

*Supernatural Interactions,  
Eastern Ghosts,  
and Postmodern Narrative:  
Angela Carter's "Fireworks"*

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THE WORK OF deconstructing and dismantling "orientalist" discourses by such scholars as Edward Said and Chris Bongie reaches an impasse at the borders of the postmodern narrative. Said's key work, *Orientalism*, in the first place, is essentially a historiography concerned with "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (3). This historiography encounters — and sets itself — certain limits in space and time: it is primarily interested in the "Franco-British involvement in the Orient," particularly "from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II" (3, 4). Secondly, Said generally focuses on a relatively straightforward mode of discourse, what he calls "scholarship," which from a poststructuralist point of view might be seen as an old-fashioned belief in objective "facts" of society, an observation that is true even of more recent versions of orientalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Said himself disparages this "new American social-science attention to the Orient" (4), which reduces Islamic cultures by failing to consider their literary articulations. Said's own view of literature in this context is classical rather than postmodern: it is a kind of cultural text distinct from the solemnity and grim reality of political texts, but its own aesthetic qualities seem to constitute a set of facts which are to redeem the reputation of Islamic societies.

A considerable body of scholarship focuses on literary orientalism and its strategies of ambivalence, misdirection, and deceptive "janiformity" (to use Cedric Watt's phrase). Among

the studies more alert to racist ideologies we might include Said's own *Culture and Imperialism*, Benita Parry's *Conrad and Imperialism*, and Bongie's *Exotic Memories*. While these scholars continue to offer some insightful work on the racist imperium, not surprisingly, their purview ends with the modern period, with such writers as Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, William Butler Yeats, and James Joyce. Aesthetic modernism, with its anguished bewilderment over Western civilization and its dealings with various others, is relatively easily accommodated within orientalist analyses — one can say this without derogating the work of such scholars.

Postmodernism poses a different set of problems altogether. Theo D'Haen rightly argues for a variety of postmodernisms marked by overlapping characteristics with particular emphases (284). Even so, and accepting that the term means somewhat different things in different media and cultural expressions, it is possible to identify certain tendencies or discursive forces at work in many postmodern texts which problematize orientalist analyses. In the first place, there is an anti-historiography which does not so much contest the nature of "true" history, as undermine the entire ground and possibility of "history" altogether. Julian Barnes's ironic text, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, is fairly representative of the postmodern attitude to history; it insists that "History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us" (242). His own text is a narrative romp through select events in received Western history; intentionally inexhaustive, playfully inventive, it seeks to elevate "fabulations" over any single historical account. If the postmodern consciousness refutes any possibility of a "metanarrative" ("*grand récit*"), as Jean-François Lyotard has it, then "history" — together with "metaphysics," "race," "culture," "gender," and other narrative accounts formerly assumed to be essential — is a field of particular, local possibilities, contextual (and perhaps temporary) assertions, rather than instruments of power. In other words, postmodernism regards "Power" simply as an anachronism, to be treated ludicrously rather than with high seriousness. Nor is this concept confined to postmodern literary discourses; what Linda Hutcheon identifies as "parody" — "repetition [of tropes,

generic and historical echoes] with critical distance" (26), which she finds in architecture as well as in literary texts — is a strategy that retains historical elements only at the cost of transforming their very nature as specific historical moment or condition. The parodic play of which she speaks, in both "historiographic metafiction" and postmodern architecture, undermines its own seriousness as "social history" in its self-conscious return to a lost, specific epoch and idiom, at the same time that it "paradoxically" denies performing such a return. If this continually ambivalent gesture does in fact re-write history as a "human construct," it does so by denying the positionality and specific contextualization on which a contestation of "facts" (such as is enacted in Said's project) would be possible.

Secondly, postmodernism evades orientalist categories by resisting the very notion of categorization. Robert Rawdon Wilson describes "post-modernism [as] peculiarly the nexus of boundaries that traverse each other" (110). Some of the textual manifestations of this philosophy are well-known: "Pop Art," for example, with its elevation to the status of art of popular visual images taken from advertising and comic strips, and its conflation of visual and verbal signs (captions, floating mottos, dislocated words) and other similar strategies. More than this mixture of aesthetic and generic categories, however, postmodernism — in its emphasis on the arbitrary fabrication of cultures — disavows the notion of a "social science" or "scholarship" which, in its supposed facticity and seriousness, provides grounds for Said's objections. The sociological, in this perspective, would be nothing more than a narrative which is unprivileged and indeed non-discrete, one which could take on characteristics of other narratives, and also be assimilated into such narratives. Furthermore, distinctions such as "oriental" and "occidental" lose their air of absoluteness in the materialist explanations of postmodernism as a product of an extensive mode of "late capitalist" exchange. Fredric Jameson indeed refers to a "whole new economic world system," implying a global applicability which, if not economically or culturally precise, can be taken as an expression of a kind of postmodern *Weltanschauung* (6). The question of whether such a view is

