

The Ravished Reader:
Angela Carter's
Allegory in "Nights at
the Circus"

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The Ravished Reader

Angela Carter's Allegory in *Nights at the Circus*

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Introduction

After Angela Carter's death in 1992, critical attention to her fiction increased considerably. Elaine Jordan reports that "in 1993-94 the British Academy were saying that for every three people who wanted to do a thesis on eighteenth-century writing, there were forty who wanted to write on Angela Carter" ("Her Brilliant Career": 82). Trying to orient myself in this jungle of criticism in relation to my work on *Nights at the Circus*, however, I soon found that it was not such a wilderness after all. Considering the complexity and seemingly polyphonic nature of this novel, the critical work it has generated seems to be surprisingly uniform.

Carter's fiction in general is seen to be theoretically oriented. As Elaine Jordan points out, "there is hardly a theoretical debate of the past twenty years that she does not subject to imaginative exploration." ("Enthralment: Angela Carter's Speculative Fiction": 34). Blurring genre boundaries, Carter's narratives may be read as theories, offered through fiction, of the mechanisms of patriarchal society that govern human thought, feeling and interaction. In *Come Unto these Yellow Sands*, Carter equates the exploration of ideas with the activity of telling stories. To her "narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms" (Lorna Sage. *Angela Carter*: 50). Although, as Sage points out, this statement refers to Carter's radio plays, it is a description applicable also to *Nights at the Circus*.

Along these lines, Angela Carter is generally seen to be (and has, indeed, designated herself) a *demythologiser*.^[1] "I'm basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them", she tells Anna Katsavos in an interview (*The Review of Contemporary Fiction*: 12). Demythologising of the structures of patriarchal society, of which literary structures are an important part, is achieved in her work mainly through self-conscious parody and inversion. A concern with this project serves as a backdrop to most critical discussions of *Nights at the Circus*. In the bibliography of Alison Easton's *Angela Carter*, criticism of Carter's *oeuvre* is systematised into different categories, which I find may also apply specifically to the work done on *Nights at the Circus*. Slightly revised, these headings may read: feminist strategies of (re)writing and reading, intertextualities, formal/generic questions, Freudian psychoanalysis, French feminisms, questions on deconstruction, postmodernism and post-structuralism, gender as performance, carnival, spectacle and power (217-221). At first glance this list hardly seems to indicate uniformity. However, at a closer reading of the critical work done on *Nights at the Circus*, one finds, as indicated above, that these categories are merely different starting points which interconnect at a basic level in being motivated by and geared towards a treatment of Carter's demythologising project.

There is hardly a critical reading of *Nights at the Circus* which does not take into account its demythologising aspirations or its rewriting of and dialogue with other texts. ^[2] Carter states herself in "Notes from the front line" that:

Reading is just as creative an activity as writing, and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode. (37)

This passage has become a standard one in criticism, serving to illustrate succinctly, and in her own words, what Carter is up to in her fiction. It has, indeed, been so often used that when I reluctantly include it here, it is only for the purpose of illustrating that the very frequency of its occurrence may seem to indicate that there has become established a particular consensus for the reading of Carter's texts. Still, I would maintain that the strategies of this community are strategies which are highly encouraged by the text itself, and not purely coincidental or subjective approaches taken as precedent, or strategies arrived at by reference to Carter's non-fictional writings. The relative homogeneity in the critical writing on *Nights at the Circus* is linked to the novel's metafictional character. One may wonder, with Linda Hutcheon, whether "metafiction, in its selfanalytic overttness, [might] be perceived as pre-empting the critic's role as commentator?" (*Narcissistic Narrative*: xii).

The project of demythologising consists, as mentioned, in the unmasking of literary as well as social structures that are seen to govern human relations. These structures are closely linked according to Carter, in that the former contributes to the construction of the latter, and as they are both *fictions* designed to uphold patriarchy. Carter's work is consequently metafictional in an extended sense of the term, her main project being the exploration of both literary strategies and social fictions designed to keep people (especially women) in their place. As the unmasking of these fictions is achieved through inversion and parody, the project is inevitably a vulnerable one, demanding a reader who is able to recognise this play for demythologising to take effect. As Linda Hutcheon states in *The Politics*

of *Postmodernism*, the political project of postmodernism will always have to engage in a struggle with its own inherent ambiguity (4). *Nights at the Circus*, itself an attempt at subversion, may also be read as a text that problematises the conditions of such a practice.

The attention to Carter's activity of demythologising, which is present as an underlying concern in all critical discourse on *Nights at the Circus*, is what produces the uniformity of reception referred to above. Paradoxically, it appears that the novel, which seeks to undermine authoritarian structures, does itself firmly direct the reader's response within a certain framework of reading. Consequently, the metafictional aspect of *Nights at the Circus* seems not only to diffuse its boundaries and leave the text open, but also to close it, by guiding and restricting responses to the text in a particular direction. This, it may be argued, is, to a lesser or greater extent the case in the reading of *any* text. What renders the fact of particular interest in connection with Carter's novel, however, is the apparent tension between this kind of closedness and the insistence on the opposite in the post-modern aesthetic of plurality and open-endedness into which, as will be discussed later, *Nights at the Circus* seems to inscribe itself. Also the emphasis in much criticism put on Fevvers' dependency on Walser, her reader in the allegory, who is referred to as the one who keeps "the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks" (*Nights*: 273), forms a contrast to the manner in which the novel itself seems to work on its reader.

As part of the demythologising project, the metafictional aspect of Carter's novel is important on two levels. *Nights at the Circus* is on the one hand a fiction about cultural fictions (myths, *consolatory nonsenses*[3]), which through a rewriting of other narratives, theoretical as well as non-theoretical ones, emphasises its own intertextuality. On the other hand, it is also a fiction about how fiction and reader interact, that is an *allegory* of reading. [4] *Nights at the Circus* is in other words a fiction about fiction(ing) as well as a fiction about reading.

The metafictional aspect of *Nights at the Circus* in the former sense - rewriting of cultural constructs and other narratives - has, as indicated above, come to be adopted as the standard approach to Carter's fiction. The main emphasis in my reading of Carter's novel, however, will lie on the second kind of metafiction involved in Carter's demythologising project, that is on the novel as an allegory of reading. However, in relation to a work so preoccupied with the effect fictions have upon our lives - the way we construct meanings and identities in interaction with each other - such a discussion will to a certain extent necessarily also be one of the novel as a fiction about fiction(ing). Indeed, as will emerge later, in Carter's allegory the border between reading and writing is not always presented as clear-cut.

In her article on *Nights at the Circus*, Beth A. Boehm raises some interesting issues in relation to the paradoxes of the project of Carter's novel. Through emphasis on the importance of the metafictional aspect (in both its forms) for the way Carter's text reads, she attributes what she calls two "misreadings"[5] of *Nights at the Circus* to the fact that they fail to recognise its metafictional intent and thereby are unable to free themselves from the androcentric reading strategies that are the very ones subject to Carter's subversion. First Boehm performs an analysis of Carolyn See's (mis)reading of Carter's novel, a reading which apparently pays no attention to the metafictional aspects of the text. According to Boehm, See reads the relationship between Walser and Fevvers according to the conventions of the romance novel rather than metafictionally, thus finding that it has little new to offer.

We are not surprised to find, however that when Fevvers loses Walser she droops like the proverbial bird in the gilded cage (...) she even breaks a wing. You can't fly without love: well, that's a laudable sentiment, but not exactly a new one. (7)

As Boehm points out, such a reading, ignoring the metafictional quality of the novel, fails to see that Carter is parodying romance conventions of happy endings, and that what Fevvers needs is "Walser as an authorial reader more than as a romantic lover" (Boehm: 197). Fevvers herself puts it this way: "Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis (...) and not only of my trajectory, alone, but of yours too, Lizzie" (285).

Adam Mars-Jones, on the other hand, finds the novel difficult to read and make sense of because of its fragmented point of view and its anachronistic literary allusions ("are they Fevvers' or Angela Carter's?"). According to Boehm these problems arise because Mars-Jones does not see that Carter often refers to the canon irreverently or ironically, thus questioning the value and legitimacy of such a construction in the first place. Consequently he attempts to read the novel "in such a way that Carter's metafiction will legitimise rather than subvert dominant ideological and literary structures" (198). According to Boehm, a reading of Carter demands recognition of both the feminist and the metafictional aspirations of her novel, which, as argued above, jointly constitute its demythologising project. On the one hand, the readings referred to in the above display the ambiguity of Carter's undertaking, its inherent danger of

being mistaken for affirming what it seeks to subvert. Despite this doubleness, though, there is no doubt a textual intention in the novel. This intention is closely tied to the novel's metafictional quality, which, also through its allegory, paradoxically seems to empower the reader. The latter, however, is not free to do whatever she likes with the text of Carter's novel, as its metafictional aspect seems to guide the reader's response in a certain direction. According to Linda Hutcheon metafiction contests the repression of the role of the textual producer of the last decades. "The romantic 'author', as originating and original source of meaning may well be dead (...) but his position – one of discursive authority – remains" (*Narcissistic Narrative*: xv). It may seem, as will be explored in this thesis, that the metafictionality of *Nights at the Circus*, its demythologising project, closes the text by demanding, or at least encouraging, a certain kind of reading. The text seems to be unable to exist (as meaningful) outside (attention to) its preoccupation with its own process of signification.

Attempting to substantiate this proposition, my discussion will revolve around the relationship between Walser and Fevvers, which, as suggested, may be viewed as an allegory of the one between reader and text. The intention is to trace Walser's development and his relation to Fevvers throughout the text and to see whether Carter's allegory of reading may correspond to the way her own novel reads. Fevvers' relation to Walser and her endeavour to plot her own subjectivity independently of pre-set structures seem to parallel the novel's search for identity/meaning, both in the end being dependent on the interaction with other texts and the reader (of these). Carter's novel is vitally dependent on other texts to achieve an identity and shows a considerable awareness of this fact through its self-conscious metafictionality. Similarly, the subversive Fevvers is dependent on (male) cultural constructs of femininity, and she actively uses these in order to construct herself as the New Woman. Just as the novel as a whole does not work if one disregards its self-consciousness, so is the identity of Fevvers built upon a play on its constructedness. While in "Siberia", she ceases this play, and Lizzie complains to her that, "Since he made himself known to us in Petersburg, you've been acting more and more *like yourself*" (197). "What I mean is that you grow more and more like your publicity" (198). Fevvers starts to fall apart when she disregards her identity as a construction. "Well who *am* I supposed to be like, then, if not *meself*" (198). Her situation when separated from Walser may be regarded as analogous to the one of the novel itself, which seeks to subvert through irony or parody and consequently is dependent on a reader to recognise it as such, so as not to lose its essential doubleness.

Still, the allegory presents Fevvers as a text that has to be understood on its own terms, a text that aims at "hatching" and forming its reader. Similarly, the novel itself is heavily dependent on its metafictionality to achieve its meaning, this trait of the text serving to position its reader, thus directing her response. Just like Fevvers is seen to fall apart in the absence of such a reader, Carter's novel starts to falter when encountering readers that fail to read within the intended framework, as exemplified in the readings of See and Mars-Jones. Paradoxically, it may seem that *Nights at the Circus* - a text which aims at deconstructing patriarchal authority - appears itself, because of its metafictionality, to be a rather authoritarian discourse. This is mirrored in Fevvers' attitude towards Walser, which in the end seems to show close affinities to the way men, from a feminist point of view, is seen to define women, their attempt at fixing female identity and constructing it as other, in order to secure a ground for the constitution of their own identity. As the novel sets out, Walser, the journalist, is intent on fixing and writing Fevvers' identity in a manner that suits his own conceptions of reality. As the novel ends, however, Fevvers has turned the tables, as Walser is re-positioned to a place in language from which she is allowed to shape him.

Being a metafictional text, *Nights at the Circus* has two major foci: the first is on linguistic and narrative constructions, and the second is on the role of the reader in relation to the text. My discussion revolves around these issues, focusing on the role of the reader in the allegory through a reading of the novel in the combined light of narrative theory and theories of reading. In every instance it is Carter's novel and its emphasis on the above themes, that invites the choice of texts from the point of view of which to (re)read the allegory. The first chapter of this thesis establishes the relationship between Fevvers and Walser as an allegory of reading by reference to Wolfgang Iser's theory of the reading process. The argument proceeds to discuss whether the particular narrative status of "London" in relation to the rest of the novel renders the relationship between reader and text one in which the voice of the reader is disfavoured. Chapters 2 and 3 both carry on the exploration of the power relations between reader and text in the allegory. The second chapter does so by considering the activity of reading in relation to Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of play, linking it to Peter Rabinowitz' concept of the different role(s) a reader has to take on in the interaction with a text. In the last chapter I discuss the relationship between reader and text as one of love, relating it to Roland Barthes' simulation of amorous speech in *A Lover's Discourse*.

Reading the allegory of *Nights at the Circus* in the light of narrative theory and theories about reading and readership, opens up for a discussion of the relationship between reader and text also on the material level, still

safely grounded in the structures of the novel itself. My reading, ultimately, attempts not only to explore the relationship between reader and text in the allegory, but also to relate this to the way Carter's novel itself reads. Her demythologising project is an attempt to unmask how fictions (are employed to) assume control over us. It may seem, however, that this is achieved only by letting her own self-conscious fiction take control of the reader. The uniformity in criticism accounted for above may hence be regarded as mirrored in the way Fevvers as text "*imposes* her vision of herself on Walser, revising, rather than dissolving, existing power structures" (Clare Hanson. "'The red dawn (...)': 67).

Although each chapter of this thesis takes one section of Carter's novel as its point of departure, the reader will note that the argument constantly reverts to the same issues, those relating to the disempowerment of the reader in her relationship to the text. This is due to the fact that, in my reading, the novel repeats itself through its three sections. In the course of the novel Fevvers is seen to withstand the attempts of different men to objectify her, while Walser, her reader, seems to lose himself on different levels and occasions.

In the novel's first section, "London", Walser's attempt at fixing Fevvers to paper fails, as she immediately assumes control of her own narrative and consequently the power over her image. During the interview Fevvers tells Walser about her encounter with Rosencreutz, who wanted to defy mortality at the cost of *her* life, and how she narrowly escaped him. This embedded story serves to echo Walser's present and failing attempt to capture Fevvers and, by disclosing her as a hoax, to secure the immortality of professional acknowledgement. Similarly, in "Petersburg" Fevvers only in the last second manages to escape the Grand Duke who symbolically devours her, by drinking glasses of vodka arranged to spell her christened name, Sophia (187). Fevvers does, however, manage to withstand his attempt to objectify her literally by transforming her into a precious miniature to keep in his collection of toys.

Parallel to Fevvers' triumphs, Walser, by contrast, seems to lose his subjectivity. As mentioned, his attempt to fix Fevvers during the interview in "London" is no success. On the contrary, she puts a spell on him with her narratives, and he is caught, it seems, in a time-warp as Big Ben strikes midnight three times. Already quite early in the session he realises that "his quarry [has] him effectively trapped" (9), an image which is echoed in "Petersburg", when, in his new role as clown, he is trapped in the circus ring with a hungry tigress. Walser survives this encounter but injures his right arm, consequently losing his journalistic abilities, and thus a vital part of himself. In "Siberia" Walser's loss of self is made even more explicit, as he loses language altogether. In the train crash he is rendered unconscious by a blow on the head and buried alive in "stored away tablecloths and napkins, some clean, some soiled" (209). This accident echoes, and repeats at a more literal level, the one in "London" when Walser, in an attempt to *avoid* a knock on the head "dislodg[es] a noisy torrent of concealed *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes' nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black, that introduced a powerful note of stale feet"(9). The novel, then, seems to move forward by intensifying repetitions, circling around the same axis.

This spiralling movement is also reflected in the temporal structure of the novel. While the narratives of the novels' first two sections are organised fairly straightforwardly in linear terms, with a narrator in one chapter picking up the story roughly where it was left in the preceding one, "Siberia", in contrast, moves back and forth in both time, space and person. As the two protagonists, Walser and Fevvers are separated after the crash, the narrative itself also splits, moving forward from two different positions, alternately recounting the stories of Walser and Fevvers, which unfold parallel in time. The narrative moves back and forth between these, oscillating between a first person narration and a third person one. One unit of the story begins where the other started, but from a different perspective, thus telling a different, but still the same, story.

While, as argued, critical readings of Carter's novel tend to repeat each other, the present reading is a repetition of itself, exploring different ways of approaching what I find to be the central issues of the novel. My reading, then, is characterised by progression through regression, in a spiralling movement, always in the end reverting to the same point but from slightly different perspectives. Each turn attempts to add to the total understanding of Carter's novel by telling a story that is different, but still the same. This is the paradoxical story of the reader who willingly lets himself be forcibly repositioned, the reader who is (re)written by the text. I see my own reading as renewing itself in potentially endless repetitions, and as such its structure may be read as mirroring that of the novel itself, whose different sections repeat or echo each other, all depicting a reader who, in the face of the text, loses himself to be re-established in the end, i.e. his progression through regression. This is evident at end of the novel as it clearly invokes its own beginning, inviting a rereading of this. When reunited with Fevvers, Walser starts to recapitulate his adventures, starting with his interview in "London", which is where I begin, too.

- [1] “I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I’m in the demythologising business.” (“Notes from the front line”: 38)
- [2] Text is here used in its widest sense, comprising all kinds of cultural products: fiction, theory, film, television, advertisement etc.
- [3] “All the mythic versions of women (...) are consolatory nonsenses: and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway (...) obscuring the real conditions of life.” (Carter: *The Sadeian Woman*: 5)
- [4] Carter considers herself an allegorist: “I do put everything in a novel to be *read* – read the way you are supposed to read *Sir Gawayne and the Green Knight*” (Haffenden: 86). As the allegory of *Nights at the Circus* is one which addresses the relationship between reader and text as well as questions about the nature of fiction, I will be treating this as part of Carter’s metafictional project.
- [5] Carolyn See. “Come on and see the Winged Lady” *The New York Times Book Review* (February 24 1985): 7. Adam Mars-Jones. “From wonders to prodigies” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 28, 1984; 1083.
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Chapter 1

Nights at the Circus is a fiction about fiction(ing) and a fiction about reading, as well as a text which problematises a clear-cut separation of these activities from each other. These issues are addressed through the novel's allegory of the interaction between reader and text, where Walser represents the former and Fevvers the latter.

