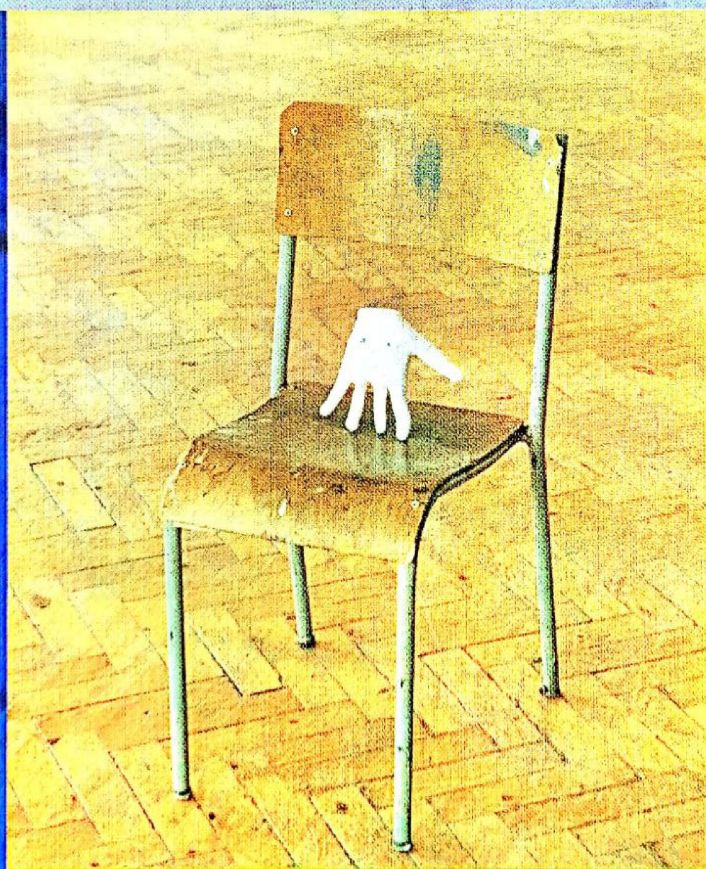


SABINE COELSCH-FOISNER (Ed.)

Fantastic Body Transformations in English Literature



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Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*: Grotesque Body Modification, Freaked Femininity and Narrative Self-Decomposition

A Confusing Space of Transformation

The Passion of New Eve, published in 1977 is a grotesque, transitional text in the Carterian corpus. It is an 'in-between text', a confusing space of transformation, that marks a gradual, yet radical, change in Carter's writing. After her realistic Bristol Trilogy (*Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions*, *Love*),¹ her rigid science-fictional dystopia (*Heroes and Villains*),² and a violent surrealist collage (*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*),³ Carter seems to turn decisively towards joyously turbulent adventures, fantastic fictions vitalized by a polyphonic, magical realist voice – a voice that becomes more and more overtly charged with ideology criticism and feminist politics. In their chronological succession, Carter's novels shift gradually from a static, gloomy realism to a dynamic magical realism, from ruthless heroes to witty heroines, from obsession with patriarchs to the celebration of daughters and, as Paulina Palmer claims, from coded mannequin to bird woman, from femininity as masochist entrapment to femininity as feminist self-realization.⁴ Carter describes *The Passion of New Eve*⁵ as an "anti-mythic novel [...] conceived as a feminist tract about the social creation of femininity".⁶ She calls it "a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity, [...] as] an illusion"⁷ – and indeed the majority of critics praise the novel for being one of the, if not *the*, most effective of Carter's femi-

¹ Angela Carter, *Shadow Dance* (London: Virago Press 1966, repr. 1997); Angela Carter, *Several Perceptions* (London: Virago Press 1968, repr. 1997); Angela Carter, *Love* (1971; New York: Penguin, 1987).

² Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (New York: Penguin, 1969, repr. 1986).

³ Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, repr. 1982).

⁴ 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), pp. 179-205.

⁵ Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve* (1977; London: Virago, 1998). Subsequently abbreviated to *PNE*.

⁶ Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", in *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), pp. 69-77, p. 71.

⁷ John Haffenden, "An Interview with Angela Carter", in *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 76-96, p. 86.

nist political attempts.⁸ From this perspective, the 'in-between' novel can be interpreted as a re-enactment of the crucial turn in Carter's literary career, her transformation from what she calls "a male impersonator"⁹ into a politically self-conscious woman-writer.

Yet, most strangely, the novel completely lacks the celebratory tone of Carter's subsequent feminist novels and seems more of a dark vision, "a bitter and quite uncomfortable book to read",¹⁰ a painfully passionate text fuelled by the grotesquely nervous, suffering feminine body marked by pain and "locked into a regressive circulation of literary metaphors of fatal, apparitional, mechanical femininity" forged by patriarchy.¹¹ As the novel unveils the grotesque agony of "becoming woman",¹² the transitional polyphonic text is cruelly torn apart, painfully shattered into pieces by contradictory, yet fatally embracing, narrative voices. Feminist, feminine, feminized transvestite, transsexual, or transgender voices "become legion"¹³ so as to enact the confusion of the psychosomatic symptoms of body dysmorphia and to shape the painful yet revelatory passion of the decomposing feminine body-text.

