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TEXTUAL GAMES WITH BAUDELAIRE  
IN ANGELA CARTER'S *HEROES AND VILLAINS*  
AND *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE*

“How can I put it; although I might have liked to write poetry like Baudelaire’s, I certainly would not, for one single minute, have wanted the kind of life that Baudelaire lived. His poetry is the product of terminal despair, and he was a shit, to boot”, wrote Angela Carter in “Notes from the Front Line”<sup>1</sup>. This mixture of fascination and aversion inspired her to revisit Baudelaire in several of her texts. In the short story “Black Venus”, he appears as one of the main characters. Narrated from the point of view of his muse, Jeanne Duval, the story mocks the poet’s misogyny and his self-creation as decadent *poete maudit*. In spite of the grotesque depiction, Carter’s enchantment with his poetic achievement is nevertheless undeniable. She rephrases fragments of his poems, seeking to recreate their mood and force in her writing. While Baudelaire’s convictions are ridiculed, his unique style transpires as an enticing mystery. As it is not the figure of the artist himself but rather his distinctive literary voice which Carter found particularly captivating, his influence is not confined to texts which mention him explicitly. The fictional worlds of *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) rework symbols from his poetry. The novels’ baroque style reverberates with his cadences, although Baudelaire as such is never mentioned. What Carter sought to achieve in the two texts was a redefinition of old concepts, both on the level of the plot and narration. Baudelaire’s treatment of the past, his stock imagery, and the apocalyptic mood of his verse are part of Carter’s fic-

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<sup>1</sup> A. CARTER. *Shaking a Leg: Collected Writings*. London 1998, p. 22.

tional worlds, yet their meanings are incessantly questioned. Carter envisages the narratives as intertextual dialogues in which ideas illuminate each other.

Carter pursues Bakhtin's view of the literary work of art as a meeting place of different discourses, each carrying its own history of previous utterances<sup>2</sup>. The dynamic character of relations of meaning within the novel, as described by Bakhtin, corresponds to Carter's desire to make the narrative an arena for a dispute of voices having equal status, inviting a diversity of possible readings<sup>3</sup>. The fictional world, as Bakhtin defines it, is dynamic, it "is only one of many possible realities; it is not inevitable, not arbitrary, it bears within itself other possibilities"<sup>4</sup>. *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve* are filled with re-assembled images and symbols whose meanings are not fixed but negotiated throughout the narrative. The fact that the novels are set in a world after an undefined disaster in which the old order has perished creates an "Adamic situation"<sup>5</sup> in the sense that after the disaster, which corresponds to the biblical fall of man, the establishment of a new order is awaited and, accordingly, a new Adam (or Eve) is also anticipated as a leader and symbol of the world's rebirth. In Carter's fiction, however, such mythic schemes are invariably destined to fail.

Influenced by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, Carter adopted his definitions and analytic attitude<sup>6</sup>. According to Barthes, myth is a man-made product only assuming the appearance of a universal or "natural" statement. Mythic characters are deprived of individuality. Their significance is taken away from them and replaced by ideological motivation. Carter describes her characters as forced into myth<sup>7</sup> irrespective of their will. "[R]educed to sign language"<sup>8</sup> is how she characterizes Jewel and Marianne groomed by Donally for the roles of new Adam and Eve. This thorough investigation of so-

<sup>2</sup> M. BAKHTIN. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin 1988, pp. 433-434.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kate Webb on Carter's interest in Bakhtin's theory of the novel: "Mikhail Bakhtin argued that language is inherently dialogic because it implies a listener who must also be another speaker. It's a proposition that Carter, the iconoclast, agreed with and tried to illuminate in her writing". K. WEBB. "Seriously Funny". In: *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*. London 2001, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup> M. BAKHTIN. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> The term is taken from R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam*.

<sup>6</sup> A. KATSAVOS. "An Interview with Angela Carter" Internet: [www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview\\_carter.html](http://www.centerforbookculture.org/interviews/interview_carter.html) (Date of access: 31 Nov 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Carter, like Barthes, uses the terms "mystification" and "myth" interchangeably. They appear as synonyms also in critical essays devoted to Carter's work.

<sup>8</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 101.

cial constructs is embedded in the dialogue with Baudelaire. His images and concepts appear both as elements of made myths and as disruptive forces, making the texts games of allusion and rereading.

### GAMES WITH IMAGERY

Carter's treatment of literary and cultural heritage as "a shop with old decorations"<sup>9</sup> bears resemblance to Baudelaire's aestheticism in which the past is perceived as a "museum of imagination" (*musée imaginaire*), a collection of concepts and images at the poet's disposal<sup>10</sup>. In "Spleen (I'm like the king...)", Baudelaire puts together medievalism, religious rituals of pagan Rome, and Greek mythology. Similarly, in her prose Carter alludes to disparate ideas from different epochs: the biblical story of the fall of man, Rousseau's noble savage, and Mother-goddess cults, to name but a few concepts. Furthermore, the richness of imagery in Baudelaire's verse coupled with its suggestive and mysterious mood allows for a play of associations, which Carter uses as a frame of reference, changing the meaning of the poem's images and redefining the symbol of spleen.