"accurate" seems less important, or at least less articulable, than its disturbing pervasiveness, its air of self-fulfilling prophecy in its own refusal to contest the cultural manifestation it patently denigrates. If it still can insist on boundaries or demarcations, these now no longer sit (as it were) geographically, between nations, genres, narratives, and economies. Rather, the boundary becomes a chronological one, between "modern" and "postmodern," cultural phases of two moments within an evolving capitalist history. Thus modern "expression," "style," and "depth" are contrasted sharply with postmodern "depthlessness," "pastiche" and "textuality" (Jameson 8-28).<sup>1</sup>

What materialist theoreticians have claimed of postmodern exchange society and its system of signs, narratologists have claimed more specifically of novels they label "nouveaux romans," "metafictions," "self-conscious novels," and "fabulations." In this case, instead of the cultural pejoration insisted upon by the Frankfurt school, there is an affirmation of qualities such as self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and the blurring of genre boundaries. These become, in Robert Scholes's terms, a source of narrative "joy," (3) an attempt to "transcend the laws of fiction" (114). In a postmodern condition where social reality itself is regarded as a textual construct, "the only fiction that still means something," insists Raymond Federman, "is that kind of fiction that . . . exposes the fictionality of reality" (7). Certainly the roots of this narratology lie in a political project akin to postcoloniality; notions of narrative jouissance and the creation of a self-reflexive text may ultimately be linked to post-structuralism's attempt to undermine the political, philosophical, and cultural bases of the Western imperium (for which the representative case was France) in an age of decolonization.<sup>2</sup>

It is thus not surprising that for many scholars, the exemplary textual manifestation of postmodernism is magic (or magical) realism, which — in the powerfully subversive literatures which emerged in South America and the West Indies in the 1960s and 1970s — became a narrative form dedicated to "resistance toward the imperial centre and to its totalizing systems of generic classification" (Slemon 408). However, in a gesture of generic blurring which is itself postmodernist, "magic realism" is

often extended to refer to literatures with similar narrative strategies, but which have very different socio-political contexts and motivations: writers like Julian Barnes, Flannery O'Connor, John Barth, John Fowles, and even William Faulkner are classified under the umbrella term. Moreover, the distinctive qualities of magic realism tend to be confused with the philosophies and agendas of other self-conscious literary styles and movements.

Thus the link between postmodern narratives and the political agenda of postcoloniality is far from obvious or uncomplicated. A further complication arises when such literatures also use elements of the fantastic or the uncanny — the thematics and narrative devices of ghosts, the supernatural, and the doppelgänger whose origins are in the gothic literature of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries — in order to heighten their metafictional aspects. Scholars have used the terms "postmodern gothic" or "fantastic postmodernism" to demarcate one variety of postmodern narrative which would seem to have a distinct social reference and relevance, albeit one pursued via fantastical narrative methods similar to magic realism. Wilson argues that postmodernism's blurring of boundaries and its "nexus" of intertextual codes and references, allow for a kind of writing which "proclaims its recognition of context, its historicity" (116). Similarly, D'Haen rescues "social realism" within a type of narrative he calls the "fantastic postmodern," in contradistinction both to modernism (which effaces the social role of the fantastic by assigning it an overwhelmingly psychological role), and to the "aesthetic" or "poststructuralist" postmodern (which emphasizes the "deferment of meaning" above all; 289, 284). Allan Lloyd Smith also argues for the "striking parallels" between the gothic tradition and postmodern narratives, chiefly in the articulation of an "anxiety and perplexity" as a response to social change (18).

There seems to be some justification for such a view in the nature of the classic gothic tales in their late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century phase. Scholars have argued for their "politicized" role, as "the voice of writers alienated from the mainstream" challenging the hegemony of bourgeois and industrial society (Davidson et al. 3). Other scholarship working

from psychoanalytic, feminist, and materialist perspectives has argued that gothic writing “functions to subvert and undermine cultural stability,” as Rosemary Jackson puts it (69). As earlier forms of self-conscious narratives, these tales exhibit elements of “play,” “heteroglossia,” and “intertextuality” which foreshadow the postmodern narrative, questioning social authority by foregrounding the arbitrary nature of narratorial authority (Howard 16, 45-47). Yet an essential ambivalence remains unanswered: was the classic gothic truly a “dialogic” subversion of the monologism of early bourgeois society, or did it “reinforce” that ideology by offering a pre-political, disordered discourse? Jackson, otherwise an able commentator on fantasy writing, raises the question in a way which makes the ambivalence obvious, but unresolved.

D’Haen’s solution — to delineate varieties of postmodern narrative — remains viable, but is not resolved merely by recourse to the classic label of “gothicism” or “fantasy,” as if this unproblematically declared the political affiliations of one strand of postmodernism. It is worth remembering that the roots of gothic and fantastic literatures are in the self-critical texts and practices which arose in the course of the nineteenth century as the imperial and industrialized West’s means of self-scrutiny — but which ultimately were also the means of sustaining and regulating critical forces. If the historicized and politicized nature of such a narrative can be granted, it still remains to show its specific politics and ideology, particularly as functions of concrete narrative techniques which we would identify as characteristically postmodern. What, in particular, happens to politics when it is inscribed within a text purposefully self-reflexive, playful, and intertextual? If Jameson is at least broadly correct in his assessment of the ubiquitous nature of “late capitalism” — that it is a condition dominant in developed economies such as America and Western Europe, a point which other scholars affirm in respect of postmodernism’s cultural effects — then the political hotbed will not be class, so much as race and nation. I maintain that the terms of orientalist analysis retain some of their relevance in a politicized reading of a variety of postmodernist writing conveniently labelled “gothic post-

modernism." Such a reading alerts us to the latent, entrenched, and complex politics of discrimination and otherness which may also reside, to varying degrees and in different textual strategies, in other metafictional styles belonging to the cultures of late capitalist countries.