I shall argue that *The Passion of New Eve* illustrates *par excellence* a transitional stage in the Carterian corpus. It discloses a femininity that is simultaneously spectacular performance and painful entrapment. It rediscovers mothers

⁸ Harriet Blodgett praises the text for being a "genuine revisionist fiction" enhancing female power and countering the inscription of patriarchy. Alison Lee stresses its powerful critique of engendering images. Sarah Gamble underlines Carter's successful transgression of the binary essentialism of representation and gender categories. Merja Makinen heralds female sexual and textual aggression represented in a positive light. Lindsey Tucker highlights the novel's enabling postmodern feminist fictional strategy, while Heather L. Johnson enjoys her "frisson of narrative pleasure" due to the liberating possibilities of the refigured, trans-gendered body. See Harriet Blodgett, "Fresh Iconography: Subversive Fantasy in Angela Carter", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14:3 (1994), pp. 49-54, p. 49; Allison Lee, *Angela Carter* (New York: Twayne, 1997); Sarah Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1997); Merja Makinen, "Sexual and Textual Aggression in *The Sadeian Women* and *The Passion of New Eve*", in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*, ed. Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 149-66; Lindsey Tucker, "Introduction", in *Critical Essays on Angela Carter*, ed. Lindsey Tucker (New York: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 1-23; Heather L. Johnson, "Unexpected Geometries: Transgressive Symbolism and the Transsexual Subject in *The Passion of New Eve*", in Bristow and Broughton, pp. 166-84, p. 178.

⁹ Angela Carter, "Notes", p. 70.

¹⁰ John Haffenden, p. 86.

¹¹ Christina Britzolakis, "Angela Carter's Fetishism", in Bristow and Broughton, pp. 43-59, p. 50.

¹² *The Passion of New Eve* seems to make an intertextual allusion to Simone de Beauvoir's famous feminist line of her *The Second Sex*, "One is not born a woman, but becomes one". See Simone de Beauvoir, *A második nem*, trans. L. Görög and V. Somló (Budapest: Gondolat, 1969), p. 197.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Rhizome", in *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), pp. 8-37, p. 8.

only to demythologize them cruelly as mere figures of speech. It traces an illusory picaresque journey that returns, disillusioned and disinterested, to its point of origin. Its sadistic masculine hero proves to be its suffering feminine heroine.

A "Male Impersonator's" Writing

A Plot of Pain

At a first reading, the novel appears to be a "male impersonator's" text written by a woman who "suffer[s] a degree of colonialisation of the mind" by positing the masculine point of view as a general one.¹⁴ The story's protagonist-narrator is a perplexingly heartless, young English professor, Evelyn, who presents to us a rather sombre and hyper-mysogynistic account of an ill-logical, post-apocalyptic world, and of his picaresque journey central to a plot of pain, as it inflicts particular torments on feminine characters. The novel begins with Evelyn's macho confessions, in which he recalls his abusive relationships as well as his necrophiliac arousal and sadistic satisfaction inspired by Tristessa, his favourite movie star, who becomes the perfection of femininity by her performance of "exquisite suffering" and "emblematic despair" (*PNE*, pp. 8-9). After cruelly denigrating and abandoning his black mistress Leilah, Evelyn flees into the desert, hoping to find there *himself*. Ironically, a group of militant feminist Amazons capture him and take revenge on him for his excessive, ruthless masculinity by granting him *herself*. In the women's city of Beulah, Mother, the self-made fertility goddess and mad scientist, ritually rapes, castrates and surgically transforms Evelyn in an elaborate sex-change operation into a perfect woman, New Eve, designed as bearer of the New Messiah of Anti-Thesis. Though Eve escapes from Beulah, (s)he is henceforth doomed to face, and identify with, cruelly grotesque embodiments of femininity: (s)he must experience the pains of becoming woman. Castrated, raped, abused, humiliated, battered, exploited, persecuted on his/her voyage, New Eve is finally fecundated by Tristessa, who turns out to be a biologically male, cross-dressing man, a transvestite merely performing the illusory essence of Woman and, by embodying his "ineradicable male" desires (*PNE*, p. 173), propagating the patriarchal myth of idealized masochistic femininity. New Eve is always on the run in her picaresque journey, yet, being more and more violently interpellated as a feminine subject, she is constantly entrapped in narratives of victimization.

Mean, Mutilating and Meaningless Myths

The Passion of New Eve narrates a story of passion in a gender-sensitive reinterpretation of the religious sense of the word: it is a novel about the passion of becoming woman. It demonstrates, à la Simone de Beauvoir, that one is not

¹⁴ Angela Carter, "Notes", p. 70.

born but is rather painfully forged into a woman,¹⁵ by being "always already"¹⁶ ideologically framed by limiting patriarchal representations, and by being culturally trapped by a social fiction of femininity associating it with suffering corporeality. *The Passion of New Eve* ruthlessly faces and disfigures its heroines with communal myths, revealing them as mean, mutilating and meaningless by the multiplication of ruined, muted and grotesque feminine bodies.

The patriarchal cult of sacred and self-sacrificing motherhood is recalled by Mother, the ingenious scientist and self-made maternal goddess of Beulah, who displays two tiers of surgically transplanted nipples grafted on her enormous chest *as well as* an enormous beard on her mask-like face. She transforms herself into an incarnate *symbol*, a "*paradigm of mothering*" (PNE, p. 60), the "*concrete essence of woman*" (PNE, p. 60), "*her own mythological artifact*" (PNE, p. 60), "*a hand-carved figurehead of her own, self-constructed theology*" (PNE, p. 58).¹⁷ She becomes the emblem of the divine Mother, embodying *both* the Great Parricide, the Grand Emasculator (PNE, p. 49) *and* the consolatory Nirvana (PNE, p. 59). She contains a castrating volcano of engulfing femininity in her gaping vagina *and* a phallic sun in her mouth (PNE, p. 64). She fuses Danae, Alphio, Demeter, Kali, Maria, and Aphrodite into one. The myopic masculine view of Evelyn merely regards her as a frightening "sacred monster" (PNE, p. 54), a disturbingly abject freak – "Mother, but too much mother, a femaleness too vast, too gross" (PNE, p. 66). Due to Eve's limited male perspective, the interpretive failure deforms the life-affirming, powerful, celebratory Bakhtinian-Rabelaisian grotesque into a repulsive, derogatory post-Romantic concept of the grotesque.¹⁸ At the end of the journey, Mother is secluded to the End of the World and appears as a miserable embodiment of the "female grotesque".¹⁹ a blind, lone, mad old lady with a canary yellow hair decorated with pink ribbons, sporting a spotted bikini, drinking vodka and singing absent-mindedly to herself. Then, Eve/lyn can rightfully denigrate her: "Mother is [nothing more than] a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness" (PNE, p. 184).

