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A Literary Life

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For Tabitha

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Contents

Introduction: Is She Fact, or Is She Fiction?

It is very difficult to imagine a successful contemporary author ever preserving their anonymity in an age where writers are celebrities whose lifestyles are as extensively reviewed and discussed as their published work. In many ways, Angela Carter was no exception. Particularly in the last decade or so of her life, after the translation of her short story 'The Company of Wolves' to the screen and the long-listing of *Nights at the Circus* for the Booker Prize in 1984, she was hailed as 'the fairy godmother of magic realism',[1] and consequently became a public figure, a status confirmed on her after her death in 1992. A host of obituaries from friends and admirers were published in newspapers in Britain and America. *Omnibus* on BBC1 screened a final interview, *Angela Carter's Curious Room*, BBC2's *The Late Show* paid tribute, and the Ritzy Cinema in Brixton hosted a celebration of her life, at which was played the music she had selected for BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* programme (luxury item: a zebra).[2] Although Carter had been too ill to record the programme itself, which had been scheduled for what turned out to be the final week of her life, the fact that she had been asked at all demonstrated that she had achieved recognition beyond a select cult following.

In actuality, most of the facts of Carter's life that have entered the public domain were put there by Carter herself. During her career, she wrote a number of autobiographical essays that were commissioned by anthologies and journals – *New Society*, to which she was a regular contributor between 1967 and 1986, published a number of them. 'The Mother Lode' (1976) relates the story of her early childhood during the Second World War, when she and her family lodged with her grandmother in South Yorkshire. 'My Father's House' (1976) and 'Sugar Daddy' (1983), as their titles indicate, focus on her father, laying particular stress on

his Scottish origins. 'Notes from the Front Line', and 'Notes from a Maternity Ward' (both published in 1983) use her personal experiences as launching points for wider social analysis. Indeed, even the most cursory flick through *Shaking A Leg*, Carter's collected non-fiction writing, demonstrates her tendency to write pieces of social commentary in a chatty style which not infrequently alluded to incidents in her own life in order to make her point. For example, an essay for *New Society* in 1977 on women wearing trousers in the workplace begins: 'When I started work in the late 1950s...'.[3] Similarly, a piece about vegetarianism opens with the words: 'My neighbourhood wholefood shop...'.[4] As Joan Smith observes in her introduction to Carter's collected non-fiction, she 'had a rare ability to use her own experience as a springboard for ideas'.[5]

From this, it could be concluded that Angela Carter was not only perfectly happy to reveal the circumstances of her life, but actively drew on it for inspiration in the course of her writing career. Such a train of thought might conclude that Carter is making a characteristically postmodern move here, dissecting the boundaries between life and art, the personal and the professional self. Self-disclosure makes the writer's life itself another text; an 'open book' for readers to peruse at their leisure. To a certain extent, this study supports such an interpretation, since Carter's autobiographical writings are clearly as textually self-conscious as her fiction. Moreover, as shall be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, there are many elements in Carter's personal pieces that evoke echoes of her novels and short stories.

However, it would be naïve in the extreme to interpret these writings as pieces that reveal the authentic circumstances of their author's life, and quite preposterous to regard them as capable of functioning as the 'proof' that Carter used her fiction as a forum for personal confession. On the contrary, it would be closer to the mark to reverse that supposition – rather than the autobiographical details throwing light upon the fiction, the fiction should make us suspicious of the authenticity of the autobiography.

Such an approach is validated by Carter's 'hybrid' writings: not quite autobiography and not quite fiction. 'Flesh and the Mirror', which resembles many of her autobiographical essays written during her stay in Japan between 1969 and 1972, was published in Carter's first collection of short stories, *Fireworks* (1974), and 'The Quilt Maker' first appeared in a short story collection entitled *Sex and Sensibility: Stories by Contemporary Women Writers from Nine Countries* (1981). The status of both as pieces of fiction rather than statements of fact was confirmed by their

inclusion in the anthologised collection of Carter's short stories published by Chatto & Windus in 1995, *Burning Your Boats*, yet 'The Quilt Maker', in particular, would not have looked at all out of place in amongst more ostentatiously non-fictional pieces such as 'The Mother Lode' and 'Sugar Daddy'.