Angela Carter's works provide an important and problematic example, as some of the scholarship (and the contentions contained therein, with their relevance to the issues of postmodern politics raised above) would suggest. The prevailing view, espoused by Wilson, D'Haen, John Haffenden, and others, is that Carter's work is a prime example of metafictional narrative put to subversive and radical ends — these ends are usually analysed in terms of a feminist critique of patriarchy, or a postmodernist destabilization of received history. Beate Neumeier sees it in slightly different, psychoanalytic terms, arguing that Carter's "postmodern gothic" thrives on exploring "images and symbols of 'infernal desire'," (141) thus "ridicul[ing] Western civilisation and its attempts at defining the Other in its own terms" (146). In opposition to these views, Robert Clark has argued that Carter's works "make possible a knowledge of patriarchy," without actually articulating a critique tantamount to a feminist politics (159). Her "transvestite style" thus owes more to aesthetic postmodernism than gothic engagement, its putative politics emerging merely as "non-referential emptiness" (158).

One can easily see why Carter has become a widely-cited topic within such a debate, as well as why there should be such disagreement on the politics of her text — although such scholarship does not directly engage with her orientalism. Carter herself cultivates the image of a "radicalized" feminist,<sup>3</sup> a much-travelled, somewhat picaresque observer of societies, whose writings are as much sociological critiques as entertaining fictions. Her book *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) is "an exercise in cultural history," as she subtitles it, and as its title also suggests is a critique of the phallogocentric gaze through an analysis of the Marquis de Sade's brand of outspoken, campy pornography. She also writes a number of articles for magazines like *New Society*, combining the narratives of the travelogue, social analysis, and autobiography, particularly in her articles on Japan, where she lived and worked

for two years. Scattered through her works are many images which seem to be familiar iconoclasm pointing to the death of imperium and of its pseudo-objectivism; the fallen statue of "Queen Victoria's swelling stone backside," on which the character Finn Jowle places his used chewing gum in *The Magic Toyshop* (104-05) suggests both the effete nature of the old centre of power (Jowle, incidentally, is Irish) and offers the ludicrous as a viable alternative to mainstream history.

In an interview with John Haffenden, Carter emphasizes the realist aspect of her fiction, eschewing as "frivolous" the kind of intentionality and self-reflexivity of a writer like Jorge Luis Borges (81). Thus she insists that her novel *Shadow Dance* (1966) "was about a perfectly real area of the city in which I lived," "absolutely as real as the milieu I was familiar with" (80). She admits, "I do like to reduce everything to its material base," and compares her work with both "anthropology," and with the eighteenth-century picaresque's project of making "imaginary societies which teach one about our own society" (92, 95). Yet the text of her interview is as playfully contradictory as many of her tales: she accepts Haffenden's label of "magic realist" and emphasizes the qualities of "invention," "bricolage," and "layering" in her stories while simultaneously rejecting the label "postmodernist" (81, 87-92).

The key to opening up her contradictory position — as cultivated and deliberate as it is — is the ideological blind spot of national space and identity which runs through Carter's discourse. While she is often alert to gender codes, to their artifice and arbitrary power, she is much less aware of the imperialist codes which place the West in the centre of her consciousness and efface all other regions and cultures into an indistinct and irrealist mass. Her comments on culture in the interview are pointedly (but not, it would appear, self-consciously) Eurocentric: they refer repeatedly to "the whole of western European culture," to "western Europe," and to "Britain" as the core of her knowledge on "real" human nature and society. When she talks about racist ideology in literature, her example is Chinua Achebe's famous essay on *Heart of Darkness*, but this observation leaves intact Carter's own cultural imperialism.<sup>4</sup> She immedi-



ately follows this point by localising her focus ("especially in the context of Britain"), speaking of British gender and class politics, but all this within a perspective which places Britain at the centre as a paradigm for an undifferentiated global society: in the case of Britain especially, she insists, the point that "everything is determined by different circumstances" seems particularly true.

