she reminds us that it is necessary "to fill new wine in old bottles," and sometimes "old wine in new bottles."[20]

18. Carter, Angela, *Expletives Deleted*, 180.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Carter, Angela, "Notes from the Frontline." 77.