

Passion and the Mirror: Angela Carter's Souvenir of Japan

Mayako Murai

In 1969, Angela Carter went to Japan with five hundred pounds she won for her third novel *Several Perceptions* (1968). The money, the exact amount that Virginia Woolf prescribed for a woman writer forty years before, came from a literary award instituted by Somerset Maugham to allow young writers to travel as he himself enjoyed travelling widely, particularly to Far East and the Pacific Islands. Carter chose Japan as her destination because she 'wanted to live for a while in a culture that is not now nor has ever been a Judaeo-Christian one, to see what it was like'¹⁾. Disillusioned with the so-called sexual revolution of the sixties as well as with her own married life, Carter was hoping to escape from what she felt to be 'a demolition site' and to experience life that is distinctly non-European and perhaps, ideally, pre-lapsarian²⁾. She stayed in Japan for about two years, writing fiction and journalism, doing odd jobs, and looking at things, namely, doing what every writer does everywhere, but with a language barrier. In her preface to the chapter self-consciously titled 'Oriental Romances' in a collection of journalism, Carter writes : 'Since I kept on trying to learn Japanese, and kept on

failing to do so, I started trying to understand things by simply looking at them very, very carefully, an involuntary apprenticeship in the interpretation of signs'³⁾.

The word 'signs' here points us to the work of Roland Barthes, another European traveller who also visited Japan in the late sixties and called the country the 'empire of signs'. Barthes begins his *Empire of Signs* (1970) by declaring that his Japan is a 'symbolic system' formed out of his 'fantasy' and that he is concerned not with 'an Oriental essence' but with '*an emptiness of language*' which he finds in Zen⁴⁾. His encounter with a culture apparently exempt from the metaphysical dilemma of the West afforded him what he calls 'a situation of writing' (p. 4), bringing more fragmentary and personal features into his theoretical discourse to develop a style of writing which transcends the boundaries between fiction, criticism and autobiography.

Equally fascinated with the flood of images curiously devoid of substance, Carter wrote some of her most perceptive semi-autobiographical pieces based on her experiences in Japan, and many of her later writings bear both overt and covert traces of those experiences. The first-person narrative of the story called 'Flesh and the Mirror' ensures that we see its self-conscious exoticism:

I think I know, now, what I was trying to do. I was trying to subdue the city by turning it into a projection of my own growing pains. What solipsistic arrogance! The city,

the largest city in the world, the city designed to suit not one of my European expectations, this city presents the foreigner with a mode of life that seems to him to have the enigmatic transparency, the indecipherable clarity, of dream. And it is a dream he could, himself, never have dreamed. The stranger, the foreigner, thinks he is in control; but he has been precipitated into somebody else's dream⁵⁾.

Like Oscar Wilde, who claimed that '[i]n fact, the whole of Japan is pure invention'⁶⁾, Carter's lonely traveller knows that Tokyo is a dream, but she also knows that it is a dream dreamed not just by strangers but by its inhabitants as well. Lorna Sage argues that in Tokyo Carter 'found out the truthfulness and finality of appearances, images emptied of their usual freight of recognition and guilt. This was not, in other words, old-fashioned orientalism, but the new-fangled sort that denied you access to any *essence* of otherness'⁷⁾.

For postcolonialist critics such as Robbie B. H. Goh, Carter's 'new-fangled' orientalist fiction employs postmodern narrative devices such as self-reflexivity, intertextuality and the blurring of genres only to conceal an ideology of European cultural and racial superiority. Finding highly problematic some critics' conflation of postmodern narratives and the literatures labelled as 'magic realism' on the basis of their stylistic similarity, Goh proposes to describe Carter's Oriental stories as 'magic tourism', just as he sees Barthes's analysis of poststructuralist play of

signifiers in Japanese culture to be motivated by ‘a touristic and imperialist impulse’ to fantasise Japan as a complementary other which may redeem the West from its moral and humanistic struggle⁸⁾.

Carter’s Japan tales indeed follow the conventions of European travel narratives, especially the kind that features love between a male traveller and an exotic lover, which becomes a source of inspiration for his artistic creation. The *locus classicus* of this trope, in a Japanese setting, would be Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), the story told by a French naval officer who temporarily marries and then leaves the eponymous Japanese woman⁹⁾. Such narratives of exotic romance always seem to send the hero back to his homeland with his conscious, imperial, masculine self all the more reinforced by embracing, and then exorcising, his lost, pre-symbolic other; upon leaving Japan, Loti’s hero feels ‘more fully its antediluvian antiquity, its centuries of mummification, which will soon degenerate into hopeless and grotesque buffoonery, as it comes into contact with Western novelties’¹⁰⁾. Carter was especially familiar with the exoticism of nineteenth-century France and wrote a short story about Jeanne Duval, Charles Baudelaire’s exotic lover and the inspiration for his ‘Black Venus’ cycle of poems. Carter is certainly aware of the tradition of the artist as an exotic traveller when the narrator in one of her Japan stories compares her Japanese lover to the Tahitians of Paul Gauguin, who went to Tahiti under the influence of Loti’s Tahitian story. Is Carter’s work, then, simply

inverting the sexes in this touristic literary motif?

