WINGS AND MASKS. GROTESQUE BODY, LAUGHING LANGUAGE AND CARNIVALESQUE TEXTURE IN ANGELA CARTER'S *NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*

ANNA KÉRCHY
PhD student
Department of English Studies, SZTE

To Professor Marinovich-Resch, Sári,
to whom I owe the fantastic world of Angela Carter

CARTERIAN BODY-TEXTS

The paper focuses on an original piece of contemporary woman's writing Angela Carter's 1984 novel, *Nights at the Circus* with the aim to provide a complex analysis of the *semioticization* of the body narrated in the text and of the subversive *somatization* of the text on the body (see Brooks 1993). I wish to reveal how the uncontrollable ambivalence of the mockingly burlesque, jovially vulgar, celebratory sublime, uncannily abject grotesque body infiltrates, vibrates the language of the novel, producing an excessive, overflowing style, a self-deconstructive, playfully carnivalesque text, a laughing language. Via a feminist re-reading of Bakhtin's theory on the grotesque, inspired by Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* (1995), I wish to reveal how the double world-view, the ambiguous nature of the grotesque intertwines dichotomies, transcends hierarchical binary logic and-by fusing capriciously into one multifaceted mask Bakhtinian carnivalesque with Kayserian grotesque, Kristevaian abject, Freudian uncanny, Bergsonian hilarious, Chaplinian burlesque and Kantian sublime-thus becomes an able model to describe women's heterogeneous experience of their polysemic bodies. Unlike Mary Russo who calls attention to the misogynist aspects of grotesque representation I wish to underline uniquely its empowering potentials for revisionary feminist readings of body-texts. The final aim is to unveil how the body becoming grotesque and the text becoming

carnivalesque rewrites feminine subjectivity, demythologizes *écriture féminine* and phallogocentric language, and problematizes masculinized authorship, along with patriarchally canonized literary, critical, readerly assumptions and conventions, so as to create in the long run a self-deconstructive women's writing able to depict the paradoxical female subject in process.

As Sarah Gamble highlights, Angela Carter's novels take place in liminal settings and focus on borderline conditions (Gamble 1997, 6). Carter's scenes, the toyshop, the fairground, the circus, the masquerade or the theatre, can be regarded as spectacular, open spaces of a grotesque, carnivalesque topography, while her favourite themes, adolescence, blurred gender boundaries, journeys and the suspension of space and time, can be associated with the constant metamorphosis of the heterogeneous, ambiguous grotesque body-especially since Carter's stories seem to host to an almost maniac extent fantastic characters with grotesque bodies, ranging from the wolfish Red Riding Hood, the tender wolf, the distorted faced Beauty, and the pregnant man, to the murderous clown, the aerial giantess, and the set of licentious old women twins.

GROTESQUE BODIES

In *Nights at the Circus* it is Fevvers, the winged giantess aerialist who embodies the carnivalesque grotesque defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as open, changing, unfinished, irregular, heterogeneous, protruding, corporeal, excessive and ambiguous as opposed to the classical body that is transcendental, monumental, disciplined, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and homogeneous (Bakhtin 1968, 303–368).

Fevvers' stage names, mocking the *Nomen est Omen* tradition and resisting the compulsory Name of the Father, reflect the paradoxical and playful, unnatural nature of an ambivalent carnivalesque grotesque being. Fevvers, a foundling, is initially christened Sophia by her stepmother, Lizzie, and sincere to this name meaning "wisdom" she renames herself cleverly, choosing ambivalent stage names masking and unveiling her throughout her performance, an ironic "confidence trick" staging her deconstructed selves. "Fevvers" embraces the word "fever," a physical symptom as well as "feather," a symbol of sublime spirituality, "Cockney Venus," "Helen of the High Wire" (Carter 7)[1], "Madonna of the Arena" (126) merge high and low, sacred and profane, divine and vulgar, fusing binary oppositions, disturbing hierarchies, degrading conventional high principles, lofty values.

[1] All parenthesised references if not stated otherwise are to this edition: Carter, Angela. 1994. Nights at the Circus. London: Vintage.

Fevvers 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. 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 sublime aerialiste, the angelic winged wonder, an "fabulous bird-woman" (15) defying the laws of the gravity in her graceful and erotic art on the trapeze. Fevvers mocks the spectators' (the readers') epistemophiliac, fetishistic gaze, she never provides a final answer to her being a fact or a fiction, Walser can merely wander upon 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 Kristevaian subject in process/ on trial (Kristeva 1985, 37) balancing on a borderline in a grotesque body always becoming an other, performing a carnivalesque subversion of the hierarchical social order, of the homogeneous subject, of transparent language and of conventional representation of femininity.