The key to Baudelaire's work is the dichotomy of "spleen and ideal"<sup>11</sup>. A depersonalized speaker tries to reach beyond the stifling dullness of the mundane (spleen, ennui) towards an ideal or a "universal Idea"<sup>12</sup>, an unspecified *ailleurs* – "somewhere else" or "beyond"<sup>13</sup>. It is precisely this element absconding naming which is expressed by the symbol. The symbol subordinates characters, objects and settings, endowing them with additional significance. Whereas symbolist verse – in accordance with Bakhtin's views on literary genres – seeks to centralize meaning, in Carter's postmodern narratives meanings are purposefully dispersed. Carter's use of symbols from Baudelaire's poetry is a way of undermining their original meanings by "novelizing" them<sup>14</sup>. According to Nicole Ward Jouve, in Carter's fiction "[s]ymbols (...)

<sup>9</sup> J. KAMIONOWSKI. *New Wine in Old Bottles: Angela Carter's Fiction*. Białystok 2000, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> H. R. JAUSS. *Proces literacki modernizmu od Rousseau do Adorna*. In: *Odkrywanie modernizmu: przekłady i komentarze*. Kraków 2004, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> J. CASSOU et al. *Encyklopedia symbolizmu*. Warszawa 1997 p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> J. HEISTEIN. *Historia literatury francuskiej: od początków do czasów najnowszych*. Wrocław 1997, pp. 184-185.

<sup>13</sup> J. CASSOU et al. *Encyklopedia symbolizmu*, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> M. BAKHTIN. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p. 5.

are not allowed to signify, except ironically”<sup>15</sup>; they are mocked and debased. Baudelaire’s king of a rainy country recurs in several of Carter’s works. The symbol becomes a figure of speech, a means of embellishing the text. It is seemingly devoid of depth and complexity. Yet, taking into consideration Carter’s suggestion that her novels be read at as many levels as the reader wishes<sup>16</sup>, the exploration of the similes in *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve* may provide insights into the plots of those novels. In order to do that, however, the symbol needs to be related to its source text.

In Baudelaire’s poem the figure of the king of a rainy country appears in the opening line and gains depth through later characterization. Because all the images in the poem are inextricably linked to that symbol, Carter’s allusion to it encompasses also those other images as well as the poem’s mood. Despite certain divergences from the French original Robert Lowell’s translation of “Spleen (I’m like the king...)” captures the mood and the relationships between the images.

I’m like the king of a rain-country, rich  
 but sterile, young but with an old wolf’s itch,  
 one who escapes his tutor’s monologues,  
 and kills the day in boredom with his dogs;  
 nothing cheers him, darts, tennis, falconry,  
 his people dying by the balcony;  
 the bawdry of the pet hermaphrodite  
 no longer gets him through a single night;  
 his bed of fleur-de-lys becomes a tomb;  
 even the ladies of the court, for whom  
 all kings are beautiful, cannot put on  
 shameful enough dresses for this skeleton;  
 the scholar who makes his gold cannot invent  
 washes to cleanse the poisoned element;  
 even in baths of blood, Rome’s legacy,  
 our tyrants’ solace in senility,  
 he cannot warm up his shot corpse, whose food  
 is syrup-green Lethan ooze, not blood.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> N. WARD JOUVE. “Mother Is a Figure of Speech...” In: *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*. London 2001, p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> S. GAMBLE. *The Fiction of Angela Carter*. Basingstoke 2001, p. 90.

<sup>17</sup> Translation by Robert Lowell. All English translations of Baudelaire’s poems are taken from <http://fleursdumal.org>

The original mode of presentation is preserved with the opening line, which suggests nothing but the conventional image of royalty. Yet its concomitant attributes, power and wealth, are unexpectedly set against weakness and weariness. Although the monarch is young and rich, he is unable to make proper use of these assets as he is taken over by a mysterious force coming from within, a tragic flaw of sorts. The first twelve lines illustrate a descent from appearance and the expectations it evokes to what lies beneath it. There is a tension between surface and depth, an incongruity in the image. The seemingly rich and strong ruler is revealed to be a “young skeleton”, drained of all his strength. The alchemist or scholar, who is said to be able to turn lead into gold, fails to extract “the poisoned element” and give the king a sense of wholeness. The “slow waters of Lethe” running in the king’s veins are a metaphor of the overpowering spleen embracing the central symbol along with the other images. The river of Lethe is the river of oblivion in Hades, the ultimate border between life and death. The king is therefore on the verge of passing into oblivion, an irrevocable immersion in the state of spleen. Since this process of dissolution entails obliteration of meaning, the incongruity of the central image cannot be cured and thus neither the ruler nor his country can escape the decay.

Once the reader is acquainted with Baudelaire’s “Spleen”, he/she is able to identify a range of correspondences between the poem and the characters in *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve*. A mood of menace and ennui pervades the novelistic scenes in which Jewel and Zero are described as kings of a rainy country. The opposition between the grandeur of the roles ascribed to them and their actual potential resembles the incongruous poetic image of the king. In *Heroes and Villains* Donally speaks of Jewel, the young leader of the Barbarians, in an ambiguous manner, with both tenderness and derision.

He turned his head towards his tutor with a faint chink of jewellery and still no expression on his face; Donally put out his long, white, tender hand again and stroked Jewel’s cheek.

‘What are you thinking of, now?’

‘Regicide,’ the other answered.

‘Don’t let’s exaggerate,’ chided Donally mildly. To Marianne, he said: ‘Look at him, he’s the Duke of Little Egypt, he’s the king of a rainy country, he’s inherited the earth.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 72.