Carter's localized cultural perspective, with Britain at the centre of a tight bulls-eye whose slightly wider perimeter is "western Europe," has to be contrasted with the forthright acknowledgement of the constricted sphere of British influence and power which occurs in other texts. This acknowledgement of British limitation was especially pointed in the wake of the Suez Canal episode in 1956, which declared Britain's diminished power in international affairs to the whole world. Ian Fleming's James Bond, together with a mass audience of pulp readers, has to endure his chief's acknowledgement of Britain's increasing feebleness in global intelligence in the 1964 novel *You Only Live Twice*:

"He's in fief" — Bond was amused by the old Scottish expression — "to the CIA. He probably doesn't think much of us." M.'s mouth bent down at the corners. "People don't these days. They may be right or wrong. I'm not a politician. He doesn't know much about the Service except what he's penetrated or heard from the CIA. And that won't be greatly to our advantage, I'd say. We haven't had a Station in Japan since 1950. No traffic. It all went to the Americans." (31-32)

The year 1956 is again invoked as a symbol of British limitation in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* (1989). In both cases Japan and America are the two points of comparison by which British power is measured (although in Ishiguro's novel this Japaneseness is merely implicit, in the textual parallels with other Ishiguro novels like *An Artist of the Floating World*). If America is the Anglophone, North Atlantic rival which displaces Britain from the position of global supremacy, Japan is the other — geographically distant, linguistically distinct, and culturally bizarre — which can no longer be ignored or marginalized in the new world order. Ishiguro's understatedly

critical evocation of British social myths is just one part of the culturally hybrid picture he creates, a picture which in other novels is equally critical of Japanese history; this complexity should not be conflated with Fleming's wistfully nostalgic comment on Britain's new uncertain place in global affairs. Nevertheless, these myths are examples of narratives of containment or limitation, a reflection of an acute ethnographic anxiety in an age of de-colonisation.

Carter's position is very different and is complicit in a postmodern orientalism concealed within several narrative tropes: a criticism of "the West" which is really a Eurocentrism and an attempt to recuperate Western culture by dramatizing its "human" crisis; a faux sociology which selectively uses post-structuralist notions of cultural signs in order to create an illusory "universal"; a metafictional, overdetermined style which enables racist codes by placing them within a semantic pluralism; and an ambivalent gothicism which spectralizes and doubles the other while seeming to destabilize the centre or self. These tropes cannot be taken individually, of course, for they are collectively part of a fantastic postmodern discourse with a distinct ideology of "cultural protectionism."

Carter's 1974 collection of stories, *Fireworks*, is a crucial text from the point of view of these concerns. The tales were begun while Carter was "living in Japan" and incorporate a Japanese leitmotif throughout: the semi-autobiographical story of the Angela-Carter-like narrator and her relationship with her Japanese lover. Not all the tales are set in Japan, however, and some have a distinctly "Western" *mise en scène*, the mixture appearing to give the collection a deliberately hybrid, incoherent structure. Perhaps this is why Carter feels that the collection has the "singular moral function" of "provoking unease" (*Fireworks* 122). In an "Afterword," she declares that her tales will play a socially-critical, subversive role. They will not reinforce the "value systems of our institutions" and they "cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge of everyday experience." She explicitly describes her tales as "gothic" in that they seek to "operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact" and will do so by exaggerating "beyond reality" (122).

The casual term "everyday experience" already suggests that Carter universalizes social conditions. Her Japanese tales — the first, fourth and sixth in the volume — are complemented by other tales set both in a variety of recognizable places and in some magically realist settings. It would seem, *prima facie*, as if Carter intended to destabilize the assumptions of the European centre with this set of exotically other cultures and locales. She suggests as much in the "Afterword," when she points to her own "Japanization":

So I worked on tales. I was living in Japan; I came back to England in 1972. I found myself in a new country. It was like waking up, it was a rude awakening.

What is implicit in this statement, and in the cultural ideology of the volume, is the idea that the change in one's assumptions which comes from living in a cultural alterity, precisely because of that alterity and difference, can somehow also be made relevant and similar to one's home or centre, at least similar enough to suggest comparisons and changes. This assumed homology or universality becomes the underlying justification for the touristic and imperial gaze which runs through Carter's writings, as if her condescending record of racial and national differences were merely part of a larger and inoffensive project of a global sociology.

The sociological tone is undeniable. The first story, "Souvenir of Japan," describes something of Japanese male chauvinism:

As they say, Japan is a man's country. When I first came to Tokyo, cloth carps fluttered from poles in the gardens of the families fortunate enough to have borne boy children, for it was the time of the annual festival, Boys Day. At least they do not disguise the situation. At least one knows where one is. Our polarity was publicly acknowledged and socially sanctioned. (6)

This sounds like a reprise (albeit relatively muted in its criticism) of the social commentary of her *New Society* articles.<sup>5</sup> She describes her (male) Japanese lover's dissolute nocturnal activities in the same story:

He and his friends spent their nights in a desultory progression from coffee shop to bar to pachinko parlour to coffee shop, again,

with the radiant aimlessness of the pure existential hero. They were connoisseurs of boredom. They savoured the various bouquets of the subtly differentiated boredoms which rose from the long, wasted hours at the dead end of night. (8)

She might be dramatizing here an episode from her experiences working as a bar hostess in Japan, as she does in the article "Poor Butterfly."

