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"ALL THE ÉCLAT OF A NEW ERA ABOUT TO TAKE OFF" Angela Carter's Neo-Victorian decadence in *Nights at the Circus* (1984)

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Abstract – This paper considers Angela Carter's engagement with the late-nineteenth century in her 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus* through the lens of neo-Victorian decadence and in parallel with the writer's ongoing reflection on femininity and gender roles, as she articulated it in her non-fiction throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. The main focus is on fin de siècle imagery and its subsequent revisions in feminist art and thought, in the light of the concept of crossmapping, which looks beyond intertextuality, and can thus account for Carter's complex interweaving of images and texts across two different epochs, that she both constructed as decadent.

Keywords: Angela Carter; *Nights at the Circus*; Neo-Victorianism; decadence; crossmapping.

It looks like the fin *has come a little early this* siècle.
(Angela Carter, "Fin de siècle", 1972, p. 189).

1. *Nights at the Circus* as a neo-Victorian novel

If we are to believe Angela Carter's own comments, the novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) marked the beginning of her obscurity (see Clapp 2012, p. 32), whereas *Nights at the Circus* (1984) established her reputation as a writer, after the success of *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979. It was, as she herself recognised, the work of maturity (Gordon 2016, p. 324). *Nights at the Circus* has attracted increasing critical attention (as indeed Carter's whole oeuvre) especially after her untimely death in 1992, and has been interpreted from a variety of perspectives, primarily from a postmodern and/or feminist angle. Quintessentially postmodern in its installing and subverting history and narrative strategies, *Nights at the Circus* unfolds a decentered and yet overall consistent narrative undermined by a pervasive unreliability which is emblematised in the advertising slogan of the protagonist, a London trapeze artist named Sophie Fevvers: "Is she Fact or is she Fiction?" (Carter 2006, p. 3). The question, which refers to her identity as either a real bird-woman or a fake one – or even a freak pretending to be a fake – is one that the performer is determined not to answer, for she thrives on the ambiguity: "if she isn't suspect, where's the controversy? What's the news?" (Carter 2006, p. 9).

As we know, the boundaries between fact and fiction are also a crucial issue in postmodern historiography and are self-consciously explored in what Linda Hutcheon has defined historiographic metafiction, in which both the past and the present are interrogated. In this complex interplay, the "presence of the present" is felt no less than the "presence of the past" that Hutcheon (1988) places at the heart of postmodernism. The late-Victorian setting of *Nights at the Circus*

> is intended to prevent any reader from ignoring both the modern and the specifically Victorian […] contexts. We are not allowed to say either that this is "only a story" or that it is "only about the Victorian period". The past is always placed critically – and not nostalgically – in relation with the present. (Hutcheon 1988, p. 4)

The relationship between the nineteenth century and the present is at the core of what we call neo-Victorianism, whose characterising palimpsestic quality, Mark Llewellyn contends, lies in the coexistence of both dimensions in the same space (Llewellyn 2008).

Neo-Victorian Studies have developed over the years, articulating a variety of concerns, drawing from as well as adding to other areas of research, from feminism(s) to trauma studies. In 2008, Marie-Luise Kohlke admitted to the openness of the field, stressing the fluidity of its temporal and generic boundaries, and its range of interests, while outlining the most promising directions that had surfaced in the previous decades. Nonetheless, the vexed question of what is neo-Victorian (and subsequently, of what is Victorian) remained unanswered fifteen years ago and still lingers today. Following in the footsteps of Kohlke's analysis (Kohlke 2008) and Cora Kaplan's study (Kaplan 2007), Louisa Hadley has argued for a shift of attention from chronological boundaries to periods of intense "neo-Victorian output and dissemination" (Hadley 2010, p. 3): most prominent among them, the 1980s and the early 1990s. Hadley aligns the neo-Victorian novel with historical narrative, in that its focus on the past is inextricable from an equally important interest in the present. In so doing, she does not mean to underplay the connection between postmodernism and neo-Victorianism, but rather to draw attention to the latter's dual approach to history. Looking backwards and forwards, neo-Victorian texts are always self-reflexively concerned with two epochs. Most of the novels written in the 1980s and early 1990s, Hadley argues, deal with the nineteenth century as well as with the years of Margaret Thatcher's premiership: it is no coincidence that her time as Prime Minister coincides with an explosion of neo-Victorian fiction as a response to the Conservatives' political appropriation of the Victorians and their values. As to bi-directionality, *Nights at the Circus* can be regarded as fully neo-Victorian; even so, its neo-Victorian elements have attracted less critical interest, and often in the light of Thatcher's open espousal of some nineteenth-century ideals. This perspective has offered new insights into overlooked aspects of the novel, its nostalgic imperialism, for instance, and the parodic rewriting of the Iron Lady in the figure of the leading character (Oliver 2010).