On the one hand, Donally ascribes great potential to Jewel, calling him inheritor of the earth. On the other hand, however, the mention of regicide suggests that both men acknowledge Donally's superiority over his disciple. The ability to make gold from lead becomes in the novel a power to turn the young disciple into the "Messiah of the Yahoos"<sup>19</sup>. Jewellery, feathers and war paint enhance his physical beauty and create an impression of wealth and power. To Marianne, Jewel appears to be "a curiously shaped, attractive stone"<sup>20</sup>. This air of distinct artificiality about him is encapsulated in his name and additionally deepened by the emptiness of his gaze: "His eyes were such a blank, inexpressive brown the colour might have been painted on the backs of the irises"<sup>21</sup>. The opaqueness of his appearance gives way in the course of the narrative as Marianne manages to peek beyond the surface, noticing "a coloured structure (...) [which], the coat opened, might reveal only the lining of its own back, no body inside"<sup>22</sup>. Eventually, Jewel becomes the Baudelairean young skeleton: "'It's almost morning,' he said and, kneeling before the fire, bent forward to dry his tangled hair, hiding a face which Marianne's swollen eyes saw for one moment entirely blasted of life and pared to the appalling integrity of bare bone"<sup>23</sup>. Merely a puppet in the hands of Donally, Jewel has a vacuous interior that cannot meet the demands of his tribesmen deluded by the allure of his magnificent surface. Consequently, when he rises against his tutor, he is doomed to fail.

Zero, the poet from *The Passion of New Eve*, is a different type of character and is much less central to the plot than Jewel in *Heroes and Villains*. His boastful self-characterization is set against Eve/Evelyn's description of him as the king of a rainy country:

My life as the wife of Zero! Boredom, pain, a state of siege.

'I am Zero,' he said in a rare burst of speech, after he'd been eyeing the bust of Nietzsche one night for some hours. "The lowest point; vanishing point; nullity. I am the freezing point in centigrade and my wives experience the flame of my frigidity as passion.'

<sup>19</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 105.

<sup>23</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 149.

But I'd have said he was the king of a rainy country, powerful yet impotent, since his power depended on his dependants. And impotent he certainly was.<sup>24</sup>

From Eve/Evelyn's detached perspective Zero is little more than a cruel caricature of the decadent artist. The submission of his wives, about which Zero talks in poetic terms as if it were a mystical experience, is the outcome of his sadistic practices. Mutilated by their master, deprived of cutlery, shoes and soap, acting as servants for his herd of swine, the women answer with unconditional love. As Eve/Evelyn notes after the arrival on Zero's farm: "Their seven faces had the unused and blinded look of nuns, all postulants in the church of Zero"<sup>25</sup>. Eve/Evelyn is immune to the power of Zero's rhetoric and his obscene rituals. S/he is able to recognize that the women's blind trust alone created his power, just as what they earned as prostitutes created his wealth. Their dedication echoes the wilful submission of the ladies of the court from "Spleen". The poet deems himself to be his own creation, yet the falsity of this claim is unveiled by Eve/Evelyn. Zero's quest to slay the legendary femme fatale, Tristessa, turns out to be his own destruction. His name signifies vacuity rather than any mystical quality, because in spite of his claims to power and originality, he builds his self-image out of conventional concepts of maleness. By the same token, the ideal embodied by Tristessa and New Eve's physical beauty reflect masculine conceptions of the woman<sup>26</sup>. Unwittingly, Zero is confined to the same sphere of ideas as the novel's chief mythographer, Mother, just as Jewel is enclosed within Donally's mythopoeia.

Donally and Mother are interested in shaping reality through myth. Their desire to conjure a new order out of the debris of past beliefs makes them evocative of Baudelaire's *savant*<sup>27</sup> in his pursuit of alchemical gold. Although they draw on the authority of the Bible and ancient mother-goddess cults, their myths are man-made constructs right through. The associations with powerful narratives of the past are there to mask this fact and give plausibility to the artificial creation, as, in the words of Roland Barthes, "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they were once made"<sup>28</sup>. The mythographers' actions are driven

<sup>24</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 102.

<sup>25</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 87.

<sup>26</sup> A. DAY. *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*. Manchester 1998, pp. 116-117.

<sup>27</sup> Scholar or alchemist.

<sup>28</sup> R. BARTHES. *Mythologies*, p. 142.

by the belief that “[m]yth is more instructive than history”<sup>29</sup> under the pretence that it is timeless and universal. When talking to Marianne about her deceased father, Donally complains: “He didn’t have to create a power structure and fortify it by any means at his disposal. He was sustained by ritual and tradition; both of which I must invent”<sup>30</sup>. Mother, on the other hand, sees in a myth-inspired matriarchal revolt a means of overcoming the world’s decay. Having transformed her body into an emblem of monstrous, chthonic fertility, she means to depose Father Time and take his place<sup>31</sup>. The New Eve, a man surgically changed into a woman and impregnated with his own sperm, is to symbolize her power. Of Donally, Aidan Day writes: “When Jewel and Donally fall out, he momentarily appears as a kind of God the Father towering over Jewel and Marianne as an Adam and Eve”<sup>32</sup>. The tattoos of snakes on the tribe members’ bodies, along with Donally’s *opus magnum* – a fresco of Adam, Eve and the snake covering Jewel’s back – serve as artefacts of Donally’s myth. Baudelaire’s *savant* is dramatized in Carter’s narratives as are the other figures from “Spleen”: the king of a rainy country, the subservient ladies of the court on whom Zero’s harem is modelled and the “people dying by the balcony” echoed by the Barbarian tribe in *Heroes and Villains*.