'The Quilt Maker' is an extended, typically Carteresque, conceit, which invites reading as personal memoir, but which also deliberately confounds that attempt. It is written in the first person, in a conversational style which places the reader in the position of confidante: 'In patchwork, a neglected household art – neglected, obviously, because my sex excelled in it – well, there you are; that's the way it's been, isn't it?.'[6] Carter includes just enough details drawn from her direct experience to maintain the sense that she's telling a true, and very personal, story, mentioning in the course of her tale her upbringing 'during the Age of Austerity' (123), her extended stay in Japan and her divorce from her first husband. The narrative voice itself is situated in 'the tall, narrow terraces' (124) of South London, where Carter did indeed live at the time, and the anxiety expressed by the narrator about turning forty ('my skin fits less well than it did, my gums recede apace, I crumple like chiffon in the thigh' [124]) can also be aligned with the author herself, who must have written this around 1980, her fortieth year.

Intermingled with the impression of casual intimacy conveyed by Carter's informal, chatty, style, however, is an ever-increasing sense of artfulness. Indeed, it is there from the narrative's opening paragraph, although at this stage it's easy to miss:

> One theory is, we make our destinies like blind men chucking paint at a wall; we never understand nor even see the marks we leave behind us. But not too much of the grandly accidental abstract expressionist about my life, I trust; oh, no. I always try to live on the best possible terms with my unconscious and let my right hand know what my left is doing and, fresh every morning, scrutinize my dreams. Abandon, therefore, or, rather deconstruct the blind-action painter metaphor; take it apart, formalize it, put it together again, strive for something a touch more hard-edged, intentional, altogether less arty, for I do believe that we all have the right to choose. (121)

This is a classic Carter tactic. The linguistic exuberance of this passage, full of asides and elaborations, works to obscure what the narrator is really saying, since the style implies a spontaneity which she actually eschews in her explicit rejection of all that is 'grandly accidental

abstract expressionist' in favour of 'something . . . hard-edged intentional'. The story itself contains a similar conundrum, appearing on the surface to be a spontaneously generated narrative that is apt to veer off the point whenever the narrator's attention is diverted, while in fact very tightly constructed and consciously manipulative.

Because of all its diversions and anecdotal asides, 'The Quilt Maker' is a difficult tale to summarise. The core of the story is a reminiscence concerning the narrator's next-door neighbour, an elderly woman called Letty, whose calls for help in the middle of the night are heard by the narrator. She alerts the police, who break into the flat to find Letty on the floor in a tangle of blankets, having fallen out of bed and unable to get back in. The incident, though trivial, brings Letty to the attention of the apparatus of the welfare state: 'Then the social worker came; and the doctor; and the district nurse; and, out of nowhere, a great-niece, probably summoned by the social worker' (133). The decision is taken to remove Letty to hospital for 'a few days' (133), but the narrator implies that her departure has become permanent. For example, when she tells us that 'Letty lives in the basement with her cat', she immediately amends that statement: 'Correction. Used to live' (127). Given that this is a narrative permeated with allusions to death and transience, whereby Letty becomes the focus of the narrator's own anxieties about aging, it's easy to jump to the conclusion that Letty is dead. At the end of the story, however, Letty returns home, leaving the narrator to indulge in histrionic expressions of regret at the foiling of her artistic intentions:

> I'd set it up so carefully, an enigmatic structure about evanescence and aging and the mists of time, shadows lengthening, cherry blossom, forgetting, neglect, regret . . . the sadness, the sadness of it all . . .
>
> But. Letty. Letty came home. (139)

This tendency of life to refuse to conform to the contrived patternings of art is emphasised to an absurd extent through the allusions to Letty's cat, '[o]ne of those ill-kempt balls of fluff old ladies keep' (132). Abandoned when Letty is removed to hospital, the cat is witnessed by the narrator apparently on his last legs, 'doddering' through the garden with '[h]is sides caved-in under the stiff, voluminous fur' (137). When he disappears, she assumes that he has died – but when Letty returns, he miraculously rematerializes, 'lolling voluptuously among the creeping buttercups, fat as butter himself' (140).