At one level, these insights into the perverse sexism of Japanese society seem merely to be a part of Carter's critique of patriarchy in all its global manifestations. Thus the seventh story, "Master," seems to be a gothic revision both of the kind of benign imperialist history of which Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is an early example, and a story of rapacious male power. The unnamed Englishman in this story, who is only called "Master," is a racist, imperialist, phallogentric rapist and butcher all at once. Feverishly pursuing an exaggerated version of the white hunter's career in the South American jungle, he abducts a native girl to be his sexual toy and bearer and christens her "Friday." His moral decay is that of English civilization as well, and the story is careful to establish the English origins of his cruelty:

He had first exercised a propensity for savagery in the acrid lavatories of a minor English public school where he used to press the heads of the new boys into the ceramic bowl and then pull the flush upon them to drown their gurgling protests. After puberty, he turned his indefinable but exacerbated rage upon the pale, flinching bodies of young women whose flesh he lacerated with teeth, fingernails and sometimes his leather belt in the beds of cheap hotels near London's great rail termini (King's Cross, Victoria, Euston). (71)

The critique of the centre is initially obvious and becomes even more obvious when the arena for his depredations becomes the "third-world" of South America and its natives.

However, even in this story, Carter's universalism diffuses her critique and contradicts its apparent revisionism. Master's rapacious violence becomes a fact of a general phallogentrism rather than the specifically imperialist history the tale initially suggests. His inhuman sexual cruelties practised on the girl are, after all, enabled by the girl's father, who barter her to the Englishman for a jeep's spare tire. The tale's magic realist style is complicit

in the Englishman's own imperialist gaze, which refuses to confer significance and consciousness on any entity around him, while insisting on his own self-consciousness: "the eyes of his self still watched him" (72). This perspective is mirrored by the tale's representation of the girl, even when this seems separate from Master's view of her:

The beliefs of her tribe had taught her to regard herself as a sentient abstraction, an intermediary between the ghosts and the fauna, so she looked at her purchaser's fever-shaking, skeletal person with scarcely curiosity. (74)

While the girl's view of Master lacks critical curiosity, she is viewed by both Master and the tale as an oddity, a curiosity remarkable not merely for her own (convenient) self-spectralization, but also for her de-humanized innocence and animalistic folklore.

The exoticized girl is the virgin forest on which the Master's male pen will carve out his cruel story: she is "as virgin as the forest that had borne her" (74). She belongs to the jaguar clan, a relationship which her simplistic mind literalizes, so that her weeping while the Master performs his atrocities on her is compared to the folktale of the jaguar's water eyes, fabricated by the macaw (75). At the end of the tale, she has "magically" transformed into a jaguar, growing claws, eating raw meat, and gnawing at the Master's corpse after she shoots him with his own gun. Her kinship with the ghosts of the slaughtered animals she (but not Master) sees around the fire also confirms her own immateriality, as a simplified and reduced backdrop in this Western drama.

The European male imperialist is finally hoisted by his own petard, killed by the innocence he has corrupted and provoked into violence, but this development comes at the cost of the text's deeply patronising view of "native" shamanism, passivity, and ghostly abstraction. Such a primitivist view of the non-European also emerges in the Haffenden interview, where Carter speaks patronizingly of "shamanic jiggery-pokery in the High Andes" and refuses to be gulled by "so much sentimentality about primitives" (Haffenden 88, 89). Carter's version of magic realism in such a tale can only be an orientalist fantasy in which postmodern

textual devices are also a means of sustaining an ideology of cultural superiority. When the magical dream about animalistic natives recedes at the end, we are left with what the tale sees as the real core of its moral, the warning to Europeans to beware the dangers of careless fantastical romps away from the centre: "Then only the flies crawling on his body were alive and he was far from home" (79).

The trope of universality also emerges in another complex story, "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter," which initially might be read as a caricature of the modern police state. One of its central figures is the hooded executioner, who punishes acts of incest with beheading, even carrying this out upon his own son. He violates this edict with impunity, but only by virtue of losing his humanity and becoming his office; he never takes off his executioner's mask, even when committing the act of incest with his daughter, "for who would recognize him without it? The price he pays for his position is always to be locked in the solitary confinement of his power" (20). This dehumanized, corrupt, and uniformed policing is complemented by a decrepit, absurdist monarchy which survives on meaningless ritual; the king is "stripped of everything but the idea of an omnipotence which is sufficiently expressed by immobility" (19-20). Hung perpetually from the ceiling in a "precarious but absolute position sanctioned by ritual and memory" (20), his static power (such as it is) is as much a dehumanizing uniformity as that of the executioner.

The barbarous, brutal people of this country, with their defining predilection for incest, could thus be read as co-citizens of the savage Master in the story discussed above; like him, they are unreasonably prey to "infinite" vices and desires, bred precisely out of the savage suppression inflicted by the institutions of authority. The tale, like much of Carter's writing, thus begins to sound like faux, or fictionalized, poststructuralist sociology. Its shocking or disturbing events circle inexorably around issues of taboos and totemization, the mythopoeisis which creates social castes, ranks and traditions, charismatic power, and various forms of disciplinary gazes.