The patriarchal myth of the *femme fatale* as "good bad girl" is embodied by Leilah, a black nymphette from the ghettos, a grotesque Lolita, "the beautiful garbage eater" (PNE, p. 18), "dressed meat" (PNE, p. 31), the "demented bird" (PNE, p. 19), whose flirt with Evelyn terminates with her abortion, hysterectomy, and tragically early sterility.

¹⁵ See footnote 12.

¹⁶ For "always already gender" see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 30-1.

¹⁷ My emphasis. All italics in the subsequent quotations are mine.

¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968); Heather L. Johnson, "Textualizing the Double-Gendered Body: Forms of the Grotesque in *The Passion of New Eve*", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14:3 (1994), pp. 43-9.

¹⁹ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (London: Routledge, 1995).

The stereotypical feminine image of the Victorian Angel in the House, the docile wife completely subservient to her idealized husband is called to life by the seven wives in the harem of the mad poet Zero. These denuded, mutilated women, with their incisor teeth pulled out, constitute grotesque embodiments of the suffering, twentieth-century angel in the household, abused both by the exploitation of her unpaid housework in a patriarchal economic system and by socially sanctified marital violence.

The traditional archetype of the Virgin is incorporated by the hero/ine Eve/lyn, upon whom Mother wishes to reactivate the parthenogenesis archetype by castrating him, excavating the "fructifying female space" inside him and, thereby, making him the perfect specimen of womanhood who is to be impregnated with his own sperm. Thus, the Virgin Mother is embodied by a "Tiresias of Southern California" (*PNE*, p. 71), and in a grotesque confusion, is named Eva, after the first fallen woman, culprit and victim of the primal sin, doomed to eternal punishment and repentance.

The patriarchal myth of femininity as an Enigma oscillating between icons of Virgin and Mother, Femme Fatale and Masochistic Martyr, embodying the bleeding scar in celestial limelight, the haunting paradox and the secret behind seven veils (*PNE*, p. 6) of femininity is fully acted out by the transvestite movie star, Tristessa, who incarnates the most beautiful, the mysteriously perfect woman, by turning himself into "the shrine of his own desires, (by making) of himself the only woman he could have loved" (*PNE*, p. 129). As Tristessa's desires keep their "ineradicable quality of his maleness" (*PNE*, p. 173), the ideal woman (s)he sado-masochistically carves on his/her own body is invariably marked by a suffering, passive femininity in a negative mode, characterized by a "beautiful absence of being" (*PNE*, p. 137). Tristessa is no more than a screen to project destructive male desires upon, a mirror reflecting masculine traumatic experiences of the Lacanian primal loss, the Freudian castration anxiety and death drive,²⁰ and revealing the "desolation of America, all estrangement, our loneliness, our abandonment" (*PNE*, p. 121).

Hurting Feminine Landscapes

The construction of patriarchally mythical femininity as victimization is not only painfully carved onto the female flesh but is also projected onto the landscapes of Eve/lyn's picaresque journey. Carter, as a precursor of feminist geographers,²¹

²⁰ On a general theory of women being screens upon which masculine libidinal and primarily death drives are projected, see Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992); on the application of this feminist psychoanalytical theory concerning Carter's work, see Jean Wyatt, "The Violence of Gendering: Castration Images in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*, *The Passion of New Eve*, and 'Peter and the Wolf'", in Tucker, pp. 60-83.

²¹ On feminist geography see Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and *Re-naming the Landscape*, ed. Jürgen Kleist and Bruce Butterfield (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

maps the engendered body in its mutually defining relationship with the surrounding (social, sexual, discursive) space, but remains within patriarchal spaces – utopian no-man's lands which are no woman's lands either. She offers a gendered rewriting of the medieval grotesque topography matching the carnivalesque grotesque anatomy, with the earthly macrocosm structured exactly like the corporeal microcosm. Yet, instead of the medieval, cosmic, communal, carnivalesque merriment incited by the grotesque body,²² Carter's dystopia maps out spaces of disillusion. Her fantastic landscapes embody fetishized, freaked and fractured female body parts, abject female corporeal waste fluids, and evoke representations of suffering femininity. The novel presents stations in Evelyn's passion of becoming a woman, tracing a topography of pain intertwined with an anatomy of the shattered female body.

New York City, the home of the succubus-like Leilah, marked by the sign of feminine fall, the Big Apple, and its walls everywhere inscribed with the insignia of angry women – a female circle with a set of bared teeth inside (*PNE*, pp. 11, 17, 23) – abounds in images of castration and of the devouring *vagina dentata*. New York is marked by the black of the tenebrous depth of the devouring vulva, feces penetrating the putrefying city, the blood-clots from Leilah's abortion. Here, the *vagina dentata* seems to devour itself.

The underground city Beulah hiding Mother's operating theatre in the deepest, warm, luminescent pink, silently murmuring cave is nothing but a simulacrum of the womb. Here, instead of a primary, oceanic good vibration of maternal Thalassa, Evelyn feels a metaphysical dread – the panic of being enclosed in a cannibalistic place without doors, of being "swallowed up underground and trapped!" (*PNE*, p. 50).

The desert – the abode of "enforced sterility, the dehydrated sea of infertility, the *post-menopausal* part of the earth" (*PNE*, p. 40) – draws the topography of the pathologized, mutilated female body, or the wounded breast. The bruised breasts of Zero's wives, the mammalian mutilation of the Amazons or Eve's nipple softly bitten by Tristessa map themselves onto the desert, where New Eve and Tristessa "cast [themselves] on the merciless *breast* of this inverted ocean, where [...] they should soon die together" (*PNE*, p. 145).

