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ANGELA CARTER'S MANNERISM IN RUDOLF II'S CURIOUS ROOM

Definitions of mannerism in prose usually concede the vagueness of the term, but generally agree in pointing out the ingenious ornateness and self-consciously elaborate manner as common denominators of the style in whatever period. From the Mannerist Period of the High Renaissance to the present time, mannerism has also been associated with the flouting of rules. All this is where Angela Carter's self-declared mannerism fits the definitions. With her bizarre amalgam of highly literary delicacy and grossness, Carter, as Walter Kendrick puts it, "triumphs over form, content, structure, tone, every genteel shibboleth."¹ Carter describes the theatricality and overflowing fluency of her style, which has by some been criticised for overwriting and artificiality, as mannerist, consciously cultivated and developed from her earlier expressionist manner.² The richness of her texts accommodates all kinds of incongruous encounters which constitute an essential part of Carter's allure: reality with fantasy, layers of the past with various layers of the present, fairy-tale worlds with postmodern theories or allegory with what she refers to as materialism.

The posthumously published collection of Carter's short stories *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993) contains a tale whose very title is suggestive of strange meetings: "Alice in Prague or the Curious Room". In it Carter's multilayered encounters in the famous *Kunstkammer* of Rudolf II—Renaissance monarch, lover of the arts and patron of several notable Mannerist painters, sculptors and craftsmen—make fascinating reading, not least for a Czech reader at a time of renewed interest in Rudolf II enhanced by the extensive 1997 Prague exhibition, which gathered together many items of the Emperor's once remarkable collection of arts and curiosities. To sample the play of

¹ Walter Kendrick, "The Real Magic of Angela Carter", in Robert E. Hosmer Jr., ed., *Contemporary British Women Writers*. London: Macmillan 1993, 66.

² John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*. London: Methuen 1985, 91.

Carter's postmodern mannerism in the Mannerist setting of Rudolf's "Curious Room" is the purpose of this article.

It was not until the 1980s that Angela Carter's work gained the wide popularity it still enjoys. Her three 1960s novels (*Shadow Dance*, 1966; *The Magic Toyshop*, 1967; *Heroes and Villains*, 1969), feminist and experimental, were somewhat ahead of their time and while welcomed as bold inventions, they were also criticised for pornographic and sado-masochistic sexual openness. Drawing on feminist and post-structuralist critical theories and pointing to perceptible shifts in social attitudes, Carter explained her approach to be aimed at the demythologisation of old social constructs which make people unfree.³ Although deconstruction of myths about women is alleged to be the clue to her prose, she denied writing in the service of feminist ideas, because what she wanted was to create space for a broad discussion about social injustice and inequality and about the relativity of views.⁴ However, these seemingly straightforward theses hardly provide Carter's reader with ready-made interpretations of her tales even if s/he keeps in mind her credo, namely, that if fiction has a moral function, it is "to find out about things [rather than] telling people how to behave."⁵ Nevertheless, Carter's "finding out about things", too, remains ambiguous and fluid under the rich layers of sensual images, verbal opulence of allusion and metaphor, utopian or dystopic fantasy, comedy and cruelty which compose the postmodern cacophony of the Carterian text. Yet there is an undeniable cohesion between Carter's mannerism and her magic realism to which, too, she acknowledges allegiance. Her language—in Salman Rushdie's words, "pitched high and replete with symbols"⁶—contributes towards creating the sense of the fantastic which underlies magic realism. Although Carter's name only has been connected with magic realism since her 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus*, there is no doubt that from the very beginning her novels and short stories had contained all the essential signs that characterise the mode: extravagant fabulation in a realistic frame, fantastic turns of events or other encounters with the supernatural mixed with fairytale, folklore and mythical elements. All of them had formed the very substance of literary "Carterland" already during the two preceding decades and therefore confirm Carter's independence of other magic realists such as Günter Grass or Gabriel García Márquez. Moreover, Carter herself explains that the differences between her work and that of South American novelists or even Salman Rushdie stem from the different backgrounds and social forces that helped to produce their writing. Her British background does not supply her with such sources of fantastic material as Márquez draws on in Colombian folklore or Rushdie when writing about shamans. Hers is fantasy and fabulation of her own making, spell-binding inventions for which

³ Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", in Michelene Wandor, ed., *On Gender and Writing*. London: Pandora Press 1973, 69-77.