Thus far, the identification of a local, particular nation or society does not seem to be important, and Carter's text uses the

symbols and ideas of existentialism, structuralist sociology, and psychoanalysis almost as universal truths about the production of codes in every human society. Yet, once again, an imperialist code is written into the story, providing a logic of reading which separates East and West. What seems at first to be universal, undifferentiated sociology takes on a core of meanings derived from Western, Christian industrial society. This seems to be the only way to make sense of the cryptic ending of the tale:

He perpetrates his inalienable right in the reeking courtyard upon the block where he struck off the head of his only son.

That night, Gretchen discovered a snake in her sewing machine and, though she did not know what a bicycle was, upon a bicycle her brother wheeled and circled through her troubled dreams until the cock crowed and out she went for eggs. (20-21)

The conjunction — execution, oedipal conflict, filicide, incest, and dream — acquires meaning against a backdrop of Judeo-Christian, late capitalist, middle-class symbols: the "inalienable right" which echoes (or parodies) American constitutional individualism; the "only son" which recalls Christ and his sacrificial death; the snake in the Edenic garden; the sewing machine and bicycle. Indeed, Wilson argues that the bicycle (which also appears in the Carter story, "The Lady of the House of Love," collected in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*) stands for "England's advanced technology and industrial power" (118).

This, then, is a familiar ethnographic pattern in Carter's work: the tacit clash between Western culture and its racial and cultural other, overcoded and concealed within other semantic and textual elements — the philosophical tale, folklore, the classic gothic, modernist angst, the anti-colonial. In "The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter," this clash emerges in the subtle dual vision with which the tale views the executioner and his daughter, on the one hand, and the other denizens of this town, on the other. The central figures are Aryanized: the Germanic name of the Executioner's daughter (Gretchen) and her fair appearance ("flaxen plaits," "pastel beauty"), the massive size of the executioner ("more than six and a half feet high and . . . broad to suit") towering over all the other villagers. In contrast, the villagers are orientalized: the women are "built for durability rather

than delight," with "forearms the size and contour of vegetable marrows" and agricultural hands "pronouncedly scoop-shaped," like "fat five-pronged forks" (17-18). Their houses resemble "Oriental demons," while their own faces have the "limp, flat, boneless aspect of the Eskimo," and their eyes the "slack skin of the Mongolian fold" (17).

Carter's notion of primitivism is once again invoked; the villagers' lives "are dominated by a folklore as picturesque as it is murderous," and "wizards, warlocks, shamans and practitioners of the occult" proliferate (19). They are all bound by the incest taboo, which is reinforced by a rigid folktale of damnation for previous sins of incest. The only ones exempt from this primitivism are the executioner and his daughter, who thus become the central human drama of this piece, symbols of the hypocrisies and paradoxes of power, but also (inevitably) the site of cultural crisis and anxiety, the possibility of action and change. In such a perspective, the other villagers can only form the static, dehumanized backdrop to this symbolization of the contemporary crisis in the West.

Carter's Japan might in this sense be compared to another postmodern orientalist construction, namely the Japan of Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs*, published four years before *Fireworks* (although not translated into English until 1982). Barthes makes it a point to de-realize his Japan; he begins by considering the possibility of constructing "a fictive nation," a "novelistic object" with an "invented name" (3). It will be merely a "system" of semiotic "features," not "an Oriental essence," so that "Orient and Occident cannot be taken . . . as 'realities' to be compared and contrasted historically, philosophically, culturally, politically." Yet Barthes's professed ignorance of Japan and his avowed refusal to write orientalist discourse, re-create in semiotic terms the same cultural imperialism he disavows in historical and political terms. For this "Japan" he reveals to the reader becomes a "situation of writing," which contextualizes the gaijin in a "shock of meaning lacerated, extenuated to the point of its irreplaceable void," an "emptiness of language" (4). The semiotic anomaly is, of course, also a cultural anomaly, a socio-historical freak which breaks radically from European cultural history. The nature of



this anomaly is its curious lack of a centre or core. To use the terms popularized by Jean Baudrillard, Japan is composed entirely of simulacra, such that any dimension of the real can only be the "real" as it is constructed by signs (1-2).

Hence the ambiguous title of Barthes's book, which (in French as well as in English) conveys something of the precession of these simulacra: "L'Empire des Signes," — the empire composed of signs, but also the imperial rule of signs over all else. This is the basis of Japan's uniqueness, in Barthes's eyes, and nowhere is this more apparent than in his contrasting of Western and Japanese theatre. Where Japanese Bunraku is the triumph of the sign over the signified, the role over the actor ("the sign shifts from the great female role to the fifty-year-old paterfamilias" 53) in Western theatre is "theological," "the space of Sin," of the "lie" (61), struggling tragically to resist the empty conventionality which the Japanese strangely embrace.

Underlying the ostensible valorization of this Japanese simulation, however, is a touristic and imperialist impulse. For if Barthes's gaze is perpetually outward — arranging Japanese society according to his few examples, which in turn are arrayed before his conviction of Japanese "emptiness" and pure signification — his emotional and moral engagement is inward, towards the human drama that is European society in postcolonial crisis. In this touristic perspective, Japan is, as Barthes puts it, only a series of "flashes" (4), impressions devoid of "metaphysics," struggle, pain. It is static and complete, already "empty," and thus arranged in an artificial finality. The West, in contrast, is invested with moral struggle and thus moral purpose, with the "space" of human desires and corruption rather than the space of the pure sign, and thus with the burden of humanity which is scrupulously denied to this Japan.