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" (see Dollimore 1991, 33) she reveals a la Judith Butler the performative and repetitive nature of gender and provides an ironic critique of the ideology of representation limiting female identification (Butler 1990). Fevvers' wings recall 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 the Nike of Samothrace that simply lacks a head. However she subverts these *clichés* of femininity from within: her sexual activity mocks the Victorian angel, yet she also challenges the stereotype of the whore, the 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 technologies of power (see Foucault 1980); she erases and rewrites traditional stories of femininity, weaving her own texts, becoming an author of her own. Fevvers is a 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 *simu-*

lacra, 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.

Fevvers defies the male gaze by taking advantage of her feminine "being-looked-at-ness" (see Mulvey 1991, Doane 1997, Van Zoonen 1994), to her slogan "LOOK AT ME!" she adds "Look! (but) Hands off!" (15) and she finds pleasure in her female gaze as well.

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" (Russo 1995, 171) exactly due 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. She is simultaneously "Cockney sparrow" (41) and "tropical bird", cripple and celestial, vulgar and sublime, bird and woman, virgin and whore, giantess and aerialiste, a feminine "symbolic Woman", an "anomaly" (161) and "a-woman" (see De Lauretis 1987, 124)[2] in her subjective corporeal reality, thus-playing on the subversive grotesque pregnant body-she can give birth to herself again and again anew.

Fevvers' body becoming the source, the engine of her revision, besides being ambiguous, bears the grotesque feature of excess enhancing the transgressive violations of her bodily limits. She has both wings and arms, thus she is "the impossible made doubly unlikely-the impossible squared" (15). Her height of six feet two, her enormous breasts, her two yards of golden hair, her six inches long false eyelashes and the superfluous, grotesque protuberances of her wing-supplements embody her feverish excess, her "grand, vulgar, careless generosity" (12) coupled with an "enormous appetite", "gigantic coquetry" (21) and a "gargantuan enthusiasm" (22). The

[2] In Teresa de Lauretis' s view the female subject is simultaneously "a-woman" embodying a singular identity in its plural, heterogeneous and uncontrollable bodily reality and "Woman" symbolizing the essential myth of homogeneous subjection and of ideologically constituted universal femininity.

robustly Rubenesque Fevvers, a material girl, performs a habit of non-productive expenditure never thinking of calculation. She is "big girl" (7) a "marvellous giantess" (42) whose monstrous attractivity is just as threatening in the eyes of Walser as it is seducing. When she yawns "with prodigious energy, opening up a crimson maw the size of a basking shark, taking in enough air to lift a Montgolfier," and stretches hugely as if "she intended to fill up all the mirror, all the room with her bulk," Walser is convulsed with nausea, panic and a "seismic erotic disturbance" (53). The mouth of the trapeze artist, the bodily opening of this sweating working girl, is like the *grotto* of a mythic monster, the cave of a carnivore beast, evoking mockingly Hell's Mouth, the grotesque patriarchal topos of the *vagina dentata,* fatally attractive, engulfing, and embracing-yet a few hours later-or in the very same moment, as time stops on the Grandfather Clock of Fevvers' dressing room-the yawn of the ever-changing Fevvers is not (only) like that of a sublime whale or a devouring lioness, but (also) just "a girl who has stayed up too long" (87). Fevvers' first spreading of her wings, ripping her chemise is extremely erotic, yet her rebirth as a winged woman is combined in a grotesque way with death, since it is also the annunciation of Lizzie's menopause (24), the closure of her procreativity, that signals in a patriarchal logic the end of her femininity.

Fevvers' grotesque body, identified with excessive sexuality, unlimited desires and bodily decay, is associated with corporeal functions, vulgar materiality, embodying the destabilizing abjectification of the subject: she sweats, farts, gorges, gulps, belches, yawns, irrespectable of limiting social conventions of politeness. The "essence of Fevvers", the "highly personal aroma" of her dressing room contains a "powerful note of stale feet" (9), "sharp gusts of cheap scent" of Parma violets (25), mingled with the smell of sweaty underwear, of eel pie with mash and gallons of champagne. She is an earthly giantess, a female Gargantua: with a Rabelaisian appetite she stuffs herself, spilling gravy, sucking up peas from the knife "with table manners of the Elizabethan variety" (22), she pours the sugar into her mug in a stream, directly from the bag (43), pops the cork of "a chilled magnum of champagne between her teeth" (8). Crying she blows her nose "rather disgustingly between her fingers" (142), while her loud laughter is a "spiralling tornado" twisting and shuddering across the entire globe (295). An angel with smut on her nose (75), sublime mistress of heterology she repulses and enchants Walser, when she talks openly about lowly physicality, her woman's bleeding, the marvellous blossoming of her flesh (23), mocking the Foucauldian society of confession by her unwillingness to discipline her body and provoking Walser who aims to frame her in the phallocentric narrative of his pragmatic report. Walser is more than impressed, touched by Fevvers' body; the tone of his language undergoes a metamorphosis, becoming more and more feverish as nights at the circus pass by.