Fevvers appears to be a text particularly difficult to grasp because of the physical otherness with which her wings equip her. On one occasion the beatings of her wings are described as disturbing the air so much that "Walser's notebook ruffled over and he temporarily lost his place, had to scramble to find it again, almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box" (16). Apart from serving as a foreboding to what will later happen to Walser (losing his place in language, thus also his sense of scepticism), this passage shows how the appearance of Fevvers seems to disturb Walser's rational mind and serve to threaten his journalistic ideal of himself as a reporter of the truth. Fevvers' wings disturb the air as well as Walser's conception of reality. Her taking control of the gaze makes it difficult for Walser to fix her image to paper, as she opens "her great eyes at him, again, with such a swirl that the pages of his notebook rustle[] in the breeze" (48).

The novel starts out with Fevvers addressing the American journalist Walser, who has been admitted to her dressing room to conduct an interview, a session which turns out to be just as much of a show as was Fevvers' appearance at the Alhambra the same night. "Lor' love you, sir!" (7), she begins, then she goes on to account for the circumstances around her birth and her upbringing, fantastic stories, as hard to believe in as her wings. Walser is a sceptical audience and rather confused as to what to believe, still he is intent on revealing the winged woman as a hoax. He is there "ostensibly, to 'puff' her, and if it is humanly possible, to explode her (...) Though not to think the revelation that she is a hoax will finish her on the halls; far from it. If she isn't suspect, where is the controversy?" (11) The ambiguity of her appearance is the very essence and prerequisite of Fevvers' existence, an existence dependent on others questioning its authenticity.

According to Wolfgang Iser's reception-theory, a literary work has two poles, the artistic and the aesthetic. The artistic text is the text created by the author, while the aesthetic aspect of a text is the realisation of the former by the reader, a realisation which in its turn is informed by the different patterns of the text. "The convergence of text and reader brings a literary work into existence", Iser claims ("The reading process": 212). In his argument Iser draws on the hermeneutical insight that acts of interpretation are stimulated by the parts that the reader cannot make fit with her conception of the whole.^[6] Just as the ambiguity of Fevvers' appearance is necessary for her continued existence, "gaps" are necessary in a text to provoke the reader's interest and involvement. "It is only through inevitable omissions that a story will gain its dynamism. Whenever the flow is interrupted the reader has to establish connections, fill in the gaps" (216). To keep the attention of its readers, an author, according to Iser, will never attempt "to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes" (218). The reader's imagination has to be activated in order to involve her and "to realize the intentions of the text" (218).

In the case of Fevvers it is her extra attributes rather than what she lacks that attract attention. Her wings are the parts that Walser cannot make fit into his conception of a coherent whole:

(...) the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs, or, as we would say, the arms, and the skeleton of a wing does indeed show elbows, wrists and fingers, all complete. So if this lovely lady is indeed, as her publicity alleges, a fabulous bird-woman, then she by all the laws of evolution and human reason ought to possess no arms at all, for it's her arms that ought to be her wings! (15)

The manner in which Fevvers works upon Walser seems to be a literalisation of how, according to Iser, a text interacts with its reader: "one detail appears to contradict another, and so simultaneously stimulates and frustrates our desire to 'picture', thus continually causing our imposed 'gestalt' of the text to disintegrate" (220).

Her ambiguity is the essence of Fevvers' identity because it is that which captures and engages the imagination of her audience. "Believe it or not!" she dares Walser (7). After having told him of her very first flight, she appears to be wanting to give him a demonstration of her acquired ability: "Everything appeared to be about to burst and take off. But the loose curls quivering on top of her high-piled chignon already brushed a stray drifting cobweb from the smoke-discoloured ceiling" (42). But as Lizzie points out, there is not enough room for such a show: "You'll 'ave to leave it to 'is imagination" (42).

This episode illustrates Fevvers' conscious play upon her own ambiguity as well as Walser's scepticism, but it also demonstrates that the limits of narrative representation are exactly what engages the reader's imagination, thereby enabling the text's coming into existence. According to Iser, the polysemantic nature of the text and the activity of the reader that attempts to abstract a consistent meaning out of it are opposed factors constituting the dynamics of a text. "The formation of illusions [of coherency], therefore, can never be total, but it is this very incompleteness that in fact gives it its productive value" (20). Fevvers, like the novel she inhabits, is a highly self-conscious text, and she indeed knows how to exploit the ambiguous incoherence of her own image productively, by making it her living.

As the interview sets out, Walser eagerly sits with an open notebook and poised pencil. Wanting to "keep his wits about him" (9) he tries to put away his glass so that Fevvers cannot pour him more champagne. She eventually succeeds in intoxicating him, however, with a combination of champagne and her storytelling. He who set out to puncture the flying hoax with his sharpened pencil and critical journalism, will, as he himself hints, in the end be the prey, effectively trapped by his own quarry (9).

Already after a short while, Walser is carried away by Fevvers' narratives: "Fevvers lassoed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her" (60). Her impact on him is likened to that of a siren's upon a sailor:

Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice (...) Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice made for singing with; it comprised discords, her scale contained twelve tones (...) Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's. (43)

Apart from illustrating the enchanting and seducing effect Fevvers' stories have upon Walser because of their "discords", this paragraph also hints to the power relation the enchantment implies. The above passages also introduce the element of violence in relation to the reading experience, which is an aspect I will return to later.

Fevvers' words are the ones that start the novel, and here, as most often elsewhere, they do not seem to have been triggered by Walser's questions. Walser is trapped, feeling "more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place" (40). The flow of Fevvers' narrative seems to be more dependent on food, drink, the presence of Lizzie and her own will, than on the investigating questions of Walser. In "London" Fevvers is clearly the one with the initiative and the one in control. Walser's questions seem to be generated by Fevvers' narrative rather than the other way around, consequently the section may be seen as reversing conventional gender roles linking the feminine to passivity and the male to activity. This reversal is sensed also by Walser: "It flickered through his mind: Is she really a man?" (35). The flow of the interview is determined solely by Fevvers' mood and initiative:

Now Walser was alone with the giantess. Who fell silent, as she had done the first time Lizzie left them alone together, and turned back to the inverted world of her mirror, in which she stroked an eyebrow as if it were imperative for her peace of mind that she set the hairs in perfect order (51-52).

Once Lizzie leaves, Fevvers turns in on herself and engages in a narcissism that leaves Walser, her audience, no interest or attention. The narrative is not resumed until Lizzie has returned and "the food [has] put fresh heart into the *aeraliste*" (53).

For Walser, the time spent in the dressing room, listening to Fevvers' stories has a magical touch to it. Not only is he faced with incredible "facts", also time seems to stand still as Big Ben strikes midnight three times. When the clock eventually strikes six and the interview with Fevvers is about to end, it is as if a spell is broken. Walser feels as if he, and the whole situation are suddenly plunged back into the real world, a description suggestive of the experience of putting down an engaging novel:

During the less-than-a-blink of time it took the last chime to die there came a vertiginous sensation, as if Walser and his companions and the very dressing room itself were all at once precipitated down a vast chute. It took his breath away. As if the room that had, in some way, without his knowledge, been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been left for a while above the spinning world and was now – dropped back into place. (87)

Having completed the interview, however, Walser still has not managed to make sense of Fevvers. Throughout the text of the novel's first section there are multiple references to Fevvers gradually removing her make-up. This act serves, however, more to emphasise her artifice and constructedness than to unmask her true self to Walser. When the interview comes to an end, Walser is left with no answers and even more questions than he set out with. "Curioser and curioser," he thinks to himself when back at his lodgings (90). His interest is evoked and his conceptions of reality challenged to such an extent that he cannot let Fevvers go. The end of his interview only constitutes the start of his relation to Fevvers, as he decides the same morning to join her and Colonel Kearney's Circus on their tour east.

The interview discussed above, the first meeting between Walser and Fevvers, constitutes a narrative frame which allows Fevvers to tell the story of her own life and of the lives of the other unfortunate women she has known. In a first reading of the novel this meeting, although belonging to the diegetic level[7], appears to be no more than a narrative frame marginal to the main action. Curiously, however, the frame story provided in “London”, seemingly not belonging to the dominant diegesis of this section, turns out in the course of the succeeding sections of the novel to be part of its main story. The world(s) of Fevvers’ narratives constitute(s) the larger part of the text of “London”, and until read in relation to the rest of the novel these metadiegetic[8] stories seem to function as the novel’s dominant level of action. There are references to the actual interviewing situation as Fevvers’ narration goes along, but the metadiegetic rather than the diegetic level is given primacy, a fact which serves metafictional ends by foregrounding the issue of storytelling. And “London” is indeed a narration about narration.

The objective of the following is to consider the development of Walser and his relationship to his own self as well as to Fevvers, and to link these developments to the allegory of reading that the novel offers. The suggested change in the centrality of the different diegetic levels of “London” to the novel’s action as a whole will be of interest in this discussion, as will the question of the identity of the narratorial voice.

Towards the end of the novel, recapitulating his past adventures when waiting for Fevvers to join him in bed, Walser ponders: “All that seemed to happen to me in the third person as though, most of my life, I watched it but did not live it” (294). Comparing this self-insight of Walser’s to the description of him given on one of the novel’s first pages, to the effect that “Walser had not experienced his experience *as* experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched” (10), “London” may actually be taken to be Walser’s own rendering of his first meeting with Fevvers. A rendering of the interview which, true to his experience of it, is presented in the guise of a third-person narration.

Towards the very end of the novel, in an attempt to reconstruct his own self, Walser paraphrases his past adventure as follows:

I am Jack, an American citizen. I joined the circus of Colonel Kearney in order to delight my reading public with accounts of a few nights at the circus and, as a clown, performed before the Tsar of All the Russians, to great applause. (What a story!) I was derailed by brigands in Transbaikalia and lived as a wizard among the natives for a while. (God, what a story!) Let me introduce my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser, who formerly had a successful career on the music-hall stage under the name of – (293-294)

Then the moment of midnight passes. Along with the birth of a new century, a new Walser emerges, as he takes “himself apart and put[s] himself together again” (294), starting the recounting of his experience to himself once more, but this time presented as a third-person narrative:

Jack, ever an adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her. He got himself into scrape upon scrape, danced with a tigress, posed as a roast chicken, finally got himself an apprenticeship in the higher form of the confidence trick, initiated by a wily old pederast who bamboozled him completely. (294)

As mentioned above, Walser at this point states that his adventures seem to have happened to him in the third person, as if he has been an audience to his own life rather than acted in it. He acknowledges that a new Walser has been born, “hatched out of the shell of unknowing” and that he “shall have to start all over again” (294). Thus Walser seems to share with Fevvers an existential compulsion to narrate as a means of self-definition.

Although the larger part of it is spoken by Fevvers, the narrative perspective of “London” is invariably that of Walser. In this section, as opposed to the rest of the novel, the representation of thought through interior monologue is reserved for Walser alone. The narration closely follows his movements mentally as well as physically. The reader is never given access to other characters’ minds in this section, while Walser’s thoughts are rendered directly and seemingly unmediated, identifying him closely with the narrator, or according to Wayne Booth, even replacing him. Booth considers the third person “centers of consciousness” to be a highly important but generally unacknowledged kind of narrator (*The Rhetoric of Fiction*: 153), claiming that “[a]ny sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator” (164).

Gerald Prince distinguishes between three different types of point of view: unrestricted, internal and external. Using these terms one may conclude that the point of view of “London” is *internal* in that “everything is represented strictly in terms of the knowledge, feelings and perceptions of one or several characters” (*Narratology*: 51). Since the information given to the reader in this section never exceeds or differs from what Walser “(could) know or tell”, [9] the point of view is also *fixed*. This argument may be contested with reference to a few passages in Carter’s

text. These, however, as I will argue, have to do with the difference between Walser as narrator and Walser as focaliser.

The transition from a first person to a third person narrative, as illustrated in the two examples above, marks a distance between the old and the new (more humble and less bragging) Walser, and constitutes the point at which Walser as focaliser and Walser as narrator emerge as two separate voices. Although the narrative perspective is Walser's throughout "London", as his thoughts seem to merge with the voice of the narrator, the voice that verbalises his vision or perspective is kept separate from this. "London" is mediated in the voice of the new Walser as a third person narrator, through his focaliser, Walser the unhatched.

There is in other words a distance between Walser-the-narrator and Walser-the-narrated, which also accounts for the fact that in some few instances of "London" the narrator displays knowledge (invariably of Fevvers' greed) that his focaliser does not possess, such as in: "You'd never think that she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers. Even Walser did not guess that" (12). Such an instance displaying the non-identity of Walser as narrator and Walser as focaliser, the former commenting on the latter's lack of knowledge, is a consequence of the fact that Walser is narrating and sorting impressions in retrospect and thus from a different position. Similarly, when one reads: "Bouquets pelt on the stage. Since there is no second-hand market for flowers, she takes no notice of them" (18), one attributes the comment not to Walser the focaliser, but to Walser as narrator.

A few other paragraphs of "London" may be also said to incorporate other voices than Walser's. However, I would argue that these voices are nevertheless filtered and represented through Walser's mind. In the description of how her native city has welcomed Fevvers, several voices resound: "Her name was on the lips of all, from duchess to costermonger: "Have you seen Fevvers? And then "How does she do it?" And then "Do you think she is real? The young reporter wanted to keep his wits about him" (8-9). The voices of the public may be understood as going through Walser's mind when finally there to meet Fevvers in the flesh, as his *re-voicing* of other voices. Similarly, when Walser looks back on Fevvers' show, the Prince's presence is referred to as follows: "God save the mother of the obese and bearded princeling who has taken his place in the royal box twice nightly since Fevvers' first night at the Alhambra, stroking his beard and meditating upon the erotic possibilities of her ability to hover and the problematic of his paunch vis-à-vis the missionary position" (18). The sarcastic tone of this passage seems to indicate Walser's imagining of the prince's thoughts rather than an omniscient narrator's referring to them. The narrative perspective seems in other words to be that of Walser, who, when waiting for Fevvers to join him in bed at the end of the novel, is the one recalling "how nature had equipped her for the 'woman on top' position" (292).

The point of view, or focalisation^[10] seems to be predominantly internal in the rest of the novel as well, but as opposed to focalisation being fixed to Walser in "London", the perspective in the succeeding sections is *variable* as the narrator moves in and out of different characters.^[11] In some cases the perspective may even be seen as *multiple*, as in the different representations of the first meeting between Walser and Fevvers after the train crash.

Chapter seven of "Siberia" is narrated by Fevvers in the first person, and ends with her seeing Walser coming out of the woods. As she recognises him she cries out his name: "Jack! Jack! (...) Jack Walser!" (251). The following chapter is narrated by an extradiegetic narrator who takes us back in time to recount what has happened to Walser during the span of Fevvers' narrative. On page 268 the narrative catches up with the ending of the previous chapter as the voice of Mignon is heard through the woods and the forest dwellers are drawn towards its source. On the middle of page 269 we get Walser's version, presented through the narrator, of the meeting with Fevvers, which she herself described some pages earlier. "Jack! Jack!" her words sound again, "Jack Walser!" (269). In "London", as opposed to such shifts, every leap in time or space follow the workings of Walser's mind or his physical movements.

Free indirect discourse as well as interior monologue are narrative devices frequently used in *Nights at the Circus*, and, by blending the voices of narrator and various characters, they contribute to creating the sense of polyphony recognised by many readers of the novel. While interior monologue may seem to give the reader direct and unmediated access to the mind and thoughts of a character, the identity of voice in the case of free indirect discourse is subtler. As a means of identifying occurrences of free indirect speech in a text, Lothe compares three discourse variants of the same sentence (47):

1. *Direct discourse*. She said: "I like him!" (present).
2. *Indirect discourse*. She said that she liked him (past).

3. *Free indirect discourse*. She liked him! (past).

As it appears, free indirect discourse occupies a middle position between the other two representations of speech, rendering the question of who is speaking more ambiguous. Although free indirect discourse and interior monologue are devices at work throughout the whole novel, the manner in which they are applied seems to separate the first section of the novel from its succeeding parts.

As mentioned above, in the first part of the novel the narrator limits himself to revealing the thoughts of Walser, while Fevvers and Lizzie are only given voice through direct discourse, referred to in inverted commas. The reader is never given access to other minds than that of Walser. In the succeeding parts of the novel, however, the narrator is not limited to one perspective, but moves in and out of various characters. Even the voice of a rather minor character such as the weary babushka merges with that of the narrator: "She turned the spigot of the samovar onto a glass. How her old bones did ache! How bitterly she regretted having promised the boy a story!" (97). The same effect can be observed in the description of Colonel Kearney: "The old glory itself toppled with a gilt eagle, unfurled with grandiose negligence from a pole propped in the corner – born in Kentucky he might have been, but no Dixie patriot he!" (99). Also Fevvers, whose voice is never confused with that of the narrator in the novel's first section, is referred to by ways of indirect discourse later (In this particular example sliding over into direct speech): "No she won't come down. She's safer up there, isn't she. What murderous fuckers have been tinkering with the rig? High as she was you could hear every word" (160). Examples abound.

While in the novel's first section such a sliding between the voice of the narrator and that of a character is only allowed in relation to Walser, it is later used as a device to present the thoughts and utterances of several other characters. The narrative perspective is no longer reserved for Walser alone. Furthermore, while in the first section of the novel Walser's thoughts almost invariably merge with the voice of the narrator, in the latter parts they are also often referred to through direct discourse, disjoining his voice more clearly from that of the narrator.

