'The portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon': The Form and Resistance of Character in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

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Angela Carter's fiction isn't, of course, known as either particularly well-behaved or particularly squeamish, but few of her characters are as insistently, unapologetically, physically in our faces as Sophie Fevvers in the 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus*. This is, in fact, the fundamental irony of this rambling tale in which we follow journalist Jack Walser follow a London circus on its 'Grand Imperial Tour': Fevvers – swan-woman, aerialiste, famous circus act of *fin de siècle* Europe, muse of Toulouse-Lautrec, the face on countless advertisements for cosmetic products – should be mythical, elusive, ephemeral, petite.[1] But she isn't: a shrewd businesswoman of voracious appetite for food, drink and money, she is tall, solidly built, and not too keen on personal hygiene. The iconic femininity suggested by the image of a woman with swan wings, by the idea of glittering belle-epoque fame and a gravity-defying circus show is crossed-out – though it remains legible – by an earthy practicality, the iridescent images are weighed down, 'made real'. Reading Fevvers inevitably draws us into the game of figuring out 'who she really is'. *Nights at the Circus* thus confronts us with the methods we habitually apply in reading literary characters, and it is this aspect of Carter's work which I would like to foreground in the following. Roland Barthes makes for an obvious narratological ally in reading Fevvers, precisely because her figure demands such a robust anti-essentialism; and yet Fevvers also refuses to quite restrict herself to structuralism's grid. I suggest, therefore, that *Nights at the Circus* can help us to enrich and update the structuralist – or semiotic – account of character and open it towards its political implications.[2]

However much Fevvers exudes 'realness' in the sense of practicality and physicality, it is anything but plausible to call *Nights at the Circus* a realist novel. 'Neopicaresque tale' seems more like it and does much better justice to this multi-faceted narrative: to the colourful but somehow hollow quality of many of its protagonists; to its meandering form, which embeds the characters' backstories in a complicated travel narrative proceeding from London to St. Petersburg and across the Siberian tundra;

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to its penchant for the excessive, unlikely, eccentric and, frequently, unsavoury. Fevvers is described as a barmaid (up close there is 'not much of the divine about her unless there were gin palaces in heaven where she might preside behind the bar' [p. 9]), her face is 'broad and oval as a meat dish' (p. 9), her voice clangs 'like dustbin lids' (p. 3). She doesn't laugh, she 'guffaw[s]' and 'slap[s]' her 'marbly thigh' (p. 3). The sacred status imposed on her by the likes of her admirer/attacker Christian Rosencreutz, she counters with the good common sense of the London working class (as in, she'll cleverly play his desires to escape his snares, but she'll certainly drink his claret while she's at it). Her street-smart industriousness is all the while accompanied by her strangely incongruous, highly abstract, wordy, and theoretically informed musings which read almost like a second textual layer sampled over the carnivalesque panorama which the novel presents.

If Fevvers is iconic femininity 'made real', then the realism that we're speaking about is certainly of the grotesque variety much more than of the formal kind (than of the kind, that is, that we have come to associate with the modern novel ever since Ian Watt laid out its features).[3] The certainly detailed texture of *Nights at the Circus* stands in no service to any 'reality effect' that would convey a sense of objectivity and referentiality.[4] For all the detailed descriptions that we get of Fevvers – down to the rasping sound when she rips off her fake lashes – seem to serve not so much any kind of respectable referential accuracy, but rather to make Fevvers a 'true' character in the sense of making her tangible, probable, life-like. Fevvers is, in a certain sense, more realistic than any formal realism could make her.

Does that detract from her mysteriousness? Interestingly, not at all. Though every grunting sound that Fevvers makes lets the reader see through the glittering hallucination that she poses as in public (and yes, Fevvers accomplishes precisely that paradoxical feat: to *pose* as hallucination), this circumstance does in another sense not unmask her at all. Foremost among the reasons for this is the fact that Fevvers retains the exclusive rights to narrate her own life story (and that of most of the other circus members, besides); and no matter how much her 'flash[ing]' her 'vast, blue, indecorous eyes' (p. 3) at Walser while she does so gives us as readers a sense of slyness and double entendre, we can never quite put the finger on her unreliability. Thus, while Fevvers is disenchanted as protagonist, she remains veiled as literary character. This chiastic movement of covering and uncovering amounts to a double negation: the legendary aerialiste's phantasmatic femininity is deconstructed; but then

the 'naked truth' that we do come in contact with through that deconstruction – our first impressions of Fevvers are, after all, from her dressing room, where Walser watches her take off her make-up in a dressing gown that has seen better days – does not at all leave us, nor does it leave Walser, with the feeling that we know for sure now 'who Fevvers really is'. Fevvers and many of her companions from *Nights at the Circus* are hyper-artificial people that, in the double negation of the truth of their appearance, are in a certain sense not artificial at all; or rather: they are always artificial, and therefore never.

1. Fevvers and/as Semiotic Character

Is this anything but a postmodern play of signifiers cut loose? I would like to argue that indeed it is; and that we can cull Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* for a deeper understanding of literary characters, of the people we encounter in stories: of the 'mode in which they exist', as Bruno Latour would put it, and of the resistance they put up against our attempts to decipher them.[5] Carter's protagonists generally tend to lean heavily on the literary, mythical, and folkloristic canon; more often than not, they are re-imaginings of or variations on figures that are already iconic.[6] This constitutes an inherent link between Carter's fiction and structuralist narratology, the conceptualisations of which derive in crucial ways from the study of folk tales and their inventory of typical actors and events.