“Spleen” serves as a frame of reference for the plots of the novels. Nevertheless, it is a frame of limited scope, describing characters and relationships as they are encountered by the protagonists, Marianne and Eve/Evelyn. The principal characters transcend the poetic frame just as they deny inscription into any conventional role. Rejected by the tribe, Marianne remains assimilated, a stranger and observer. Likewise, after his transformation into the New Eve, Evelyn is suspended between femininity and masculinity. In Zero’s harem, Eve/Evelyn plays the role of a woman without conviction, all the time watching Zero and discovering in the tyrant’s actions to be an exaggerated reflection of his own past misdeeds against women.

The two characters seek to escape from all that stifles them, yet they are either tracked down by their oppressors or find themselves in a new kind of confinement. From the Professors’ stronghold Marianne flees to the Barbarians, and when she tries to leave the tribe, Jewel brings her back. Eve-

<sup>29</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> A. DAY. *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, p. 53.



lyn's retreat from New York into the desert leads him to Mother's laboratory and then to Zero's farm. Successive adventures bring Eve/Evelyn back to the desert and to another encounter with his/her re-maker, Mother. As opposed to the other characters, so impassive and fixed in their assigned roles that they could be treated as almost directly transferred from the poem, Marianne's and Eve/Evelyn's failure to adjust makes them truly novelistic heroes in the light of Bakhtin's theory of the novel. Their maladjustment to the narrative world is the condition of the plots' development beyond mere repetition and elaboration of poetic images from Baudelaire's "Spleen". It is through Marianne and Eve/Evelyn that the dialogue between the poem and the novels takes place. They are the only characters capable of recognizing the poetic frame. Eve/Evelyn does so by naming Zero the king of a rainy country. In the case of Marianne, the fear she feels hearing Donally's words may suggest that the allusion is yet another piece of knowledge the girl shared with the fugitive Professor. The protagonists' insight gives them the privilege of questioning and deriding. Not deluded by the rich facade of the king of a rainy country, they ridicule him. Thus despite being immersed in the sectarian cult of Zero whilst on his farm, Eve/Evelyn sees him only as a "one-eyed, one-legged monomaniac"<sup>33</sup>, insane with his obsession so that "he no longer needed news of the world, since he manufactured it himself to his own designs"<sup>34</sup>. Marianne speaks her mind openly, calling Jewel "a complete anachronism", a "pun in time"<sup>35</sup>, trying to impress on him the grotesqueness of the myth by which he and his self-contained community live. Yet she sees the Professors' endeavours as equally vacuous and based upon false myths. It appears to her to be a pointless quest for knowledge lost with the demise of the old world, knowledge inapplicable to the reality after the disaster. Driven by ennui, Marianne joined the Barbarians, yet she discovered that life among them was in no way more authentic than what she had left behind. Likewise, Evelyn's philandering in the times before his encounter with Mother was a means of alleviating the dreary emptiness of his existence. Having exploited that possibility, Evelyn sought a different source of consolation which ultimately led him to the desert. Evelyn's belief that in the desert he has found "a landscape that matches the landscape of [his]

<sup>33</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 80.

heart”<sup>36</sup> is quickly dispersed by the appearance of Mother’s soldiers, who take him to Beulah where his bodily transformation into a woman takes place.

Through the experience of weariness with the world Marianne’s and Eve/Evelyn’s adventures gain a different dimension. Not only do they oppose inscription within a frame or convention, but they also exemplify Baudelaire’s dichotomy of spleen and ideal. The mood of spleen, ascribed in the poem to the king of a rainy country, appears to be transposed to the protagonists in Carter’s novels. Spleen assumes in them the form of an impulse toward movement and change<sup>37</sup> rather than overpowering decrepitude. In accordance with Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, reformulation of this kind is an important facet of the dialogue of genres within a text. The unity of the poem, which belongs to the “completed genres”<sup>38</sup>, must therefore necessarily be broken in the dialogue with the dynamic novel.

In their pursuit of transcendence, Carter’s protagonists are threatened by absorption into made myths. In Beulah, Mother’s desert headquarters, the myth of the new Eve is not made flesh in its entirety because of Eve/Evelyn’s flight. Enclosed in a body strange to him, the protagonist is nevertheless untouched by Mother’s ideology. Only when Zero decides to perform a grotesque wedding ceremony with Eve/Evelyn and Tristessa as bride and groom, does the hero/heroine feel drawn into the mythic scheme, as the actress herself is an incarnation of the tantalizing myth of the *femme fatale*. The mode of femininity represented by Tristessa served as a source of inspiration for the mythographer in Beulah. The actress’s tragic charm was also what Evelyn sought in his successive lovers and what mesmerized Zero into believing that Tristessa was the cause of his sterility. Convinced that Tristessa’s death will cure him, Zero orchestrates a macabre wedding as an introduction to a ritual killing of the movie star. With the actress revealed to be a transsexual, the confusion of genders and roles is amplified, undermining Eve/Evelyn’s ability to distinguish real events from legend and the self from the masks in which it is enveloped.

(...) [A]n entire audience composed of Zero applauded the transformation that an endless sequence of reflections showed me was a double drag. This young buck, this Baudelairean dandy so elegant and trim in his evening clothes – it seemed, at first glance, I had become my old self again in the inverted world of

<sup>36</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 41.