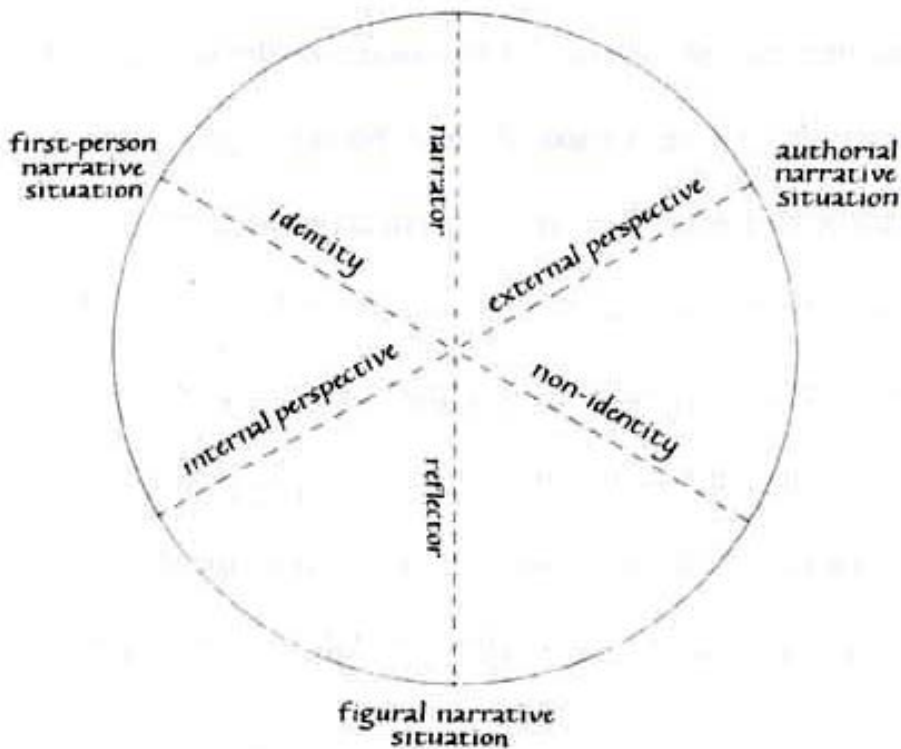
In his attempt during "London" to get to the bottom of the mystery of Fevvers' wings, Walser may be seen as instrumental in transforming Fevvers' experiences into narratives. Not only because his voice tends to merge with that of the narrator, but also through his mere presence. Without him, her reader, in the dressing room there would be no storytelling, no text. At one level, then, his function in the novel's first section resembles the one Jakob Lothe assigns to the narrator as "a narrative instrument that the author uses to present and develop the text" (*Narrative in Fiction and Film* 20), although, as noted earlier, his questions seem to be generated by Fevvers' narratives rather than the other way around. Recalling Booth's claim that "[a]ny sustained inside view, of whatever depth, temporarily turns the character whose mind is shown into a narrator" (164), one may suggest that Walser, through whose mind the narration of "London" is filtered, paradoxically seems to function not only as a reader, but also as a narrator.

Although Walser's function in "London" may be likened to that of a narrator, one should, as mentioned, still bear in mind that Walser is clearly established as a *reader* of the stories that make up the larger part of the novel's first section, being recurrently addressed directly as the audience of these, starting already with the novel's first line: "Lor' love you, sir!" (7). Thus Walser is easily established as the actual reader's representative or locus for identification in the text. This of course contributes - already in the novel's first section - to establishing Walser's reading activity as important, but it is only later that the allegory of reading is established as the novel's central concern.

As the novel progresses it becomes evident that the journalist Walser is very much a participant rather than just an observer of the action, as the activity of his reading of Fevvers turns out to be the novel's main issue. At first Walser appears (and believes himself) to be there to report actions of which he himself is not an integral part. "I'm here to write a story about the circus. About you and the circus", he tells Fevvers (114). But as the novel progresses it turns out that Walser himself is one of the protagonists of a story which seems to be just as much about him reading and *being written* as him *writing*. In other words, that which seemed to be outside the main story turns out to be the story itself as the metadiegetic and the diegetic levels of the section undergo a shift in centrality in relation to the novel's action.

Jakob Lothe's definition of a third-person narrator as "outside or 'above' the plot" (21) corresponds closely to the journalistic ideal of objectivity as well as to Walser's stated experience of his own life. Also, as mentioned, the role

the reader assigns Walser when reading “London” for the first time resembles Lothe’s characterisation of the third-person narrator as “outside the action (but within the fiction)” (23). Wallace Martin refers to a narration with a third person limited point of view as evading “the category of grammatical person by suppressing the narratorial use of ‘I’” (133). Since it “assumes access to only one mind and often uses the visual perspective of that character”, he accepts F.K. Stanzel’s term “figural narration” for this kind of narration and opposes it to “authorial narration” where an implied author refers to himself as “I” (134). The narration of “London” is not of the purely figural kind, as there *is* an “I” surfacing on some occasions, still it shares with the above narrative situation the feature of a *reflector*-character. [12] As will be argued in the following the narrative situation of the kind we have in “London”, should, rather than the figural narrative situation, be seen to constitute the diametrically opposite of authorial narration in Stanzel’s typological circle (56).



When it comes to differentiating personal from authorial narration, it is, according to Stanzel “not the occurrence of the first person of the personal pronoun (...) outside dialogue, which is decisive, but rather the location of the designated person within or outside the fictional world of the characters of a novel or a story” (*A Theory of Narrative*: 48). As he points out, in the term “first person narration” the pronoun points to the narrator, while in “third person [figural] narration” it refers to a character in the fiction which is *not* the narrator (48). The opposite of authorial narration is seen by Stanzel as an unrealised, but theoretically possible narrative situation, with the “*identity* of the realms of existence to which the narrator and the characters belong” distinguishing it from the authorial as well as the figural position. The diametrically opposite of authorial narrative, then, would not be figural narration (as Martin seems to indicate), but would rather lie in the transitory sector between a first person and a figural narrative situation, with an internal (*intradiegetic*) perspective as its primary characteristic, filtered through the mind of a reflector-character. The narrator would be *homodiegetic* in that the realm of his existence is identical to that of the fictional world, being a character in the fiction.

If one takes Walser to be the narrator of “London”, this section must be regarded as displaying all the features characteristic of the transitory narrative situation between personal and figural narration accounted for above; internal perspective, reflector-character and identity of narrator’s world with that of the characters. Although we do have an “I” surfacing on a limited number of occasions, the narration is, as already argued, still internal, filtered through the mind of the reflector-character, Walser. Furthermore this “I” refers to Walser, a character in the story, i.e. Walser as *homodiegetic* narrator. What appears to be *extradiegetic* turns out to be (*intra*)*diegetic* and the seemingly *heterodiegetic* turns out to be *homodiegetic*. The “London” section is, however, easily apprehended as occupying the middle ground between authorial and figural in Stanzel’s typological circle, diametrically in opposition to the first person narrative situation, as the identity of narrator and fictional world is obscured and the

section apparently is part of the narrative of an extradiegetic narrator. Thus the close relation between “London” and a first person narrative is almost completely obscured.

According to Stanzel, “[s]ubstituting a teller-character for a reflector-character can result in a decisive change in the narrative statement” (60). In “London”, however, this may not seem the case since the reflector-character (focaliser) and the narrator is the same character. The narration of “London” is so thoroughly filtered through Walser’s consciousness that a transposition of this into a first person narrative would be unproblematic. In some cases, the interior monologues of Walser, there seems already to be almost complete convergence of narrator and character, teller and reflector:

First impression: physical ungainliness. Such a lump it seems! But soon, quite soon, an acquired grace asserts itself, probably the result of strenuous exercise. (Check if she is trained as a dancer) My, how her bodice strains! You’d think her tits were going to pop right out. What sensation that would cause; wonder she hasn’t thought of incorporating it in her act. Physical ungainliness in flight caused, perhaps, by absence of tail, the rudder of the flying bird – I wonder why she doesn’t tack a tail on the back of her cache-sexe; it would add verisimilitude and, perhaps improve the performance. (16-17)

But - and Walser smiled to himself again, as he remembered his flutter of conviction that seeing is believing - what about her belly button? Hasn’t she just this minute told me she was hatched from an egg, not gestated in utero? The oviparous species are not, by definition nourished by the placenta; therefore they feel no need for the umbilical cord...and therefore, don’t bear the scar of its loss! Why isn’t the whole of London asking: does Fevvers have a belly-button? (17-18)

Although easily achieved, the transposition of the third-person narratives surrounding Walser’s monologues into first-person representation, would, however, obscure the point that a new and different Walser is narrating of his old self in retrospect, and render the section a traditional first person narration.

As argued above, there seem to be basically two narratorial devices at work in *Nights at the Circus* for interweaving the voice of the narrator with that of a character, the dominant in “London” being interior monologue, while the rest of the novel makes more extensive use of free indirect discourse. In addition, the device of letting Fevvers present parts of her own story in first-person narratives throughout “Siberia” contributes to giving her narratorial status. These narratives do, however, not so much represent the *merging* of as the *identity* of character and narrator. In relation to the allegory and the possible confusion of diegetic levels discussed earlier, this is an interesting fact, as the reader at this point seems to enter the fiction, stepping into Walser’s role as Fevvers’ audience in his absence.[\[13\]](#)

If one tries to relate free indirect discourse and interior monologue to Stanzel’s typological circle, it appears that the latter, which is associated with “London”, not unexpectedly, is closer to personal narration than the former, which occupies a space between figural and authorial narrative situation (Stanzel: xvi). It is evident that interior monologue, so often used in “London”, is less ambiguous than free indirect discourse, in that it is basically direct discourse, giving an illusion of immediacy.

One might say that the narrator of the novel’s latter parts is more omniscient than the one of its first section. Or, since talking of *degrees* of omniscience does not seem to make much sense, it should perhaps suffice to conclude that the latter parts of the novel are less restricted when it comes to its perspective. Also the free indirect discourse of these sections paradoxically - keeping in mind the impression of polyphony it produces - may seem to require a more distinct authorial voice than does the interior monologue of “London”, where the narrator as mediator appears to be effaced. Where the “London” narrator restricts himself to reporting direct speech and the thoughts of only one character, the narrative perspective of the latter sections of the novel constantly changes. Also this latter narrator provides information which none of the characters are in possession of or able to communicate, as in the case of Mignon’s story. None of the characters present know her history, and she herself does not know a language in which to make herself understood, consequently her story has to be communicated to the reader through an omniscient narrator. This kind of omniscience is never present in the first section of *Nights at the Circus*. The only story not revealed through reference to Fevvers’ speech here, is the story of the reporter, which starts in a manner strikingly similar to his own summaries towards the end of the novel (see above: 18): “His name was Jack Walser. Himself, he hailed from California” (9).

The narration of “London”, then, may seem to be of the figural kind with Walser viewing himself from the outside, the section at one level constituting a narrative where the “I” is suppressed, placing it between personal and figural narration in Stanzel’s typological circle. As mentioned, although narration of the figural kind is dominant in the

frame of “London”, there are, however, a couple of instances of a narrating “I” surfacing also in this section, as in: “I say he had the propensity for ‘finding himself in the right place at the right time’; yet it was almost as if he himself were an *objet trouvé*, for subjectively, *himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought” (10). Here the self-reflective narrator is referring back to and modifying what he said on the preceding page: “In the course of his adventuring, he discovered in himself a great talent with words, and an even greater aptitude for *finding himself in the right place at the right time*” (9, emphasis added). It appears that the narrator develops his view of Walser in the progress of narration. The “I” of this passage should be seen as the narrating Walser, “hatched out from the shell of unknowing” (294), looking back, narrating the story of his former self as a homo- and intradiegetic “I”, rather than a hetero- and extradiegetic one, for which it is easily mistaken.

As mentioned, the distance between the new and the old Walser is evident already as he first starts the narration of his own adventures towards the very end of the novel. Pages 293 and 294 feature two different synopses of Walser’s experience. From first thinking that he “joined the circus of Colonel Kearney in order to delight [his] reading public with accounts of a few nights at the circus” (293), he changes to realise in the second narrative that he “ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle blonde in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her” (294). Along with this realisation he also goes from introducing Fevvers as “my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser” to acknowledging the fact that he still has no right to name her as an extension of or appendix to himself and ought rather call her by the name she has constructed for herself: “‘Fevvers’, he said, some sixth sense kept him from calling her Sophie” (294). The combined voices of the narrating Walser and Walser-the-focaliser pervade the narrative frame in “London”, the oscillation between these positions - the old and the new Walser – actually being a prerequisite and the motivation for the narrative. As Fevvers realises that Walser has changed, or “hatched” as she puts it, she encourages him to start the interview over again (291).

“London”, then, may be read as Walser’s looking back upon his experiences in the guise of a third person narrator, limited to his own perspective, a response to Fevvers’ “Get out your pencil and we’ll begin!” (291).^[14] Such a reading of its first section adds a curious level of circularity to the novel, as well as being of importance to its metafictionality. If viewed in this way, the novel not only starts with “the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century” (11), the narrative also starts when its own story is about to end. Consequently, the novel, apart from ending with the birth of a new century and a love affair, ends with its own start. The last section of the novel concludes with Fevvers rejoicing in the fact that Walser’s change makes their love possible: “That’s the way to start the interview!” she cries (291). Or as Walser himself puts it: “And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing (...) I shall have to start all over again” (294). My proposition, then, is that the first section of the novel may be viewed as Walser’s starting anew, and thus the beginning of the novel does in fact coincide with its ending, as Walser on the novel’s last pages begins to narrate parts of the novel we have just been reading. This circular structure may be seen as thematising the view that a narrative is always retrospective and motivated by its own end, both as regards its narrative structure and its reading.^[15]

“London” is the American journalist Walser’s account of how he experienced his own interview with the winged woman Fevvers, a meeting which is the initiation of a relationship that throughout the novel serves as an allegory of the interaction between a text and its reader. Walser’s function in the novel is thus a very complex one. On the one hand he functions allegorically as a reader in his relationship to Fevvers, and on the other one he seems himself to be the writer of this allegory, just as the novel as a whole seems to write the allegory of itself and its reading, thus existing within a perpetual circularity.

The ambiguous narratorial voice of “London” also links with the change in centrality given to the different levels of “London”’s narrative by the reader. As discussed above, the interview which at the outset seems marginal to the main action or plot of the novel, does in fact constitute the core of it. Jakob Lothe defines the diegetic level as the level “which the third-person narrator (on the extradiegetic level) presents but does not participate in” (32). Just as the novel’s first part deceptively depicts the meeting between Walser and Fevvers as a frame story, its narrator seems at first glance to be situated outside the plot. As one reads on, however, that which at the start presented itself as a frame turns out to be the picture itself, and the narrator that seemed to be situated outside the action turns out to be one of its protagonists. In this respect my experience of reading *Nights at the Circus* may seem to be mirrored in Walser’s attitude towards his own experiences.

A reading which establishes Walser as the narrator of “London” does also result in a change of the diegetic status of the whole of this section in relation to the rest of the novel. The apparent structure of “London” may be schematised as follows:

Narrator providing the frame story/the interview (same level as the rest of the novel)
within which Fevvers' stories are told
within which other people tell their stories

Having established Walser as the narrator of "London" the structure not only of the narrative hierarchy of "London" but also of the novel as a whole is altered. The interviewing situation of "London" becomes a metadiegetic narrative within the novel as a whole and consequently all narrative levels of the first section change hierarchical positions, the result being a structure of the following kind:

Narrator provides a narration (the text of *Nights at the Circus*)
within which Walser narrates a story (the interview/frame)
within which Fevvers tells her stories
within which other people tell their stories

As appears from this model, Walser-the-narrator intrudes into the narrative structure offered in the first model and as a consequence alters the diegetic status of all its constituents, rendering metadiegetic that which appeared to be diegetic, meta-metadiegetic that which appeared to be metadiegetic and so on. What first appears to be told by an extradiegetic narrator is in fact narrated by Walser at the novel's diegetic level, rendering the whole section of "London" a metadiegetic narration. The novel does in other words start out with a narration that belongs to its metadiegetic level, but which cannot be recognised as such before one is able to establish Walser as its narrator. "London" does in fact consist of a narrative embedded in the novel as a whole but it is not recognisable as such until the novel's very last pages. Because Walser is the teller of a story within a story that is not yet told, and because, for reasons accounted for above, his narrative is presented in the third person, his words pass for those of the narrator. Walser's narrative is in other words a pseudo-diegetic one, taken control of by the first narrator, and turning out in the end to be a hidden metadiegetic analepsis.[\[16\]](#)

Walser, the character that first appeared to be minor, proves in the course of the novel not only to be one of its protagonists, he also appears to be the narrator of part of its central diegesis. He develops from first being considered a minor character, then a protagonist, and finally to be established as a narrator-character. Marginal turns out to be central and extradiegetic turns out to be diegetic.

The extradiegetic is traditionally the narrative level of the third-person narrator as well as that of the implied reader, "outside the action (but within the fiction)" (Lothe: 23). Consequently the shifts accounted for above, where the reader's locus for identification changes from being apparently outside or marginal to the plot into constituting its centre in addition to being its narrator (rendering the narrator of the section diegetic rather than extradiegetic), may serve to confuse the reader's experience of her own status in relation to the narrative. As mentioned above, also the reader's apparent taking over of Walser's role as Fevvers audience in "Siberia" may seem to unsettle the traditional role of the implied reader as extradiegetic.

Gerard Genette defines *metalepsis* as "taking hold of (telling) by changing levels" (*Narrative Discourse* 237n). The most general kind of metalepsis consists in "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (...) or the inverse" (234-35). As an example one may take the instance in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* when Helen has just had an agitated talk with Tibby, wanting him to tell Margaret about the past affair of her newly wedded husband and Jacky, the narrator draws itself into the fiction by stating that "It is convenient to follow him in the discharge of his duties" (252). [\[17\]](#)

Another figure which Genette connects to metalepsis is the telling of something as though it were diegetic although it has "been presented as (or can easily be guessed to be) metadiegetic in its principle or, if one prefers, in its origin" (236), bringing a second narrative to the first level.[\[18\]](#) The metalepsis of deceptively presenting Walser's narrative as the narration of the novel's third person narrator, in addition to drawing the apparently marginal Walser into the centre of the plot, are both devices of metafictionality creating in the reader a sense of diffuse borders between the different narrative levels, thus also a questioning of her own status in relation to the text. "The most troubling thing about metalepsis", Genette writes, "indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees - you and I - perhaps belong to some narrative" (236). The metalepsis in effect links closely with a question which pervades the whole novel, the question of what is fact and what is fiction.

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette writes that “one narrative can scarcely ‘embed’ another without indicating the operation and, therefore, without designating itself as the first narrative”. “*Can* the designating be done silently or fallaciously?” he asks (87-88). Perhaps one could see the positioning of “London” in front of what actually precedes it chronologically as the extradiegetic narrator jealously and silently trying to incorporate Walser’s narrative into its own? By putting Walser’s narrative in the beginning of the novel, the novel’s narration almost erases its own metalepsis. Does this metalepsis constitute the ultimate disempowerment of Walser as a writer, rendering him nothing but a *written* subject as a reader of Fevvers’ (subversive) narratives? Is narrative egocentrism what causes Walser’s recollections to be put first in the text, and, given the fact that he presents them in the third person, to effectively disguise his narrative as the words of the extradiegetic narrator? The narrative presentation of “London”, which at first seems to privilege the perspective of Walser and thereby to endow him with a certain amount of power as the narrator that reports the history of Fevvers, may in fact be seen as the narrator depriving Walser of voice.

Fevvers, by contrast, is given a narrative privilege not only through her stories quoted, thus given credit as being her own words in “London”, but also in the many instances of her first person narration in the third section of the novel, “Siberia”. Significantly, also, these latter ones occur at a time when Walser has lost both memory and language. It may seem that Fevvers’ ability of self-definition through narration is made possible at the cost of Walser’s.