What happens if we attempt to grasp Fevvers, as literary character, in the terms that structuralist narratology has suggested? Famously, Barthes claims that 'when identical semes traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle upon it, a character is created'.[7] In this understanding, characters – or really, more specifically, their *names* – are nodes of ascription; coat hangers, almost, for the attributes connected to them. Fevvers is, quite obviously, an object of insistent ascription, a site where various cultural and individual fantasies come to rest (so much so that the novel often contends itself with simply passing on to the reader a sense of the admiration that Fevvers' audience expresses: 'Heroine of the hour, object of learned discussion and profane surmise, this Helen launched a thousand quips, mostly on the lewd side' [p. 5]). What is more, Barthes' claim comes as a bit of a relief in this context because it liberates us from an obligation we might otherwise have felt to make our way through the thicket of ascription surrounding Fevvers, make sense of the

thorny contradictions and shifting alliances among the diverse attributes and grasp 'who Fevvers ultimately is'. Barthes' semiotic approach liberates us from giving too much credit to what he calls the 'realistic view of character', according to which, through the key component of a protagonist's motivation, we would be able to develop a coherent psychological profile.[8] The question of, 'what does Fevvers really want?' yields either no answers or answers so profane ('money') that they are unsatisfactory as psychological explanation (for that, after all, we'd have to know what the money is *for*). Barthes, in turn, points out that character is first and foremost a function of discourse – which then proceeds to act as support of the very discourse which produced it. Sarrasine – the example that Barthes investigates at length in *S/Z*:

> is impassioned because the discourse must not end; the discourse can continue because Sarrasine, impassioned, talks without listening. Both circuits are necessarily undecidable. Good narrative writing is of this very undecidability. From a critical point of view, therefore, it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him off the page in order to turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): *the character and the discourse are each other's accomplices*: the discourse creates in the character its own accomplice: a form of theurgical detachment by which, mythically, God has given himself a subject, man a helpmate, etc., whose relative independence, once they have been created, allows for *playing*.[9]

Here, *S/Z* manifests the general programme of structuralist narratology for which, when it comes to literary characters, the decisive factor lies not in psychology, but in the virtual capacities of action and thought: 'knowing or being-able', as A. J. Greimas puts it; that is, if anything 'characterises' literary personae, it is not their motivation or other psychological setup, it is their capacity of transducing the possible into the actual.[10] This is what the actors in narratives do: actualise the potential of action contained in virtual actantial roles ('narrative discourse', Greimas says, is 'being made up of a relatively complex network of actantial roles that are manifested in a conjoined or disjoined way by actors who can now be viewed as elements of discourse').[11]

Certainly, Fevvers and many of her companions in *Nights at the Circus* are more plausible as actors in that sense than as psychological characters driven by individual motivation; as actors, that is, whose *raison d'être* is an abstract actantial programme that they – with greater or lesser

success – transduce into living action.[12] Barthes' approach is a bit more nuanced than that, though: literary characters, according to him, are combinations of attributes attached to proper names which not only act out actantial programmes, but who effect a properly biographical dimension in the process. Because the proper name refers 'in fact to a body, it draws the semic configuration into an evolving (biographical) tense'. In that sense, a properly named and individuated literary character (and be their name simply 'I') has 'biographical duration', can 'undergo […] an intelligible "evolution"', be signified as 'an object with a destiny', all of which gives 'a meaning to time'.[13] Though Barthes does not say as much, he seems to suggest that literary characters not only actualise but additionally have the power to *transform* their a-personal virtual counterparts. The latter Barthes refers to as 'figures'; and as discourse and character are mutual accomplices, so do figures appear to pre-shape characters even while they seem to be something like sedimented characters themselves. The figure, Barthes says,

> is not a combination of semes concentrated in a legal Name, nor can biography, psychology, or time encompass it: it is an illegal, impersonal, anachronistic configuration of symbolic relationships. As figure, the character can oscillate between two roles, without this oscillation having any meaning, for it occurs outside biographical time (outside chronology) […] . Thus, [for instance,] the child-woman and the narrator-father, momentarily effaced, can return, can overtake the queen-woman and the narrator-slave. As a symbolic ideality, the character has no chronological or biographical standing; he has no Name; he is nothing but a site for the passage (and return) of the figure.[14]

Grasping Fevvers in terms of this distinction makes sense precisely because we get the impression, as laid out above, that her person is traversed by several layers of meaningfulness, several versions of her identity – swan-woman and 'celestial fishwife' (p. 47), artistic muse and enterprising working-class girl – that do not cohere into any unified entity; versions of Fevvers that really seem to exist in different universes, of which one tends more towards the semiotic-discursive, supra-personal and a-temporal (swan-woman); and the other towards the physical, personal, and biographical (fishwife). And once more, the contradictions between the various images in the kaleidoscope of Sophie Fevvers that *Nights at the Circus* presents need not be resolved because, 'outside chronology' as they are, they can be present all at once. In this sense, 'the real Sophie Fevvers'

is precisely this kaleidoscope and nothing but, a 'site' for the figural versions of herself that traverse her.[15] The case of Fevvers thus highlights the virtues of the structuralist approach to character: its attention to forms and surfaces and its refusal of a mimeticism which, more often than not, fails to account for the aesthetic specificity of literary character.