It is a fact that Carter strongly disapproved of the Conservative Party and of its leader in particular, as a representative of what she deplored in contemporary British society: for her, Thatcher was a demonstration of the overwhelming influence of mass-media and the predominance of appearances over ideas; besides, she fostered "the marshmallow sentimentality with which the English have chosen to smother their bloody, bellicose, and unexemplary history in order to make it digestible" (Carter 2013, p. 230). In terms of women's emancipation, she marked a step backwards, in spite of her being a woman in power. "I really don't know if it would be a better world if women ran it", Carter wrote in 1983; what she knew was that Thatcher was "not good advertisement for women in command" (Carter 2013, p. 61). For almost a decade, before she came to power as Prime Minister, Thatcher had been eulogising free enterprise, self-reliance, thrift, and family as the bedrock of the Victorian epoch, a "great reforming age, whose zeal we should do well to emulate in terms of our own age and its needs" (Thatcher 1977b). This is what Raymond Williams would call tradition, a selective version of the past obliterating its own selectivity, while producing and reinforcing ideas of historical continuity and inevitability; whereas, Carter wrote in one of her harshest attacks on Thatcher's politics,

"nothing is inevitable; history seems inevitable only by virtue of hindsight" (Carter 2013, p. 239).

2."The *fin* has come a little early this *siècle*": crossmapping decadence and new decadence

Carter's complex relationship with the Victorian past comes over very clearly in her journalistic output, which covers the central decades of her life and career, from the second half of the 1960s, when she was in her twenties, to the early 1990s. In the wide-ranging articles she produced for the periodical press, she interrogates both past and present, establishing an ongoing dialogue with history – not only recent history, but also and most importantly, the nineteenth century, in so far as *that* seemed to offer "the insight of hindsight" (Carter 2013, p. 12), being at once distant and yet unfinished business. The duality that Hadley sees at work in neo-Victorian narrative informs Carter's non-fiction no less than her fiction and is particularly prominent in *Nights at the Circus*. In fact, if her 1984 novel "can be understood in terms of its continuity with her non-fiction" (Stoddart 2007, p. 4), it is possible to articulate this continuity in terms of neo-Victorian decadence, considering a selection of the articles Carter submitted to various magazines while drafting the novel, whose project began in the early 1970s and was well underway in 1977. In her attempt to come to terms with the "very confusing" (Carter 2013, p. 223) reality of post 1968 Britain, Carter draws upon the previous century, mapping the present onto the past to identify shared concerns, elements of persistence as well as change. Hers, I would argue, can be seen a kind of crossmapping, namely a preposterous way of reading history and engaging with it, in Mieke Bal's sense, in that the past and the present are interdependent and continually revising each other (Bal 1999; Bronfen 2022). As a reading strategy, crossmapping could be a fruitful perspective from which to explore *Nights at the Circus* as a neo-Victorian-Decadent novel, wherein the past – particularly in the first volume on which I will focus – is a recognisable time-space constantly calling attention to itself while pointing to the present.

A writer of fiction and a journalist, a staunch feminist interested in semiotics, Carter thrashes out fraught issues of contemporary society that emerged at a certain point in the past and are still haunting the present. Above all, gender roles and femininity. Her aim is not to disclose a progressive teleological order, but to make sense of an increasingly complex world as an artist should do it, with subtlety, always alert to change and capable of locating the new at specific conjunctures in history (Barthes 1992). Today's artists, according to Roland Barthes, should be neither dogmatic nor insignificant. Like the French semiotician, a major influence in Carter's intellectual career, she places the reader center stage, claiming that her work poses questions and only rarely – if ever – offers answers. Fiction, in particular, is the place for asking "questions that can't be asked in any other way" (Carter 2013, p. 43). At stake is a complex and critical view of both the Victorian epoch and the present one: the latter, however, is broader than the so-called Thatcher era, stretching back to the 1970s – a key period in Carter's process of maturation and radicalisation as a feminist and a writer. It is in these years that she became aware of herself as a woman in a patriarchal society, and of the possibilities that could not have emerged but at that particular time: "the sense of *limitless freedom* that I, as a woman, sometimes feel is that of a *new kind of being*. […] I am the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in *decline*" (Carter 2013, p. 49; my emphasis).