<sup>37</sup> J. CASSOU et al. *Encyklopedia symbolizmu* p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> M. BAKHTIN. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, pp. 4-5.

the mirrors. (...) I only mimicked what I had been; I did not become it. But I understood immediately that Zero intended to close the performance with a marriage, the formal conclusion of pastorals. (...) You and I, who inhabited false shapes, who appeared to one another doubly masked, like an ultimate mystification, were unknown to ourselves. Circumstances had forced us both out of the selves into which we had been born and now we were no longer human – the false universals of myth transformed us, now we cast longer shadows than a man does, we were beings composed of echoes.<sup>39</sup>

The ritual triggers in Eve/Evelyn a realization that myth understood as an invented frame subsuming people and facts is ubiquitous. In order to become the new Eve, Evelyn would have to wilfully obliterate himself, which is a loss he cannot accept. The grotesque muddle of Mother's speeches<sup>40</sup> as well as Zero's and Tristessa's insanity exhibit to Eve/Evelyn the danger of ultimate reduction through myth.

In a similar vein, the wedding service in *Heroes and Villains*, performed by Donally and composed of random elements of forgotten religious rituals, frightens Marianne and Jewel:

[Marianne] was prepared for the unexpected; even so, the bizarre phenomenon of Donally took her by surprise. (...) Jewel had on a stiff coat of scarlet interwoven with gold thread, perhaps once a bishop's possession; he was as strangely magnificent as an Antideluvian king or a pre-Adamite sultan. (...) He was like a work of art, as if created, not begotten, a fantastic dandy of the void whose true nature had been entirely subsumed to the alien and terrible beauty of a rhetorical gesture. His appearance was abstracted from his body, and he was wilfully reduced to sign language. He had become the sign of an idea of a hero; and she herself had become forced to impersonate the sign of a memory of a bride. (...) He caught sight of her face at a new angle, half in shadows; the opaque brown discs of his eyes opened up and, for the first time, transmitted a message to her, a sudden and horrified flash of recognition.<sup>41</sup>

The heroes find themselves in the power of the strange decor and the solemn formulas uttered by Donally. For the mythographer, the ceremony is a means of consolidating his authority over the tribe. Decrepit ornaments, reminiscent of remote cultures and eras, mesmerize the audience, turning the scene into a

<sup>39</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. DAY. *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, p. 115.

<sup>41</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, pp. 101-102.

surreal moving picture. The decadent mood pervading both wedding scenes, along with the figure of the Baudelairean dandy mentioned in both of them, bring to mind the poetic frame in which all the myth-coinage in the novels is inscribed. Moreover, the heavily poeticized language of the descriptions recalls Baudelaire's style. In the process of dialogization, the novelistic and the poetic discourses mingle so that the poem ceases to exist as a closed entity but becomes embedded in the novel, contributing to the diversity of its modes of expression. The potential transformation of the novelistic heroes into new Adam and new Eve becomes enshrouded in spleen, its hopeless artificiality exposed. Sadness and doubt eat away at the mythic scheme. The newly-weds are turned into symbols in the hands of Donally, yet, unlike the spectators, they are conscious of their predicament. Recognition signifies the end of the mystification in spite of its momentary triumph, as subsequent events in both novels show.

The death of the weak king of a rainy country, prefigured by the poetic frame of "Spleen", is tied to the ultimate defeat of the mythographer. The novels differ in the choice of resolutions, however. The plot of *The Passion of New Eve* progresses towards the ultimate unravelling of myths and concepts. Zero dies shortly after the ritual, in the ruins of Tristessa's revolving glass castle. Afterwards, Eve/Evelyn's journeys bring him/her back to Mother only to find that the self-proclaimed mother goddess has become a tired old lady spending her last days by the sea. The last meeting of the mythographer and her creation brings no further myth-making. Sailing out to sea in a boat stolen from Mother, Eve/Evelyn cuts him/herself off from all manner of mystifications. The last sentence in the novel: "Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth"<sup>42</sup> explains nothing. It is a mysterious incantation uttered by the protagonist moving away from a reality permeated with spleen towards an indefinite, unnamed destination.

Unlike *The Passion of New Eve*, *Heroes and Villains* does not end with an unequivocal condemnation of mythic schemes. Jewel banishes Donally from the tribe, choosing to rule on his own with the advantage of the legend his mentor had built around him. Yet his death in combat soon thereafter reveals his real weakness. For Marianne, however, this does not render mystifications obsolete, but suggests that Jewel was not able to fulfil his role. Upon hearing about his demise, the girl decides: "I'll be the tiger lady and rule

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<sup>42</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 191.

[over Barbarians] with a rod of iron”<sup>43</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that the last word in the story belongs not to Marianne, but to Donally’s son, who brings the message of Jewel’s death. “‘No more,’ he said and relapsed into silence”<sup>44</sup>, is the abrupt conclusion of *Heroes and Villains*. The boy has seen the machinery of myth at work. To him it seems little more than “tortures, mutilations and displays of magic”<sup>45</sup>, as one of the characters sums up Donally’s actions earlier in the story. The Professor’s son witnesses both his father’s and Jewel’s downfall in all their terrible tangibility, learning how history and fact get the better of mystification. He delivers no specific warning or moral lesson. This notwithstanding, his brief statement closes the narrative, allowing the story to end in a tone of despair. What persists after the dissolution of the frame of the story is once again sadness and a hint at a potential *ailleurs* beyond the order induced by myth.