2. Limits of Semiotics, Limits of Mimeticism

And yet, Carter's novel has a tongue-in-cheek quality to it that simultaneously makes the structuralist approach somewhat unsatisfactory. There is a 'good common sense' practicality punctuating in an almost rhythmic manner the glittering panorama as well as any lofty philosophical-political impromptu speeches the protagonists might deliver which renders the idea of virtual actants or supra-biographical figures into so much twaddle. When Fevvers, for instance, waxes lyrical about her newly awakened feelings for Walser to her foster mother Lizzie, she is cut short in the middle of her rhapsody by Lizzie cooing nonsensically over the stranger's baby the two happen to have in their care at that moment:

> 'On that bright day, when I am no more a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact – then he will slap down his notebooks, bear witness to me and my prophetic role. Think of him, Lizzie, as one who carries the evidence –'
> 'Cushie-cuhie-coo', said Lizzie to the restless baby. (p. 339)

More often than not, the manifestation of abstract, iconic figures as life-like characters is, precisely, a bit *too* literal in *Nights at the Circus*, rendering the whole process absurd. (Fevver's face, for instance, 'in its Brobdingnagian symmetry, might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships'. Walser's knee-jerk reaction to it parodies the sensationalism of all celebrity news: 'It flickered through his mind: is she really a man?' [p. 37]). Thus as literary character Fevvers is, if anything, a reflection on the *limitations* of actualising virtual actantial roles; a reflection on the capacity of the biographical character to hold figural meaning and the point of assuming such a thing as actantial programmes, to begin with. While certainly not available for any comprehensive psychological profiling, Fevvers nonetheless appears to us

quite insistently as living, breathing (farting, sweating) woman whose corporeal immediacy seems to stand somewhat at odds with a semiotic approach.

This circumstance is implicitly a comment on the general usefulness of structuralist narratology. As Andrew Scheiber puts it, it is 'a pedagogical if not a critical commonplace to treat novels, and the characters that inhabit them, as if Structuralism and its antecedents had never happened, as if we still lived in a cozy Edwardian world in which art held a mirror to life, and the codes which inscribe and evoke experience exerted an unambiguous and unproblematical authority'.[16] In other words, what has been termed the mimetic or hermeneutic – as opposed to the semiotic – approach to character persists in our everyday dealings with literature; that is to say, we still treat literary characters as representations of 'real people' and the fact that they appear to us between the covers of a book is a circumstance we treat as given and then, for the most part, neglect to thematise in our discussions.[17]

That circumstance – of appearing between the covers of a book – remains subliminally relevant, though, even when we follow a mimetic approach. For it seems that we do expect of literary characters not only what we expect of 'real people', but really a bit more than that. The 'nineteenth-century novel has trained us to be compulsive pursuers of significant design in fiction', Leo Bersani says.

> The degree of looseness varies, but in writers as different as […] Austen, Balzac, Dickens and James, we find a shared commitment to the portentous detail. The most casual word, the most trifling gesture, the most tangential episode all submit easily to the discipline of being *revealing* words, gestures and episodes. Behavior in realistic fiction is continuously expressive of character. Apparently random incidents neatly carry messages about personality; and the world is thus at least structurally congenial to character, in the sense that it is constantly proposing to our intelligence objects and events which contain human desires, which give to them an intelligible form.[18]

The 'happy marriages of Elizabeth and Darcy' and others of their kind are thus 'the just consequences and rewards of just perceptions of character'.[19] This assumption, or this programme of reading is, of course, crossed out in *Nights at the Circus* as much as structuralist semiotic schemes are disturbed. Even if we take the blithely practical 'fishwife' beneath the swan-woman to be the 'real' Sophie Fevvers, she still does not submit to

the criteria for realist character in the above sense. This is, not least, because of the novel's decidedly picaresque slant. While the most obviously picaresque protagonist would be Walser – a man who, according to the novel, hasn't 'experienced his experience *as* experience' (p. 7) and is thus less a subject on an adventurous trip and more the plaything of random turns of event which he deals with as best he can – Fevvers is, in many ways, not that different. She is an orphan, as Walser is, and like Walser's, her life is more of a procession of incidents that she faces with admirable resourcefulness than a course of events which would be 'continuously expressive of character' or take place in a world 'congenial' to it. She thus excels at what Bernard Malkmus calls the picaresque 'art of incorporating coincidences into the context of [her] particular situation as "necessary", i.e. driven by an internal logic not accessible to the public, [which] makes [her] appear uncanny and eccentric. By doing so [s]he masters the unexpected as something that appears expectable, yet never is'.[20] Playing 'a wide range of different roles' is indeed often 'a question of survival' for her. It is, almost paradoxically, this resilience which 'predestines' Fevvers as picaresque heroine to 'become a virtuoso faker *sui generis* who implicitly debunks the very notion of authenticity and calls into doubt one of the tenets of post-Enlightenment and bourgeois culture, namely the consistency and organic development of character'.[21]

It is this picaresque mobility, the common sense and the practicality it implies, which, while still repelling mimetic readings, likewise forbid us to reduce Fevvers to a model case for semiotics. To move forward from this impasse, it is helpful to look beyond the literary domain in the narrower sense and take the question of character as a more general aesthetic concern – one with, moreover, political implications.

3. The Politics of Character

In fact, it might be one of the bigger problems with the realist approach to character such as Bersani outlines it – the one where we assume a 'structured self',[22] the one to which the paradigm of motivation most easily applies – that any ambivalence, any equivocality is located on the side of the observer, that is, the reader, who, if they can't comprehensively explain the character they're dealing with, simply isn't doing a good enough job as psychologist/critic. Structuralist narratology in turn locates ambiguity

strictly in the structure of discourse. Nobody, it seems, locates it on the side of person itself, which is an omission worth looking at more closely.