Baudrillard describes the basis of this occidental project: in analyzing the Watergate hearings, he sees them as the creation of empty signs by the centre of authority, which simulate political policing or opposition in the name of "purging and reviving moral order" (15). The figure of the other in this postmodern strategy takes on some common characteristics, despite the different arenas (the political, the literary, the American or British or

French) in which it is created: the simulation of difference, the use of a plenitude of flashing, depthless signs, the gothic spectralization of the other such that it is simultaneously concrete and ephemeral, particularized and vague. Baudrillard's phrase, the "phantasmagoria of the social contract" (15), might again be another way of expressing this postmodern response to the crisis in late capitalist Western society.

This brings us, finally, to the explicitly "Japanese" stories in *Fireworks*, which evince the most disturbing features of Carter's narrative method, and which I have thus deferred discussing until now. For it is in these stories — "A souvenir of Japan," "The Smile of Winter," and "Flesh and the Mirror" — that Carter's foregrounding of the West and orientalizing of the East is expectedly the most conspicuous and objectionable. Yet it is precisely in these stories that postmodern narrative devices intervene to overdetermine the tale and conceal this political agenda. In the first place, there is a marked blurring of textual and generic boundaries: all three stories tell of a foreigner in Japan and her troubled relationship with her Japanese lover. The *gaijin* is described as Carter is often portrayed in her photographs: she has "pink cheeks, blue eyes and is blatant yellow" (7), admits to looking "lonely when [she's] alone" (61), and reproduces the sardonic feminist tone of Carter's own *New Society* articles on Japan. Indeed, the cognizant reader often recalls those articles, as when the "Asiatic Professor" in "The Loves of the Lady Purple" speaks "an incomprehensible rattle of staccato k's and t's" (24), recalling the article entitled "Tokyo Pastoral" in which Carter describes Japanese as "a language full of Ts and Ks," a "sound like briskly plied knitting needles" (*Nothing Sacred* 29). Lady Purple's early career, in which she seduces and kills her foster father and his wife, points the reader to Carter's analysis of Oshima's film *Ai No Corrida*, also a story of a murderous femme fatale, in her article "Japanese Erotica" (*Nothing Sacred* 129-31). The image of the knitting needles also occurs in the tale "Reflections," where an androgynous fate-like figure knits the fabric of worlds — Carter's aural metaphor for (Japanese) language thus becoming a self-conscious analogy for fabulation and the work of the author herself.

These intertextual elements not only link the tales with the non-fictional articles, but also connect tale to tale, thus "Japanizing" the seemingly non-Japanese stories. The geisha-like puppet in "The Loves of Lady Purple" has a chignon of hair decorated with "pieces of broken mirror" (26), and variations of this image recur throughout the volume: in the mirror on the ceiling of the tawdry hotel room which the *gaijin* and her lover occupy in "Flesh and the Mirror" (64-65); in the "sequin eyes" of the Japanese man she picks up in the same story (65), which is echoed in the "silver sequins" stuck onto the eyes of the adrogyne in "Reflections"; and in the mirror-doorway in "Reflections."

Yet another game which the narrative plays is that of metafictionalizing, as if the tales were not narratives in which a story is to be told, but merely the occasion for talking about other fictions. Thus her similes and analogies are almost always borrowed from other texts: Japanese bikers are "as beautiful as the outriders of death in the film *Orphee*" (40); the *gaijin* lover is large (in the Japanese context) like "Glumdalclitch," Swift's young giantess (7), or lonely like "Mariana," Tennyson's forsaken lover (41); a South American native girl brutalized and abducted by an English hunter is christened "Friday" by him, and — lest we miss the allusion — the "Afterword" reminds us, superfluously but metafictionally scrupulously, that this is "a small tribute to Defoe, father of the *bourgeois* novel in England" (122).

Other passages dismantle *histoire* to reveal the bare skeleton of narrative or composition itself. Thus the story "The Smile of Winter," which appears at first to be a melancholy, existential ramble through the abandoned lover's consciousness, ends with a paragraph which breaks the spell of melancholia and reveals it for the self-indulgent and self-conscious exercise it is:

Do not think I do not realize what I am doing. I am making a composition using the following elements: the winter beach; the winter moon; the ocean; the women; the pine trees; the riders; the driftwood; the shells; the shapes of darkness and the shapes of water; and the refuse. These are all inimical to my loneliness because of their indifference to it. Out of these pieces of inimical indifference, I intend to represent the desolate smile of winter which, as you must have gathered, is the smile I wear. (46)

Here is the narrative's self-consciousness at its most explicit, calling the reader's attention (lest one misses the other cues) to the deliberately piecemeal nature of its composition, even at the expense of de-realizing its ostensible core of meaning — the mental and emotional state of the *gaijin* lover.