This kind of reading of the two novels seems to suggest a circularity of sorts: the mood of ennui, which initially triggered the protagonists’ endeavours, cannot be overcome and pervades the endings as well. The fixity is only apparent, however. Concepts and their meanings fluctuate in the course of the stories, as the author “severs the cords between words and things, words and beliefs, images and power”<sup>46</sup>. The prose texts’ interaction with Baudelaire’s “Spleen” opens up the poem. The mood is freed from the imagery and character to which it was originally ascribed. The elements begin to function as if independently of each other. In the novels, the poetic images provide a frame of reference for the novelistic heroes and the relationships among them and to some extent also inform the plot. This frame is linked with the mythic schemes depicted in the novels. The ordering of reality such frames provide is portrayed as mere mystification. Its aim is to distort reality with its chaos and diversity so that it may be subordinated by the ideology behind the myth: “[Carter’s] writing, its antics and self-deflating rhetoric, exposes, unpicks the fabrication process: never promotes the illusion”<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, Carter’s speculative works may be read as stories of transition from the tyrannical order of mystification to the freedom of chaotic reality. The protagonists, Eve/Evelyn and Marianne, journey from a dull life organized by rules and legends through mythic transformations towards an

<sup>43</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 212.

<sup>44</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 214.

<sup>45</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> N. WARD JOUVE. “Mother Is a Figure of Speech...”, p. 155.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 148.

undefined *ailleurs*. Initially, the relationships between the heroes who have counterparts in the characters described in “Spleen” are easily related to the poetic frame. Yet the frame is broken by the dynamics of dialogue between the texts. The formidable, lasting mood of spleen, a concomitant of disillusionment with masquerades and artificial orders, signifies both the inevitable immersion in chaos and a potential for discovering in it the unnameable “Idea” no mystification can offer.

#### SPLEEN AND THE APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPE

The heroes’ passage through mystification in Carter’s dystopias is set against the background of a decaying world. Enlivened by the author’s use of poeticized language and described with great attention to detail, the setting is a significant element of the stories. Jerzy Kamionowski stresses its metaphorical character, proposing to treat Carter’s “presented worlds as *virtual realities* which do not attempt to reflect the so-called ‘objective reality’ of the given historical moment (...), but congeal into concrete shapes from the debris of cultural reality; shapes which remain potential, simulatory and ontologically unstable”<sup>48</sup>. The “debris of cultural reality” is made up of scattered symbols and allusions to works of literature. Among the elements out of which Carter weaves the descriptions of decaying realities, allusions and borrowings from Baudelaire’s poetry have a special significance. The aesthetics of fading beauty<sup>49</sup> developed by Baudelaire, his decadent attitude towards the intricacies of human existence and the intimations of a downfall awaiting civilization in his verse<sup>50</sup> make his work a crucial point of reference. Whereas in “Spleen (I’m like the king of a rainy country...)” the emotion of spleen is assigned to the figure of the king, other poems in the sequence present it as a psychic property transposed on a landscape or the process of dilapidation affecting objects such as forgotten love letters, withered flowers and the fading colours of ancient paintings. Carter also uses these techniques in her descriptions of setting, emphasizing the correspondences between places and objects and the characters’ states of mind.

<sup>48</sup> J. KAMIONOWSKI. *New Wine in Old Bottles: Angela Carter’s Fiction* p. 55.

<sup>49</sup> H. R. JAUSS. *Proces literacki modernizmu od Rousseau do Adorna* p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> J. CULLER. *Nowoczesna liryka: ciągłość gatunku a praktyka krytyczna*. In: *Odkrywanie modernizmu: przekłady i komentarze*. Kraków 2004 p. 232.

In *The Passion of New Eve* the presentation of New York enclosing around Evelyn like a cage bears resemblance to the gloomy landscape imprisoning the speaker of “Spleen (When the sky low and heavy...)”.

When the low, heavy sky weighs like a lid  
 On the groaning spirit, victim of long ennui,  
 And from the all-encircling horizon  
 Spreads over us a day gloomier than the night<sup>51</sup>

The city’s darkness echoes Evelyn’s despair and contributes to his isolation. The hero identifies with the city, seeing it both as a source and as a reflection of his inner morbidity. Kamionowski observes: “[t]he most noticeable feature of Carter’s New York is lack of light and an overpowering smell of decay”<sup>52</sup>. Just like the speaker of Baudelaire’s poem, Evelyn finds himself in a rotting, dissolving confinement which steadily takes control of him:

(...) a finite and succinct city where the ghosts who haunt the cities of Europe could have found no cobweb corners to roost in. But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world.<sup>53</sup>

Even background characters are burdened with fatal sadness: “nothing could alleviate his ennui”<sup>54</sup>, reads a short description of a guard patrolling the city streets. As the awareness of the fall sets in, reality is not only burdened by sadness and decadence, but it reverts to chaos which “embraces all opposing forms in a state of undifferentiated dissolution”<sup>55</sup>. Spleen marks the beginning of the process of decomposition of reality into meaningless elements.

Whereas in *The Passion of New Eve* Evelyn only assumes that a new “entropic order of disorder”<sup>56</sup> is on its way, the fictional world of *Heroes and Villains* is already a world suffering from an irrevocable loss of meaning. It is a realm of the indescribable, where the objects labelled by old names either exist no longer or have ceased to fit their definitions:

<sup>51</sup> Translation by William Aggeler

<sup>52</sup> J. KAMIONOWSKI. *New Wine in Old Bottles: Angela Carter’s Fiction*, p. 86.

<sup>53</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 15.