As a piece of writing, this story is characteristically double-edged. The writer is 'a middle-aged woman sewing patchwork' (140), a self-conscious

(and self-consciously well-worn) metaphor for the attempt to translate the formlessness of 'real life' into the shapes, textures and patterns of fiction. In other words, it is pointing to the limitations of art, which, because it always has to reach some kind of resolution, is always going to be outrun by life, a never-ending sequence of events with random and unpredictable outcomes. Yet 'The Quilt Maker' also celebrates its own failure, since the return of Letty from hospital and the unlikely resurrection of her cat is a far happier ending than the storyteller herself predicted; and she rejoices in it, even if it does derail the progress of her narrative. The narrator identifies closely with Letty throughout, since she is the means through which the narrator is enabled to contemplate her own, inevitable, descent into old age: 'The significance, the real significance, of the age of forty is that you are, along the allotted span, nearer to death than to birth. Along the lifeline I am now past the halfway mark' (124). In this context, Letty's escape from 'the clean white grave of the geriatric ward' may be 'ridiculous' (139), but it also reminds the narrator herself that, while aging and death are inevitable, the will to live persists to the very end:

> We know when we were born but –
> The time of our reprieves are equally random. (140)

But this confrontation between art and life is also itself a conceit, a point underscored by the uncertainty regarding the provenance of this story. For the fact is, of course, that Carter's inclusion of autobiographical material does nothing to anchor her narrative in any kind of exterior reality: indeed, it does precisely the opposite. If we cannot establish what is real and what's contrived, then we cannot accept Letty's story as part of a world outside the narrative; therefore, we cannot ultimately accept the conclusion laid out for us by the narrator that she has been frustrated in her assumption that the world outside the text will ever conform to attempts at fictional representation. Instead, Letty's return is a deliberate sleight of hand by a narrator who only *appears* to lose control of her story. In the end, all we are left with is a portrait of the narrator in her South London garden: 'the woman of forty, with dyed hair and most of her own teeth, who is *ma semblable, ma soeur*' (140). Appearances to the contrary, this is not a resolution, but a final turn of the screw. Throughout the text there's a deliberate slippage between the real author, Carter herself, and the implied author, whose autobiographical voice merges with Carter's own. Here, yet another layer is added to the confusion, as the implied author not only objectifies herself by shifting

from the first to the third person, but also stresses the implications of that splitting-off by explicitly distancing the observer from the observed. She is '*ma semblable, ma soeur*' – 'my likeness, my sister' – but not 'my self'. This allusion to one of Carter's favourite poets, the French symbolist Charles Baudelaire, is the final indicator that, for all its sense of self-disclosure and personal emotion, 'The Quilt Maker' is not actually going to tell you anything that's verifiably true about the actual author, who, for all of her lavish use of the intimate first person, is concealed beneath a mannered and many-layered persona.

However, one of the other things 'The Quilt Maker' does is contemplate the activity of autobiography itself. One of the most teasing elements in this story is its allusions to an affair Carter had while she was in Japan – an episode which is the central theme of 'Flesh and the Mirror' – but, as in 'Flesh and the Mirror', it is represented in terms which tell her audience absolutely nothing about it. The narrator's lover, distanced from her by time and culture, is apostrophised as a mask – a mask, moreover, which may be inhabited by no-one: 'I cast the image into the past, like a fishing line, and up it comes with a gold mask on the hook, a mask with real tears at the ends of its eyes, but tears which are no longer anybody's tears' (126). Tellingly, though, while Letty may be nearer the narrator geographically, temporally and culturally, she is as much a mystery to the narrator as her Japanese lover ever was:

> What Letty once saw and heard before the fallible senses betrayed her into a world of halftones and muted sounds is unknown to me. What she touched, what moved her, are mysteries to me. She is Atlantis to me. How she earned her living, why she and her brother came here first, all the real bricks and mortar of her life have collapsed into a rubble of forgotten past.
>
> I cannot guess what were or are her desires. (131)