The ambiguous Fevvers' "asymmetric splendour" (8) embraces the grotesque, carnivalesque degradation of sublime beauty. She is "divinely tall" yet looks "more

like a dray mare than an angel," her wonderful face seems "broad and oval as a meat dish," (12), "beefsteak red and gleaming" (13), and wholesome like an "Iowa cornfield" (18), while her voice of the spheres sounds "raucous and metallic [...] clanging of contralto or even baritone dustbins" (13). The fantastic aerial wonder recalls an "over-literal winged barmaid" (16), whose flight is that of a Trafalgar square pigeon flapping and plummeting "lazily enough to show off the crack in her bum" (17), whereas her star's dressing-room is "mean as a kitchen maid's attic" (14).

Fevvers's grotesque ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that her uncanny double also appears in the text in the form of Buffo, the mad circus clown. Just like Fevvers – as Tamás Bényei also highlights-Buffo bears all the characteristics of a grotesque being. Ambiguous, he is the Great Clown of Clowns, a quintessence of all that clowns personify, his laughter embodies the deepest sorrow, despair and the filth of life. He is lonely, lovesick Pierrot, cunning, clumsy Harlequin, deformed Triboulet, vulgar Buffon[3], and a sacred madman, "a mad priest," the very image of Christ suffering for the sins of mankind. Excessive, he drinks prodigiously as if he could "bottle the whole world, tip it down his throat, then piss it against the wall" (118), and partakes in the orgiastic, wasted, anal, death-miming violent bergomask, the savage jig of the clowns. He embodies corporeality and degradation, as he wears, in a grotesque reverse logic, his most intimate and obscene insides on his outside in the form of a wig simulating a bladder, and thus suggests that "he stores his brain in the organ, which, conventionally stores piss" (116). During his dreadfully fascinating constant metamorphosis, an unchanging change, the mask becomes the face that eclipses me to reveal the other (--while he claims ironically that the "beauty of clowning is that nothing ever changes"). On the stage, amidst the most hideous grimaces he transgresses his physical boundaries, when he "shakes(s) out his teeth, shake(s) off his nose, shake(s)away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment" (117): a deconstructed subject he is the object of hysterical laughter.

Fevvers' and Buffo's numerous similarities turn them into a schizophrenic pair, two sides of the same grotesque coin. They are of lowly Cockney origin, Fevvers' enormous appetite matches Buffo's insatiable thirst, both are simultaneously saint and freak, the trapeze artist defies gravity as the clown defies reason, Fevvers demythologizes femininity as Buffo does Christianity. They both grimace at their warped reflections in the "inverted world of the mirror," cracking the glass of the socializing-normalizing Lacanian mirror stage (see 51, 88, 173, 177) by performing multiple, ever-changing, illusory identities in spectacles provoking enchanted or frightened laughter: during their double confidence trick Buffo's madness appears on stage as an "illusion of intentional Bedlam" (177) while Fevvers performs the

[3] For a differentiation between various types of clowns see Szabolcsi, Miklós. *A clown, mint a művész önarcképe.* Budapest: Corvina, 1974.

authentic miracle pretending to be a hoax. Already before her circus career Fevvers' adolescent body foreshadows her spectacular future: in her first revisionary performance she poses in Ma Nelson's *tableau vivant* as Victory with wings equipped with a phallic sword, while her naked body is "*spread* with the wet white that *clowns* use in the circus" (37) *(emphasis mine)*. The promise of her spreading wings is linked to the clowns' act. Her body becomes a telling melting-pot combining two modes of grotesque subversion, the sublime flight and the dance macabre to come. Fevvers and Buffo are intimately linked, since "under these impenetrable disguises of wet white [of the clowns], you might find, were you to look, the features of those who were once proud to be visible. You find there, per example, the *aerialiste* whose nerve has failed" (119). The winged trapeze artist inherently carries within herself the potential to become a fallen angel, a sad circus clown bound to the earth of the arena miming a happiness he does not own. The clowns, like Fevvers, are "whores of mirth perpetually at play" (119), yet they embody a different mode of the grotesque and provoke a different laughter.