For her, the 1970s were the new decadence, when anarchy seemed to be the harbinger of a new order, as it had been in the 1880s and 1890s. In such unsettling times, at end of the nineteenth century, "[women] had less to lose [than men] in the disappearance of old cultural forms and much to hope for in the birth of a new century" (Showalter 2006, p. xviii). Similarly, women in the 1970s could see themselves as new New Women who, not unlike their late-Victorian counterparts, were perceived as a threat to society, potential disrupters, "dangerously part of chaos itself" (Showalter 1990, p. 8). The 1890s and the 1970s were, in Carter's view, important cusps, namely moments of transition between no longer and not yet. A clearer idea of what she means by cusps or fin de siècle(s) is in a review she wrote in 1986: relatively independent from strict chronological boundaries, the fin de siècle is "a temporal lacuna", "an adolescent time, neither one thing nor the other". It is at these points in history that "the relations between the sexes are in a state of flux" (Carter 2013, p. 326) and that unprecedented phenomena – like the New Woman, the offspring of decline – can emerge.

Nights at the Circus is set precisely in such a period of "plentiful, painful tensions" (Carter 2013, p. 326) between two eras *and* an era in itself, in its specificity, "defined by modernity and a desire to be modern" (Thain, Parejo Vadillo 2006, p. 390). Of this period the heroine is the living emblem: "it is the final, waning, season of the year of Our Lord, eighteen hundred and ninety-nine. And Fevvers has all the *éclat* of a new era about to take off" (Carter 2006, p. 9). "London" is the first of the novel's three volumes – a three-part format that in itself defies and defers to the Victorian three-decker, very popular throughout the nineteenth century but, by the 1890s, in steady decline. In "London" the *aerialiste*'s story unfolds, challenging while relying upon (auto)-biographical conventions, including other voices and perspectives. Fevvers' narrative stretches back to the day when, an orphan bird-baby, she was found and adopted by a kind sisterhood of fairy godmothers-prostitutes. Her initial words evoke the underlying unreliability by playing on the double meaning of the verb 'to hatch':

> Not billed the 'Cockney Venus' for nothing, sir, though they could just as well 'ave called me "Helen of the High Wire", due to the unusual circumstances in which I came ashore – 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. Hatched out of a bloody egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is! (Carter 2006, p. 3)

The "sir" is Fevvers' main addressee, the American journalist Jack Walser, who has been sent to London to interview and expose her as one of the "Great Humbugs of the World" (Carter 2006, p. 8). His is one of the many (male) attempts in the first section of the novel to interpret Fevvers through a range of categories, from angel-goddess to femme fatale-prostitute. As to her real identity behind the heavy makeup, garish colours of dress and feathers – dyed feathers, the only trick she admits to playing on the audience – the main question remains: "do you think she's *real*?" (Carter 2006, p. 5; emphasis in the text).

That is what Walser tries to work out, looking for cues, scribbling frantically on his notebook during the night he spends in the performer's dressing room. It dawns only at the very last page of the first volume, in which we see the journalist having breakfast and flicking through his notes, musing about the unsettling experience he has just gone through. It has been one of those nights Carter describes in a review as a moment when "time could be persuaded to stand still", thereby "the thin skin that divides Victorian London", the present one and "London of the near future might dissolve altogether. The partitions of time dissolve in the memory, after all" (Carter 2013, p. 247). The suspension of time during the night can be seen as a further metaphor for the impending end of the

century – 1899, when the story takes place, is a standstill, "the fag-end, the smouldering cigar-butt, of a nineteenth century which is just about to be ground out in the ashtray of history" (Carter 2006, p. 8), a time of tensions and transformations.