It is quite evident towards the end of the novel, however, that Fevvers is not able to construct her own self through narration alone, she also needs a reader of her story. Walser becomes the one to fill this role in Fevvers project and this reduces his own quest for identity to a matter of reading and writing Fevvers,^[19] rather than writing his own self: “The young American it was who kept the whole story of old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true. She longed to see her reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes” (273). Walser seems to be no more than a mirror in which Fevvers can affirm her difference, which in essence constitutes her identity as such.

When her reader is not present, Fevvers is unable to exist; she needs constant confirmation of her difference in order to exist as other than just Sophie. When separated from her reader, Fevvers looks “more and more like the London sparrow as which [she] had started out in life, as if a spell were unravelling” (271). Although Fevvers has a compulsion to name her self rather than being named by others, she needs someone, a reader to accept and affirm this constructed identity for it to take effect. She exists for her reader on her own terms. The reader, rather than the text, seems to be the one that needs to be modified in order for the intended meaning to be established.

As it appears, then, Walser’s power in relation to Fevvers (by allegorical extension, the reader’s power in relation to the text) turns out to be of an illusory kind. “London”, which first seems to privilege Walser’s point of view, is instead his being deprived of a proper voice by narrative structuring. This deceptive empowering or freedom is present also in the next two sections of the novel, in “Petersburg” where as a clown Walser illusorily experiences “the freedom to juggle with being”(103), and in “Siberia” where he apparently rescues Fevvers from her crisis of identity.

[6] See for instance Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*, esp. the chapter “The hermeneutical significance of temporal distance” (258-267).

[7] Usually the diegetic level “points to the dominant level of action” in a narrative (Lothe: 32). Or, since an embedded story may well serve as the main action of a narrative (as is the case in for instance Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*), the diegetic may, more accurately be said to constitute a *first level* of narration.

[8] The metadiegetic is the level of narrative imbedded into the diegetic narration, i.e a narraton within the narration, a second level.

[9] Gerald Prince on internal point of view: “In this case, the narrator tells only what one or several characters (could) know and tell” (*Narratology. The Form and Function of Narrative* 52).

[10] Gerald Prince’s terms *external* and *internal* point of view, the latter subdivided into *fixed*, *variable* and *multiple* correspond to those of focalisation that Rimmon-Kenan proposes on pp 76-77.

[11] For examples of *external* perspective in the two latter sections of the novel see Chapter Two of “Siberia” (209) and the beginning of Chapter Six of “Petersburg” (145).

[12] “a reflector-character reflects, that is, he mirrors events of the outer world in his consciousness, perceives, feels, registers, but always silently, because he never ‘narrates’, that is, he does not verbalize his perceptions, thoughts and feelings in an attempt to communicate them.” (Stanzel: 144)

[13] There are two other particularly interesting instances of interweaving of voices which also serve to diffuse the boundaries between the different diegetic levels of the narration. In “Siberia” an extradiegetic narrator accounts for Walser’s experiences. At one point, however,

Walsers' thoughts seem to interact with this narration in an unusual manner: "A stew of dried fish bubbled away for supper, adding to the rich odours of man and beast already present a reek as of a whore's drawers. 'A whore's drawers' said Walsers to himself, reflectively. 'A whore's drawers'" (263). Similarly, on p 203, in the midst of the extradiegetic narrator accounts of Fevvers' and the colonel's dinner, the narrative in a peculiar way slides over into Fevvers' personal one: "As if the notion of cannibalism refreshed his appetite, he attacked a veal cutlet with gusto (...) As for me, I slipped the nasty thing on my own plate across to Sybil".

[14] The importance of Fevvers as a driving force of Walsers' narrative will be discussed further below.

[15] See Peter Brooks *Reading for the Plot* (1984).

[16] Genette defines analepsis as "any invocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (*Narrative Discourse* 40).

[17] For my use of pronoun in this context, see note 20 below.

[18] One simple example of such a *metalepsis* may be the presentation of the content of a dream as if constituting the diegetic level of a narrative, revealing itself as a *metalepsis* only by ending the narrative with a sentence of the kind: "and then she woke up and realised that it was all a dream".

[19] A writer only in the sense of a *scribe*, writing following directions: "Think of him not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amanuensis, she said to Lizzie" (285).



Chapter 2

Walser, the verifier of facts, started out with the intention to expose the winged Fevvers as a deception. Although aiming to put the bird onto the ground, in the end he ends up beneath her. Caged by the power of Fevvers' narratives, Walser decides to join the Colonel's circus in order to pursue his enchantress. From this moment on his place is in the ring, playing the role assigned to him in the Ludic Game – that of a clown.

Already when visiting Fevvers in her dressing room in London, the American Walser is on foreign soil, but he is still there as a journalist, performing what has been his occupation through several years. This meeting, however, results in Walser "begging for a job with the circus" (98) and his subsequent geographical movement to the much stranger and exotic settings of Petersburg and Siberia. Parallel to his stepping into the exotic in geographical terms, Walser, as mentioned, also takes on the occupation of clowning, which is entirely new to him. "Now you are a first of May. (...) - it's what we all call the neophytes, the virgins of the ring, the green beginners in the art of playing", Colonel Kearny informs him (102). Reading Fevvers leads Walser to step further and further into a new and unknown world. The following discussion will evolve around Walser's development as a reader of Fevvers after they both have left London for Petersburg.

According to Peter Rabinowitz (*Before Reading*), there are three kinds of audience in/for every text. Firstly, there is the *actual audience* of flesh and blood, consisting of unique readers with individual dispositions governed by parameters such as class, gender, race, personality, training, culture and historical situation (21). An author writing will always do so with her audience, their beliefs and knowledge and familiarity with conventions in mind, thus designing her work rhetorically for the second kind of audience, "some more or less specific *hypothetical audience*" (21). This kind of audience, which Rabinowitz also calls a text's *authorial audience* (21), is joined by accepting the text's inscribed "invitation to read it in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers" (22). Fiction is in other words seen as "a contract designed by an author who invites his or her audience to adopt certain paradigms to understand reality" (Barbara Foley quoted in Rabinowitz: 23). Walser signing a contract with the Imperial Circus in order to be able to complete his reading and understanding of Fevvers may be considered a literalisation of such an idea. By offering to join the circus and accepting to play the clown, Walser voluntarily enters a mode of being and thinking with which Fevvers is associated, hoping it will help him in his reading of her.

The third kind of audience that Rabinowitz envisages for a text he terms its *narrative audience*. By introducing this concept and differentiating it from that of the authorial audience, he seeks to illuminate a distinction that, according to him, other theorists have tended to conflate. Like other critics before him, Rabinowitz claims that the events of a novel must be treated as true and untrue at the same time. To deal with this duality and the dialectic it causes he proposes "to add a third term to the distinction between actual and authorial audience" (94).

Unlike a text's narratee, which is a fictional character (implicit or explicit), the narrative audience is "a role which the text forces the reader to take on" (95). In order to read a book the reader must do more than join its authorial audience. Being an instance of representational art, a novel always imitates something it is not. A narrative, according to Rabinowitz, is in the end always a more or less self-conscious imitation of a non-fictional discourse, such as history or biography. Literature, then, is regarded as fictive discourse, i.e. an imitation of utterances rather than of actions. Hence, a narrator will "generally [be] an imitation of an author", that is, a simulation of a real person/voice that addresses an audience with particular knowledge and beliefs (95). This imitation audience, who believes the discourse to be non-fictional, taking it to be the utterance itself rather than an imitation of it, is what Rabinowitz terms a text's *narrative audience*. The narrative audience of *Nights at the Circus*, thus, is not only (as is its authorial audience) familiar with for instance the historical persons and events that the novel alludes to, as well as the literary climate within which the novel is written, it also believes the fictional characters of the novel to be real.

The pretence involved in joining a text's narrative audience Rabinowitz links to Coleridge's notion of the 'willing suspension of disbelief', except that he argues "not that disbelief is suspended but rather that it is suspended and not suspended at the same time" (95). In order for the reader to join the narrative audience of a text, she has to adopt beliefs which enable her to treat (what she knows is) fiction as real. In relation to so-called realistic texts this may not involve a greater effort than to take on "certain minimal beliefs in addition to those we already hold" (96), such as temporarily taking the characters of a novel to be real people. In other types of fiction, however, such as for

instance fairy-tales or fantasy, the gap between authorial and actual audience on one side and narrative audience on the other is greater. The authorial audience of *Nights at the Circus*, for instance, knows that Fevvers' wings can not possibly be real, while the novel's narrative audience, like part of Walser, the allegorical reader, cannot exclude this as a possibility. The same goes for the episode when Fevvers apparently escapes from the Grand Duke in his miniature train, to find herself on the Transsiberian railway the next second. The authorial audience of the novel knows that such a move is impossible, while the narrative audience has to accept it if the narrative is to work.

Walser being faced with the fantastic stories of Fevvers' narratives in "London" serves allegorically to display the relationship between a text's narrative audience and its real audience as opposing stances. Clearly the logic of the world of Fevvers' narratives, as well as her appearance, differs from that of Walser's world. This discrepancy is of course also sensed in the reader of the novel, who, as discussed earlier, readily identifies with Walser in this section. As the world of Fevvers' stories does not belong to the diegetic level of the novel, however, its improbabilities are less challenging to the reader than are those that occur on the diegetic level. It is less difficult for the reader to "believe" that Fevvers has told Walser stories of women with eyes for nipples, than to accept for instance that she herself has wings, or that she is able to escape the Grand Duke by means of his model train. The kind of disbelief that the two latter fictions (?) evoke in the novel's reader is reflected in Walser's experience as reader of Fevvers and her stories, one narrative level below. This is a mirroring which is enhanced by the fact that Walser serves as the reader's locus for identification. *Nights at the Circus* is consequently not only what Rabinowitz calls an imitation of a non-fictive discourse; this fiction's rendering of the relationship between Fevvers and Walser may also be viewed as an imitation of the non-fictive one between the novel's reader and its narrator.[\[20\]](#)

The narrator of Carter's novel emphasises that its discourse is nothing but a fiction, still it seems to insist on its relation to "that authentic history to which [its] narrative (...) does not belong" (97), firmly situating its actions in a particular historical period and often referring to actual historical events and persons. Just as the essence of Fevvers' identity lies in the ambiguity of her appearance, being dependent on her audience's inability to decide whether she is real or not, the novel self-consciously plays with the fact that "[w]e cannot treat a work of art either as what it is or what it appears to be, we must be aware simultaneously of both aspects" (Rabinowitz: 94). In the aesthetic experience the work of art must be treated as both fact (i.e. being what it only represents) and fiction at the same time.

"Although many critics have dealt with the implied audiences of texts", Rabinowitz argues, "they have tended, on the whole, to ignore the distinction between the authorial and narrative audiences" (97). Just as the narrative audience of a text is a fiction, so is the authorial one, but in a different sense. In Rabinowitz the dialectic between belief and disbelief occurs not primarily between the factual reader and the reader implied in the fiction, but also within the latter. The distance between the authorial and the real audience of a text is inevitable but generally undesirable (98), obviously the gap has to be narrowed down to a point which allows communication to take place at all. When it comes to the difference between the real and the authorial audience on the one hand and the narrative audience on the other, however, it is not only desired, but also necessary for the "double-levelled aesthetic experience" to take place (99).

The self-conscious text of *Nights at the Circus* may be read as thematising exactly this double-levelled experience of reading caused by the gap between the authorial/real audience and the narrative audience. The lingering between belief and disbelief is illustrated through the effect that Fevvers has upon her surroundings, Walser in particular. His reaction to her wings and her fantastic stories may be seen to mirror the reader's relation to the narrative audience the novel demands. The question of whether Fevvers' wings are facts or fictions is never resolved, the nature of their existence must be regarded in less categorical terms, as must her escape in the miniature train and the clowns' dancing away of themselves and the outlaws in "Siberia".

The joining of a text's narrative audience must be regarded as occurring in that part of the reader's consciousness which takes fiction for truth, while the authorial reader is aware that this is only pretence. Both these modes are in other words roles prescribed for the actual reader by the text, and ideally they are both taken up by her. The lingering between these two potentially overlapping stances in the imagination of the reader is characteristic of all experience of reading fiction. And Fevvers is, like the novel she inhabits, a text which makes the reader constantly aware of this oscillation between belief and disbelief.[\[21\]](#)

As mentioned earlier, a literary work is always designed with an authorial audience in mind; that is, presupposing a certain kind of reading. Consequently, reading authorially involves a certain distancing from one's position as a

member of the actual audience. Wayne C Booth introduced the concepts of the textually *implied author* and its counterpart the *implied reader*, distinguishing them from the real/material reader and author.^[22] Like Rabinowitz, he stresses the need for the actual reader to identify with the role the text prescribes for him as its reader. Just as the author creates his “second self”, the *implied author*, he also creates a second self for his reader. “It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author’s”, he writes.^[23] “Regardless of my real beliefs and practices I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full” (138). Rabinowitz’ notion of the authorial audience denotes, like Booth’s *implied reader*, a role that is inscribed in the text and ideally identified with by its reader. However, while “subordination” to the work of art in Booth, seems to be a matter of (an impossible) self-effacement, the joining of a text’s authorial audience involves a reorganisation of the self, rather than a cancellation of it. This reorganisation is, as Rabinowitz argues, governed by the text through its invitation to the reader to read it according to certain strategies.

Walser’s decision to join the circus in order to complete his reading of Fevvers does, as mentioned, result in him having to take on the role of a clown. “You must know what you have become, young man”, Buffo tells Walser, “how *the world defines you*, now you have opted to lose your wits in the profession of the clown” (120, emphasis added), indicating the paradoxical freedom involved in the reading of a text. Once as a reader you have opened up to a text, decided to join its audience(s), you have to leave behind your own self and let it be reorganised by external forces. Buffo’s instruction to Walser seems to contradict the sense of freedom that Walser is described as having behind the mask:

When Walser first put on his make-up, he looked in the mirror and did not recognise himself. As he contemplated the stranger peering interrogatively at him out of the glass, he felt the beginnings of a vertiginous sensation of freedom that, during all the time he spent with the Colonel never quite evaporated; until that last moment when they parted company and Walser’s very self, as he had known it, departed from him, he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, within dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being, and indeed, with the language which is vital to our being, that lies at the heart of the burlesque. (103)

Viewed in relation to the depiction of the clowns in general and Walser’s actual experience while with the circus in particular, his sense of freedom as described above seems to be of an illusory kind. As a clown Walser enters the circus courtyard “by means of the modest wicket gate, *the performers’ entrance*” (106, emphasis added). This movement indicates the potentially productive and creative aspect of his activity as clown, and thereby links it to a sense of freedom. Later, however, he is trapped in the circus ring together with a lethal tigress as the exit bangs behind him (112). When he tries to step out of his role as a clown, attempting heroically to rescue Mignon, he pathetically puts his own life in a position which requires a rescue operation. The incident results in an injury to his left arm, rendering him unable to type. “Therefore, for the moment his disguise disguises - nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a *real clown*” (145). The paradoxical freedom of clowning and reading seems to be the same, that of willingly putting on a mask and ultimately losing what is behind it, one’s self. As Buffo describes it: “And so my face eclipses me. I have become this face which is not mine, yet I chose it freely” (122). As Walser’s mask no longer hides anything how may it then provide him with a possibility to “juggle with being”?

If Booth seems to disregard the restrictions the implied audience may put on the author, the reader being the one who must accommodate or “subordinate” to it, Rabinowitz to a greater extent emphasises the authorial audience as a notion informing the shaping of a text as well as the reading of it.

The conception of an authorial audience necessarily puts constraints on the writer of a text as well as on its reader: “authors can put down whatever marks they wish on the page; readers can construe them however they wish. But once authors and readers accept the communal nature of writing and reading, they give up some of that freedom” (Rabinowitz: 23). Fevvers’ freedom, too, is restricted in the accommodation of her tale to an authorial or hypothetical audience that she hopes Walser is to join in order that she may “make him into the new Man (...) a fitting mate for the new Woman” (281). In her attempt at subversion by inversion, parody and irony, she is vitally dependent on the structures she attacks. Just as one may argue that subversion in general - involving an overturn of structures from their foundations – requires an attack from within, *all* texts, whether pronounced subversive or not, need to work on their readers from the base of a common ground. Consequently, Fevvers is dependent on images constructed by a male-dominated Western culture, such as Winged Victory and Helen of Troy, in her attempt to construct herself as the New Woman of the new era she believes the twentieth century to become.

When separated from Walser, her reader, in Siberia, Fevvers seems to suffer a physical as well as a psychological decomposition. What is actually happening in “Siberia” in this respect? According to Beth A. Boehm, Fevvers

suffers and fades because she lacks an authorial reader (“Feminist Metafiction and Androcentric Reading Strategies”). Thus her falling apart in the novel’s last section may be seen as mirroring the fate of the text of the novel itself in interaction with readers such as Adam Mars-Jones or Carolyn See, who according to Boehm, “misread” it because they are unable to identify with its authorial audience. The image of Fevvers rendered unable to fly in the absence of her lover may be read as an allegory of how a novel loses its dynamic nature, how its different parts are unable to work together in a coherent whole, when not interacting with the kind of reader it demands. This claim is obviously not one I would want to challenge, still I think that Boehm reaches this conclusion through a simplification of Rabinowitz’ terms.

In her discussion Boehm completely disregards Rabinowitz’ notion of the *narrative audience*, which the reader also needs to join in order to take full pleasure in a text. As argued above, the aesthetic experience is characterised by exactly that lingering between belief and disbelief which is caused by the conflict or discrepancy between the authorial and actual reader on the one hand and the narrative reader on the other. I would argue that Fevvers’ falling apart in “Siberia” is a consequence of the fact that she can no longer sustain herself as aesthetic object (thus nor as subject) in Walser’s lingering between belief and disbelief, as his dispossession of language, memory and interpretive strategies, allowing no room for such distinctions, makes him incapable of aesthetic experience.

Just like the notion of an authorial audience puts restrictions on Fevvers, Carter herself is also subject to such constraints. In order for her demythologising to take effect, she, like her heroine, is dependent on the structures she seeks to subvert as well as on the presence of a reader who is familiar with the social, literal and interpretive structures she plays with. As Beth A. Boehm puts it: “the more an author attempts to undermine traditional literary conventions, the more she must hope her reader to understand and expect those conventions to begin with” (191).