Perhaps Fevvers and Buffo never appear together, never meet face to face throughout the novel because they embody two opposing sides of a single identical Janus face, two different aspects of the very same ambiguous, troubling phenomenon called grotesque. On the one hand Fevvers embodies the Bakhtinian Medieval grotesque, a burlesque comedy inciting a joyous laughter by the promise of unlimited wish-fulfillment, a celebratory liberation by the carnivalesque playful destabilization of the micro- and macrocosmic order. This feverish laughter celebrates ambivalence getting rid of fear and limitations, and provides a Dionysian delirium of subversive possibilities, revelry in excess, and a festive debauchery of desiring bodies without end. (In the meanwhile, the sublime nature of Fevvers calls for an enchanted laughter, a Kantian awe-struck admiration of the mighty, incomparable, unknowable, all-embracing, infinite totality.) On the other hand, Buffo incorporates the Romantic grotesque, a darker, uncanny, abject side that threatens with the return of the repressed (see Freud 1953, Kristeva 1982), and provokes a hysteric, painfully disillusioning and corrective laughter by revealing human being as a puppet in a hostile *theatrum mundi,* aware of his existential uncertainty. The clown's disillusioning laughter, the laughter on the clown--the embarrassed grimace-smile of alienated being (see Kayser 1963, 154) or the ironic, knowing laughter of the post-modern split subject (see Bényei 1997, 308)-is confused by the ambivalence of chaos and unnamable fears, troubled by primary loss, uncompensatable lack, desiring mourning forever in vain. Fevvers and Buffo, the two modes of the grotesque fuse in *Nights at the Circus* to vibrate the novel with their differing laughters in a polyphony, producing a carnivalesque grotesque, feverish, laughing text.

Fevvers' voice fusing corporeal and textual metamorphosis is a vocal mise-en-scene of the dynamic interrelation between grotesque body and carnivalesque language.

> [...] 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 (43)

The description of Fevvers' ambivalent voice is a metatextual comment on Carter's playfully subversive text, a spectacular, seducing, enchanting, excessive and ecstatic narrative that is a confidence trick, as the voice of the winged aerialist is the very voice of the laughing woman writer.

LAUGHING LANGUAGES

The characteristic differences of the grotesque body are textualized in Carter's subversive narrative that elaborates on Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque language, a familiar speech of the fairs fuelled by a folk laughter associated with polyphonic ambivalence, jovial vulgarity and transgressive excess. *Nights at the Circus* exploits the potential of carnivalesque language to undermine official discourse and conventional representation, with the specific feminist aim of destabilizing phallogocentric discourse, patriarchal representation and masculinized author position.

The paradoxical double world view of the grotesque is echoed in the ambiguous voice of the Fevvers, the winged freak personificating the woman writer writing from within yet subversively against the phallocentric language of patriarchal literary institution and canon. Fevvers' speech combines the highbrow, sometimes affected utterances of a cultivated perfect lady and the coarse, vulgar slang of a street girl or a rag and bone merchant (88), she mockingly mixes different registers with sentences like "This is some kind of heretical possibly Manichean version of Neo-Platonic Rosicrucianism, thinks I to myself, tread carefully, girlie! I exhort myself." (77). Fevvers' narrative of the self as Carter's autobiografiction melts the obscene, uproarious, sneering laughter of common folk, the Cockney heehaw with the winking intertextual allusions and subtle irony of the intellectual elite and a metatextual humour of her own kind. The knowing yet familiar tone of the recurring allusions to the canonized master, Shakespeare signifies an *hommage* to the vulgar yet poetic

language of the dearly loved Bard, as well as a revelation of the grotesque relativity of high and law. ("we were just a hop and a skip and a jump away from the good Old Vic at Waterloo where, at very reasonable prices, we perched up in the gods and wept at Romeo and Juliet, booed and hissed at Crookback Dick, laughed ourselves silly at Malvolio's yellow stocking" (53)) The text, as Fevvers' voice balances on the thin dividing line between sublime and ridiculous, revealing poetic clichés, archaic diction, lofty tone, sentimental topos and sublime narrative as mere mannerisms, incongruous with the brute materiality of corporeal reality, and thus performing an ironic miming (see Marinovich-Resch 2002) [4] of conventional, patriarchally canonized features of the so-called "feminine literature."