Tristessa's transparent glass house, perfectly imitating her spectacular performance of femininity based on reflectivity, passivity, and pain, is filled with mirrors and sculptures of tears. Tristessa associates woman's being with the absence of being, with perpetual vanishing (*PNE*, p. 110) – the transparency of the looking glass. (S)he *mirrors* all the sorrows of the world *mimicking* a "receptacle of all the pain [...] projected out of [...] hearts upon her *image*" (*PNE*, p. 122). Thus, Tristessa's suffering femininity, the crying eyes and the transparent mirrors become emblems of each other in the novel outlining a topography of pain.

²² Cf. Bakhtin, pp. 303–68.

The last station of Eve/lyn's picaresque journey is a cave by the ocean at the end and the beginning of the world where the hero/ine is led by Leilah-Lilith to meet again Mother. As Eve/lyn crawls into a fissure in the rock and painfully pushes herself forward in a narrow stone track towards a cave that sucks her inwards, she enacts a reversed birth and re-experiences the infant's suffering. In the cave's sphere, time is turning back on itself, evolution is reversed, all is dissolving in the amniotic sea, as Eve/lyn is returning to the place of her/his conception, and re-experiences his/her initial being cannibalistically devoured by the *vagina dentata*, the violently embracing maternal womb, castrating him, creating her. Then, as Eve/lyn is expelled from "the wide mouth of the cave" (*PNE*, p. 186) and is regurgitated amidst abject matter and violently thrown up from the "fissure in the rock face" (*PNE*, p. 179) outside onto the green seaside, the devouring lips of the *vagina dentata* transform into a vomiting mouth. Mother's grotesque cave unites the devouring vagina and the regurgitating mouth into one fissure, and therefore embodies the highest and lowest fetishized and abjectified cavities of female corporeal topography, fusing beginning and end and revealing the picaresque journey as an illusory motion. The picaro/picara must learn that reaching the end signifies returning to the point of origin ("I have come home. The destination of all journeys is their beginning. I have not come home" [*PNE*, p. 186]). Mother never answers when Eve/lyn realizes that coming home, finding herself in himself is impossible. Eve/lyn throws away into the sea Leilah's present, the portable mini-refrigerator containing the set of genitals which had once belonged to Evelyn. Thus, (s)he symbolically renounces the phallic potential whilst ceasing to believe in mythical-matriarchal powers. Although Eve/lyn sails away on the transgender fluid of a "maternal ocean", (s)he seems disappointed rather than hopeful. In her boat, which is Mother's coffin exchanged for Leilah's alchemical gold, (s)he submerges in illusions, ready to drown.

The following table illustrates how *The Passion of New Eve* may be read as a narrative that consistently associates fetishized female body parts, abject female body fluids, and patriarchal fictions of suffering femininity with hurting landscapes and places, tracing a topography of pain intertwined with an anatomy of the shattered female body.

Patriarchal Myths of Femininity	The Femme Fatale	The Mother	The Angel in the House	The Enigma Virgin, Whore Mother, Martyr	The Virgin (Mother)
Place	New York	Beulah	Desert	Tristessa's glass house	Cave by the ocean
Fetishized Body Part	Devouring vagina dentata	Sterile womb	Wound(ed breast)	Crying eyes	Regurgitating mouth
Female Body Waste	Feces	Blood	Sweat	Tears	Vomit
Colour	Black	Red	Yellow	Transparent	Green
Pain	Leilah's abortion	Mother's delivery, Evelyn's castration, Eve's birth	Zero's wives and Amazons' mutilation	Tristessa's lack of being and humiliation	Eve/lyn's loss

A "Feminist Tract about the Social Creation of Femininity"²³

In spite of all the feminine sufferings and painfully grotesque female embodiments revealed in the novel, *The Passion of New Eve* can nevertheless be interpreted as an "anti-mythic novel [...] conceived as a feminist tract".²⁴ The fundamental paradox of metafiction is that it has to paraphrase the representations, invoke the ideologies, repeat the very fossilized myths it aims to subvert. Hence, a *corporeographic metafiction* is a writing that wishes to analyze the text of the body and the body of texts, and undertakes to problematize the social-discursive construction, the ideological inscription of individual feminine *bodies* and of collective *corpuses* of canonized women's literature. To accomplish this, on the one hand, it must necessarily replicate the ideologically prescribed subjectivity 'written on the female body' by patriarchal technologies of power,²⁵ and, on the other hand, it must retell a narrative according to the traditional codes of "always already engendered"²⁶ text production, remaining within the frames of both stereotypical representations of femininity and stereotypically feminine representations. In my view, *The Passion of New Eve* is a prime example of corporeal metafiction as its aim is to exploit the feminist tactic of speaking in quotation marks, of rehearsing mean, muting and mutilating social fictions of femininity in order to *reveal* them and to show that they are unacceptable, and in order to *unveil* and question the alleged incompatibility of femininity/subjectivity (i.e. authorship/authority).

²³ Angela Carter, "Notes", p. 71.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ For technologies of power and ideological machines see Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

²⁶ Butler, pp. 30-1.

Carter's strategy of "putting new wine in old bottles and in some cases old wine in new bottles"²⁷ coincides with Teresa De Lauretis's insistence on the feminist potential of internal re-vision and the importance of our *recognition of misrecognition* in the ideologically interpellated, engendered subject position.²⁸ Carter seems to forecast De Lauretis's argument: Woman is caught inside the system of representation, society, but always only as the outside of it, as a marginalized other, associated with corporeality and, thus, deprived of subjectivity and agency. Her repetition of arche-images of patriarchal mythology responsible for the cultural construction of femininity reveals the constructedness of gender and therefore enables women readers to see how they have internalized images of femininity.