The new 1899 is 1979 – when it was widely felt that an epoch was about to end. It is perhaps worth noting that a front cover cartoon in *Punch* represented the year 1979 as a threshold between old and new, a boundary that is signified by a mirror in which the present – a younger Margaret Thatcher, with James Callaghan and David Steel – and the future – an older version of the three politicians – look at each other, caught in a moment of suspension, when nothing has happened *yet* (*Punch* 1979). At the end of its seventh segment, Carter noted, the mood of 1970s was beginning, "with hindsight, to shape up" (Carter 2013, p. 145), as a decadent decade, "a period of conflicting ideologies" (Carter 2013, p. 147), not unlike the late-nineteenth century and the years of the French Revolution.

3. Winged women, celebrities and cake-women: a preposterous look

At the end of the first volume, and at the end of an exhausting night, the problem of Fevvers' real nature is far from solved; rather, it has engendered more questions, which will prompt Walser's decision to follow the *aerialiste* to Petersburg. The reader is left with an unreliable narrative, including a most puzzling autobiography intersected by several other stories. Meanings proliferate, closure is deferred. In 1979, Carter published in the *New Society* a series of reviews under the title of "Much, Much Stranger Than Fiction", in which she explored the boundaries between fact and fiction in a set of autobiographies of celebrities, eventually borrowing the term "factoids" from Norman Mailer. What these books delineate is "a twilight world", in which facts – "My life" – or its variation, "in her own words, as told to" (Carter 2013, p. 437) are inevitably reshaped and transformed into fiction so as to convey a predetermined meaning and – not a minor preoccupation – to sell well.

Sophie Fevvers' story is *also* an autobiography whereby she is, in a way, trying to sell herself, as indeed she tries to sell everything else. "You'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers" (Carter 2006, p. 9). She would put everything on the market if she could, including her bottled smell, "she never missed a chance" (Carter 2006, p. 5). In this respect, the trapeze artist embodies postmodernism's complicitous critique with capitalism – as well as with history and narrative – one of the tenets of postmodernism according to Hutcheon, which also harks back to the end of the nineteenth century, articulating the paradoxical position of decadence towards modernity, between celebration and unease.

In her insistence on the vital link with London, Fevvers points to yet another defining idea of decadence, that is its being an urban phenomenon: "whatever coloration Decadence takes, it is typically the expression – the projection – of urban experience" (Weir 2018, p. 8). Dandies and New Women, creatures of the "fin de siècle bestiary" (Dowling 1979, p. 453) inhabit the modern metropolis, whose face was undergoing a massive transformation in the final decades of the Victorian age. It was changing again in the 1970s, when the same figures resurfaced, challenging the social order, and "asking unanswerable questions" (Carter 2013, p. 234), as Carter remarked as early as 1967, identifying the new urban dandies. They all are, like prostitutes, *flâneurs* (and *flâneuses*), the offspring of modern cities. Fevvers describes herself as the "prodigal daughter" of

London, "my lovely London that I love so much" (Carter 2006, p. 5), "the city which, for want of any other, I needs must call my natural mother" (Carter 2006, p. 39). Later in the novel, when she manages to escape from an old fanatic called Rosencreutz, she finds her way back to London flying over the telegraph wires, for at the time she is not yet able to rise above the clouds.

In this episode and elsewhere, the *aerialiste*'s feathery wings – after which she was given the name of Fevvers – are a sign of both difference and power, through which she asserts her will and eventually saves her life. Critics have often regarded them as a trope for female emancipation: either real or fake, the wings metonymically stand for the New Woman at the turn of the century as well as prefiguring the Suffragettes' movement (Day 1998, p. 173). In particular, Fevvers' initial fears and failed attempts to fly have been considered as the projection of a (male) sceptical perspective regarding women's right to vote. This is Walser's point of view, with which the reader tends to identify, but also mirrors Fevvers' own doubts about the possibility of emancipation. Suffrage was an issue for the prostitutes at Ma Nelson's brothel: "we were all suffragists in that house; oh, Nelson was a one for "Votes for Women", I can tell you!" (Carter 2006, p. 41). Nonetheless, Showalter reminds us, it was not the main preoccupation in the 1890s: "after the amendment's defeat, women's suffrage was more or less a dead issue until the beginnings of militancy in 1905" (Showalter 1990, p. 7). Women's emancipation is only one of the manifold resonances of Fevvers' wings, a multilayered signifier referring to women's hard-won freedom, and also the sign of Fevvers' own account of her birth as an ironical revision of the myth of Leda and the Swan. Thus the wings visualise her double nature as human and bird, while alluding to the underlying violent subtext of her story. As in the episode of the old Rosencreutz who buys his "Queen of ambiguities" (Carter 2006, p. 92) to sacrifice her on the altar of his religion and lust, male violence – physical, moral, no less than the violence of the gaze – is pervasively evoked and resisted not only through irony but also by preposterously suggesting subsequent revisions of the roles and figures Fevvers wishes (or is forced) to perform.