In order to address this issue, a turn to philosophical anthropology might appear somewhat obscure, but is in fact entirely helpful. Helmuth Plessner, in his *Limits of Community* (1924), makes a sharp remark that could, in fact, have come straight from Sophie Fevvers: 'Naked honesty', he says, 'unless extraordinary circumstances are at work, quite simply spoils the game'.[23] He makes this claim because his fundamental assumption is that of an 'ontic ambiguity of the psychic [*ontische Zweideutigkeit des Psychischen*]'[24] – in other words, of precisely the *inherent* and *internal*, rather than external or superficial, equivocality of person. Neither a semiotic-structuralist nor a mimetic-realist approach can incorporate such an 'ontic ambiguity' of person into its account of literary character, the former because it refuses to orient itself towards the notion of person at all, and the latter because, while the notion of person is precisely what it is trying to get at, it does so in an essentially positivist manner.

The ultimate use to which Plessner puts his notion of the ontic ambiguity of the psychic is to argue against a social radicalism based on community [*Gemeinschaft*] and in favour of a political order that values society [*Gesellschaft*].[25] The fundamental difference between the two, according to Plessner, consists in the fact that community must base its egalitarian claims on a similarity between its subjects which it can only assume by conceptually intruding upon these subjects' inward life and disambiguating it in the name of, precisely, commonality. But such disambiguation betrays human dignity because any externalisation, in definitive terms, of inward life will misrepresent what is constitutively equivocal ('ontically ambiguous').[26] Because the soul can never appear as itself, as the disambiguation required is already an untoward and awkward reduction which exposes the soul to ridiculousness, there is an 'absolute necessity of developing a form'[27] – of masks, manners, disguises, conduct which clothe the soul and make no claim to authenticity, to begin with. This can only be realised in society, Plessner says, never in community.

This is a fundamentally liberalist argument – if we take liberalism as the name for a political order whose sacrosanct good is the distinction between public and private.[28] Not only does this apply rather straightforwardly to Fevvers' lifestyle which is, in many senses of the world, liberal (including liberalism's most negative interpretation: money-grabbing). It also helps to come to terms with the fraught relation between essence and appearance we perceive in her: to say that Fevvers, as literary character, is nothing but a conglomeration of appearances ('semes' that

hang on to her name) does not do justice to her obvious substantiality. To read this substantiality as the representation of psychologically plausible personality (mimeticism) appears equally to betray her. The only way out, here, might be to read Fevvers as an instantiation of the necessity of form for beings whose existence *as such* is constitutively ambiguous. For those beings, *a* form is necessary, but the precise form assumed is contingent, and therefore neither false nor authentic, neither entirely random nor entirely organic. Fevvers' costumes and fake lashes, her splendid dress and bottle-blond hair, up to the mannered cadence of her speech are not disguises in the conventional sense of the word but the forms which a being must assume that can never be translated into immediacy *as herself*.[29] Plessner argues for a 'culture of impersonality [*Kultur der Unpersönlichkeit*]' which, we imagine, would suit Fevvers quite well.[30] 'Impersonality' here does not mean, though – as it has sometimes come to do in more recent critical theory – a radical openness that has evolved beyond our habitual narcissistic tendencies and, precisely, rejects definite form.[31] It means, rather, a political sphere that allows us to mask ourselves, that determines an outward form whose constitutive characteristic is that it makes no claims to authenticity. And indeed, it is a telling moment in the third part of *Nights at the Circus* that Fevvers, after a train wreck, only begins to feel *like herself* again at the prospect of getting her hands on some peroxide to re-dye her hair. Speaking on a meta-level: isn't it precisely Fevver's brilliant *artificiality* that makes for her idiosyncratic quality as literary character? In both regards, to figure her out – to pin her down once and for all as, say, a vulgar 'material girl' and a postmodern feminist answer to the novelistic hero, respectively – is to diminish her, quite as Plessner claims holds for human beings in general, because her ambiguity, obscurity, indeterminacy is not a surface effect but rather – and paradoxically – an essential quality.

4. Impersonal Narcissism

Nights at the Circus ends in a happy union between Fevvers and Walser that hovers somewhere between kitsch and irony. How to assess the insertion of romance into this scenario of constitutive maskings? Leo Bersani claims, somewhat enigmatically, that 'the myth of love can become its truth only if we reinvent the relational possibilities of narcissism itself'.[32] The commonplace account has it that '[p]ersonal narcissism' is problematic

because it is 'an extreme form of appropriative possession'.[33] Relinquishing all narcissistic claims might not be the best alternative to these 'violent games of selfhood' though[34] – and indeed, to continue this argument in a Plessnerian vein would certainly be to point out that evading narcissism through relinquishing the ego is an illusional solution, as narcissism reappears on the level of community, to much more detrimental effect. Bersani speculates about 'another possibility: might the excitement of the hyperbolized ego be forestalled not by the rational will but by a nondestructive eroticizing of the ego? I will attempt to describe a narcissistic pleasure that sustains human intimacy, that may be the precondition for love of the other'.[35]

What would impersonal narcissism imply? Bersani finds this particular kind of narcissism adumbrated in the Platonic account of love, the crucial point of which, for Bersani, is the assumption that love is fundamentally a recognition: the recognition of ideal forms instantiated in a loved one (such that a beloved 'boy's beauty is a likeness of ideal Beauty').[36] To contemporary ears, this might sound like a rather despicable kind of romantic ignorance; but in the Platonic (Socratic) account in *Phaedrus*, the soul 'is individualized not in the way that personalities are, to our modern psychological understanding, individualized. Rather, it has what might be thought of as a general, universal, individuation'.[37] 'I love somebody *like* you' is, in this interpretation, not an insult but an appropriate declaration. Bersani calls 'this love impersonal narcissism because the self the subject sees reflected in the other is not the unique personality central to modern notions of individualism'. The Platonic account breaks out of the essentially identitarian 'field of knowability' and institutes