Despite its images of grotesque embodiments of suffering femininity, *The Passion of New Eve* lends itself to an interpretation of the text as an internally subversive, ideology-critical "feminist manifesto", since the novel is structured in the manner of a retrospective autobiographical narrative, in which the masculine Evelyn looking at women is from the very beginning, always already looked at by the 'feminized' Eve looking back on him(self). No matter how misogynistic, chauvinistic the narrative seems to be, it is always easy to detect an ironic woman's voice complementing the macho confessions. There are numerous examples. (The sadistic Evelyn calls himself a "tender little milk-fed English lamb" (*PNE*, p. 9), he escapes New York "like a true American hero, [his] money stored between [his] legs" (*PNE*, p. 37). Mother's self-created god-head is "as big and as black as Marx's head in Highgate Cemetery" (*PNE*, p. 59), while her two tiers of divine breasts recall a "patchwork quilt" (*PNE*, p. 60). The captured Evelyn ceremoniously exclaims: "Oh, the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated with a phallic symbol!" (*PNE*, p. 70), and is turned through the ritual surgery into a "Playboy center fold" (*PNE*, p. 75). The masculine entity of the ocean is called a "mother of mysteries" (*PNE*, p. 191). Eve's ventriloquist, ironic voice within Evelyn's macho confessions is certainly powerful enough to make readers smile (as Ward Jouve's account of her son's reading the novel attests).²⁹ To this we might add Lorna Sage's convincing claim: Carter's story of the "woman born out of a man's body" reflects not only Carter's hardships as a woman writer of "coming out" as a feminist, but also provides a more general "allegory of the painful process by which the 1970s women's movement had to carve out its own identity from the unisex mould of 1960s radical politics".³⁰

²⁷ Angela Carter, "Notes", p. 76.

²⁸ Cf. Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987), pp. 1-30.

²⁹ Nicole Ward Jouve, "Mother is a Figure of Speech ...", in *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago, 1994), pp. 136-71.

³⁰ Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter* (London: Northcote House, 1994), p. 35.

A Transgender Narrative?

Heather L. Johnson's original reading of the novel argues that Eve/lyn's reminiscences highly resemble non-fictional accounts of transgender experience insofar as they include the (re)construction of gender identity as a performance, and question the gender status of the 'I' in the text due to the collision between the pre- and post-operative states, between the old male sense of the self and the new female appearance. The result is a fetishization of the body strengthened by an overplayed transvestite style. I disagree with Johnson, who comfortably concludes her article by celebrating the birth of a powerful transgender being within enabling, multiply gendered, narratives.³¹

Despite the fact that Eve/lyn's narrative questions the gender identity of the autobiographically narrated self and reflects the post-operative antagonism of a multiply gendered writing subject, the pluri-gendered narrative of this fictional post-transsexual subject never succeeds in providing a playful, celebratory, (in feminist terms) fully satisfactory (sub)version of existing binary gender categories and narrative possibilities. Instead of offering harmonious alternatives via a liberating and reassuring polyphony of complementary or interchangeable voices, Carter's transgender novel remains stuck within a textual/sexual chaos. A cacophonic duo of dissonant voices from the radically stereotypical gender poles, the narrative voices of the effeminate transvestite and of the masculine cross-dresser constantly interrupt, violate, and abort each other, shattering the text painfully into pieces.

Although Johnson claims that Tristessa's transvestite narrative is a "lost history" engulfed by the "fully declared presence" of Eve/lyn's first-person transsexual narrative,³² I think that none of the voices is guaranteed a "fully declared presence" in the text, because the effeminate transvestite voice constantly re-emerges to infect, erase and take over the narrative of the ineradicably masculine cross-dresser and, in its turn, is annihilated and violently overwritten. Eve/lyn's reminiscences are repetitively turned into a Tristessian "symbolic autobiography in arabesques of kitsch and hyperbole" (*PNE*, p. 5), filled with "her incomparable tears and every kitsch excess of the mode of femininity" (*PNE*, p. 71) and constituting an overly effeminate transvestite narrative characterized by uncertainty and illusions ("That night I stayed in a hotel that caught fire in the early hours of the morning – or, rather seemed to have caught fire, for there was all the appearance of fire." [*PNE*, p. 11]), by emotional and histrionic sentimentality ("Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion. Woman? Ah! " [*PNE*, p. 6]), by catachretic illogic and hyperbolic excess (Leilah is fox, bird, racehorse, nymph, siren and succubus [*PNE*, pp. 18-27], Mother is Kali, Maria, Aphrodite, Jocasta,

³¹ Heather L. Johnson, "Unexpected Geometries: Transgressive Symbolism and the Transsexual Subject in *The Passion of New Eve*", in Bristow and Broughton, pp. 166-84.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Danae, Alphito, Demeter, while Tristessa is Madeline Usher, Carmen, Juliet, Dido, Lazarus and Ezekiel, among others).

The engendered concept of this *écriture féminine* is symbolized by Tristessa's writing/reading in glass tears: "I can read tears. They map our destiny when they flow down the face. I perform divinations by means of tears, I let my glass flow the same way, at random, in sorrow. I let the glass form the pattern of my tears and then I consult the augury and make my own memorials" (*PNE*, p. 143). Her glass tears are ruthlessly crashed into pieces by the hyper-masculine, misogynistic Zero penetrating Tristessa's glass house to destroy it, just as the masculine voice of the cross-dresser shatters the effeminate narrative voice. The male impersonator in the feminine writing self, the ineradicably masculine Evelyn in *New Eve* is never fully eliminated from the narrative.