⁴ Haffenden, 93-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶ Salman Rushdie's Introduction to *The Collected Angela Carter: Burning Your Boats Stories*. London: Chatto and Windus 1995, ix.

she uses the European (literary) heritage as a kind of folklore, albeit "folklore of the intelligentsia."⁷

The short story "Alice in Prague or the Curious Room" with its multiple cross-referencing between different times and distant, though European, cultures is a good case in point. It offers an interesting miniature of the Carterian "bricolage"⁸ resulting from reactions to literary experience and other stimuli from the whole of Western European culture which make up the elements of the imaginative life. The story takes us to the pulsing heart of Rudolfian Prague—Rudolf's *Kunstkammer*, where we find the well-known English Renaissance mathematician and astrologer Doctor Dee contemplating his crystal ball, which "contains everything that is, or was, or ever shall be."⁹ In this tableau¹⁰ composed of a plethora of allusions Carter evokes a period in European history, art and thought ingeniously woven from a skein of symbols and metaphors which harmonise with the idea of the Renaissance. (She compares this technique to the way Renaissance writers referred to the Classics.¹¹ (Rudolf II, King of Bohemia and Hungary and Holy Roman Emperor of the Germans (whom Carter unaccountably reduces to a mere Archduke), and his famed collection symbolise the Renaissance longing for knowledge supported by a belief in wonders. Carter's Dr Dee would like to mate Rudolf's bottled mermaid with an angel who, as everybody knows, could step out of his crystal. Nor does Carter's Renaissance horn of plenty lack a sprinkling of coarse burlesque humour—when the Iron Mask Ned Kelly muses at his scrying disk whether "it is cold enough in Prague to let him piss an arc of ice." (p. 127)

Historical accuracy is clearly not Carter's concern. Historians have no cause to disprove Dr Dee's diary,¹² according to which he was only given one brief audience by Rudolf (on 3rd September 1584) at which Kelly was not present and resented it. During their stay in Prague (with interruptions from 1584 to 1586) they did conduct seances when the Archangels allegedly spoke to them through the crystal, but they were barred access to the court and Rudolf's presence and in fact had to face a great deal of hostility, gossip and intrigue against them. Eventually they were banished from Prague by Rudolf in May 1586 and only allowed to stay at Třeboň in southern Bohemia under the protection of Vilém of Rožmberk. They seem to have outstayed also Rožmberk's welcome by 1589, when Dr Dee with his large family returned to England¹³ while Edward

7 Haffenden, 81-2.

8 Ibid., 92.

9 Angela Carter, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*. London: Vintage 1993, 121.

10 Lorna Sage remarks on the "still" quality of Carter's plots in *Women in the House of Fiction*, London: Macmillan 1992, 169. This short story has little plot and even less movement.

11 Haffenden, 92.

12 E.g. Robert J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*. Oxford University Press 1973; *Rudolf II a jeho svět*. Praha: Mladá fronta 1997, 266-7. John Dee, *Private Diary*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, London 1842.

13 Claude Postel used three autobiographical texts of Dr Dee, including his *Private Diary* in *John Dee, Le Mage de la Ruelle d'Or*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1995; *John Dee, Mág ze Zlaté uličky*. Praha: Lidové noviny 1996.

Kelly reemerged in Prague and briefly enjoyed the Emperor's favour until in 1591 Rudolf ordered his imprisonment, the details of which are unclear as are the circumstances and the date of Kelly's death in Bohemia, probably in 1597.

From this brief outline of historical facts it is obvious that there was none of the radiant harmony that Carter's picture of the Curious Room suggests. The discrepancy between fact and fiction may either be one of Carter's demythologising ploys, a parody of the proverbial tolerance of the Rudolfian court, which was as relative as Elizabethan "Merry England"¹⁴, or she may be putting fantasy purely in the service of experiment where her own quest for "finding out about things" ingeniously parallels Dr Dee's unquenchable thirst for learning. The *Kunstammer* together with the four celebrated protagonists (besides Dee and Kelly, Rudolf II and the painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo also appear on the scene) are then an evocation of the spirit of the age and pose as a metaphor of the European Renaissance that takes on a life of its own. As usual Carter heaps meanings that radiate out numerous, sometimes obscure associations which she, however, does not necessarily expect the reader to disentangle.¹⁵ Carter's mannerist style and pastiche match the setting in the first Mannerist Period with bravado:

The crystal resembles: an aqueous humour, frozen;

...

a drop of dew endlessly,
tremulously about to fall from
the unfolded petals of a rose and,
therefore, like the tear, retaining
the perfection of its
circumference only by refusing
to sustain free fall, remaining
what it is, because it refuses to
become what it might be, the
antithesis of metamorphosis; (pp. 122-3)