> a kind of reciprocal self-recognition in which the very opposition between sameness and difference becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of being. What Socrates describes as something we remember can be reformulated as the psychic anteriority of our *virtual being* in relation to the quotidian manifestations of our individual egos. Virtual being is unmappable as a distinct identity; it *is* only in becoming more like itself.[38]

Crucially, this account of love makes absolutely no claim to authenticity in the conventional (or modern) sense. And indeed, authenticity plays only a limited role in the final union of Walser and Fevvers, even after which Walser finds that '[s]ome sixth sense kept him from calling her Sophie' (p. 349) and that he is only 'as much himself again

as he ever would be' (pp. 347–8; my emphasis). And Fevvers' greatest joy in this union is, in fact, the success of tricking Walser into believing her to be a virgin. (The novel closes with Fevvers' remark: 'To think I really fooled you! […] It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence' [p. 350].) So although the union between Fevvers and Walser is, so the text suggests, an affectionate and a joyful one, its happiness does not hinge exclusively on immediate personhood. The forms that people give themselves – preserved in iconic proper names: 'Fevvers' – remain relevant and, as Fevvers' exuberant joy at the success of her lie suggests, veracity really isn't the point at all. Affection, in the novel's 'Envoi', is not tied to the notion of a 'true personal core' and the discarding of all superficialities. Rather, it is directed as much at surfaces and likenesses, at appearances and self-stylisations as it includes the immediacy of personal existence. Journalist Walser, who has put considerable energy into finding out the *truth* about Fevvers (is she really part swan?), finds that it simply doesn't matter anymore. After much speculation about whether or not she has a navel – which would, supposedly, tell him whether she was born or hatched – he finds, at the end of the novel, that kind of factuality to be quite irrelevant: 'He saw, without surprise, she indeed appeared to possess no navel but he was no longer in the mood to draw any definite conclusions from this fact' (p. 347). De-prioritising the notion of 'personal essence' in this way ensures that 'personality' is nothing more – but nothing less, either – than a constant individuation *into* something; and 'love' nothing more – but nothing less, either – than what Bersani terms a 'generous narcissism'.[39]

In the ethics of *Nights at the Circus*, a gap is thus preserved between soul and form which helps to secure precisely the societal spirit that Plessner demands. How exactly is his anthropology connected to Bersani's psychoanalytic approach? The point is not to read the forms in Plessner's political call for the 'absolute necessity of developing a form' as Platonic forms, or at the least not in any technically exact sense. But what *Nights at the Circus* exemplifies might just contain traces of the 'new relational modes' which, Bersani says, we need to make an effort to imagine because without them, no collective, that is, political change can be effective ('no recognizably political solution can be durable without something approaching a mutation in our most intimate relational system').[40]

Ultimately, 'impersonal narcissism' and 'social form' are both notions that encode the political relevance of the idea of character. Plessner's insistence on the political relevance of the *form* of personal appearance suggests that the aesthetic quality of character is not restricted

to the literary domain. Bersani, in turn, gives us an idea of how this aesthetic quality might play a role in social organisation without us reverting to the baser forms of narcissism. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* thus contributes to a project of relational reconfiguration that seems to not yet have found its proper political programme but is conjured into being in places as diverse as philosophical anthropology, psychoanalytic ethics, and postmodern feminist fiction. As Bersani puts it rather beautifully:

> The relationality I have just sketched could amount to a revolutionary reversal of the relational mode dominant in our culture, one that nourishes the powers of evil that govern us and with which, as long as we remain in this relational field, we are all complicit. In Socrates' version of love, the wings on which we can soar to our virtual ideal being need constantly to be watered. Unlike the more specifically Platonic world of ideas – immobile and unchanging in 'the place beyond heaven' – Socratic ideality […] is more cultivated than it is contemplated. Cultivated through dialogue – intrinsically unending dialogue, for we are always either moving toward or falling away from the being it is our greatest happiness to 're-find' in others.[41]

5. The Autonomy of Character

So there is no authentic form, and yet a form we must choose: in Plessner, this circumstance takes the form of a dilemma. With Fevvers, and in *Nights at the Circus*, this circumstance takes the form of possibility: if we must assume some form or other, Fevvers' blithe practicality suggests, we might as well make the most of it. Plessner argues that distance – the un-intrusiveness of a properly societal order – can ultimately only be guaranteed by power or, as Plessner terms it quite frankly: 'violence'.[42] Only sovereign decision can ultimately solve the dilemma. But Fevvers', as it were, 'practical reason' projects an individual *profiting* from the play of masks and forms, and thus implies that, at least to some extent or in some way, the individual is superordinate to any normative frame that sovereign power imposes ('Everywhere she went, rivers parted for her, wars were threatened, suns eclipsed, showers of frogs and footwear were reported in the press and the King of Portugal gave her a skipping rope of egg-shaped pearls, *which she banked*' [p. 8; my emphasis]). This profit is clearly not limited to the negative profit of not being harmed due to

distance guaranteed, which is, so to speak, the best-case scenario in Plessner. Fevvers' attitude presents both a more liberal and a more affirmative version of societal (as opposed to communal) order than is suggested in *Limits of Community*. She exhibits an entirely secular, robustly practical, and unapologetically physical *relish* in giving herself form: 'Evening dress on, Fevvers leaned forward to greet her real face in the mirror with a brilliant smile. […] In her red and black lace, it hurt the eyes to look at [her] […]. She was feeling supernatural tonight. She wanted to *eat* diamonds' (pp. 212–3).