Her performance on stage was much admired by Parisian audiences; now, at the Alhambra Theatre, in London, the reader can observe it from a vantage point, through the eyes of an astonished Walser who then tries to describe it in his notebook. Here Toulouse-Lautrec comes to mind: a regular visitor of cabarets and music halls, the French artist, whose name is often associated with the 1890s world of celebrities, represented the choreographies of the American dancer Loïe Fuller in a series of lithographs. He used to call her the Nike of Samothrace because once on stage, she seemed to metamorphose into that statue. The Winged Victory is Fevvers' role in a *tableau vivant* she stages at the London brothel where she grows up. The costume is devised by the madam, Ma Nelson, as a way to allow her *protegée* to earn her bread by entertaining the customers without being involved in "the business of the house" (Carter 2006, p. 35). Anticipating a twentieth-century feminist consciousness, the old woman is aware of the significance of the statue, as a symbol of mythologised femininity and of the stories and voices of women muted and "mutilated by history" (Carter 2006, p. 40). She also seems to be perfectly aware of what is at stake in dressing up as a statue with so many resonances – herself an experienced cross-dresser. At the onset of the twenty-first century, the American artist Sarah Charlesworth reused the image of the Nike of Samothrace in a piece called *Nike*: the figure on a bright blue background can be seen as a continuation of a project she had begun in the 1970s in which a series of images onto monochromatic backgrounds brought to the fore the pre-existence and codification of feminine roles and poses *before* the individual subject and body. Charlesworth might be considered as one of the many

feminist artists who, starting out in the 1970s and 1980s, "produced a corpus of visual culture that can be characterised as neo-Victorian, but which has yet to be analysed as such"(MacDonald, Goggin 2013, p. 12). As a visual writer who dealt with images no less than with words, Carter offers fascinating insights into what in 2013 Tara MacDonald and Joyce Goggin thought was still an under-explored area of neo-Victorianism and contemporary feminism(s), that is the latter's persistent engagement with the nineteenth century, across media.

Another example of this engagement from *Nights at the Circus* could be provided by one of the many secondary female characters: a woman named Wonder, who is employed to entertain guests at parties hidden inside cakes, before ending up in a downward spiral of sexual exploitation. This Victorian story of illegitimate children, fallen women, prostitutes and freak shows also points forwards to a London exhibition Carter might have seen or heard about in 1973. That year, *Spare Rib*, then a brand-new magazine founded and animated by feminist intellectuals and activists with whom Carter was well-acquainted, dedicated an illustrated review (signed by Laura Mulvey) to the work of Penny Slinger, a young artist whose cakes and cake-women – a set of photographs of installations, constructions and costumes –were being exhibited at Angela Flowers Gallery in London. Women *as* or *in* cakes were meant to challenge codified gender roles, hinting at the underlying violence of women's lives and everyday rituals.

Such crossmappings across two epochs and media broaden our understanding of how past and present are intertwined in Carter's imagination. It is in this interplay of literature and visual culture in time that her "demythologising business" (Carter 2013, p. 47) is to be considered, not least because she thought about fiction writing in terms of images as well as words (Gordon 2016, p. 273). Crossmapping does not erase intertextuality, but looks beyond it, for "no simple or unequivocal intertextual relation can be determined, but a more complex transformation", the afterlife of "images and stories that define us" (Bronfen 2022, pp. 4-8) and that we cannot escape. Carter certainly does engage with stories and images of the Victorian age, using the past, as she famously said in an interview, as a "great scrap-yard" (Haffenden 1985, p. 92), or "a vast repository of lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based" (Carter 2013, p. 51). She felt free to use the past, not only its literary texts, but anything else, from paintings to sculptures, from movies to myths and folklore. Predictably, her narrative is replete with quotations and allusions to such an extent "that one can only commiserate with the task facing future annotators of [one of her] novel[s]" (Bristow, Broughton 1997, p. 9). These comments could be applied to most of Carter's fiction, and undoubtedly to *Nights at the Circus*. Overall, intertextuality has been a major concern for Carter's scholars. Rebecca Munford has argued that it chiefly enacts a feminist strategy, bringing into play a wide range of images, texts, histories, and voices, offering a "distinctly feminist inflection" (Munford 2006, p. 8) to structuralist and poststructuralist notions of textuality, and in particular to Barthes' formulation of the death of the Author.