Although being a useful concept, Rabinowitz’ *authorial audience* still displays a weakness in relation to the group of texts to which Fevvers obviously belongs, those with subversive intent, as one may infer from Boehm’s statement above. “The reader”, Rabinowitz claims, “can read as the author intended only by being in the right place to begin with” (26). He acknowledges the belief that texts are incomplete in themselves and that they are only fulfilled through their reading, “put together according to the principles of the reader’s interpretive community” (27, 28). His position nevertheless seems to be less relativist than that of Stanley Fish, [24] as he claims that if a successful reading is to take place, “the author and the readers are members of the same community, so while the reader does in fact engage in an act of production, he or she makes what the author intended to be found” (28). Rabinowitz’ position, in consequence, does not only seem to disempower the reader, but in some respects also the author, as it leaves little, if any, room for the subversive text, the idea that a literary text may alter the ideas and beliefs of its reader. For a text to be understood according to intention it is demanded of reader and text that they already be inscribed in the same community.

The depiction of Walser’s illusory “feeling of freedom behind the mask” (103) may, in line with Rabinowitz’ claim that the reader only produces what the author intended, be read as contesting the post-structuralist insistence on the freedom of the reader by Roland Barthes and others. [25] *Nights at the Circus* may well be seen to propose its own interpretation. Apart from being an allegory of reading, thus offering a model for how it envisages its own relation to its reader, the novel also, independently of this, seems to place itself as subject to certain strategies of decoding. Or, recalling Rabinowitz’ formulation: the text invites the reader “to read it in a particularly socially constituted way” (22). Madame Schreck’s dumb (actually *mouthless*) and black servant, Toussaint, must be said to be a quite obvious symbol, a literalisation, of an oppressed being deprived of voice. It is not left at that, though. Later Toussaint undergoes surgery in order gain the power of speech, upon which event Lizzie comments:

And yet it is the lot of those who toil and suffer to be dumb. But consider the dialectic of it (...) how it was, as it were, the white hand of the oppressor who carved open the aperture of speech in the very throat you could say that it had, in the first place, rendered dumb (60).

If there was little doubt before as to what was the significance of Madame Schreck’s servant, the above paragraph spells it out in capital letters, and thus contributes to guiding the reader into a certain mode of interpretation. Lizzie is also the one who explicitly invites the reader to consider the circus as a microcosm:

Why, you might say that we constituted a microcosm of humanity, that we were an emblematic company, each signifying a different proposition in the great syllogism of life (...) upon which the wilderness acted like a magnifying glass, exaggerating the blemishes of some and bringing out the finer points in those whom we thought had none. (279)

Furthermore, she also invites, or even forces the reader to contemplate the conventions of happy endings of Shakespearian comedies and romance novels, and to relate them to the novel she is presently engaged in reading:

“Don’t you know the customary endings of the old comedies of separated lovers, misfortune overcome, adventures among outlaws and savage tribes?” she asks her. “True lovers’ reunion always ends in a marriage” (280). “The Prince who rescues the Princess from the dragon’s lair is always forced to marry her, whether they have taken a liking to another or not. That’s the custom. And I don’t doubt that that custom will apply to the trapeze artiste who rescues the clown. The name of this custom is ‘happy ending’” (281).

My proposition is that the kind of textual self-consciousness displayed in *Nights at the Circus* necessarily also implies a strong and exhibited awareness of its preferred reader/reading, which appears to constrain the reader’s freedom to a greater extent than the novel’s aesthetic initially seems to imply. Most readings of Carter’s novel praise its openness by reference to for instance the polyphony that its fragmented point of view seems to furnish it with.^[26] Furthermore, the emphasis the allegory puts on the fact that Fevvers as text may only exist in interaction with Walser, seems to imply a vision of a reader that is free and empowered in relation to the text. “[I]s it not to the mercies of the eyes of the others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world?” Fevvers asks (39). Carter’s own comments to her literary work, indeed indicate a “yes” to this question, displaying a belief in the reader as powerful figure. In an interview with Toril Moi, she praises the reader who through the reading of her novels rewrites them for herself, that is, makes a new text of it.^[27] Carter is well known for (and often quoted as) stressing the fact that reading is just as productive an activity as writing. “I try, when I write fiction”, she explains, “to think on my feet – to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions” (“Notes from the front line”: 37). *Nights at the Circus* appears to aim at constituting an open-ended discourse, and it is as such that the novel is typically treated, the novel’s openness having been established as its *function*. Paradoxically, then, Carter’s rebelling against conventions is itself being subject to a conventionalised way of reading.

Although the carnivalistic aspects of *Nights at the Circus* have been treated by many critics as part of Carter’s post-modern subversive strategies, some critics also recognise and comment on the harsh critique of this mode that the novel offers, chiefly posed through its depiction of the clowns, whose leader is aptly called “The lord of Misrule”(175).^[28] Buffo in traditional carnivalistic fashion “wears a wig that does not simulate hair. It is, in fact, a bladder. Think of that. He wears his insides on the outside, and a proportion of his most obscene and intimate insides, at that; so that you might think he is bald, he stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss” (116). Although the clowns are presented as themselves being the ones constructing their roles: “We can invent our own faces! We make ourselves!” (121), the paradox still prevails: a clown’s face and appearance may be constructed only according to certain conventions, and once this is done, freedom is lost. Buffo describes the ephemeral moment of freedom as follows:

It is given to a few people to shape themselves (...) and in that moment of choices – lingering deliciously among those crayons; what eyes shall I have, what mouth, exists a perfect freedom. But once the choice is made, I am condemned therefore, to be “Buffo” in perpetuity. (122)

According to Rabinowitz, reading, as mentioned, involves for the reader the signing of “‘a contract designed by an author who invites his or her audience to adopt certain paradigms to understand reality’” (23). Similarly, Walser’s pursuit of Fevvers, his attempt to enter her world and get to the bottom of her mysteries, demands that he sign a contract with the circus. The different paths of his and Fevvers’ world are described as converging “only upon the brick barracks of the Imperial Circus” (105). Like the reader’s joining a text’s authorial audience involves her acceptance to play the role it assigns her, Walser, by accepting the contract with the circus, also accepts to take on the role of a clown.

Like the clown’s face, which may be crayoned only according to certain rules, a reader may also only be productive in a very limited sense. The clown’s made-up face is a *reproduction* of a structure, rather than a *production*, as is the individual reading of a text according to Rabinowitz, where the reader “makes what the author intended to be found” (28). The freedom of the reader lies in the choice between accepting and not accepting the contract of reading that the text offers. Once the decision to join a text’s authorial audience is made, the freedom of the reader is restricted.

Once a clown has put on his mask, nobody will ever take him seriously. As a clown he may do whatever he likes, but nobody will ever believe he is doing it in earnest. This is grimly illustrated in the story that Buffo tells of the generic clown who is only laughed at when mourning the loss of his wife and his unborn child. Similarly, when Buffo goes mad, threatening Walser on his life, all the audience do is to laugh their eyes out.

As a clown is never taken seriously, he is deprived of a voice - according to Buffo, the mask hides nothing but “[a]n

absence. A vacancy” (122) - he thus possesses no possibility of influencing his surroundings. In consequence the clowns are

(...) *licensed to commit licence and yet forbidden to act, so that the baboushka back home could go on reddening the charcoal even if the clowns detonated the entire city around her and nothing would really change. (...) So then you'd known, you'd seen the proof, that things would always be as they had always been; that nothing came of catastrophe; that chaos invoked stasis.* (151-52)

Carnival is in other words not presented as an adequate strategy for bettering the situation of women or any other socially oppressed group. Or as Buffo himself puts it: “The beauty of clowning is, nothing ever changes” (117). Carnival may be seen as illusorily dialogic, the momentary topsy-turvy eschewing only on the surface the power relations which underlie and precondition it.

The depiction of Walser at the circus may accordingly not only be considered as an illustration of his illusory sense of freedom as a reader of Fevvers, it may also be read as a critique of the carnivalesque as a subversive strategy, thus perhaps attacking Fevvers as text, as well as the novel itself. Fevvers is clearly linked to the carnivalesque through her appearance, especially in “London” where she breaks wind - “better in than out, sir” (11) - and indulges in hearty eating among her dirty underwear. “She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety (...) she wiped her lips on the sleeve and belched” (22). She is also associated with the carnivalesque by being linked to the clowns: “How was I costumed for my part [as Winged Victory]? (...) My face and the top half of my body was spread with the *wet white* the clowns use in the circus and I had white drapes from my navel to my knee” (37, emphasis in the original).

It is not only Fevvers' posing as a statue in Ma Nelson's establishment which is linked to the activity of the clowns, so is the more common enterprise of a whorehouse. Ma Nelson, head of the whorehouse is called “Mistress of the Revels” (49), [29] rendering her the female counterpart of Buffo – “The Lord of Misrule” (175) and chief clown in the colonel's circus. Clowning is explicitly connected with prostitution when Buffo describes the clowns as “the whores of mirth, for, like a whore, we know what we are; we know we are mere hirelings hard at work and yet those who hire us see us as being perpetually at play. Our work is their pleasure and so they think it must be our pleasure, too” (119). What links prostitution and the carnivalesque is that both activities may falsely be apprehended as liberated from the structures that actually precondition their existence.

Keeping in mind the double function of Walser-the-clown as both reader and (carnivalistic) text, the description of the clowns may also be seen as an embodiment of how socially constructed reading strategies, in their attempt to fix meaning, rather serve to abolish it, as meaning only exists in the dynamic interplay between reader and text. In the case of the clowns, this dynamic has vanished entirely as they are always taken by their audience to be doing or meaning the same thing – play. The actions of the clowns are by convention automatic and always taken to have the same aim, to provoke laughter. The way the clowns thus have lost their possibility to communicate may serve as a manifestation of how misreadings result from the reader's entrapment in socially constituted reading strategies. As a clown Walser accordingly falls victim to the same mechanisms by means of which he tried to trap Fevvers in “London”. The very hermeneutical structures that governed Walser's attempt to fix Fevvers' identity during their first meeting are those that effectively trap him in “Petersburg”.

In “The Reading Process”, Wolfgang Iser suggests that the reading experience operates on two different levels of consciousness – in the *real* or *virtual* as well as in the *alien* “me” (*The Implied Reader*: 227). This distinction may thus initially seem to suggest much of the same as does Booth's distinction between the real and the implied reader. Iser's approach, though, is strongly influenced by the phenomenology of Husserl and the aesthetics of Roman Ingarden. The latter argues that the intentionality of a work of art, its directedness towards an audience, makes it possible for a reader to re-experience a text in his own consciousness, that is, makes the reader capable of thinking what Iser would call “alien” thoughts. [30] According to Iser, books “consist of ideas thought out by someone else, but in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking” (225). Through the reader's “leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience” (218), suspending “the ideas and attitudes that shape [his] own personality” (225), the division between text and reader momentarily disappears, thus causing new borders of subjectivity to be drawn in the latter.

Iser's stance, it seems, allows for the potential subversive power of literary texts to a greater extent than does that of Rabinowitz. Iser argues that in reading (i.e. through text) the consciousness of reader and author converge. In other words, alien thoughts and ideas temporarily become part of the reader's consciousness in reading, thus redefining the borders of this, making possible - even demanding, I would claim - a change in his/her position in language, and

thereby his/her being-in-the-world as a result.

Iser's phenomenological approach to the work of art is also strongly influenced by the notions of fusing horizons and the productivity of difference proposed in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose concept of play I think will prove useful in my reading of Carter's novel. Gadamer compares the work of art to the concept of play. Play, he argues is "the mode of being of the work of art" ("The Concept of Play", *Truth and Method*: 91). The player is aware that she is only playing, but this awareness must be suspended if the activity is to be successful. Like the player loses herself in play, rather than distancing herself from it as if studying an object, the reader when reading a novel knows that she is dealing with fiction. Yet she is not only able to lose herself in this alternative world and treat it as if real, but, indeed, *has to* do so if reading is to be successful. "In our idea of play", Gadamer writes, "the difference between faith and pretence is dissolved" (94).

By the necessity of losing oneself, the reader, just like the player of a game, does in some sense have to give up control of the situation, herein lies, indeed, the attraction. Playing and reading both involve taking chances and putting oneself/one's self at risk. The player, like the reader, does in other words put herself/her self at play. In this sense, play plays its players rather than the other way around. This is particularly evident in games that are governed by rules. In a game of chess or a match of tennis, for instance, the activity of the players is clearly conducted by the game itself. Similar to Rabinowitz claim that "while the reader does in fact engage in an act of production, he or she makes what the author intended to be found", Gadamer's concept of play implies that the game utilises its players for the sake of self-representation, existing only when taking precedence over them. "All playing is a being-played" (95), claims Gadamer, since the subject of play "is not the player but the game itself" (96).

Similarly, according to Gadamer, what happens in the experience of a work of art, such as a text, is not that the subject (reader, audience etc.) rejoices in an object (the work of art), but that the work of art rejoices in and plays out its recipient. "The structure of play absorbs the player into itself" (94), just like a reading or experiencing subject is drawn into and overwhelmed by a work of art. One may clearly observe the lines toward the Iserian insistence on the dissolvment of object and subject boundaries in the process of reading that has already been discussed. "The work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself", Gadamer claims. Just like play "merely reaches its presentation through the players" (92), a work of art has its true being "in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it" (92).

According to Gadamer, a reader cannot methodologically assure herself that her interpretation of a text is "correct", but has to be prepared to open herself to the potential truths of the text. Thus, as in Iser, the reader's prejudices (beliefs, conceptions of reality) are activated or put into play. To the extent that the reader is able to modify her former prejudice by letting the truth of the text speak, she has *experienced* the text. Consequently, one may deduce, not only is all playing a being-played, but also all reading a being-written.

Nights at the Circus is a novel of play on various levels. On the one hand it engages in a typical postmodernist subversive play of intertextuality and parody, but the concept of play is also of thematical importance. The activity of play becomes a *leitmotif* through the novel, as the majority of its characters are presented as playing games or putting on performances, the major setting of "Petersburg" tellingly being *The Ludic Game*, as the circus is called by its owner.

Fevvers' play on the ambiguity of her appearance is, as argued earlier, performed in order to enable the construction of her identity and subjectivity through the interplay with her audience, Walser in particular. By joining the circus in order to bring this interplay with Fevvers to a resolution, Walser needs to take a step away from what Gadamer calls the "world determined by the seriousness of purpose" (91) into the play of the Ludic Game, where his task is to play the clown, a "green beginner[] in the art of playing" (102). Through the allegory, then, the interactive processes of reading as well as writing are presented as play. In the following I will try to link the reading Walser's taking on the role of the clown to Gadamer's concept of play in order to try to illuminate *Nights at the Circus's* allegory of reading, writing and the possibility of subversion.

While at the circus Walser clearly puts on a different role than the one he usually plays. As a clown, he is described as experiencing "the freedom to juggle with being" and the language which constitutes it (103). Like play demands so of its player, joining the circus demands of Walser that he steps out of his ordinary self: "Walser-the-clown, it seemed, could juggle with the dictionary with a zest that would have abashed Walser-the foreign-correspondent" (98). According to Gadamer, the player "expressly separates off his playing behaviour from his other behaviour by

wanting to play”, choosing an area “that is specifically marked out and reserved for the game” (96). This is exactly what Walser does as he tells his boss that he needs to join the circus in order to have a break from his ordinary doings: “I need to be refreshed. I need to have my sense of wonder polished up again” (90). Paradoxically, his joining the circus ultimately results in his *losing* his sense of wonder, as discussed above.

Initially Walser is in control of his new activity, intending through his play a “relation to seriousness of purpose”, as his aim is to provide the readers of his newspaper with stories “straight from the Ringbark!” (91). His lack of seriousness in play consequently renders his activity at this point a non-play, or an unsuccessful play, in Gadamer’s terms. The first description of Walser as clown is followed by his returning his attention to the typewriter: “His get-up was of the ‘silly kid’ type, with white shirt, baggy short pants, comedy suspenders, a schoolcap atop a fright wig and the wig was coming adrift. Hastily adjusting it, he returned to the keyboard” (98). This is followed by an instance of his journalistic writing. Walser is still *both* a journalist and a clown. Gradually, however, he is absorbed by his role-play, losing himself in it, as an injury prevents him from performing his original occupation and thus renders him nothing but a clown. “He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown, willy-nilly, force of circumstance has turned him into a *real* clown” (145). The fact that Lizzie makes sure to take advantage of this situation, secretly making him send home her own revolutionary writings, serves to emphasise that Walser is “played out”, or being played: “-oh? you’re not despatching for the moment, due to your wound? Well, then, all the more room for *our* stuff!” (156-57). He is merely a courier, subject to the game of others, not aware of what his part consists in, only “that he has been made their dupe” (145). Fevvers’ seduction, which already in “London” served to unsettle Walser, has now caused him to lose his critical journalistic attitude completely. During her show in London Fevvers’ wings disturbed the air so much that “the pages of Walser’s notebook ruffled over and he temporarily lost his place”. On that occasion, though, with a certain amount of effort, he managed “to grab tight hold of his scepticism” (16).

Fevvers has the effect on Walser of drawing him out of his normal patterns of behaviour: “Hadn’t it been for the sudden sting of jealousy that struck him when he thought of Fevvers, (...) in the Grand Duke’s arms, he would, out of sheer curiosity, have stopped to check out Lizzie’s letters, that she was so anxious to despatch to London (...) Might even have spotted the code; the secret writing. Have found a story, there, that would have turned him back into a journalist, again.” (181). Lost in play and in love, Walser, however seems to completely have lost his empiristic-journalistic flair. As his interaction with Fevvers has caused him to change in this manner, she must be said to have succeeded in at least a first step of subversion of him.

Following Gadamer, Walser losing control in his engagement in the game (of reading) seems to be a necessity, since if play (reading) is to be successful, its relationship to and dependency on a “world which is determined by the seriousness of purpose” (92) is not to be intended. Paradoxically then, successful play must in essence be serious, “only seriousness in play makes the play wholly play” (92). At first Walser tries to keep up this link to “the real world”, however, wanting to both play and not play at the same time, or in Gadamer’s words failing to see that the sphere of play is “a closed world without transition and mediation over against the world of aims” (96).

Booth preaches “[t]he divorce between my ordinary self and the selves I am willing to become as I read” (138), the need to become the reader a book demands of us. Rabinowitz similarly stresses the need for the reader to join a text’s narrative audience in order to have a full experience of it. But the latter activity seems to be less a matter of losing oneself, than a matter of a dynamic tension between being lost and not. Gadamer stresses a similar productivity of difference. To him reading involves not the kind of effacing of the self that one sees in Booth. Losing oneself in the aesthetic experience is according to Gadamer rather the giving in to the dynamic interplay between one’s own prejudices, one’s horizon and that of the text. The to-and-fro movement of this interplay, “the game itself”, is what constitutes aesthetic experience, thus the work of art. Walser’s being trapped in his role as a clown may be viewed as foreshadowing the event in “Siberia” which causes him to lose his position in language completely, inhibiting the dynamic to-and-fro movement.