The question which is implicit in this story throughout, therefore, is this: in the face of this impossibility of knowing anybody, even one's self – which in this story keeps receding steadily into the distance – what is the point of autobiography, a genre whose central tenet has been defined as 'the ideology of subjectivity-as-truth'?[7] In the final analysis, 'The Quilt Maker' justifies what it also enacts – the endless evasion of disclosure through the substitution of a succession of masks and shifting narrative personae. And if there is no essential self in the humanist or Cartesian sense, then the endeavour to write an autobiography becomes just as 'The Quilt Maker' implies – an endeavour which

is all style and linguistic games, with no tangible end to be attained other than the pleasure of the exercise. No wonder Carter said to John Haffenden in 1984 that 'all attempts at autobiography are fraught with self-defeat and narcissism'.[8]

The mask is an apt motif to evoke in a consideration of Carter's life, since she was so extremely adept at constructing them. When one reads the interviews that Carter gave in her lifetime, their repetitiousness is striking, and the extreme control Carter exercised over the areas of her life she chose to make available for public consideration is evident. The autobiographical essays delineate the territory – her childhood and adolescence are most frequently alluded to, her time in Japan is mentioned, although never in personal terms, and the topic of motherhood is skirted around. Her relationships, both past and current, were hardly ever mentioned. Although she retained her married name throughout her career – it was the name under which she was first published, and hence by which she was professionally recognised – she was actually divorced in 1972.[9] Throughout her life, she retained a dignified silence on the topic, saying only that 'it wasn't so much my husband or myself that was at fault: it was the institution of marriage that was making us behave in ways we didn't seem able to prevent'.[10] Paul Barker, the editor of *New Society* between 1968 and 1986, wrote a posthumous profile on Carter in *The Independent on Sunday* that was full of affectionate reminiscence, but even he professed little knowledge of the relationship (or relationships) so coyly hinted at in the essays she sent him for publication from Japan:

> Her life in Japan was bizarre. She joined a lover there. I think he was Korean, and Koreans are as despised in Japan as (say) Poles are in Chicago... She worked briefly for a broadcasting company, but then did anything and everything. She was a bar hostess on the Ginza, where, she told me, "I could hardly call my breasts my own." In one short story collection, there is what seems like direct reportage of being picked up in the street and taken back to a be-mirrored cheap hotel for an instant seduction. I was never sure how close she got to prostitution in Tokyo.[11]

Interviewers, though, appear to have followed the script Carter laid down with compliancy; and she had a tendency, in her later interviews in particular, to repeat her own autobiographical articles more or less word for word. For example, she told Olga Kenyon in an interview published in 1992 that: '[m]y mother learned she was carrying me when

the Second World War was declared. Our family had a talent for magic realism – she told me she had been to the doctor's on the very day'.[12] In fact, this is a direct echo of a passage from 'The Mother Lode': 'My mother learned she was carrying me at about the time the Second World War was declared; with the family talent for magic realism, she once told me she had been to the doctor's on the very day.'[13] A little further on in the same interview, Carter simply refers Kenyon to already-published versions of her autobiography: 'If you want to know more about my early life, read my essay called *Family Romances* about all the anecdotal figures who influenced me.'[14] In her study of Carter, Lorna Sage cites a letter that Carter wrote to her in 1977 after Sage had interviewed her for *New Review*, in which Carter wryly commented on this tendency to quote herself:

> The *New Review* piece is smashing. Thanks. The only snag, as far as I'm concerned, is that I only have the one script, alas, so that a number of the details of my autobiography are repeated in the 'Family Life' piece – repeated word for word, what's more. Which is a great tribute to my internal consistency, I suppose; only, my childhood, boyhood and youth is a kind of cabaret turn performed, nowadays, with such a practised style it comes out engine-turned on demand. What a creep I am.[15]

Although Carter's death in 1992 marked the beginning of a process of literary canonisation, with academic analyses of her work proliferating throughout the 1990s, no new biographical material has appeared to throw light on the areas of her life she chose to keep private, nor has her autobiographical 'cabaret turn' been substantially tested or challenged. In spite of the fact that Carter has been repeatedly defined as one of the most important British authors of the second half of the twentieth century, there are no collections of letters, diaries or memoirs in the public domain, and no detailed biographies have as yet been published.