In *Nights at the Circus*, this strategy also implies an engagement with Victorian imagery, which is at once evoked and undermined, seen from elsewhere, from a feminist angle, in the light of what comes afterwards. What is important is less to detect specific sources than to explore the afterlives of the nineteenth century, "documenting how the present reads the past, and also how the past can read the present" (Kucich, Sadoff 2000, p. xxvii). In the case of Lautrec, while his work is not specifically referenced in the novel, his iconography is often suggested in the first volume. The artist is mentioned at the onset and his presence metonymically evoked by one of his drawings, hanging on the wall of

Fevvers' dressing room. There is not much more to admire in this place, "a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor" (Carter 2006, p. 6): no photographs, "nothing to give her away. A star's dressing room, mean as a kitchenmaid's attic" (Carter 2006, p. 11). The reader's attention is drawn to the performer's appearance: in front of a mirror, in *deshabillé*, surrounded by cosmetics, very much conscious of being an object of attention and gazing back at the viewer and reader, she is strongly reminiscent – and at least in part a parodic rewriting – of Nana, Zola's famous courtesan who inspired Manet's paintings. A voice "like dustbin lids" (Carter 2006, p. 3), a face "like a meat dish" (Carter 2006, p. 9), with "beefsteak red" skin (Carter 2006, p. 11), the London star offstage is both fascinating and coarse, in her silk gown stained with grease, elegant embroidered stockings like Nana, emanating "a powerful note of stale feet" (Carter 2006, p. 5). Much emphasis is placed on her hair, too. The scene of the maid-friend-mother Lizzy brushing Fevvers' long hair in front of the mirror, "hair yellow and inexhaustible as sand, thick as cream, sizzling and whispering under the brush" (Carter 2006, p. 18) recalls another of Lautrec's lithographs, *La Coiffure* (1893). Fevvers indeed calls forth more than one figure from Lautrec's universe: the singer Ivette Guilbert, for instance – in her self-styled appearance designed to appeal to the public and play out certain aspects of her bodily appearance – and the famous Louise Weber, known as La Goulue, whose blonde hair combed in a trademark chignon, as well as her notorious appetite and passion for drinks recall Fevvers' equally renown gluttony, "powerfully sweet tooth" (Carter 2006, p. 47) and unquenchable thirst for champagne.

Talking about the heroine of *Nights at the Circus* in an interview, Carter said that she had intended her to be a barmaid, one of those working-class women who had no voice in fiction. She wanted a barmaid center stage (Gordon 2016, p. 324). In fact, Fevvers *is* described as a barmaid more than once, which suggests yet another celebrated image of late-nineteenth-century iconography, Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882): here the barmaid in the foreground is, like the trapeze artist whose feet we glimpse in the background – and like Carter's trapeze artist as well – the self-conscious object of male gaze and of artistic representation. Sexual difference structures the painting, hinting at power relations in terms of gender and class. In the glittering world of cabarets and music halls at the fin de siècle, independent women like Fevvers and La Goulue, can achieve popular success and accumulate wealth; still, they "[exist] only as an object in men's eye" (Carter 2006, p. 42). Sexual exploitation is alluded to in Manet's painting through the ambiguous presence, on the right-hand side of the painting, of a hatted man whose eyes are on the woman's face. In *Nights at the Circus* male aggressive sexuality is explicitly represented and simultaneously downplayed through irony. It is inscribed into the protagonist's story and body, in a scar (the mark of a murder she barely escaped), for instance, which she shows to Walser. Meanwhile, his rational mind struggles to account for her "physiological anomaly" (Carter 2006, p. 13) through Darwinian laws of evolution. Yet Fevvers' body is to remain a site of contradictions. Heavy and light, ungainly and graceful, "with gigantic aplomb" (Carter 2006, p. 17), she is both goddess and barmaid, an angel "with big carnivorous teeth", endowed with the voice of "a celestial fishwife" (Carter 2006, p. 47).