Essential in play is its renewing of itself in constant repetition, which Gadamer calls the essential to-and-fro nature of play, linking the concept to the original meaning of *spiel* as dance. In Petersburg, when ordered to dance with the tigress that almost killed him earlier, Walser obeys, but excuses himself: “Walser by name I may be, ma’am, but I fear I’m no dancing man” (164) Later, however, it is exactly as a dancer (player) he identifies himself: “‘Waltz!’ he cried. And then, with glad recognition: ‘Walser! Me, Walser!’” (...) “‘Walser is me’”(259).

The to-and-fro movement causes the player to be absorbed into play, freeing her from the burden of the initiative by

drawing her effortlessly along. In order for such a movement to be generated, a player always needs something or someone to play with that responds with a counter-move. "Thus the cat at play chooses the ball of wool because it responds to play". Because "freely mobile in every direction, appearing to do surprising things of its own accord" (95), a ball is the perfect playmate. As argued earlier, the dynamic interaction between reader and text may be described in similar terms, rendering the to-and-fro movement that holds the kitten in its spell analogous to that of the play which absorbs a reader in her interaction with a text.

"Every game presents the man who plays it with a task" (96), Gadamer writes - Walser's is to play the clown, an activity which results in his gradual absorption into the Ludic Game - becoming a clown for real - his "being-played". "In spending oneself on the task of the game, one is", according to Gadamer, "in fact, playing oneself out" (97). This because "the purpose of the game is not really the solution of the task, but the ordering and shaping of the movement of the game itself" (97), in other words the *self-representation* of play, just as textual meaning comes into being through the reader's engagement with it.

In a play acted out on a stage, players play their roles as in any game (thus play is represented), but the play in such cases comprises the spectators as well as the players. Actually a total switch then takes place, putting the spectator in the place of the player, illustrated literally in *Nights at the Circus* by having Walser, the reader of Fevvers' performance, play the clown. A stage play, like any artistic presentation, by nature exists *for* someone, this trait being its essence. However, this "[o]penness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play. The audience only completes what the play as such is" (Gadamer: 98). Or, as Rabinowitz puts it: "while the reader does in fact engage in an act of production, he or she makes what the author intended to be found" (28). The clown that willingly puts on a mask only to lose himself behind it does, like the player/reader, "enjoy[] a freedom of decision which at the same time is endangered and irrevocably limited" (95).

There are plenty of passages in *Nights at the Circus* which problematise the idea of "freedom behind the mask" that may also allude to the function and coming into being of language. Words and sentences are seen as constructing "reality", rather than mirroring it, as the relation between the two is strictly arbitrary. Linguistic rules, rather than reality itself, govern language. It is in other words the relationship between the internal components of language which determines their meaning, rather than their relation to reality.

"Without Grik, Grik is a lost syllable, a typo on a programme, a signpainter's hiccup on a billboard." (123).
"their white faces possessed the formal lifelessness of death masks, as if (...) they themselves were absent" (116)
"It occurred to Walser they thought his white, red and black clown make-up was his real face" (110)
"And so my face eclipses me. I have become this face which is not mine, yet I chose it freely" (122)

The clowns in general gain their meaning through their opposition to "ordinary people" as well as defining these as "ordinary", thus the atmosphere of Clown Alley is likened to that of "a prison or a madhouse" (116). Our singularity or difference in relation to others is necessary in the construction of our own identity, as this is only activated in interaction with others. This is especially clear in the case of Fevvers. Just as she gains her identity through her difference (a fact which of course also makes her dependent on her others), a text gains its meaning through differing from its reader, through his or her "filling in of the gaps". The mechanisms of identity may be viewed as analogous to the mechanisms of textual meaning, as the coming into being of Fevvers' identity/subjectivity through the interplay with Walser allegorically represents the establishment of textual meaning. Like Gadamer's concept of play, identity and textual meaning also only exist in/as an interactive process. The subject of Gadamer's game, or the subject of reading, is neither the text, nor the reader, but the meanings they acquire in the process of interacting.

Walser's encounter with the narratives of Fevvers is described in terms bringing to mind those Gadamer uses to illustrate the to-and-fro movement of play in the example above (60): "He continued to take notes in a mechanical fashion but, as the women unfolded their joint stories together, he felt more and more like a kitten tangling up in a ball of wool it had never intended to unravel in the first place" (40). This passage, though, seems to present Walser's activity as play frustrated and should be read as pointing forward to "Petersburg" where Walser loses himself in the game of clowning, only to find out that Fevvers disapproves of clowns in the first place.

The clowns are, as already discussed, presented as trapped and controlled by their occupation, their situation likened to that of prostitutes. Just as there is no desire involved in the occupation of prostitution, there is no mirth involved in clowning for the clowns themselves. "Nothing is more boring than being forced to play." (109) Because the clowns have opted to join the game, it has played them out. They will forever be the object of laughter "and yet- yet! also the subject of laughter. For what we are, we have chosen to be" (119). From the moment of this choice, the meaning of a clown's action will always be the same for his audience who paradoxically will consider him "as being

perpetually at play” (119). All his freedom is lost, as his audience will always read his action in the same manner- in accordance with the rules of the game- whatever he says or does. Walser has joined the game of clowning out of his free will, but after this decision, it seems, he is only able to exert his play within certain given limits, as convention has written or defined him: “It was as if a fairy godmother had given each clown an ambivalent blessing when he was born: you can do anything as long as nobody takes you seriously” (157). The game of Colonel Kearney’s Imperial Circus is paradoxically everything but a *ludic* game.

However, the sense of frustrated play should first and foremost be seen to point forward to “Siberia” where Walser loses language and thus identity altogether. This losing of the self, reminiscent of Booth’s notion of the reader’s leaving her self behind for that which the text has prescribed for her, allows no room for the dynamics of difference so important in Gadamer and Rabinowitz, hence the movement of play ceases.

Nights at the Circus offers comments on different views on how a text in general works on its reader, being at one level always an attempt at subversion, always seeking (more or less radically) to re-position her.^[31] “London” may, as argued in Chapter 1, be seen as laying bare the dialectic relationship between reader and text. The section illustrates how the difference between the world of the text and that of the reader is what enables their interaction, as well as defining their respective boundaries. In “London”, however, the interaction between reader and text, Walser and Fevvers, does not seem to result in a synthesis incorporating the reading experience into a new and modified identity or subjectivity on the reader’s behalf. His interest, however, is aroused. “Curiouser and curiouser” (90), he thinks, and the section ends with him returning to the text, but this time from a different angle, as he decides to join Fevvers’ world of performance through enlisting with the circus. In Rabinowitz’ terms, the first section of the novel may be read as demonstrating how Fevvers as text seems to contest the beliefs of her actual reader, illustrating how the authorial and narrative readers she needs and demands differs from her actual one. In response to the discrepancies between his own conceptions and beliefs on the one hand and the world that Fevvers is offering him on the other - “Shall I believe it? Shall I pretend to believe in it?” - Walser decides to join the circus to pursue the text, opening up to the role(s) this interaction may demand of him to play.

In Iserian terms, the reading experience and its need for deciphering is what gives us as readers “the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity, i.e. bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious” (227). Reading is in other words not only an activity which brings the text, but also the self into existence, as it provides us with a “possibility to formulate ourselves” (227). The ephemeral or even illusory freedom involved in this formulation as presented in Carter’s allegory, has already been discussed in relation to Walser’s activity as clown. His willingly taking on a new role prescribed for him by someone else, only to lose himself behind it, brings to mind what Grok says about masks:

Sometimes, it seems, (...) that the faces exist of themselves, in a disembodied somewhere, waiting for the clown who will wear them, who will bring them to life. Faces that wait in the mirrors of unknown dressing-rooms, unseen in the depths of the glass like fish in dusty pools, fish that will rise up out of the obscure profundity when they spot the one who anxiously scrutinises his own reflection for the face that it lacks, man-eating fish waiting to gobble up our being and give you another instead. (122)

Subversion (by implication, reading) in “Petersburg” is closely tied to the carnivalesque. Walser’s activity behind the mask of the clown is explicitly linked to the burlesque (103). Through the allegory the novel seeks to tie the reading process to the circus and the carnivalesque, as the paths of Walser and Fevvers, reader and text, are described as “converg[ing] only upon the brick barracks of the Imperial Circus” (104).

The carnivalesque is a mode, however, which the novel also severely criticises, precisely through the description of Walser in his new role. He has sought to understand Fevvers by entering her world. She does, however, turn out to hate clowns. “Don’t you know how I hate clowns, young man? I truly think they are a crime against humanity” (143), she reproaches him. Thus Walser’s play/reading is frustrated, as anticipated in “London”, he starts to get tangled up in the ball of wool.

In “Siberia” Walser is once more born anew. This time his rebirth is a total regression, as he loses language and memory and thus literally behaves like an infant. In contrast to his willed renewal in “Petersburg” (he literally *begged* for it), this time it is not at any stage voluntary, as his new state of mind is caused by a severe blow on the head in the train crash. The following chapter will treat the latter section of *Nights at the Circus* and the discussion will, as in the above, revolve around the illusory freedom of Walser, the reader in the allegory, in his relation to Fevvers, the text.

[20] Narrator here meaning “higher” narratorial authority as in Rimmon-Kenan: “In my view there is always a teller in the tale, at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it. Even when a narrative text presents passages of pure dialogue (...) there is in addition to the speakers or writers of this discourse a ‘higher’ narratorial authority responsible for ‘quoting’ the dialogue or ‘transcribing’ the written records” (88). In referring to the narrator in this sense, I use the pronoun “it”.

[21] This dialectic is, in slightly different terms, also addressed by Linda Ruth Williams who reads *Nights at the Circus* as intersecting both the realm of the Freudian concept of fantasy, seen to govern the shaping of sexed identities, as well as Todorov’s concept of fantasy as genre, both relying upon visions of the impossible or unbelievable image (“Writing at Play”).

[22] Actually Booth never explicitly uses the term *implied reader*, this rather being a term attributed to him as it serves to denote the conceptual counterpart of his *implied author* which is logically inferred from his discussion.

[23] He must have meant the *implied author*’s?

[24] Fish claims that a reader reads the meaning *into* a text, rather than *from it*, and that this activity is governed by the particular interpretive community to which the reader belongs (“Interpreting the *Variorum*”).

[25] Barthes preaches the birth of the reader at the cost of the death of the author. “A text’s unity”, he claims, “lies not in its origin but in its destination” (*Death of the Author*: 171).

[26] “One of the book’s most striking effects – much rehearsed by Carter in the short stories – is the way the narrative labour is shared out, intercutting the third person with speeches, inset tales, metafictional overviews, and so forth.” (Lorna Sage. *Angela Carter*: 46)

[27] <http://www.vinduet.no/arkiv/klassikere/06.html>

[28] See for instance Paulina Palmer’s: “From coded Mannequin to Bird Woman: Angela Carter’s Magic Flight”, Magali Cornier Michael’s “Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*: An engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies” and Elaine Jordan’s: “Enthralment: Angela Carter’s Speculative Fictions” as examples of the former camp, and Aidan Day: *The Rational Glass* for an example of the latter.

[29] “the very gilt ceremonial sword (...) that she used to wear at her side, and sometimes use as a staff to conduct the revels - her wand, like Prospero’s” (37).

³⁰ See Roman Ingarden *The Cognition of the Work of Art* §4, p 16. The argument largely rests on his previous work *The Literary Work of Art*.

[31] Confer with Gadamer’s view that the work of art has its true being “in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it” (92).



Chapter 3

As discussed in the previous chapter, Walser's attempt to read Fevvers by taking on the role of a clown does not result in a termination of his project. What, then, happens during Siberia, that seems to enable the desired for union between reader and text? As I have tried to show in the above, the seeming empowerment of the reader in the allegory, which turns out to be the opposite, is a tendency which may also be seen mirrored in the way Carter's novel itself works on its reader. Seeking to further illuminate the nature of the relationship between reader and text, which has been discussed earlier in relation to Rabinowitz, Gadamer and Iser, I will in the following turn to its erotic aspect, entering the argument via the concepts of Socratic dialogue and Socratic irony as they appear in Plato.

Socratic dialogue refers to a philosophical method of systematic doubt and questioning of another to elicit a clear expression of a truth, while the term Socratic irony designates the pose of ignorance and of willingness to learn as one interrogates another on the meaning of a concept. In Plato's works Socrates feigns ignorance, as well as an eagerness to be instructed by his partner in conversation by asking him questions that leads the dialogue to a definition.

...if any of you think that I am allowing myself to assume what is not true, he must interrupt and challenge me. I am not speaking dogmatically from the certainty of assured knowledge; I am simply your fellow explorer in the search for truth. (Georgias: 115)

In principle, Socrates hesitates to put forward an argument or a view; rather he makes the other take a stand in questions he asks him. Seemingly, then, Socrates tries to avoid any claims, still seeking, however, to make the other think in specific terms. On the surface Socrates furnishes his partner with a great deal of power when it comes to providing the answer to the problem under discussion, while he is in fact directing the other to an answer he already seems to know. Socrates' questions, the frame he sets for the discussion, seem to be what in the end determine its outcome, his aim being clearly didactic. As Socrates himself tells one of his interlocutors, it is his aim to prove a point to him "in order to *persuade* you, if I can, to *change your mind*" (Georgias: 93 emphasis added). As the Socratic dialogue consists in teaching by questioning, it deceptively empowers the pupil by letting him provide the answers. As will be argued below, the relationship between Fevvers and Walser may be characterised in similar terms.

Like Socrates, Fevvers also has a didactic project, obviously wanting to mould Walser. "Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him" (281). Apart from her didactic aspiration, Fevvers' real name, Sophia, and her greed for money do in fact seem to link her closer to Socrates' contemporaries, the Sophists.^[32] Plato was at pains to distance Socrates from the Sophists, his main charge against them being that they used the dialectic of antilogic^[33] only for the purpose of winning an argument, and not in order to ascend to an understanding of the forms, i.e. the truth. (Kerferd: 247). Fevvers must also be seen as differing from Socrates in this respect, where his aim is to lose himself through dialogue, by letting language or truth speak, Fevvers' dialogue with Walser is intended solely to *sustain* her self.

According to Roland Barthes in his *Retorikken*, the relationship between the two participants in a dialogue is of an erotic kind (14), which is also, as will be discussed below, the one between reader and text. If, following Plato's ideal, the participants in a dialogue regard the process as a mutual help towards knowledge, aiming to settle a problem rather than to prove the other wrong, an amorous relationship between the two will result. The challenged participant will come to love the one who asks him questions, and seek his company (Næss: 96). The dynamics of such a dialogic relationship may be viewed as analogous to that which governs the reading process as presented in Carter's allegory, love and the erotic being important features of the relationship between Walser and Fevvers. Throughout "London" Fevvers constantly challenges Walser's conceptions of reality and thus forces him to revise his opinions, whereupon Walser falls in love and decides to follow Fevvers to Petersburg. As will be argued in the following, the dynamic between Socrates and his antagonist, being enabled by the former deceptively giving the activity of the other prominence, is mirrored in the relationship between Walser and Fevvers in "Siberia". Fevvers apparently needs Walser to tell her the truth of her being, while, in the end, as foreboded by her assuming control in "London", he is forced to give in to a dialectic whose premises are given by her alone.

"Siberia" starts off with Fevvers' own first-person narration, accounting for the travels of Colonel Kearney's circus on the Transsiberian railway, heading for Japan. The train suffers an explosion, however, and the crash causes Fevvers and Walser to be separated. While Fevvers and the rest of the party are kidnapped by outlaws, Walser is

rendered unconscious by a blow on the head and buried alive in “stored away tablecloths and napkins, some clean, some soiled” (209). Paradoxically, the journey Walser has undertaken in order to experience a union with Fevvers leads to their separation. The description of his accident echoes the episode in “London” when Walser, for fear of getting drunk (losing himself as reader of Fevvers) tries to get rid of his glass without knocking his head on the mantelpiece, only succeeding “in dislodging a noisy torrent of concealed *billets doux*, bringing with them from the mantelpiece a writhing snakes’ nest of silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black, that introduced a powerful note of stale feet” (9). While in “London” Walser’s self is challenged by the effect of Fevvers’ narratives on his conceptions of reality, in “Siberia” he loses himself in a literal sense in an intensifying repetition of the first event. [34]

In contrast to the occasion in Fevvers’ dressing room, this time Walser is not able to evade the knock on his head, which results in him virtually reverting to the state of an infant. When he wakes up he has lost all linguistic conceptions that earlier served as categories in which to order his experiences and impressions. “Walser no longer knew enough to ask ‘Where am I?’ Like the landscape, he was a perfect blank” (222). His first word is “mama” (222), and just as in the case of an infant, Walser’s being is now governed by bodily senses rather than by his mind: “He is a sentient being still, but no longer a rational one; indeed, now he is all sensibility, without a grain of sense, and sense impressions alone have the power to shock and to ravish him” (236). The rational, almost scientific attitude that governed Walser’s reading in “London” is now all gone. The “professional necessity to see all and believe all” (10) is replaced by the primacy of sense impressions over rationality, and later a philosophical attitude replaces the one of empirical verification. The questions he asks Fevvers as they are reunited towards the end of the novel: “Have you a Soul. Can you love?” (291), display a radical change in his attitude as compared to the one witnessed in “London”. As mentioned earlier, though, this change from mind to body, from sense to sensibility has been in process throughout the section of “Petersburg”.

Two things, so far, have conspired together to throw Walser off his equilibrium. One: his right arm is injured and, although healing well, he cannot write or type until it is better, so he is deprived of his profession. (...) Two: he has fallen in love, a condition that causes him anxiety because he has not experienced it before. (145)

As the train crashes, it seems, the transformation that was first generated by Walser’s falling in love, starting already in “London”, is brought to a climax. The incident may be viewed as a literalisation of Walser losing himself as a reader of Fevvers, or, as Iser puts it, of the reader’s “leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience” (218) and his suspension of the “ideas and attitudes that shape [his] personality” (225).

With reference to Brian McHale’s *Postmodern Fiction*, Beth A. Boehm argues that love in post-modern fiction is often a *metaobject* which “characterises not the fictional interactions *in* the text’s world, but rather the interactions *between* the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other” (203). In *Nights at the Circus* one finds love in both these senses, as the allegorical relationship between Walser and Fevvers establishes love and desire as important features of the relationship between text and reader. In an article on the narcissism of current literary theory, Maria Margaroni also points to the parallel between the lover and the reader, considering the literary critic’s desire for a union with the text as analogous to the lover’s desire for union with the beloved. “It is, then, to this final erotic embrace, this coming together in language, in the critic’s commentary on the text, that criticism has always aspired, and for the sake of which the critic has felt the need to abdicate the self” (“From Medusa’s gaze to the myth of Narcissus”: 77).