Pathos and bathos fuse in Fevvers' polyphonic life narrative (constituting the first part of the novel) told to Walser, the young reported to be seduced by the winged giantess and her midget stepmother, intruding in each other's voice, commenting on, complementing each other like "two Scheherezades, both impacting a thousand stories into the single night" (40). ("She paused for precisely three heartbeats. 'I fell...and give my poor nose such a whack on the brass fire-guard-'"(30)) 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 grotesque set of twin Scheherezades weaving the text, thus embodying the polyphonic, subversive woman *writer*. The ambiguity of the grotesque body is textualized in the various poetic figures and tropes of *mésalliance*-metaphors condensating, metonyms displacing different concepts, litotes expressing meaning with opposite meanings, and oxymorons uniting antagonistic terms-overabound in the story of the "robustly rosy cheeked," "less colossal than human" "Cockney Venus," an oxymoron itself.

The unlimited excess, the transgressive overflowings and the unusual protuberances of the grotesque body infiltrate the text by the constantly recurring hyperbole, as well as by infinite enumerations, the avalanche of adjectives, the overabundance of synonyms, the nearly maniac accumulation of metaphors, and a joyous luxuriation in every possible textual, stylistic, rhetorical exaggeration characterizing the loquacious Carterian narrative. Fevvers' grotesque body, her identity

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[4] Carter's subversive repetition of the feminine literary tradition is in a sense very much like the parody of the female gothic described by Sarolta Marinovich Resch 2002 as not necessarily a disgracing, trvializing, ridiculizing caricature but rather recalling an ironic inversion, a parodic imitation, implying a dialogic, intertextual hommage to the parodied woman's writing. Marinovich-Resch associates the crude caricature with Bakhtin and connects the liberatory parody to Hutcheon, however, as I argued in my paper, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque ridicule also has its subversive potentials, while Hutcheon's concept of the parody seems in some sense limiting, and much more uninvolved, impersonal and cruel as opposed to the tenderly ironic rewriting employed by Carter.

performance is repeatedly illuminated in the light of an excessive and antagonistic language[5]: "Her breast fluttered as if her heart wanted to fly out. Her heavy head hung down like a bell that has ceased tolling. She even seemed to have diminished in size, to have shrunk to proportions only a little more colossal than human. She closed her eyes and let out a long exhilaration of breath." (87) These poetic highlights fuse various subversive tropes playing with sounds ("flutter"-"fly," "bell"-"toll"), paradoxical similes ("as if flying", "hung down like a bell") mix with alliterations ("her heavy head hung"), onomatopoeia ("fluttered," "tolling") and the embodied voice ("exhilaration of breath").

The mockingly harsh material reality of the grotesque body invades the text as the semioticization of the body results in the somatization of the narrative, producing a text vibrated by corporeal presence. Obscene licentiousness, direct vulgarity ("me old cock" (89)), cursing, swearing ("rot her soul" (73)) and the degrading travesty of carnivalesque language melt with winking self-correction ("pardon my French" (70)) and sublime erotic allusions ("the drawing room was snug as a groin," "soft, feathery growths...pulling my shoulders backwards with the weight and urgency of an invisible lover" (27)). Ironically, even the lowliest bodily functions are described in a disillusioning realistic yet poetic manner ("she let a *r*ipping fa*r*t *r*ing *r*ound the *r*oom" (11)) that acquires an intensive effect celebrating the totality of life by addressing all the senses, making the reader feel, smell, hear, taste, touch Carter's very text.

The embodied voice can be deciphered in the oral exclamations, in the lively vocality of the text-- the "Splat!" (13), the "whoosh!" (19), the "crack" (106), the "squeak, squeak" (110), the "Yes, sir!" "Ooops!" (47), the "ahem" (25) the "rat-a-tat-tat [...] and lo and behold" (46) the "H'm, [...] and, h'm, again" (79)-as well as in the onomatopoeic verbs, the roars, neighs, grunts, cries, sighs, giggle and applause echoed in the circus, and in the pre-linguistic noises of Fevvers' unlimited body, her whisper, laughter, fart, belch, the bang of her empty glass, the rattle of her jars of fards, the thump of her giant feet, the swash of her wings. Fevvers' grotesque body resonates the text by the trans-discursive, primary rhythm, repetition and musicality of its materiality, by its unspeakable excess, as if the narrative was embraced by her "simmering wake of [...] hair [...], a sufficiently startling head of hair, yellow and inexhaustible as sand, thick as cream, sizzling and whispering under the brush [while] Fevvers sighed with pleasure" (19).