As I have demonstrated, the text constantly enacts the construction of femininity as victimization of women and finds the sadistic pleasure of the male gaze (even) in the extreme chaos of her (own) dissolution ("the plastic surgery that turned me into my own diminutive, Eve, the shortened form of Evelyn [...] I had become my own masturbatory fantasy [...] the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself" [*PNE*, p. 75]). The narrative voice often turns rational, objective ("as I fled the Woman's Town, I felt myself almost a hero, almost Evelyn again, in my arrogant and still unaltered heart, I remained irrationally convinced I could escape them by a sheer effort of will" [*PNE*, p. 82]). Eve/lyn's voice is detached, even disinterested ("I felt a sense of grateful detachment from this degradation, I registered in my mind only the poignant fact of my second rape in two hours: 'Poor Eve! She's being screwed again!'" [*PNE*, p. 91]). The narrator is aware that in this picaresque journey a passive hero goes through the stages of his passion for the instruction of the readers, yet in the end may only return to the origins as a disillusioned (she-)man, (still) dreaming of destroyed, vanishing femininities (and masculinities) ("dreaming of [...] Tristessa's [...] hall of mirrors [...] smashed, [...] he with the fatal red hole in his breast, [...] vanishes when I open my eyes" [*PNE*, p. 191]).

The gender status of the 'I' is doubly destabilized in the text by the transsexual and the transvestite (auto)biographers' gender trouble. Both Eve/lyn's and Tristessa's narrative destabilization of the gendered self daringly switches between 'woman', 'man', 'she', 'he', until both of them arrive at 'it':

... like a drowning man ... I was again the *child* whose dreams she had invaded and also the *young man* for whom she had become the essence of nostalgia and yet I remained *the thing I was*, a *young woman*, New Eve, whose sensibility had been impregnated with that of Tristessa during the *insomniac* nights of transmutation in the desert. *New Eve* looked down, in an *ecstasy of regret*, at this *sign of love made flesh* ... (*PNE*, pp. 118-119)

... I crept up to *him* and kissed *her* pitiful, bare feet with *their* fine ankles and high ballerina's arches. I could not think of *him* as a man, my *confusion* was perfect – as perfect as the exemplary confusion of the proud solitary *heroine* who now underwent the unimaginable ordeal of a confrontation with the essential aspect of *its* being *it* had

so grandly abandoned, the implicit *maleness* it had never been able to assimilate into itself. (PNE, p. 128) (my emphasis)

The multiply gendered narrative merely reflects a neurotic, 'neither/nor' body, tormented by a gradual disembodiment which results from the perpetual vanishing of a solid subjectivity.

Thus, the dissonant duos of the ineradicably masculine, transsexual Eve/lyn and the over-effeminate male transvestite Tristessa, of Evelyn's stereotypical machismo and New Eve's mystified femininity never incite a joyous textual catharsis, but contribute to the disturbing decomposition of both the narrative and the subject. Despite Johnson's proposition, the transgendered self remains impossible. *Either-or* (feminine versus masculine) gender dichotomies are disrupted only to produce *neither/nor* bodies – disillusioned 'no-ones' painfully shattering the text. The discursively constituted, gendered identity is challenged, reduced to zero, yet the moment of crisis (felt over the constant self-deconstruction) seems to predominate over the empowering potential of reconstituting a new, creative, plural subjectivity. The polyphony of *The Passion of New Eve*'s reflects a pain in the text and a text in pain, as the self-crucifying, self-devouring, self-disgorging text narrates bodies' sufferings.

Narrating a Nervous, Bulimic Body-Text

Carter's suffering feminine bodies problematize the ideological *technologies of gender*,³³ surfacing in violent body disciplines, painful body management and self-stylization prescribed by the beauty myth, which imposes contradictory expectations on the feminine subject. The feminine body is simultaneously idealized and standardized, aestheticized and pathologized, eroticized and asceticized, marked by visibility as a real simulacrum in a society of spectacle and repressed, silenced, and hidden as taboo in a society of *scientia sexualis*.³⁴ *The Passion of New Eve* is an extraordinary text, since its self-contradictory narrative voices verbalize the immediate consequences of the painful social construction of femininity, notably by enacting the psychosomatic symptoms of the neuroticized second sex(text), semiotizing female body dysmorphia and narrating a nervous, bulimic body-text.

Distorted Bodies, Vacillating Subjectivities

Female body dysmorphia, also known as body image distortion syndrome (BIDS) usually appears in young female patients who are seriously frustrated by social expectations of femininity. They become unable to conceive their objec-

³³ Cf. De Lauretis, p. x.

³⁴ Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. R. Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

tive body image and thus suffer from eating disorders. Relying on Helen M. Malson's and Susan Bordo's descriptions of the disease,³⁵ I would like to argue that the major characteristic of the anorexic and particularly the alternatively devouring and disgorging bulimic patient is a painful oscillation between the binary gender (op)positions. (1) On the one hand, the patient *over-internalizes* the traditional masculine ideal of slender, suffering *femininity*, while, on the other hand she wishes to compensate for her lack of status and power in society, by *becoming masculine*, which is synonymous with the agency of autonomous subjectivity. Hers is a triumph of the *masculinized* mind and the will over the ruthlessly controlled, *femininized* body. (2) Her disgust of disorderly fat marks a *disgust of traditional femininity* (associated with pregnancy, excess, voracity) while her compulsive over-eating, her unrestrained consumption *stages exactly the stereotypically uncontrollable female expenditure*, uncontained desire, combined with an unbound will. The bulimic's traumatic vacillation between compulsive over-eating and purifying vomiting, between insatiable appetite and ascetic self-starvation, between binging and purging marks the feminine subject's effort to balance the socially and culturally available gender positions, the ideologically prescribed passive or excessive femininities, and the always already masculinized autonomous, self-mastering subjectivity.