The aim of Margaroni’s article is to show that the narcissism of current literary theory may not necessarily render it as unhealthy and unproductive as it is often accused of being. Thus, she consistently writes of the literary *critic’s*, rather than the *reader’s* relationship to the text. Still, keeping in mind the already discussed views of Iser, Booth and Gadamer, I think that the parallels Margaroni draws between the critic and the amorous subject is apt also when it comes to the *reader’s* relation to the text. Thus, the act of reading may be viewed as an act of lovemaking between reader and text, the reader aiming at a union with the truth of the text through the process.

According to Margaroni, the anxiety concerning the narcissism of current literary theory rests on its differentiation of current *theory* from traditional literary *criticism*. Theory is accused of its “inflated interest and projection of itself” and the infertility of its “abnormal, irresponsible, destructive and self-destructive erotic fixation with the self” (75), that is, its own discourse. Unlike traditional literary criticism, which is regarded as “outward-looking, heteroerotic (...), healthily related to the other” (75), current theory has betrayed the other (the text, Echo), thus cutting off the romantic love relation. While (narcissistic) theory indulges in its own discourse, traditional literary criticism humbly approaches the text as some kind of divinity that holds the truth that he or she desires to glimpse through the abdication of the self (Margaroni: 77). The discourse and attitude of the traditional critic, then, may be seen to

resemble the lover's discourse about the loved being.

Like the speaking agent in Roland Barthes' simulation of the discourse of the amorous subject in *A Lover's Discourse*, [35] the traditional critic/reader is commonly seen to approach the beloved (the text) with a sense of his/her own inadequacy and an awareness of the inability to find words to express its otherness. Just as the lover in Barthes sees the beloved as an object that cannot be adequately represented, the critic/reader engages with the text with the awareness that it will never be understood or captured in its entirety. In the words of Barthes' amorous subject: "The other whom I love and who fascinates me is *atopos*. I cannot classify the other, for the other is, precisely, Unique" (Barthes: 34). "Being Atopic, the other makes language indecisive: one cannot speak *of* the other, *about* the other: the other is *unqualifiable* (this would be the true meaning of *atopos*)" (35).

Despite the awareness of the other as *atopos*, the "dream of the total union with the loved being" persists (Barthes: 228). Although the realisation of the dream is impossible, the desire for its fulfilment, the desire to fully understand the object, grasp its otherness or truth, is what drives the lover and reader forward. The dream of union as the driving force of reading is reminiscent of Iser's concept of the tension between the reader's illusion of coherence and the text's polysemantic nature as constituting the dynamics of a text, as well as of Gadamer's hermeneutics. As discussed earlier, it is such a dream of penetration of Fevvers' truth, a desire for the closure of an unambiguous meaning, which makes Walser join the circus and causes him to undertake a journey which ends in him being rendered "a perfect blank"(222), the abdication of his self.

"I am engulfed, I succumb" (10), cries Barthes' lover, and this has, Margaroni points out, "traditionally been the critic's cry in the face of the text" (76), as the text is seen as charming, enchanting and casting a spell on the critic/reader. The relationship between Fevvers and Walser in "London" is characterised precisely by these factors. Walser is seduced by Fevvers' narratives; he becomes "a prisoner of her voice" (43), time and situation magically standing still as Big Ben strikes midnight three times. He has set out to make Fevvers his quarry, but she assumes a position of authority, which soon makes Walser realise that his prey has trapped him instead (9).

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes links the discourse of love to violence. In the first fragment of "Ravishment" he refers to two myths of the relationship between lovers, one ancient and one modern. The former refers to the view of love as a violent ravishment where the active male part sweeps the passive female part off her feet and carries her away, "in the ancient myth, the ravisher is active, he wants to seize his prey, he is the subject of the rape (of which the object is a woman, as we know, invariably passive)" (Barthes: 188). In the modern myth, however, love is conceived of as passion (in the obsolete sense of suffering), and the object of the ravishment turns into the active, suffering part, as the other draws back. "This singular reversal", Barthes proposes, "may perhaps proceed from the fact that for us the 'subject' (since Christianity) is *the one who suffers*" (189). As such, the distinctions and shift between the archaic and modern myths set up by Barthes seem to be historically determined. In the subsequent fragments, however, he uses these shifts to simulate the lover's discourse in different stages of a particular love relationship. In the discussion below, the opposition between Barthes' ancient and modern myths will be used in both these senses, illustrating how the relationship between Fevvers and Walser develops in time, and also how Fevvers' reversal of the gender roles of the ancient model may be viewed as part of her subversive project. The manner in which Barthes' scheme seems to be unsettled by the notion of the narcissistic text will also be discussed.

In his first meeting with Fevvers, Walser sets out according to the ancient myth of the active, male ravisher, wanting to seize his prey, the passive woman, the object of his rape, but Fevvers soon manages to reverse these roles. In "London" she is the seductive teller, Walser the told, the object of her verbal ravishment, rendering the section her overturn of the traditional relationship between male seducer/ravisher and his female object. Fevvers' words are the ones that start (as well as end) the novel. Throughout the section of "London" she is clearly the one with the initiative and the one in control, thus reversing conventional gender roles which link the feminine to passivity and the male to activity.

This reversal in turn causes Walser to take on the role of the ravished object of Barthes' modern myth of love-as-passion, as Fevvers becomes "the ravisher [who] wants nothing, does nothing; [s]he is motionless" (188). In "London" this shift is foreboded in the instances where Fevvers ceases her narration and narcissistically turns in on her own image in the mirror. After their first meeting in London, Walser is the one who actively pursues their relationship, deciding to follow her to Petersburg. He goes from being the passive "*object* of capture" to becoming "the *subject* of love", the active, amorous subject.[36] Consequently, Fevvers, the *subject* of his conquest, moves into the class of loved *object*. [37] Walser's relationship to Fevvers is an allegory of the reader who takes the ever-

elusive text as object of his desire. Accordingly, Fevvers may in “London” be seen to play the role that Margaroni attributes to the text as “the active (male) member of the pair which assaults and seduces the critic/lover, changing him irrevocably” (76). After being seduced through “London”, the ravished Walser takes on the role of the amorous subject. The reversed gender roles persist, though, as “the lover – the one who has been ravished - is always implicitly feminized” (Barthes: 188-89).

In Barthes’ model, the aspect of violence in the relationship between the lover and his object is, as mentioned, clearly present. With similar connotations, Geoffrey Hartman uses W. B. Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” as a metaphor for the hermeneutic activity, viewing this as a violent seduction, a rape, which for the reader “seems to contain the promise not only of mastery but also paradoxically, of joining oneself to an overwhelming intent even at the cost of being subdued” (22).

*A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.*

*How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
(...)*

*Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent back could let her drop?*

Paradoxically, then, reading involves not only a desire to penetrate the truth of the text, but also an invitation to be penetrated, as in the joining of a text’s authorial audience. Or in the words of the amorous subject: “*You have every mastery over me, but I have every knowledge of you*” (Barthes: 229). The mastery over the other gained through the knowledge of its truth will paradoxically always also involve the surrender to it.

In “London” Walser’s desire for mastery over Fevvers through knowledge is evident. With his sharpened pencil poised, he is ready to penetrate the image of Fevvers, “to ‘puff’ her” (11), clearly considering himself to be an emissary of truth. He wants to write the truth of Fevvers, to be the only one to know her. Like Barthes’ amorous subject, Walser, as lover and reader, seeks to understand his other, to be the one who possesses the truth she conceals, or to possess her in her truth. “[O]nly I know him”, says Barthes’ lover, “only I make him exist in his truth” (229). Walser intends to use Fevvers’ story as part of his own writing, the series called “Great Humbugs of the World” (11). Initially, then, he seems to want to write Fevvers in *his own* truth by proving her false, rather than to penetrate and possess her in *her* truth. As, according to Barthes, there is always the narcissism of self-representation involved even in amorous discourse, [38] this is also an aspect of Walser’s reading activity. He is, however, as his reading progresses, ready to abdicate his self (as illustrated in his playing the clown in “Petersburg”), ready to be mastered in order to gain knowledge. Thus he may be seen to resemble Leda in her surrender to the divinity of the swan, the novel’s ending - Fevvers hovering on top of Walser - being an evocation of this rape and the yielding to it.

Throughout “Petersburg” and parts of “London”, Walser is presented as the amorous reader of Fevvers. In “Siberia”, though, yet another reversal of Barthes’ scheme occurs. Just before the train crashes it is obvious that Fevvers, too, is falling in love. She is no longer merely the object of Walser’s desire; she is also a desiring subject, seemingly wanting to reach the true Walser, the man underneath the make-up: [39]

What is it this young man reminds me of? A piece of music composed for one instrument and played on another. An oil sketch for a great canvas. ... his sunburned bones! His sunbleached hair! Underneath his make-up, that face, like a beloved face known long ago, and lost, and now returned, although I never knew him before, although he is a stranger, still that face which I have always loved before I ever saw it so that to see him is to remember, except it might be the vague, imaginary face of desire (204)

Immediately after Fevvers’ outburst of desirous thoughts, the train crashes and she is separated from her love object. “Of my young man no sign” (205), she laments. After the separation Fevvers seems to take on the active role of the amorous subject, longing for and seeking a union with Walser, the object of her love. She gets down on her knees before the train wreck, wanting to excavate him from a place her “bewildered eyes thought they’d glimpsed a movement” (206). With disappointment, however, she has to conclude: “of the young fellow who was *my* quest”

(206), there is still no trace. In “Siberia” Fevvers seems to establish Walser as the one holding the truth she wants to possess “The young American it was who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true” (273). Walser himself, on the contrary, lives according to a cosmology where no truths exist, as there are no falsities. Interestingly, parallel to Fevvers’ change from being a loved object to becoming an amorous subject, “Siberia” features extensive instances of her first person narration.

In the allegory, then, the text assumes an active, male part, as Walser, who sets out to puncture the flying wonder, is seduced by her narration instead. After this ravishment, however, Fevvers becomes passive, thus causing Walser to take on the active role of the ravisher, following her to Petersburg. Towards the end, another shift takes place, as in “Siberia” Fevvers, the text, seems to put on the role of the amorous subject, with Walser, the reader, as her loved object. Fevvers’ pursuit of Walser, though, is primarily of the narcissistic kind. She seems to need her love object as a mirror to confirm her own truth, more than she desires to penetrate *his* truth. “She longed to see herself reflected in all her remembered splendour in his grey eyes” (273). Unlike Walser as amorous subject, looking to penetrate the truth of Fevvers, she is less willing to abdicate her self; indeed, her quest is rather the avoidance of such an abdication. She needs Walser less as a lover, it seems, than as a means to (re)establish her own self. “Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe (285)”, Fevvers tells Lizzie. “Her misery was exacerbated by the knowledge that the young American, to whom she had taken such a fancy was so near, but yet so far away. Exacerbated, but not caused. Her gloom had other causes” (272). Feeling that she has “mislaid some vital something of [herself] along the road” (273), Fevvers needs Walser to confirm her being, her truth. “The young American it was who kept the whole story of old Fevvers in his notebooks” (273), a story *she* has provided him with.

As mentioned earlier, a narcissistic aspect is always present in amorous discourse, but to Barthes’ amorous subject, as to Walser as lover, this narcissism is manifested only in the power of the knowledge of the other, the knowledge of which truth will always also imply surrender to it. Fevvers, it seems, wants power through the possession of her own truth alone, gained through her love object’s surrender to it. Fevvers’ fear of solitude is a fear of the loss of the self. In the same manner that Fevvers needs Walser, Carter’s text, itself, may seem to need a/n (authorial) reader. As mentioned earlier, both Fevvers and the novel need a reader to recognise the ironies and doubleness so essential to their identity for these features to take effect at all. When united with Walser, Fevvers, “horror of horrors” (289), sees that he considers her to be perfectly normal, as to Walser, in his new state, *seeing is believing*. When he no longer seems capable of scepticism, thus being disabled as reader, Fevvers suffers her worst crisis: *She felt herself trapped forever in the reflection in Walser’s eyes. For one moment, just one moment, Fevvers suffered the worst crisis of her whole life: ‘Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?’* (290)

As Fevvers’ existence depends on others questioning its authenticity, in the same manner as a subversive or ironic statement needs a reader to perceive it as such in order to retain its essential doubleness, Walser’s new state is a threat to her. The importance of the dialectic relation of a text to its reader, the lingering between the latter’s belief and disbelief, is evident. Fevvers wants mastery over herself through Walser by making him read and reflect her identity the way she intends it to be perceived, but his eyes seem “to have lost the power to reflect” (289). As a last resort she spreads her wings, attracting the gaze of all those present in the god-hut, their “eyes fixed upon her with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was” (290). As she sinks down in a curtsy before Walser, the haze clears from his eyes. This act seems to form a contrast to her appearance in London where she leaves her ability to fly to Walser’s imagination (Ch 1: 15).

In the novel’s first section the limits of narrative representation are presented as that which engages the reader’s imagination and thereby enables the text’s coming into existence. In Siberia, however, Walser and Fevvers are for the most part separated, thus such a dynamic is inhibited. In addition Walser has, as mentioned, lost his place in language, a fact which causes his eyes to lose “the power to reflect”. When they are reunited, however, Fevvers plays less on her ambiguity and to a greater extent forces an image of herself upon Walser and the rest of her audience. In Iser’s terms she may seem “to set the whole picture before [her] reader’s eyes” (218) instead of activating the reader’s imagination in order to involve him in the shaping of the text. In the case of Fevvers it is her extra attributes rather than her lacks that draw attention, thus the reader is left with less productive power than in Iser, where s/he is to “fill in the gaps”. In the end Fevvers seems to be less interested in the dialectic itself, the affirmation of her self being her ultimate aim. This lack of dialectic is foreboded in the already discussed image of Walser’s impeded play as reader of Fevvers, likened to a kitten “tangling up in a ball of wool” (40). However, even though Fevvers may seem to “set the whole picture before her reader’s eyes” in the end, the reader is still never sure whether her wings are real or not. While Walser was “putty” in the hands of Fevvers “since the first moment he saw

her" (294), he, in turn, seems to have no power in moulding her. Walser undergoes a tremendous change, whereas Fevvers, as Lorna Sage puts it, "stays her own woman throughout, and keeps her mystery, the picaresque heroine whose experience rolls off her like water off a duck" (*Angela Carter*: 47). This tension between Fevvers' stable image of herself as a self-conscious text and her need for an audience who questions the authenticity of her existence, pervades the whole novel, and is, as will be argued later, linked to the paradox of metafiction.

The "Envoi" depicts a Walser who has learned that total union with the other is an illusion. Still being uncertain as to what to believe, he has, however, accepted this as a fact of reading, seemingly having given up the desire for mastery over / penetration of Fevvers, recognising her as *atopos*. He has become the passive part, the loved object, the object of the lover's rape. Thus one may read the ending - the winged Fevvers on top of Walser, urging him to surrender to her truth, and his subsequent yielding - as a re-enactment of Leda's rape. Still there is a disturbing ambiguity in this image, as it evokes the notion of prostitution at the same time. Walser's willing surrender to Fevvers may be seen as him selling himself / his self for knowledge of her. Walser's activity as clown in "Petersburg" is also linked to prostitution. Putting on the mask of the clown, believing it will allow him to "juggle with being", he ends up losing himself behind it instead, becoming a "whore of mirth", condemned to be laughed at. His lack of control is evident also as Fevvers' laughter ends the novel, Walser not being quite sure "whether or not he might be the butt of the joke" (295).

If one reads the novel's ending as a re-enactment of Leda's rape, the relationship between Walser and Fevvers seems to have reverted back to Barthes' ancient scheme of the ravisher / ravished relation, only with inverted gender roles. The allegory of *Nights at the Circus*, however, seems to destabilise the two kinds of relationships between reader and text that may be read from Barthes' myths. In the end Walser seems to occupy the role of the feminine part of the ancient myth, with Fevvers as his male ravisher. Still, Fevvers may also be regarded as re-feminised, as the ravished and suffering amorous subject of the modern myth. Her suffering is what seems to set her apart from the ravisher of the ancient myth, yet her extensive narcissism distinguishes her from the amorous subject. As argued, Fevvers seems to be after Walser's truth about *herself*, the verification of her own truth, rather than his truth through the abdication of her self. However, like Barthes' amorous subject, who "cannot write his love story" (93), Fevvers needs Walser to tell her own story. "Only the Other could write my love story, my novel" (93). The paradox of Fevvers, who needs Walser to write her story, is similar to that of the metafictional text which calls for the reader as co-producer, but at the same time pre-empts its own reading. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, "the point of *metafiction* is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary, and in so doing, (...) sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered" (*Narcissistic Narrative*: 6). Thus one may actually regard Fevvers as the narcissistic text that in her suffering decides to turn to her reader, her Echo, who cannot but repeat her narrative. (Which is what Walser does in "London".) Fevvers is in the end the amorous subject who "[d]espite the difficulties of [her] story, despite discomforts, doubts, despairs, despite impulses to be done with it" (Barthes: 22), wants to re-enact the love story. "Let us begin again" (24), cries Barthes' lover. "That's the way to start the interview", Fevvers cries, "Get out your pencil and we'll begin!" (291).

Let us briefly return to the discussion of narcissistic theory versus traditional literary criticism. Maria Margaroni tries to refute the claim that current theory is less productive than traditional literary criticism because of its narcissism. The pleasure the so-called healthy outward-looking literary criticism or commentary takes in "its knowledge of and about the text, in its exaltation of the eye / I that sees and pronounces (...) its presumption to speak in the name and for the other" (82), she claims, is clearly of a narcissistic kind. The overt self-reflexivity of contemporary theory, in contrast, "should not be perceived as ego-centric", since "reflexivity never leaves the ego intact" (83). By putting itself within the frame, current theory challenges and interrogates its own existence, rather than glorify and reinforce it. Paradoxically one loses the self by making it the object of one's gaze. The productive and self-renewing aspect of overt narcissism opposes the hidden, but essential narcissism of traditional criticism that is seemingly "healthily related to the other", but for which the Swan's rape of Leda serves as a better metaphor. The lover's discourse about the loved object has already been established as analogous to the discourse and attitude of the traditional literary critic. By way of the last reversal of Barthes' scheme, caused by Fevvers' narcissism, she is in "Siberia" also linked to the discourse of the lover, sharing its obscured self-interest. Fevvers is the narcissistic subject deceptively turning to her other, only to make him reflect her self, a Narcissus who rapes Echo.