The excessive body-text abounds with onomatopoeic verbs of action inviting corporeal reality and its fleeting presence into the text, destabilizing narrative temporality and moving discourse to the rhythmic tune of the body changing with passing time.

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5 See also quotations on Fevvers' eyes, voice, wings, hair.

> Then she spread out her superb, heavy arms in a backward gesture of benediction and, as she did so, her wings spread, too, a polychromatic unfolding fully six feet across, spread of an eagle, a condor, an albatross fed to excess on the same diet that makes flamingos pink. OOOOOOOh! The gasps of the beholders sent a wind of wonder rippling through the theatre. (15)

The moving, musical materiality, the embodied voice, preverbal noise, and delirious overflow of Carter's subversive language recalls Julia Kristeva's revolutionary poetic language able to recuperate the lost pre-symbolic Semiotic bodily bliss by semioticized corporeal energies, rhythmic, repetitive, playful linguistic subversions and other text(ure)s pointing beyond conventional meaning and established language use. Accordingly, the novel's poeticity joyously exceeds representational norms and mockingly troubles horizons of expectations by fusing denotative and figural meanings, mixing realistic and metaphoric levels. In Carter's literalised metaphors, self-confidence lends real (?) wings to Fevvers who actually stumbles down off the trapeze when she falls head over heels in love with Walser. The mock aerial being puts on airs and graces, when her affected manners give the impression of great elegance but in reality have the opposite effect. Finally, after changes in fortune, at the successful end of the trial, the *picaro* birdwoman can literally have the last laugh.

Carter's complex, compound sentences provides the pleasure of rhythmic sound, augmented tension, paradoxical symmetries of free associations, excessive stylistic play of unlimited overflow and artistic verbal mastery of minute details and nuances. Carter reveals the grotesque sublime of the grain in the avalanche, of the breath in the thunder. Reading *Nights at the Circus* out loud guarantees not only the full enjoyment of the oral, vocal, tonal quality of the text, but also turns the reader into a laughing grotesque being herself. As the reader goes on with the extremely lengthy sentences of Carter's baroque periodic style, the reader's breaths taken between the too long clauses within one single sentence, echo Fevvers' harsh, maniac, frenetic laughter just as much as the embodied inner voice of silent, meditative breathing. In the logic of Eastern philosophy, laughter may become a mode of spiritual healing and the source of wisdom. The reader ready to breathe to the rhythm of the text may take part in the woman-writer's revolutionary revision, as the breathing coded in Carter's subversive, excessive, carnivalesque text models the physical pneumonic contractions, the intensive respiration of laughter.

Thus, in the long run, Carter's unlimited, overflowing writing is apt to model the uncontrolled corporeality, the abject excretion, the delirious ecstasy, the sexual incitement, the sublime flight and the uncanny macabre clown-dance of the grotesque body. As the "spiralling tornado" of Fevvers' final, delirious laughter suggests, on the whole, the engine of the excessive subversive carnivalesque narrative is a polyphonic, enchanted and uncanny, vulgar and ironic, liberatory and corrective,

frenetic, frivolous and frightened, burlesque laughter that nevertheless becomes a joyous, unlimited frenzy, a child-like laughing fit working on the level of Carter's excessive language, vibrating body and text alike.[6] *Nights at the Circus* remain(s) open-ended, as "[t]he spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a *spontaneous response* to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and *breathed,* everywhere was laughing" (295) *(emphasis mine)*. At the end (or beginning) of her spectacular, seducing and smiling performance, that is at the end (or beginning) of the carnivalesque narrative, the winged Fevvers, like the womanwriter, Carter herself, laughing, "kisses her free hand to all. [and] folds up her quivering *wings* with a number of shivers, moues and grimaces as if she were putting away a naughty *book*" (18) *(emphasis mine),* rewriting femininity from a laughing grotesque body, that is "the abode of a limitless freedom" (41).

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[6] Unlike Tamás Bényei, who argues for the clown's disillusioned, metaphysical, "adult" laughter to be the blindspot and engine of the text, or unlike female critics (Paulina Palmer, Mary Russo, Magali Cornier Michael, Marina Warner among others) who highlight the text-organizing feminist power of Fevvers' laughter, I think that this frenetic, joyous, childish laughing fit of/in Carter's excessive language resonates Nights at the Circus even louder than Fevvers' carnivalesque or Buffo's uncanny laughter.

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