(...) the dictionaries contained innumerable incomprehensible words [Marianne] could only define through their use in (...) other books, for these words had ceased to describe facts and now stood only for ideas or memories.<sup>57</sup>

Scientific tracts are written never to be read, old books are kept unopened as good luck charms and souvenirs of the incomprehensible past. Even the sign of the cross is passed down from one generation to the next only as superstition, its true meaning so mind-boggling as to be considered a “piece of useless information”<sup>58</sup>. The derelict houses which the Barbarians occupy when roaming the woods are full of mementoes of earlier inhabitants. These are ignored by the nomads who use the dwellings according to their needs and burn them down before setting off. Even so, the mystery of lost history and culture weighs upon the Professors and the Barbarians through ancient objects and rituals, which evoke feelings of excitement and fear. Memories and ancient objects have a similarly troubling impact on the speaker of *Baudelaire’s* “Spleen (I have more memories...)”. Tormented by the images of things long gone, the speaker feels doomed to the oblivion that has become their fate:

I have more memories than if I’d lived a thousand years.  
 A heavy chest of drawers cluttered with balance-sheets,  
 Processes, love-letters, verses, ballads,  
 And heavy locks of hair enveloped in receipts,  
 Hides fewer secrets than my gloomy brain.<sup>59</sup>

The recollection of things which have lost their worth in time brings about ennui. The power of time over matter buries all hope of permanence. Only spleen “becomes as large as immortality”<sup>60</sup>.

Not surprisingly then, in Carter’s depiction the clock is the most powerful symbol of the past. The way it orders time is felt to be distinctly artificial and incompatible with the apocalyptic reality. The clocks in *Heroes and Villains* are either dead, like a wristwatch – described as “a little corpse of

<sup>57</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p.10.

<sup>58</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 209.

<sup>59</sup> Translation by William Aggeler.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*



time” – worn by a Barbarian girl for decoration<sup>61</sup>, or they make time freeze through segmentation<sup>62</sup>. Even when she is among the Barbarians, who do not use clocks to measure time, Marianne is haunted by their menacing force. The timepiece in *Heroes and Villains* acquires the status of a sinister deity as described by Baudelaire in "The Clock": “Terrible Clock! God without mercy; mighty Power!”<sup>63</sup>. The rejection of its hegemony entails an immersion in chaos – the day becomes “a featureless block of action and night of oblivion”<sup>64</sup>. With the failure of mythic schemes the strange charm evaporates, turning the clock into a harmless, dilapidated object.

In *The Passion of New Eve* it is not the clock but the albatross, another important symbol in Baudelaire’s poetry, which acts as a harbinger of chaos. The bird’s sudden appearance in the middle of the desert is a sign that the laws of old logic have been suspended. Evelyn’s deliberation of the bird echoes Baudelaire’s verse:

But what gale could have blown it so far from the ocean to a death in the dry navel of the desert and who shot it down, here, where nobody was, to leave it dying on a roadside? How ugly and pathetic the bird is, now it has been forced to come to terms with the gravity that this glider, this high-diver, this acrobat upon the unstable trapeze of the heavens had spent its life defying.<sup>65</sup>

Although in the fragment Carter alludes to Baudelaire’s “The Albatross” explicitly, the bird in her rendition does not symbolize the poet. It is a figure of incongruity and strangeness characterizing the dissolving reality. Moreover, the frail body of the albatross reflects the impermanence of human concepts. The actress Tristessa, when revealed to be a man performing the role of an icon of femininity, becomes “the veritable, Baudelairean albatross”<sup>66</sup>, adrift and forlorn. Having become the living incarnation of the femme fatale, Tristessa is not able to survive without the myth. The demystification of Tristessa induces Eve/Evelyn to embrace his/her undefined, confused self as it is, not modifying it to suit any model of gender. Therefore, returning to Mother, the protagonist does not consent to the role of the new Eve.

<sup>61</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>62</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 57.

<sup>63</sup> Translation by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

<sup>64</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 147.

Mother's beach refuge is only a stop on Eve/Evelyn's journey into the unknown.

Since Donally's mythic scheme falls through just like Mother's, neither of the two novels allows the new Adam and Eve to be born. Baudelaire's conception of a new Adam created "against nature" so as to preclude the original sin<sup>67</sup> finds no reflection in Carter's fiction. The writer's scepticism of made myths is evident in her insistence on connecting designs to intentions and the ideologies behind them. The myths concocted by Donally and Mother serve as vehicles for the exposure of all manner of orders organizing human existence in compliance with the view that "[p]ostmodern contradictory art installs (...) order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning"<sup>68</sup>. Mystifications meant to order reality are not only common but they all lead to a dead end. The indescribable aspect of reality always breaks through the illusion seeking manifestation. Spleen, the sadness and boredom with the deadening order imposed on reality, is an impulse towards existence beyond mystification. Carter investigates the possibility of ridding the world of illusions. Therefore, the Adamic situation, as she presents it, is the moment before the naming and mastering of reality. As the spell of the clock is broken, undifferentiation begins. Things lose the names bestowed on them by humans, time moves backwards unwinding the layers of ascribed meanings. *Heroes and Villains* offers a poeticized description of the process:

Before them and around them were all wonders of the seashore, to which Marianne could scarcely put a single name, though everything had once been scrupulously named. The fans, fronds, ribbons, wreaths, garlands and lashes of weed had once been divided into their separate families, wracks, tangles, dulses, etc. (...) Losing their names, these things underwent a process of uncreation and reverted to chaos, existing only to themselves in an unstructured world where they were not formally acknowledged, becoming an ever-widening margin of undifferentiated and nameless matter surrounding the outposts of man, who no longer made himself familiar with these things or rendered them authentic in his experience by the gift of naming.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>67</sup> H. R. JAUSS. *Proces literacki modernizmu od Rousseau do Adorna*, p. 47.