Likewise, the self-reflexivity of *Nights at the Circus* renders its relation to the reader an ambiguous one. At one level the metafictional quality of the novel seems to empower the reader, in that it makes the reader aware of her role in constructing the fictional universe.

[The] central paradox for readers [of the metafictional text] is that, while being made aware of the linguistic and

fictive nature of what is being read, and thereby distanced from any unself-conscious identification on the level of character or plot, readers of metafiction are at the same time made mindful of their active role in reading, in participating in making the text mean. (Hutcheon: xii)

Although the reader is given status as co-creator of the text, its metafictional aspect also serves to restrict her freedom, since the text's constructedness cannot be ignored as a vital aspect of its meaning. If the metafictional aspect of Carter's novel is not taken into consideration, it will easily, as witnessed in the readings of See and Mars-Jones, be read as affirming the narrative strategies and structures (in its widest sense) which it parodies and seeks to subvert. The reader is in other words "manoeuvred by the work into a 'proper' position from which to perceive the paradoxically hidden, but perceptible, structure of meaning" (Hutcheon: xvi), in a manner which brings to mind the dynamic of the Socratic dialogue.

In "London", initially in the allegory, the text seems to favour the point of view of Walser (representing the reader in the allegory), in the end, however, he may, as argued in Chapter 1, be established as deprived of his status as "the real narrator" of this section, albeit only as Fevvers' echo and on her request. The allegory may consequently be read as illusory when it comes to the freedom and power given the reader. Fevvers seemingly invests her reader with a considerable amount of power in the construction of her identity. As it appears in the allegory, however, the self-representation of the text (Fevvers) appears to be enabled only at the cost of the identity/subjectivity of the other, rendering textual meaning the product of the rape of the reader. Fevvers allegorical rape of her reader may be read as mirrored in the novel's own imposition of a closed perspective through its metafictionality.

Fevvers as text is on the surface a discourse "healthily related to the other", but her narcissism disguised as love resembles the narcissism Margaroni attributes to traditional criticism.^[40] As this kind of narcissism is all about self-affirmation, it is a less healthy and productive one than the overt narcissism of literary theory, which consists in the continual questioning of itself. According to Yvonne Martinsson, Carter's allegory in *Nights at the Circus* is a critique of Barthes' failure to recognise the other in the reading process.^[41] My claim, however, as argued in the above, is that the importance of the power and freedom of the reader in the construction of the text turns out in the allegory to be an illusion, and that this feature may also be viewed as mirrored in the way Carter's novel itself works upon its reader. The self-conscious Fevvers, as well as the novel she inhabits, has obvious didactic aspirations, a quality that Linda Hutcheon regards as a characteristic feature of all metafiction, inevitably giving its discourse a hint of authority. "Textually self-conscious metafiction today is a most didactic form. As such, it can teach us much about both the ontological status of fiction (all fiction) and also the complex nature of reading (all reading)" (xi-xii). Paradoxically then, even a novel such as Carter's, which aims at exploring the difficulty or impossibility of textual closure, does so "by overt, self-conscious control by an inscribed narrator / author figure that appears to demand by its manipulation, the imposition of a single closed perspective" (xiii).

Even though, as already discussed, the end of Carter's novel avoids a pure reproduction of Barthes' ancient myth, the allegory, in invoking another myth, that of Leda's rape, may still seem to face the problem of subversion by reversal of gender roles alone. This becomes particularly evident when considering how Carter uses the same motif with solely negative connotations in *The Magic Toyshop*. In this novel the orphaned Melanie is forced by her puppeteer uncle to play Leda in his theatre, so that he may symbolically rape her through manipulating the swan puppet. In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter argues that the fear of rape is "a fear of physical terror", as well as "a fear of a loss or disruption of the self" (6). The enactment of Leda's rape in *The Magic Toyshop*, with Melanie playing the role of the victim, may in these terms be read as a metaphor of her psychic disintegration, her reduction to "the feminine object required by a patriarchal social order" (Jean Wyatt: 66). Viewing Uncle Philip's household as a microcosm of patriarchal relations, Wyatt reads this scene as Uncle Philip's way of inscribing Melanie into a world defined by the male gaze, her learning to see herself as men see her, i.e. as an object (67).

She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality itself and drape the girl in a blizzard of white feathers. The swan towered over the black-haired girl who was Melanie and who was not. (166)

The Magic Toyshop depicts a patriarchal society where, as Wyatt points out, "becoming a woman requires a 'rape', an alienation of a woman's subjective agency that amounts to mutilation" (77). In *Nights at the Circus*, however, the tables are turned, as the woman assumes the role of the violent and mutilating swan, hovering over the man:

She made a grab; another squawk, as she ascertained she wrestled with a male. (...) Fevvers did not let go of the hand between her teeth as she tumbled the rest of the faceless anatomy to the ground, where she plumped herself down on his chest, breathing heavily. (288)

Just like woman's identity in *The Magic Toyshop* is seen as erased as she is inscribed into the patriarchal order, so is

the reader's subjectivity violated in the allegory of *Nights at the Circus*. Fevvers has, as argued, taken over the role as the subject in the love relation. When she wrestles Walser towards the end, he is to her a faceless *it*, an object. *She bit bone and tasted blood. It was alive (...) It shouted in a language that sounded not as if spoken but as knitted on steel needles. It must have asked for some light on the business, for, a moment later, came an odd cadaverous glow from somewhere in a corner ...*(288).

According to Wyatt, "The rape of Leda (...) illustrates the power relations that patriarchal culture misinterprets as love relations" (72). Likewise, in Carter's allegory, the violence of the interpellation of the reader may be seen as masked by the dynamic of love that apparently produces it. In "Siberia" Fevvers seemingly needs her lover/reader in order to be fulfilled. "Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?" (290) she desperately asks herself when reunited with Walser, apparently lacking her former power over her own image. In the end, however, it turns out that there exists no such distinction as her two questions point to, as Walser, like Leda, "half stunned (...) yet [himself] impassioned" (28), puts on *her* knowledge. The eyes that tell Fevvers who she is, does so, it seems, merely by *reflecting* her image the way she has constructed it. Walser having lost language and thus a subjective centre from which to organise the world, enables Fevvers' interpellation of him, his objectification. If one considers Iser's claim that "[t]he convergence of text and reader brings a literary work into existence", Fevvers' allusions to being the product of Leda's rape may, as argued above, refer symbolically to her interaction as text with her reader as the moment of her coming to life. Consequently, the ending, Fevvers' sexual union with Walser, allegorically enacts her (and her novel's) coming into being. Carter's rewriting of the myth to the woman's advantage consequently seems to be enabled only at the cost of Walser's subjectivity, and is thus just as brute and cruel as its original.

According to the ancient myth, the rape of Leda was also the conception of Helen of Troy, whom Fevvers seems to identify with, "- for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*" (7). Ironically, the mythic Helen was also the cause of the Trojan War, subject of one of the most central works of the Western literary canon, the status of which is questioned through the intertextuality deployed in Carter's novel. This may suggest a recognition of the paradox that subversion inevitably consists in the simultaneous rejection and affirmation of its object. Consequently, when Fevvers alludes to Leda's rape as being the instance that brings herself to life, "my own primal scene, my own conception" (28), one may read it as an acknowledgement of the fact that she, the New Woman, is inevitably a product of the very past that she tries to break with. Thus Fevvers' existence is dependent on an interaction with the past, as well as with a reader who is part of this. In similar terms, Carter's novel is dependent on other texts and a reader of these, once again rendering the question of where the text begins and where it ends an impossible one to answer.

[32] i.e. to the stereotypical view of these rhetoricians as a movement.

[33] "the opposition of one proposition to another which contradicts it" (Kerferd. "The Sophists": 247).

[34] This is also foreboded in "Petersburg" when, as a consequence of an injured arm and of falling in love, Walser loses his journalistic capacities.

[35] This works deals with how love is actualised through language and literature, being closely tied to the relationship between fact and fiction.

[36] As amorous subject Walser suffers both psychically (jealousy) and physically (injured arm).

[37] "in the modern myth (...) the *object of capture* becomes the subject of love, and the *subject* of the conquest moves into the class of loved *object*" (Barthes: 188).

[38] "Whoever is not me is ignorant of the other. Conversely, the other establishes me in truth; it is only with the other that I feel I am 'myself'" (*A Lover's Discourse*: 229).

[39] It should be noted that this reversal has been in progress since "Petersburg". See for example how Fevvers in "Petersburg" tells Walser that she hates clowns, and how she removes his make-up (143).

[40] Although Margarony writes about the relationship between critic and text, I have found it useful to transpose her insights onto the relationship between text and reader at the level of the allegory.

[41] Yvonne Martinsson. *Eroticism Ethics and Reading Angela Carter in Dialogue with Roland Barthes*.



Conclusion

My engagement with Carter's penultimate novel, *Nights at the Circus*, started out with a strong sense of the text's suggestiveness in relation to its own reading. I was intrigued by the novel's close and self-conscious interaction with post-modern critical theory, in effect forming an invitation to be read within a certain framework of ideas. This impression was strengthened by a study of the critical response the novel has generated. Judging from the relative homogeneity of its reception, Carter's text appeared to "mean" only in a closed universe. Consequently there appeared to be a tension between the novel's intertextuality as a means to guide the reader's response on the one hand, and intertextuality as serving to open up the borders of Carter's text on the other. Also the established reading of Carter's allegory as empowering the reader seemed to form a contrast to this kind of closure.

On the one hand, the novel's overt intertextuality demonstrates the text's dependency on other texts to achieve its identity, giving the intertextually constituted reader an important role in the production of meaning. Still, this role, in relation to such a self-conscious text as Carter's, is one with a tight script. According to Peter Rabinowitz, every text invites the reader to read it in "a particular socially constituted way" (22). It may seem that in the case of metafiction, this claim is particularly pertinent, as, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, such fiction "constitutes its own first critical commentary, and in so doing (...) sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered" (6). This limitation of the freedom of the reader is obscured, however, by the metafictional text's invitation to the reader to work as co-creator of its imaginative world. My aim, then, has been to investigate the role of the reader/critic of such a text, which, according to Carter herself, may be seen as constituting "a kind of literary criticism" (Haffenden: 79).

I have used the term metafiction about Carter's text in an extended sense throughout this thesis, referring to the novel as a fiction that investigates social and literary fictions, as well as the relationship between reader and text. Part of the novel's metafictionality, then, is the allegory of reading that it offers. It is from the basis of this I have addressed the issue of the power of the reader. Although the reader in the allegory is initially pacified, as Fevvers takes control of her narrative, he is later seemingly given an important role in rescuing her from disintegration. The established reading of Fevvers' relationship to Walser focuses on this latter observation, preaching, in true post-modern spirit, the interdependency of reader and text, and the reader's freedom in this dialectic. This freedom, however, as I have attempted to show, is illusory.

"London" apparently favours the voice and point of view of Walser, the reader in the allegory, by representing events as filtered through his mind. Read in light of the novel's ending, though, its first section may be established as originally being Walser's embedded narrative. He is, however, deprived of narratorial status, as the first narrator's metalepsis incorporates the narrative into its own discourse. Similarly, the novel's second section, "Petersburg", also presents Walser in possession of an illusory freedom. In my second chapter I investigated the metaphors of play and the mask to elucidate the mechanisms of the reading process. In "Petersburg" Walser joins the circus and takes on the role of a clown in order to be able to finish his reading of Fevvers. His stepping into the new and unknown in these terms was read as analogous to the reader of a text having to take on a different role during the process of reading. Behind the mask Walser envisages his own freedom and creativity, his "chance to juggle with being" (103). As he loses himself behind the disguise, however, and becomes nothing but a "real clown" (145), such play is inhibited.

In "London", as mentioned, Fevvers was seen to pacify Walser by taking control of her own narrative, seemingly being independent on his questions and response to continue her story. In "Siberia", however, she falls apart in his absence. Their separation is not only physical; Walser has also lost his place in language and is at this stage consequently incapable of aesthetic experience. The dynamic lingering between the reader's belief and disbelief, which is seen to constitute the aesthetic experience, thus the representation of the text, is inhibited in this section. Consequently Fevvers starts to fall apart, and she does not regain her former splendour until reunited with Walser in the end. On the surface, then, Fevvers is vitally dependent on the imagination of her reader in order to exist. This latter aspect of Fevvers and Walser's relationship is, as mentioned, usually foregrounded in criticism. But although Fevvers does indeed turn to Walser, seemingly inviting a dynamic interaction, this is merely, I have argued, in order for him to reflect her self-constructed image. Walser may thus be likened to Gadamer's player, whose activity is guided by and directed towards the self-representation of play. In the allegory, the reader is played out in order to secure the self-representation of the text. Like a game plays its players, using them for the sake of self-

representation, a text may be seen to write its reader.

My last chapter considered the relationship between Walser and Fevvers as one of love, reading it in the light of Roland Barthes' simulation of the lover's discourse. From this perspective as well, Fevvers was seen to reverse traditional patterns of power to her own advantage. As it appears, her turning to the loved object, Walser, is in the end only narcissism in disguise, a consequence of her need for him to reflect her self. As such Fevvers' relationship to Walser is seen to mirror that of the self-conscious text to its reader. While the reader is invited by the text to act as a co-producer of its universe, she is only given status as a mirror of the image the text has constructed for itself. Fevvers *does* need her reader, but she experiences as a threat the readers who believe her to exist only as a product of their own imagination:

Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, wily-nilly, from a woman into an idea. (289)

This passage modifies the extent to which Fevvers needs the creative ability of others in order to exist, emphasising how she is nobody else's invention. In the end, the power Fevvers' reader has to shape her identity seems to be weaker than the one she has in shaping his, as she firmly controls her audience's response. As Carter herself puts it,[\[42\]](#) "[e]veryone changes throughout the novel (...) except for Fevvers who doesn't so much change as expand" (Haffenden: 88).

My aim has been to show that the freedom of the reader in the allegory - his power in the creation of the text - is much more limited than is generally recognised. I still retain, however, the assertion that a text's dynamic interrelation with its reader is demanded for the former to exist. While other readings of the allegory emphasise the reader's vital and creative role in this process,[\[43\]](#) I have argued that this dynamic movement is directed by the text's self-consciousness, only on the surface freeing the reader. The reader's role is important as a reflector rather than as a narrator.

The limitation of the reader's productivity is, on the allegorical level, obscured by Fevvers' apparent turning to Walser in the end. This tendency is mirrored in the narrator's apparent favouring of Walser's perspective by presenting him as a reflector-character in "London", while in the end depriving him of his status as narrator. Furthermore one may also relate this to how Carter's novel itself works on its reader. Being a text that constantly draws attention to its own fictionality, thus making the reader aware of her role as a co-creator of its imaginative world, the novel's self-consciousness paradoxically also serves to direct the reader to a position from which to perform her reading. As in the case of Fevvers, whose extra attributes, her wings, are what draw attention and thus guide the audience's response, it may seem that the self-conscious attributes of Carter's novel, rather than its "gaps", direct its reading. In the last instance it is what the text *does* say about its own interpretation, rather than what is left unsaid, which govern the reader's response.

As argued, Carter's novel is almost invariably read according to strategies that emphasise typical postmodernist themes, such as openness, fragmentation, the freedom of the reader, polyphony etc. This, paradoxically, has turned into a conventionalised approach to Carter's fiction (and perhaps to self-conscious post-modern fiction in general), and seems to blind critics to the fact that their own freedom in reading is consequently restricted. Similar to Walser's relation to Fevvers at the allegorical level, the restricted freedom and power of Carter's own reader is masked as its opposite. This masking is achieved mainly through the novel's metafictionality, which self-consciously inscribes the text into the context of a typical post-modernist aesthetics/poetics and guides the reader's response in this direction. Obviously the existing corpus of criticism, as well as Carter's own comments on her fiction is part of this inscription, constraining the reader's response to the novel, while disguising it as her complete and unrestricted freedom. Slightly modifying Iser's claim, one may contend that the reading of self-conscious, post-modern texts such as Carter's, involves thinking the thoughts of someone else – believing them to be one's own.

As discussed, the discrepancy between the novel's allegory of reading and the way in which the novel itself works upon its reader proved to be illusory. Carter's novel, as well as its allegory falsely give an impression of a free and empowered reader. The question of whether one should thus read the allegory as deconstructing the project of the novel, or regard it as yet another twist in Carter's post-modernist play, is pertinent. However, it is the reading strategy which the novel invites, rather than the allegory itself which demands that this question be raised. Viewing Carter's allegory as a self-conscious and demythologising imitation of the way we are brainwashed by reading strategies, appears to be a too delicately constructed interpretation. Yet, the possibility of such sliding of meaning is suggested by Carter's text through the interpretive approach it encourages, and may therefore not be excluded by the

reader who has agreed to read the text according to this. The necessity of the above question itself consequently suggests a reader caged in the reading strategies summoned by the text, paradoxically being strategies that embrace openness.

Trough its metafictionality *Nights at the Circus* inscribes itself, as well as its reader into a post-modern ideology of instability and ambiguity. Although I regard my reading of Carter's allegory to be performed as a member of its authorial audience, the question of whether or not it corresponds to authorial intention will remain unsettled. Carter may claim that she wishes her reader to construct a new text for herself when reading her fiction, but obviously, not any reading would do for her stated aim of demythologising to take effect. The story of the reader's illusory freedom is my construction of a new text through a reading of Carter's, thus the latter may hardly be self-conscious at this level. Because I read within the particular conventions the novel encourages, however, it is required of me that I contemplate the possibility of the masked disempowering of the reader in Carter's text as being part of her subversive project. Thus, whether one takes Carter's novel to be an unintended self-revelation of post-modern literary strategies or not, her text may be characterised as obscuring, rather than revealing the real conditions of reading in its emphasis on openness. The possibility that Carter's allegory is a self-conscious commentary upon the illusory openness of institutionalised ambiguity, has to be contemplated by the reader who has agreed to decode the text in accordance with the strategies it calls for. Hence the reader is either way trapped in, rather than freed by the openness the novel suggests. The instability of Carter's allegory addressed by the question above, then, is primarily the interpretive product of a post-modern reading strategy demanded by the text itself, thus inseparable from it. By having the reader adopt a certain strategy of decoding which makes her incapable of taking anything at face value, the novel secures its own ambiguity, masking the institutionalisation of this as openness. The reader of Carter's novel is consequently played out to secure the self-representation of the post-modern game of reading.

[42] quoting "an American friend".

[43] See for instance the readings of Yvonne Martinsson and Beth A. Boehm.



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