Cannibalistic Discourses, Dissonant Voices

This painful oscillation enacted by the bulimic body is ingeniously semiotized in the Carterian narrative via stereotypically feminine or masculine discourses constantly disagreeing with each other in the cacophonous textual chaos of the transsexual autobiographic(tion)al narrative. Thus, in *The Passion of New Eve*, the disturbingly antagonistic palimpsest of male impersonator's story and feminist manifesto is reflected in the strange narrative duality of the 'feminine' narrative convulsions and flows of the hectic hysteric and the stuttering, pseudo-objective over-verbalization of the male hypochondriac. Moreover, the hybrid mixture of different genres, styles and narratives (combining magical realism, picaresque adventure, feminine romance, masculine pornography, Hollywood-style mythomania and postmodern demythologization, fairy-tale fantasy, science-fiction dystopia, female Gothic, *Bildungsroman* and fictional autobiography) contributes to the (de)composition of a pathologically polyphonic text. Contradictory narrative voices and cannibalistic cross-gender discourses violate, interrupt and abort each other in a shattered narrative that models the insoluble conflict of nervous feminine subjectivity and the painful dissolution of the bulimic body.

³⁵ Cf. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Los Angeles, CA: California UP, 1993); Helen Malson, "Anorexic Bodies and the Discursive Production of Feminine Excess", in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction*, ed. Jane M. Ussher (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 223-46.

Bulimic Imagery

On a thematic level, bulimic images reinforce the irritating fluctuation of the multiply gendered narrative voice destabilizing the feminine subject. As I have shown, the devouring, disgorging mouth of the *vagina dentata* opens up in New York to consume the autobiographical subject and initiate Eve/lyn's story, and at the end re-opens in Mother's cave by the sea-side to regurgitate and vomit her/him back to the point of origin, where gender trouble remains unresolved. Hyper-feminine corporealities are identified, via the accumulation of culinary metaphors and similes, with delicacies, 'sweet sins' luring to be consumed. Cannibalistically devoured yet difficult to digest, these constitute the peak of temptation, gratification and remorse leading to the binge and purge characterizing the 'female malady'. Leilah is linked to the hash candies, pink milkshakes, Baby Ruth and Americana lollipops, New Eve's naked body forms a gingerbread-woman invitingly calling "Eat me!", while Tristessa's figure is marked by "the blood caked at the corners of her mouth" (*PNE*, p. 130), and Eve/lyn's repeatedly recalled childhood memory of the "sharp, sweet sting of the (chocolate)ice(cream) [...] intimately associated with (his) flaming, pre-adolescent heart and the twitch in (his) budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering" (*PNE*, p. 8). The bulimic metaphors reflect New Eve/lyn's antagonistic relation to the social fiction of femininity framed in a scenario of suffering. The female body itself is identified with food to be devoured and disgorged in a cruel abjection of the subject, which coincides with the rejection of the other(ed) (sex/gender) in the self.

The Patho-Logic (of) the Postmodern Transsexual

The reader of *The Passion of New Eve* is faced with abortive narrative voices, emptied symbols, disillusioning simulacra and the perpetual vanishing of gendered identities in a nauseous, self-crucifying narrative. Instead of Judith Butler's playfully gender troubling, parodically political transvestite performance,³⁶ the Carterian text recalls Jean Baudrillard's postmodern reading of the transsexual or transvestite subject. In Baudrillard's view, symbolically speaking, all postmodern subjects are transsexual, transvestite beings characterized by a disillusioned play with the non-difference of genders, a disinterest towards sexuality as a source of pleasure, a surgical or semiotic manipulation of the body turned into a hyper-real prosthesis, an artificial, androgynous android. Baudrillard's transsexual postmodern subject, like the Carterian hero/ine, is marked by a disbelief in authentic identity that is displayed through the over-theatricalization, the elusive performance of one's self-simulating image(s), surfacing in an ambiguous, ephemeral, changing look.³⁷

³⁶ Cf. Butler, pp. 1-35.

³⁷ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *A rossz transzparenciája (La Transparence du Mal)*, trans. Á. Klimó (Budapest: Balassi, 1997), pp. 23-8.

Carter's writing style models the dissolution of the *transsexual*, bulimic body by de-composing an over-written, magically mannerist text that is unable to gain relief by outpouring in an overwhelming flood. The nervous female body is narrated excessively: (1) by transforming the obsessive and compulsive motor movements into repetition, (2) by turning *body dysmorphic*³⁸ vomiting and diarrhea into an excessive accumulation of metaphors, synonyms, and avalanches of adjectives and adverbs, (3) by converting hypochondria into lengthy sentences, and (4) by translating hypersensitivity into a text on/of desire. Yet, the semiotization of the nervous body fails to become a healing strategy enabling Freudian sublimation. The text trembles with neurotic convulsions and muscle contractions. It returns to its point of origin. It lacks goals, depth or accomplished meanings. It suffocates in simulacra.

Aborted/Castrated Narratives

The self-crucifying narrative seems to work by systematically establishing a displeasure of/in the text, by aborting the pleasurable, mostly linear flow of the retrospective narrative, by betraying secrets too early, giving away punch-lines ill-timed, thus ruining narrative tension and 'castrating' the whole story. (Tristessa appears in person only on page 119 but already on page nine she is disclosed as one of the protagonists of the passion: while an unnamed girlfriend performs fellatio on Evelyn in the cinema, the musing narrator gives away the punchline of the story, that the 'passion of new Eve' will narrate the adventures of the sex-changed Evelyn: "She kept a hieroglyph of plastic in the neck of her womb, to prevent conception, the black lady never advised me on those techniques when she fitted me up with a uterus of my own" [*PNE*, p. 9]). Throughout the story, the arousal of beginnings, the readerly curiosity, the desire for the end are satisfied prematurely. (This is symptomatic of the bulimic narrative: devouring is followed by a quick disgorging, a metaphorical cannibalistic self-consumption, a disrupted metabolism denying the pleasures promised by the slow digestion of the narrative.) There is no place left for tension, for the pleasure of desiring. The narrative commits suicide by falling victim to the Brooksonian "narrative short-circuit", which signifies the dangerous reaching of the end too quickly, of making the wrong choice, of achieving the improper death.³⁹

Deserted Symbols

The bulimious narrative structure stuffs itself and regurgitates un-eased on the level of symbols as well. The novel can be read as a surrealist collage, since it overabounds in symbols, yet these enigmatic signs are either related to pain – e.g. the hurting landscapes representing suffering femininity – or they appear

³⁸ Cf. Bordo, pp. 55-60.