English poetry of the time, marked by mannerist euphuism and sonneteering conceits as well as probing metaphysical questions, also contributes to the scene in the form of direct allusions to John Donne's "The Song":

[Dr Dee] could provide answers to many questions or knew where to look for answers. He had gone and caught a falling starre—didn't a piece of it lie beside the stuffed dodo? To impregnate the aggressively phallic mandrake, with its masculinity to the power of two, as implied by its name, was a task which, he pondered, the omnivorous Archduke, with his enthusiasm for erotic esoterica, might prove capable of. And the answer to the other two i m-

¹⁴ Peter Ackroyd demolishes the latter with Dr Dee's nightmare about Elizabeth's bloody hands dipped in his own corpse. *The House of Dr Dee*. London: Hamish Hamilton 1993; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1994, 216.

¹⁵ Haffenden, 87.

ponderables posed by the poet were obtainable, surely, through the intermediary of the angels, if only one scried long enough. (p. 134)

Moreover, at Rudolf's court Carter finds one of the notable mannerist painters—Giuseppe Arcimboldo—who worked in Prague from 1562 to 1587. In her story she has Arcimboldo, in the manner of his paintings, create for Rudolf a female figure of fruit as a living metaphor of all that the world has to offer. The very Carterian use of metaphor as reality bears a close resemblance to the mannerist metaphorical representation. Arcimboldo's curious contraption of the fruit woman "Summer" is to be a material metaphor of the possibilities, pleasures and maybe even wonders contained in the idea that by intercourse with her Rudolf may fructify his cold winter kingdom. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the Renaissance interest in detailed study of nature and man and the correspondences of their unity, Carter's fantasy appears less bizarre and not entirely cut off from reality. There are hints at Arcimboldo's actual fruit paintings of Rudolf as Vertumnus (now in Skokloster, Uppsala) and Autumn (Museo Civico, Brescia, Alinari) hidden in Dr Dee's preoccupation that the eccentric "Archduke" might one day want to be transformed into a harvest festival. Arcimboldo's triumphant entry with his female fruit sculpture both betrays Carter's passion for the carnivalesque and resonates with the lavish spectacle of the Renaissance masque.¹⁶ The form and content of the late 16th-century *maniera* merged in a unity which did not distinguish between the artificial and the natural/real. Its apparent artificiality is the result of the artist's ingeniousness with the purpose to discover and to teach rather than to entertain by an artful invention per se. In this sense mannerism is at home in the *Kunstkammer* and is an integral part of the world where the alchemist, occultist, astrologer and any other scientist as well as the artist participate in an ardent endeavour to gain knowledge about the *universum* in whose divine order they believe. And this is where Carter's post-modern mannerism parts company with its Renaissance predecessor and fills the gap created by the shift in belief and values with playful experiment.

The mannerist perspective with shimmering vistas of perhaps yet undiscovered worlds is translated by Carter into "the distant light of the Age of Reason" which may be glimpsed when "the hinge of the sixteenth century, where it joins with the seventeenth century ... judders open as reluctantly as the door in a haunted house" (p. 123). In Dr Dee's crystal sphere this future is still invisible and hard to conceive of, like another unexplored country. When out of the future world Lewis Carroll's Alice comes in through the crystal ball instead of an angel, the celebrated magus of numbers, mathematician and cabalist John Dee is not ready to follow her practical mathematical reasoning and even Arcimboldo's illusion of the fruit woman begins to disintegrate under the pressure of Alice's rational questions.

¹⁶ The two are similarly combined in the "Shakespearean" celebrations in Carter's last novel *Wise Children* (1991).

Carter's uses of fantasy are manifold, one of the important instances being her concepts of history and change. In her materialist view, which she emphasises,¹⁷ history keeps a hold on change, as Dr Dee's fantastic encounter with Alice may well illustrate. Or, as David Ian Paddy puts it, "the relation of fantasy and history in Carter's work highlights a tension between the desire for a different world and the historical forces that prevent that desire from being actualized."¹⁸ A potent tool of Carter's fantasy is time-switching, or the notion of the fluidity of time, intimated here at the very beginning by Dr Dee's "fearful sphere that contains everything that is, or was, or ever will be." Within such a scheme Alice's sudden appearance from the future, and what is more from the world of literature (though the characters she encounters are historical figures), seems no more out of place than the incongruous time elements in "The Company of Wolves" or the post-apocalyptic *Heroes and Villains*, where the ruins of the old world may be generations old, but yet somehow within the living memory of some. Many of the stories collected in *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* have a similarly unsettling effect of intermingling time where the Old World touches the New World. Calling up the devil in a flyblown Mexican border town, an ageing drunken European Count and a Vienna music student summon up in the Archer of the Dark Abyss merging figures of demons of both worlds. In "John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore" Carter recreates the theme of the Jacobean drama in a western-like tale as it could be filmed by the American film-maker John Ford (1895-1973). In the same story, Carter's mannerist image of America bears an uncanny resemblance to Arcimboldo's woman of fruit:

America, with her torso of a woman at the time of this story, a woman with an hour-glass waist, a waist laced so tightly it snapped in two, and we put a belt of water there. America, with your child-bearing hips and your crotch of jungle, your swelling bosom of a nursing mother, and your cold head, your cold head. (p. 21)

The attraction that all such transfigurations obviously hold for Carter also happens to coincide with the Renaissance liking for animation. The questions that Carter poses in "Alice in Prague" examine the relationship between reality and artificiality, of interest to both the early modern and postmodern periods, and could well be addressed to the Prague animator (and creator of an animated film version of Alice) Jan Švankmayer, to whom the short story is dedicated:

Are they animate or not, these beings that jerk and shudder into such a semblance of life? Do these creatures believe themselves to be human? And if they do, at what point might they, by virtue of the sheer intensity of their belief, become so?

(In Prague, the city of the Golem, an image can come to life.) (p. 135)

¹⁷ Haffenden, 92.

¹⁸ "Angela Carter's Visions of Change", in Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, Hanna Wallinger, Gerhild Reisner, eds., *Daughters of Restlessness*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter 1998, 98.

At another level and as another piece of Carter's artful jigsaw puzzle, these transformations have also much to do with continuity. Carter's scepticism about the possibility of radical change has been commented on.¹⁹ The wistful ending of "Alice in Prague" ("'Poor Tom's a-cold', offered the raven. After that, came silence.") (p. 138) as well as the haunting parallels between the Old and the New Worlds showing how easily old tales can be transferred into new settings, endorse that scepticism. On the other hand, the intense interaction of her texts with the past seems to suggest her recognition of the importance of continuity. As early as 1974, in a letter to a friend, she describes how impressed she was by "an image of continuance" (although this concerned a rather pastoral image of the freedom of nomadic life) and, on a more personal note, goes on to tell him about the significance of having "rediscovered" her parents.²⁰

From the same letter we learn how much already way back in the seventies Angela Carter was concerned with the form and language of contemporary prose, herself "making verbal structures ... more elegant than Pynchon and contain[ing] a fair amount of baleful European magic" (p.12). The effort was aimed at reviving the English novel, which had then been despaired of as a defunct form, but the vitality remained characteristic of Carter's writing and came to be associated with postmodernism. The density of the Carterian text is formidable and what is more, even a rather short story like "Alice in Prague" does not remain encapsulated in its time and place or restricted to its own pages. For there is an interplay between Carter's texts through which we can recognise her kind of feminist teasing in Alice's appearance in Rudolf's Curious Room. Though recognisably Lewis Carroll's little Alice, she is also one of Carter's strong, independent women, who leaves the learned men of the Renaissance puzzled and causes them to look helpless and inefficient. In their turn they eventually echo Carter's other male figures who, unless emanating patriarchal evil, are at best likeable dreamers and no match for her forceful heroines. These links, too, add to the layers and shades of meaning which every one of Carter's characters always embodies. Alice and her involuntary companions may carry as many meanings outside their context as Fevvers, the winged Cockney Venus from *Nights at the Circus* (1984) or the werewolves in "The Company of Wolves" (1979).

There is no denying that writing about women, or rather collapsing the mythologies surrounding femininity and womanhood, has been seen as central to Carter. But beneath and beyond the feminist overtones of her prose, her constant crossing of boundaries between different times and cultures encompasses other discourses that seem to be of increasing relevance to our time. Within this framework Angela Carter's postmodern experiment with images and thought of the Renaissance in its somewhat extreme form of Rudolf II's court in Central Europe points to connections of which her mannerism is but one element. More generally, the foregrounded image of the late Renaissance loss of illusions about the possibilities of man is probably in many respects one that our end-of-the-millennium world also shares.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "A Letter from Angela Carter", *Messenger* V/I Spring 1996, 11.