One effect of these devices is that Carter's style itself becomes a dazzling bit of mirrorwork, with bursts of bright images like the "flashes" of Japan which Barthes encountered, or like the "fireworks" which Carter describes in her first Japan story and appropriately chooses as the title of her collection. The reader is fascinated by these allusive images, entering into a kind of game in which one is complicit with the self-conscious play of the narrative. Another effect, however, is to privilege the narrative's Anglocentric perspective, and that of the Carter-like narrator, as a seemingly detached, ironic and self-effacing position. It installs imperialist codes as merely one of multiple levels of meaning, racist insights as merely one "flash" of insight into a common sociological truth. Yet persistently, inexorably, the logic of textual (and political) segregation persists in all this: it is in the continued foregrounding and privileging of the Western character and perspective as the "real" one, sustained by intertextual allusions to Carter's own biographical details, her image as represented in photographs on bookcovers, the authorial note of the "Afterword" which effectively becomes the fourth (quasi-biographical) Japanese tale in the volume, Carter's insistence on a final word from the position of the "Japanized expert." The segregation is also enforced by the way in which this quasi-biographical, persistently real "Carter" then perceives her Japanese lovers (and Japanese society as a whole) as the realm of the empty sign: unnamed, depersonalized, spectral, and transient, possessing a fascinating plethora of surface details, but never the human significance and drama assigned to the West. It is only fitting to allow Carter's lover to retort and make this clear:

Sometime he seemed to possess a curiously unearthly quality when he perched upon the mattress with his knees drawn up beneath his chin in the attitude of a pixy on a door-knocker. At these times, his face seemed somehow both too flat and too large for his elegant

body which had such curious, androgynous grace with its svelte, elongated spine, wide shoulders and unusually well developed pectorals, almost like the breasts of a girl approaching puberty. There was a subtle lack of alignment between face and body and he seemed almost goblin, as if he might have borrowed another person's head, as Japanese goblins do, in order to perform some devious trick. These impressions of a weird visitor were fleeting yet haunting. Sometimes, it was possible for me to believe he had practised an enchantment upon me, as foxes in this country may, for, here, a fox can masquerade as human and at the best of times the high cheekbones gave to his face the aspect of a mask. (6).

Androgyny, ghostly haunting, shamanistic enchantment, the *kabuki* mask and the simulation of a humanity actually absent — some of the key tropes of Carter's gothic postmodernism — combine in a representation of an entire national culture and space as essentially different, primitive and threatening to the covertly, though decipherably Western self.

Carter's gothic postmodern narrative is only a slightly more telling version of a late orientalism which persists in its segregation of the East — particularly communist China and Japan — from the central human perspective aligned with Western Europe and America. Jameson's notion of the late capitalist condition must be qualified with the awareness that this does not totally efface national spaces, which return, not in the cruder terms of "first" and "third" world economies, but in the "cultural protectionism" which subtly reinforces the more overt politico-economic discourse of trade competition. The racist codes of "free trade" and "human rights" criticisms targeted (usually) at China and Japan are fairly easily detected, but less obvious are the narratives inspired by postmodern tropes and techniques of simulation, gothic phantasms, mixed genres, and intertextual overcoding.

The link between Western anxieties over Eastern economic power (and Japan is once again the obvious scapegoat) and the cultural protectionism which creates zones of meaning differentiated along national lines is revealed in Carter's telling note in *Nothing Sacred* — I "will probably never be able to afford to go back [to Japan] again" (28) — which summarizes a story of perceived Western decline and the threateningly rapid growth of

the former enemy and other. This hidden, perhaps unconscious anxiety and competition towards Japan, and more recently other parts of the "Asia-Pacific" region as well, are always involved in the seemingly introspective, literary, and philosophical critique of the West by its own discourses. Carter's narrative demonstrates how a form of political pseudo-liberalism, born out of the post-structuralist riposte to imperialism in the 1970s, disturbingly re-writes that imperialism within a new discourse of "magic" tourism, sociology, and cultural semiotics.

When other forms of gothic postmodern, magic realist narratives which do not create such orientalist codes are considered and contrasted — one thinks of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, or Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*, both of which create spectral identities of the socially marginalized, but seen from within the consciousness of the hybrid self both authoritative and segregated — one is tempted to describe Carter's narrative as the "anti gothic" postmodern.<sup>6</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 In this Jameson is of course following the demarcation established in the analyses of the Frankfurt School. See, for example, Walter Benjamin's treatment of art in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt and Theodore W. Adorno's similar argument in respect of film and music in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*.
- 2 This has been shown thoroughly and persuasively by Robert J. C. Young in *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*.
- 3 Thus she says in *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, "In Japan, I learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalized" (28).
- 4 *Novelists in Interview* 94. In the final analysis, too, Carter defends Conrad's imperialism — he "wasn't a bad man by any means, and he wasn't a racist." If anything, he is merely proof of the universal truth that perspectives must arise from a particular context. Of course it is the Eurocentric perspective and its imperialist history which Carter justifies with this argument.
- 5 See especially articles entitled "Once More into the Mangle" and "A Fertility Festival," in *Nothing Sacred*.
- 6 My thanks to Ms. Renee Chow, who was most helpful with bibliographical assistance; my own ideas were often stimulated in supervising her postgraduate work on Angela Carter.

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