Nights at the Circus thus develops the paradigm of *sovereign decision* into that of *autonomous choice*. In Plessner, the fact that the precise form assumed by living beings is always, to a certain extent, groundless makes the determination of form the sovereign's natural task. However, as Thomas Khurana points out – through a meticulous close reading of the core texts of German Idealism, no less – it is precisely with groundlessness that the issue of individual autonomy comes into its own. Autonomy, Khurana emphasises, involves a paradox: any autonomous decision must involve some kind of regularity, or else the notion of freedom collapses into that of arbitrariness. But if the decision involves regularities, can we properly call it autonomous? Yes, Khurana says, but only if we manage to show that the regularities involved are those particular to the living being making the decision; that the regularities in question are such that they serve the formation of a living being's given first nature into a willed second nature which isn't so much *super*natural as it is the realm of a constant engagement with, an ongoing appropriation and transformation of, natural existence. Autonomy and therefore freedom are, in this interpretation, not a triumph over or the dismissal of nature. 'Liberation from nature' becomes, more precisely, the 'liberation from a dualistic relation to nature', the objective of which is 'a [second] nature recognisable as posited spiritually, but retaining its characteristic as natural existence'.[43]

If that is true, it provides an exit from the sovereign framing of societal existence, such as it is envisioned by Plessner: for the latter offers, as the only two choices, either the shame involved in laying open a soul that must whither in the light of day; or to deny oneself the emancipations of a second nature and remain, essentially, in the state of a first, with sovereign form the inaccessible other framing one's own life. In Khurana's terms, though, a 'second nature' can provide, precisely, an individual, autonomous access to a form in which the soul can appear 'out in the open': disguised, but unadulterated.

Fevvers, of course, epitomises the idea of a second, but nonetheless natural nature. Her special mix of the artificial and the authentic is precisely her trademark as an artist, as the impression Walser gives us of her performance transmits: 'What made her remarkable as an *aerialiste*' Walser says,

> was the speed – or rather, the lack of it – with which she performed even the climactic triple somersault. […] Indeed, she did defy the laws of projectiles, because a projectile cannot *mooch* along its trajectory; if it slackens its speed in mid-air, down it falls. But Fevvers, apparently, pottered along the invisible gangway between her trapezes with the portly dignity of a Trafalgar Square pigeon flapping from one proffered handful of corn to another, and then she turned head over heels three times, lazily enough to show off the crack in her bum. […] [Walser] was astonished to discover that it was the limitations of her act in themselves that made him briefly contemplate the unimaginable – that is, the absolute suspension of disbelief. For, in order to earn a living, might not a genuine bird-woman – in the implausible event that such a thing existed – have to pretend she was an artificial one? (pp.15–16)

If freedom is the – precarious and ongoing – realisation of a second nature, as Khurana argues, then Fevvers' immensely successful circus act, deliberate *and* natural at the same time, is an act of autonomy in every sense of the word.

6. Envoi

The issue of autonomous form poses itself, as it turns out, not just for Fevvers, but really for the entire novel. For as is alluded to throughout, but only properly revealed in the 'Envoi', the story that is being told in the novel is not even what is 'actually' happening. Rather, it turns out that Fevvers' foster-mother Lizzie is a secret communist agent and the 'real' protagonist of a 'real' story that *Nights at the Circus*, this giant digression of a novel, does not tell. As Fevvers reveals to Walser:

> it was, of course, never *religion* that made [Lizzie] such an inconvenient harlot but her habit of lecturing the clients on the white slave trade, the rights and wrongs of women, universal suffrage, as well as the Irish question, the Indian question,

> republicanism, anti-clericism, syndicalism and the abolition of the House of Lords. All of which Nelson [that is, the madam of the brothel in which Fevvers grew up] was in full sympathy with but, as she said, the world won't change overnight and we must eat. Those letters we sent home by you in the diplomatic bag were news of the struggle in Russia to comrades in exile, written in invisible ink, so we made most grievous use of you, I'm sorry to say […].
>
> (p. 346)

Fevvers and Walser, in this 'actual' story beneath the surface story of *Nights at the Circus*, are thus only minor characters; and the novel isn't a picaresque road trip at all but really a spy thriller that we're never told. All the colourful circus adventures aren't really 'the' story but only a chain of events which Fevvers and Lizzie have *decided* to relate to us. The impression persists that Fevvers is who she is, and the story we're being told is the story we're being told, because she *chooses* it to be that way – for no particular reason. The novel itself is thus as 'essentially ambiguous' as is its main protagonist; its precise shape, ultimately, the result of autonomous choice more than anything else. In a certain sense, then, character precedes its own representation with *Nights at the Circus*; further confounding attempts to read Fevvers mimetically – as psychologically plausible, if non-existent, depiction of a person, that is, whose actions can be explained by the motivations and desires driving her forward. Personhood, for Fevvers and in *Nights at the Circus*, is always already impersonation; and autonomous choice thus of necessity precedes any law of existence that Fevvers might proclaim for herself or that we might proclaim in our interpretations of her. 'Impersonation', here, isn't pretence; it is not an 'as-if', but poiesis proper.