The writer of a study such as this, which seeks to follow the passage of an author's life in order to place their work within a social and cultural context, is therefore faced with a paucity of sources, since Carter differs from the majority of other subjects of the *Literary Lives* series in the respect that her life has not – or at least not yet – become the subject of substantial analysis. Moreover, as has already begun to be demonstrated, and will continue to be so throughout the course of this book, the process of contemplating Carter's life is complicated by the fact that she deliberately plays about with the notion of the autobiographical writing

self. Her perennial fascination with masks, masquerade, theatricals and dressing-up, tropes that appear throughout her fiction, in this respect point to the endlessly shifting identity of the author herself. As Lorna Sage puts it:

> Taking into account the writer's life doesn't mean that you have to reinvent your subject as a 'real' person. Angela Carter's life – the background of social mobility, the teenage anorexia, the education and self-education into the deliquescent riches of the ruins of various great traditions, the early marriage and divorce, the role-playing and shape-shifting, the travels, the choice of a man much younger, the baby in her forties – is the story of someone walking a tightrope. It is all happening 'on the edge', in no-man's land, among the debris left by past convictions. By the end, her life fitted her more or less like a glove, but that was because she had put it together by trial and error, *bricolage*, all in the (conventionally) wrong order.[16]

As a woman who began writing in the sixties (her first novel was published in 1966), Carter appears somewhat out of step with her contemporaries; something to which Lisa Appignanesi drew attention when she interviewed Carter in 1987:

> I find it very interesting that most of the women writers who have come out of this last wave of feminism actually write in a very autobiographical and confessional mode, and you can actually chart their lives from their fiction – you can tell when they have their sexual awakening, their first love, first lesbian experience, the lot. Whereas reading you, of course, is rather more opaque.[17]

As many critics of women's writing have pointed out, the confessional novel became a popular form amongst feminists writing in the seventies, in which the personal experiences of the author become representative of a more general female quest for self-determination. Discussing Kate Millet's *Flying* (1974) – a text which is frequently cited as an example of this trend – Rita Felski argues that however experimental it might appear, its ultimate goal is the recovery of the subject as a perceptible, recognisable, and above all, stable self:

> [E]ven the more experimental forms of feminist confession continually refer back to the perceptions of the female subject as their source and authority; there is a conspicuous lack of interest in irony,

> indeterminacy, and linguistic play. Thus Millett, for example, implies that the purpose of her text is to aid the discovery of an underlying buried self, moving her closer to 'recovering my being'.[18]

This is not a statement that could ever be applied to Carter. Indeed, she functions as its absolute antithesis, writing novels which are all about 'irony, indeterminacy and linguistic play', and which stringently interrogate the notion that there is such a thing as a self that is capable of being unproblematically 'recovered'. As she asserted in her final interview for the BBC just before she died:

> I never believe that I'm writing about the search for self. I've never felt that the self is like a mythical beast which has to be trapped and returned so that you can be whole again. I'm talking about the negotiations that we have to make to discover any kind of reality.[19]

It could be argued, indeed, that this stance enables Carter to avoid the double-bind which Rita Felski identifies as intrinsic to the feminist confessional mode, which finds that 'the more emphatically it defines its function as the communication of the real, the more clearly the unbridgeable gap between word and referent is exposed'.[20] Carter's texts, however, explicitly embrace the uncertainties of a vacillating and uncertain subjectivity, which is brought into being through, as she says in the comment quoted above, the never-ending 'negotiations' involved in trying to bridge the gap between what Felski terms 'word and referent'.

In presenting the subject in this way, though, Angela Carter was not unique – typically, she was just in advance of the trend. Laura Marcus notes that autobiographies written by women in the eighties became much freer in their 'use of fiction within the autobiographical text', with the result that:

> [t]he 'fictional' can become the space for more general identifications, or for the trying-out of potentialities and possibilities – what might have been, what could have been, what might yet be – or it can be a way of suggesting how much fiction is involved in all self-representations.[21]

This is far closer to the mark as far as Carter is concerned, and it enables her portrayal of subjectivity to be aligned with postmodernist conceptions of gender identity – in particular, the work of theorists such as