<sup>68</sup> L. HUTCHEON. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York 1988, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> *Heroes and Villains*, pp. 193-194.

Marianne's admiration is not tied to any kind of analysis of the view. Since she can hardly attach names to the phenomena before her eyes, she receives them as elements of primordial amorphous matter. She observes the process of uncreation from a remote perspective, whereas Eve/Evelyn is absorbed into it. The realization of the demise of orders and mystifications is worded by the protagonist upon entering the cave through which he/she must pass in order to meet Mother: "The rocks between which I am pressed as between pages of a gigantic book seem to me to be composed of silence; I am pressed between the leaves of a book of silence. This book has been emphatically closed"<sup>70</sup>. Eve/Evelyn's passage through the cave is a symbolic purgation of mystification. S/he is absorbed by the walls of the cave. The reversal of time implies the destruction of form as the boundaries between the elements of reality, delineated by language, are blotted away. Freed from man-made classifications, things grow unintelligible.

At this point Carter suspends the narratives. The two passages from *Heroes and Villains* and *The Passion of New Eve* are the last glimpses of the novels' fictional worlds. The climax of undifferentiation remains beyond description, it is the death of language since there is nothing more for it to describe and differentiate between. The writer leaves open the question whether the climax even comes about. Since both the acceptance of myth and absolute demystification lead to inertia, the struggle against form, order and ascribed meaning may well be said to be the condition of existence. The movement from spleen towards the evasive *ailleurs* is never completed as this would mean complete closure and resolution of the plot. Condemning myths, Carter nevertheless realizes that they are necessary for story-making. Narrative relies on them as repositories of forms and order. Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* also concludes with a substantiation of the inevitability of myth-coinage:

The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> *The Passion of New Eve*, p. 180.

<sup>71</sup> R. BARTHES. *Mythologies*, p. 159.

Barthes writes about alienation, while Carter's polemic with mystification is related to the concept of spleen. Derived from Baudelaire's poetry, the idea acquires new connotations in Carter's fiction since, in the light of Bakhtin's theory, "[n]othing 'recurs'; the same word over again might accumulate, re-inforce, perhaps parody what came before it, but it cannot be the same word if it is in a different place"<sup>72</sup>. The idea is reinterpreted in the new context. It grows out of the decadent view of the world but as a feature of the apocalyptic reality in Carter's speculative novels, spleen embraces several aspects. It is not only a feeling of confinement but also a premonition of decay as well as a fading memory of the past. The mood of spleen furthermore binds the incommensurable elements of the fictional worlds, endowing them with an almost poetic melancholy through the allusions to Baudelaire's verse.

#### CARTER'S *SPLEEN*

Spleen as we encounter it in *The Passion of New Eve* and *Heroes and Villains*, is Carter's invention – derived from Baudelaire but coined anew in the dialogue between the texts. Carter's conception of spleen is closely connected to the disruption of artificial orders. Spleen acts as the guiding impulse for Carter's protagonists, as a symbol of inescapable decay as well as the alluring force of the past sinking into oblivion. Discarding their roles in the mythic schemes, Carter's protagonists not only break the illusory order of mystification but also transcend the frame of reference provided by Baudelaire's verse. The mood of menace and sadness enveloping their exploits and escapes is reinforced by quotations and allusions to the "Spleen" poems recurring in the descriptions of characters and the fictional world. The textual games do not merely accompany the plot but enter into it as even minute elements of the setting or background characters evoke associations with decadent poetry. The dialogue between Carter's and Baudelaire's texts frees the mood from the poetic imagery. Spleen becomes the ineluctable condition of reality. It stands for the futility and inevitability of myth-making, expressing at the same time a desire for freedom and a yearning for order.

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<sup>72</sup> C. EMERSON. "Editor's Preface". In: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis 2003, p. xxxv.

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## GRY TEKSTUALNE Z BAUDELAIREM

W ANGELI CARTER *HEROES AND VILLAINS* I *THE PASSION OF NEW EVE*

## Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest dialogowi powieści Angeli Carter z poezją Baudelaire'a. Odniesienia do twórczości Baudelaire'a są rozproszone w tekstach Carter, fragmenty jego wierszy pojawiają się u niej w formie prozatorskiej. Obrazy z wiersza „Spleen (Jestem jak król...)” służą Carter jako punkt odniesienia dla związków między bohaterami jej powieści, natomiast Baudelaire'a poetyckie przedstawienie przedmiotów i krajobrazów znajduje u odbicie w jej opisach rzeczywistości apokaliptycznej. Co więcej, ton pewnych ustępów z *Heroes and Villains* i *The Passion of New Eve* odzwierciedla charakterystyczny dla poezji dekadencej nastroj smutku i zagrożenia. Umieszczone w nowym kontekście prozy postmodernistycznej, styl, obrazowanie oraz koncepcje rozwinięte przez Baudelaire'a są jednocześnie komentarzem do fikcyjnych światów Carter, jak i przedmiotem reinterpretacji, a nawet parodii. Reinterpretacja poezji Baudelaire'a

splata się u Carter z krytyką koncepcji mitu. Podobnie jak Roland Barthes, Carter postrzega mit jako konstrukt podporządkowujący fakty ideologii. Baudelaire'owski symbol *spleenu* staje się u Carter główną, wszechogarniającą koncepcją podważającą autorytet fałszywego mitu.

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**Słowa kluczowe:** Carter, Baudelaire, Bakhtin, Barthes, mit, intertekstualność.

**Key words:** Carter, Baudelaire, Bakhtin, Barthes, myth, intertextuality.