The principles of impersonation that Fevvers lives by, and that *Nights at the Circus* endorses, require a resolute 'irrealism' such as it is not only advocated by Plessner ('*Irrealisierung*'), but likewise informs structuralist narratology in its refusal to subject literary character to knowability, to identity and identification, insisting that characters are dynamic functions of discourse, not stable representations of 'real people'.[44] This irrealism remains crucial if we want to avoid concepts of literary character which are really the ambassadors of an ideology of 'personality', psychological profile and structured self which contains – though it claims to do otherwise – little respect for individual dignity; and to lose sight of this irrealism would be to underestimate the political implications of Carter's novel.[45] But *Nights at the Circus* implies the existence of another level, one preceding, to some extent, the

determinations of political sovereignty (Plessner) as well as those of discourse (structuralism). It elevates form from 'mere surface' into a relational element proper. More than that, even, *Nights* suggests that form – the form of the novel as well as of its characters – contains an element of autonomous choice which gives to the 'necessity of developing a form' a poietic aspect that denies the logic of representationalism as much as it denies sovereign rule. What becomes clear through engaging with Fevvers and her troupe is that structuralist narratology provides the necessary, but not the sufficient condition of thinking 'new relational modes' through the literary modelling of character.

Barthes frames the question of whether discourse creates character or character creates discourse as a 'theurgical detachment' where 'God' (read: 'discourse') has given himself a 'helpmate' and plaything. But Carter's novel projects a domain of personhood which precedes the reign of discourse: the space, precisely, in which 'it is decided' between the alternatives of spy thriller and picaresque romance. The question of character thus might not be an exclusively narratological concern. Paradoxically enough, to deny the representational or mimetic principle with such insistence *for narrative*, as Barthes does, is to leave it in place, at least tentatively or by omission, for the politics of everyday life.[46] In making literature a special case, real life remains, by implication, the domain where representationalism and its conceptual counterpart, essentialism, can reign supreme. Only if we allow the notion of form – of a 'second nature' which is the object of an 'impersonal narcissism' – any purchase beyond the discursive realm, can we begin to properly acknowledge its relational, as well as its liberatory, potential.

Notes

[1] Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage, 2006), p. 105. All further references to Carter's novel will be given directly in the text.

[2] This essay, then, is narratological in focus more than it addresses Carter's œuvre in any systematic way. The friendly quarrel between Angela Carter and French theory more generally, however, is nicely exemplified in her exasperated remark to Susannah Clapp in a letter written during Carter's 1980 stay at Brown University: 'I've fallen among semioticians & am trying to make head or tail of the deconstructionists. I haven't got a dictionary in my flat & keep forgetting to look "hermeneutics" up in the library. It's been busy, busy, busy as far as thinking is concerned but I don't know how much use all this Derrida & stuff is going to be when I get home. I keep wondering just what Derrida is up to &, if he's so clever, why doesn't he write a novel of his own?' Angela Carter, quoted in Edmund Gordon, *The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography* (London: Vintage 2017), p. 307.

[3] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel. Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974). In fact, Carter's fiction in general habitually punctuates realist depiction with what we might, borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, call a 'grotesque realism' which reminds us of the 'lower' material, fluctuating and unformed stratum of existence. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[4] Compare Barthes' deconstruction of the epistemological paradigm supporting formal realism in 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard, ed. by François Wahl (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141–48.

[5] Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). The resistance and rebelliousness of literary characters is, of course, an old problem; as is evident from E.M. Forster's much-quoted remark that 'characters arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book'. E.M. Forster, quoted in Andrew J. Scheiber, 'Sign, Seme and Psychological Character: Some Thoughts on Roland Barthes' *S/Z* and the Realistic Novel', *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 21.3 (1991), 262–73 (p. 262).

[6] Rarely more so than in her famous fairy-tale rewritings in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979); but one might likewise think of Tristessa de St. Ange as variation on Greta Garbo in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), or Finn as awkwardly urban Faun figure in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967).

[7] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 67.

[8] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 178. This 'realistic view' is not exactly off the table in narratology. As Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider put it in the introduction to their *Characters in Fictional Worlds. Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film and Other Media* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010): 'The ›motivation‹ of characters constitutes the interface between characters and action. The term motivation usually refers to a part of the psyche, the inner life and personality traits: the entirety of psychical processes that initiate, maintain and regulate behaviour. This definition includes aims, wishes, feelings and drives. We explain the actions of characters by ascribing them such motivations, and we expect certain actions once we know their motivations. This is why motivation tends to be the motor and the centre of a story, transmits its theme and presents a significant influence on emotional reactions' (p. 24).

[9] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 178.

[10] Algirdas Julien Greimas, *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*, trans. by Paul J. Perron and Frank H. Collins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 79.

[11] Greimas, *On Meaning*, p. 113.

[12] Apart from Fevvers, we can think here of Jack Walser, textbook example of a picaresque hero: once a 'scapegrace urchin', hailing from 'the other side of a world whose four corners he had knocked about', he is, in all his adventurousness, psychologically speaking a bit of a hollow man: he is like 'a handsome house that has been let, furnished' (pp. 6–7).

[13] Barthes, *S/Z*, pp. 67–8.

[14] Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 68.

[15] 'Kaleidoscope' is, in fact, the rather apt description Carter gives us for Jack Walser, who is said to be a 'kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness' (p. 7).

[16] Scheiber, 'Signs', p. 263.

[17] Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion puts it rather succinctly when she points out that '[s]eparated from a world, semiotic criticism manages only to expose arbitrariness; separated from textuality, mimetic criticism ignores the literary experience itself'. Margrét Gunnarsdóttir Champion, *Dwelling in Language. Character, Psychoanalysis, and Literary Consolation* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 34. See Champion for an interesting approach to character which maintains character's textuality but mends the arbitrariness of semiotic criticism through modelling character ontology on psychoanalysis: literary character – as I read Champion's argument – depends on narcissistic identification and hence involves, analogous to all forms of human desire, a fundamental lack. Other than in neurosis, however, the avoidance of the lack underneath the plenty of desire is precluded – because of the obviously non-referential quality of the literary setting – and one is thus forced to confront the radical otherness one would suppress 'in real life'. Literary character thus 'exists primarily as an effect of narcissistic identification, and its ontology can be profitably described analogous to Freud's model of imaginary reconstructions' (pp. 55–6).