In the figure of the *aerialiste*, "Carter playfully mobilizes and parodies the images of womanhood available in nineteenth-century culture" (Palmer 1997, p. 31). Angel, virgin, fallen woman, prostitute, femme fatale, New Woman, half animal and half human, Fevvers is the embodiment of fin de siècle anarchy. At one point, Walser even wonders whether she might be a sort of mechanical doll, not unlike the mechanical maid featured in one of the short stories included in *The Bloody Chamber*. Hers is a decadent body, which

she perceives as both a constraint – the cage is a recurrent trope in the novel – and "the abode of limitless freedom" (Carter 2006, p. 45). In this respect, she is an emblem of the contradictions and possibilities of the 1890s. Looking back at the 1970s, Laura Mulvey, whose "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published in 1975, and whose influential concept of to-be-looked-at-ness Carter incorporates in *Nights at the Circus*, said that the decade was characterised by a sense of possibility, a distinctive in-betweenness. It was an experimental era, "which came to an end quite suddenly in the early 1980s" (Mulvey 2004, p. 1287).

4. Conclusion

A new era began in 1979, when Margaret Thatcher's victory inaugurated eighteen years of conservative government. As I remarked earlier, Thatcher's politics is also parodied in the novel. Here it might be interesting to note the presence of Thatcherism in at least one way which connects to the neo-Victorian-Decadent map I have been trying to delineate. In contrast with the status of prostitution in Victorian society, and despite what Charles Baudelaire said of them, Fevvers and the prostitutes at the brothel are forced to sell their bodies, and they do not regard their position in moral terms, but as ordinary business: "the French poet, sir" Fevvers explains, "a poor fellow who loved whores not for the pleasure of it but, as he perceived it, the *horror* of it, as if we was, not working women doing it for money but *damned souls* who did it solely to lure men to their dooms, as if we'd got nothing better to do" (Carter 2006, p. 41; my emphasis). Nor do they consider themselves as doomed creatures. In fact, their life is an example of Thatcher's principles of self-reliance, free enterprise, and thrift. The brothel is the cleanest place in London, with "an air of rectitude and propriety" (Carter 2006, p. 26) – perhaps another ironic hint at Thatcher's rhetoric of cleanness – with a cosy fireplace around which they gather during the day. They call their house the Academy, because there they are encouraged to read and learn what they will need to cope with the world once they leave their position. In their kindness, solidarity and industriousness, they undercut the mythology of the Victorian prostitute, as it was perpetuated throughout the nineteenth century in literature and the visual arts (Nead 1988, p. 140). After the brothel is destroyed in a fire, these women will not embrace a tragic death, as the conventional narrative has it (usually by water), but the future most of them have been saving money for. Self-made and self-reliant, they are perfect Thatcherite Victorians, except that they are prostitutes. Not exactly the ideal "wealth creators" (Thatcher 1977c) that the conservative leader had in mind when she praised the nineteenth century as "the heyday of free enterprise in Britain" (Thatcher 1977a), but rather, one of its disturbing dark sides, those she was determined to exclude from the picture of a golden age, "when the well-being and freedom we enjoy today" (Thatcher 1978) were created.

Fevvers and the prostitutes of Ma Nelson's Academy will find their way to happiness, in London or elsewhere. Before setting up in business as a performer, Fevvers also helps Lizzie with her family trade; eventually, she ends up in a circus, travelling from England to Petersburg and Siberia. Across two more volumes, in a series of adventures and unexpected twists, she encounters all sorts of men and women whose lives and destinies articulate Carter's complex engagement with feminism and what has come to be known as Theory. It is in the "London" volume, however, that the interplay of past and present decadence come to the fore: the initial section encapsulates the writer's interest in and commitment to fraught questions of her time, looking at British society in a pivotal

moment of its history, without losing sight of the Victorian past "in the rearview mirror" (Joyce 2007).

At the end of the first volume, the last image we see of Fevvers and Lizzy is through the eyes of Walser; as they walk along a bridge, their features blur, their contours blur, their mutual relationship is reversed, Lizzy looking like the tiny daughter of a huge winged mother. Her hair unfurled in the wind, Fevvers now seems as if she is about to unfurl her wings too and take off. "The pure child of the century" (Carter 2006, p. 25) and the offspring of the modern city, Fevvers points to the New Woman of the 1970s, a new kind of being, as Carter saw herself, who "could not have existed, as I am, in any other preceding time or place" (Carter 2013, p. 49).

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