³⁹ Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot: A Model for Narrative", in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), pp. 90-112, p. 109.

mainly as pseudo-symbols, emptied of meaning, impossible to interrelate to create a coherent emblematic system. In their imbroglia, the symbols of the novel merely reveal an inescapable disintegration of texts and bodies, as well as the illusory nature of fictional worlds. Zero's cacophonous, symbolic rhetoric is regarded as nonsense by Eve/lyn: inspired by grass "his ranch house was Solomon's temple, the ghost town was the New Jerusalem, the helicopter his chariot of fire, his prick his bow of burning gold, etc etc etc." (*PNE*, p. 100). Submerged in a similar catachresis, Tristessa's figure also exemplifies the novel's twisted, chaotic iconography. (S)he fuses the Unicorn, the Baudelarian albatross, Jesus, Ezekiel, Lot's wife, Lazarus, Cassandra, the Enigma, the Virgin, the Mother, the Femme Fatale, the Masochistic Martyr, the Mirror, Madame Bovary, Catherine Earnshaw, Madeline Usher, Scarlett O'Hara, Juliet, Desdemona, Dido, the Camelia Lady, Bloody Mary, and many more – until, in a crisis of identity, (s)he is finally no-one.

A Disembodied Body-Text

It is a sign of both cruel irony and ambiguity, characteristic of the devouring-disgorging bulimic text, that the baroquely overflowing narrative is tainted with a minimalist, neutralized voice. Manic over-verbalization is aborted by an ascetic taciturnity at the traumatic points of the plot. Eve/lyn narrates her passion, the detailed account of her apprenticeship into suffering femininity in a distanced, even disinterested voice. When Zero rapes Eve/lyn (s)he wonders laconically: "I felt a sense of grateful detachment from this degradation, I registered in my mind only the poignant fact of my second rape in two hours: 'Poor Eve! She's being screwed again!'" (*PNE*, p. 91). Along with other women in the story, Eve/lyn is violently battered and tormented, she undergoes a drastic operation, a mutilation, a rape, yet (s)he never spills any blood, nor does she shed tears. (S)he never 'lives' or believes her/his pain. Hers is the anesthetized pain, the self-negating passion of the bulimic. As in the case of the body dysmorphic patient, Eve/lyn's corporeal fissure (the abject wound of her newly-formed vulva), her/his confrontation with bodily reality strangely opens up the way to disembodiment, to an alienation of the body. From this perspective, the anaesthetized passion of *The Passion of New Eve* (de)forms a disembodied body-text.

A Novel of Perpetual Vanishing

Fuelled by the presence of painfully freaked bodies and pathologically grotesque corporealities, *The Passion of New Eve* is also a narrative marked by a 'perpetual vanishing' of bodies. In such a scenario, guaranteeing solely the disillusioned disappearance of 'no-bodies', Tristessa is deprived of essential markers of femininity and is buried in the desert. Diminished and denigrated, Mother wanders off to die on the seashore. Eve/lyn herself/himself casts away the phallic apparatus of his male identity and denies the consolatory myths of motherhood, as (s)he sails away on the sea towards no-where, lacking any hope to find an iden-

tity matching the body that is not her/his anymore. The journey back to the 'place of birth' is a voyage to the beginning and to the end. The picaresque turned circular loses its target, the quest for a self turns meaningless, the traditional teleology of the *Bildungsroman* is neglected, the magic of magical realism vanishes because of the emptied symbols. Instead of a gratifying closure, there remains an unresolved irritation in the plot,⁴⁰ as the Carterian overwriting style paradoxically seems to coincide with a "permanent and infinite vanishing"⁴¹ of a borderless, expansive text that is torn apart by mutually abortive voices, all narrating the disillusionment of subjects and the disintegration of bodies.

The Passion of New Eve can be interpreted as the first part of Carter's final novel-trilogy, which traces the 'evolution' of the fantastic freak heroine from the tormented transsexual Eve/Iyn to the confidence-trickster bird-woman Fezzers in *Nights at the Circus*,⁴² and the Chance sisters in *Wise Children*.⁴³ This gradual empowerment of the female freak in the Carterian oeuvre is particularly thought-provoking since it may help us to understand how contemporary culture conceives the material body as a site of power-struggles with particular stakes for women who experience the disciplining of their bodies on a daily basis. Moreover, Carter's work sheds new light on contemporary feminist art preoccupied with the subversive potential of their playfully and politically 'self-freaked' corporealities (ranging from Orlan's radical project of surgically redesigning her body to Hannah Wilke's cancerous self-portraits, Nancy Burson's photographs of anomalous faces, or Ulrike Ottinger's filmed freaks, and Jenny Saville's paintings of fat women). The aim is to open the way towards a 'grotesque body- and identity politics', which is non-normative, daring and sisterly solidarious, towards a dynamic model of social subjectivity, towards new ways of reading ourselves by starting out "on the side of the freak".⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tom Paulin reproaches Carter's writing for "an easy fluency and soft stylishness [...] won at the expense of form and mimesis" and producing "an expansive territory without boundaries or horizons, a kind of permanent and infinite vanishing." (Tom Paulin, "In an English Market", *London Review of Books* [3-17 March 1983], p. 19, quoted in Bristow and Broughton, p. 6)

⁴² Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 1984, repr. 1994).

⁴³ Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (New York: Penguin, 1991, repr. 1993).

⁴⁴ Russo, p. 12.