[18] Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax* (London: Marion Boyars, 1978), p. 53.

[19] Bersani, *Astyanax*, p. 55.
[20] Bernard Malkmus, 'Picaresque Narratology: *Lazarillo de Tormes* and Edgar Hilsenrath's *Der Nazi und der Friseur*', in *Clowns, Fools and Pícaros: Popular Forms in Theatre, Fiction and Film*, ed. by David Robb (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 217–18.
[21] Malkmus, 'Picaresque Narratology', p. 211.
[22] Bersani, *Astyanax,* p. 6.
[23] Helmuth Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), p. 83. The translations from the German original here and in the following are mine; but I have consulted Andrew Wallace's translation, *The Limits of Community. A Critique of Social Radicalism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999).
[24] Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 92.
[25] The distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* that Plessner is referring to is originally Ferdinand Tönnies'.
[26] The constitutive, ineluctable 'misinterpretability [*Mißdeutbarkeit*]' (Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 64) of the soul can only be done justice to in the order of society.
[27] Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 83.
[28] As Judith Shklar for instance stipulates in her 'Liberalism of Fear', in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. by Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 19–38.
[29] Compare the inflated descriptions of her nature which Fevvers delivers to Walser, for instance: 'My legs don't tally with the upper part of my body from the point of view of pure aesthetics, d'you see. Were I to be the true copy of Venus, one built on my scale ought to have legs like tree-trunks, sir; these flimsy little underpinnings of mine have more than once buckled up under the top-heavy distribution of weight upon my torso […] [But] the cranes cross continents, do they not; they winter in Africa and summer on the Baltic! I vowed I'd learn to swoop and soar, to emulate at last the albatross and glide with delighted glee on the Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties, those winds like the breath of hell that guard the white southern pole! For, as my legs grew, so did my wing-span; and my ambition swelled to match both. […] Cockney sparrow I might be by birth, but not by inclination' (pp. 44–45).
[30] Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 133.
[31] The concept of impersonality is therefore different here from how we encounter it for instance in Esposito's (Deleuzian) concept of 'third person'. Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, trans. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
[32] Leo Bersani with Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 76.
[33] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 121.
[34] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 122.
[35] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 72.
[36] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 81.

[37] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 82.
[38] Bersani, *Intimacies*, pp. 85–6.
[39] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p, 86.
[40] Bersani, *Intimacies*, pp. 76–7. He takes the idea and phrase of 'new relational modes' from Michel Foucault.
[41] Bersani, *Intimacies*, p. 87.
[42] 'If it is true that every impact of one person on another is tied to respecting a public, societal relationality in that moment in which soul wants to step into contact with soul, which brings, due to the reductive nature of reality […], the risk of injury, if it is true that, outside of a genuine community of love or conviction, one must only proceed according to tact and diplomacy, then neither state nor church need to refer to original sin to legitimise their exercise of power [*zur Rechtfertigung ihrer Gewalt*]. The freedom of man, man's equal capacity for different ways of acting in one and the same situation, is the negatively compelling occasion, man's psychic existence the positively compelling occasion for restraint. And restraint is pure violence. [*Wenn es richtig ist, daß jede Einwirkung von Mensch zu Mensch in dem Augenblick an die Beachtung einer öffentlichen, gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisform gebunden wird, als Seele mit Seele in Kontakt treten will, auf dem in den Verkürzungen der Wirklichkeit* […] *das Risiko der Verletzung lastet, wenn es richtig ist, daß außerhalb echter Liebes- oder Überzeugungsgemeinschaft nur nach Takt oder Diplomatie vorgegangen werden darf, dann haben Kirche wie Staat es nicht nötig, zur Rechtfertigung ihrer Gewalt auf die Erbniedertracht des Menschen zu verweisen. Seine Freiheit, seine Gleichmöglichkeit zu verschiedenen Taten in einer Situation ist negativ zwingender Anlaß, sein psychisches Sein positiv zwingender Grund zur Verhaltenheit. Und Verhaltenheit ist reine Gewalt*' (Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 129). In Plessner, this violence is in turn itself restrained by an ultimate voluntary accountability towards God that any political leader in service to societal order must assume ('the ultimate, voluntary act of obligating oneself to divine command [*dieser letzte freiwillig vollzogene Akt der Selbstbindung an göttlichen Auftrag*]'; p. 124).
[43] Thomas Khurana, *Das Leben der Freiheit. Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), p. 397. My translation.
[44] Plessner, *Grenzen*, p. 105.
[45] However, Bersani points out that even realist character, as well as the realist concept of character, ultimately contain an element of transformativity – both, as it were, in spite of themselves: 'To live entirely without sublimation and psychic continuities is unthinkable. And even in the imaginary, "irresponsible" spaces of literature, psychic coherence [...] inevitably reappears. But we might argue that even the structured self can enter th[e] play of mobile desire […] For such reflectiveness to take place, the repression, repetition and sublimation of desire must have proceeded to a point at which the notion of the self has become a coherent and rather elaborate fiction. It's true that such fictions tend to immobilize us in a single identity. But they must also be sustained in time, and the accidents of history happily subvert those sense-making impulses which

would reduce history to the persistence of orders and systems' (*Astyanax*, p. 314). In other words, Bersani suggests that there is a tipping point beyond which (the realist concept of) character subverts itself; where the very exercise of keeping up structure over time circles back onto itself and requires, precisely, the transformation of that very structure.

[46] Barthes' formulation implies as much: 'it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him *off the page*' (my emphasis).

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