Through analyzing Carter's fictionalised memoirs of Japan and the influence of her experiences in Japan on some of her later writings, this paper will examine the ways in which Carter's works both follow and undermine this Eurocentric and male-oriented stereotype prevalent in travel literature. My main focus will be on her two semi-autobiographical short stories, 'A Souvenir of Japan' and 'Flesh and the Mirror', which were written during her stay in Japan and collected under the title of *Fireworks* in 1974; both stories have a first-person narrator, presumably a young English woman temporarily living in Japan, who recounts her experiences from the point of view of posteriority, and her retrospection centres about her troubled relationship with her Japanese lover. I will suggest that in these stories the mirror figures as the key metaphor functioning both thematically and as an organising principle within the narrative structure. The self-reflexive and fractured narrative structure is correlated with the themes of reflection, looking and reversal, so that a doubled mirror effect multiplies the otherness that the traveller faces in a looking-glass country where everything appears to be the exact mirror image of what is believed to be 'real' in the West, thus unsettling the conventional perception of modes of being and seeing. The narrator-protagonist of 'A Souvenir of Japan' comments on the hooded mirrors in traditional Japanese inns: 'as if in celebration of the thing they feared, they seemed to have made the entire city into a cold hall of mirrors which continually

proliferated whole galleries of constantly changing appearances, all marvellous but none tangible. If they did not lock up the real looking-glasses, it would be hard to tell what was real and what was not' (p. 9). Unlike Lewis Carroll's Alice, however, Carter's heroine does not simply break out of the looking-glass to go back to the 'real' world ; the stories end with a blurred boundary between this world and the looking-glass world, between the self-same subject and the other as its mirror image. In these stories, Carter's mirror-work, inspired by Japanese culture, produces the most dazzling and, as I will argue, potentially empowering effects.

'A Souvenir of Japan', the first story in *Fireworks*, begins with the image not of fireworks themselves but of their reflections multiplied in the dark water, an image that adds a twist to the 'floating-world' representation of Japanese culture dominant in Europe since the late nineteenth century. The first-person narrator, portrayed much like Carter herself, lives with a Japanese man who is much younger than she and dependent upon her. She calls him Taro and tells the story of Momotaro, a hero in a Japanese folktale who was born from a peach, adding that her lover has 'the inhuman sweetness of a child born from something other than a mother' (p. 5). After musing on their relationship, however, she addresses the reader as 'you' and admits: 'At times, I thought I was inventing him as I went along, however, so you will have to take my word for it that we existed... I only called him Taro so that I could use the conceit of the peach boy, because

it seemed appropriate' (pp. 8–9). The self-reflexive narrative voice, which announces that the story comes before the supposedly real-life person, overturns the dominance of the I-narrator in conventional memoirs and exposes the unreliability of such narrative authority. The narrator then applies the mirror metaphor to the novelistic art of characterisation, reminding the reader that in this text not only the fireworks but also the characters are images reflected in the mirror: 'You must be content only with glimpses of our outlines, as if you had caught sight of our reflections in the looking-glass of somebody else's house as you passed by the window' (pp. 8–9).

The narrator describes her lover as a mysterious, almost unreal creature: he is a 'pixy', a 'Japanese goblin', 'a weird visitor', and a Japanese 'fox' masquerading as human to practise 'an enchantment upon me' (p. 6). His face looks like a 'mask' to her (p. 6), the mask, here probably referring to the kind worn by Noh actors, with only slits for eyes, giving an ever-so-slightly changing expression to its otherwise expressionless surface. Obviously, she posits her Oriental lover as the other in the gothic tradition, the other that has elements of the uncanny, the ghostly doppelganger, who acts out repressed desires of the self. Assuming her own body as the 'real' one, she feels herself to be literally substantial, fearing that she 'might smash him' in bed (p. 7).

The narrator's gaze not only orientalises but also feminises the body of the Japanese man. She describes his body as having 'such

curious, androgynous grace with . . . unusually well developed pectorals, almost like the breasts of a girl approaching puberty' (p. 6). She also notes in him 'a passive, cruel sweetness I did not immediately understand, for it was that of the repressed masochism which, in my country, is usually confined to women' (p. 5). The heroine's Japanese lover becomes the projection of her own repressed femininity, her shadowy mirror image, and here her fetishisation of his body reaches its morbid extreme: 'I should have liked to have had him embalmed and been able to keep him beside me in a glass coffin, so that I could watch him all the time and he would not have been able to get away from me' (p. 6). She wishes to make him into a Sleeping Beauty or a Snow White in a glass coffin, those age-old icons of passive femininity in European fairy tales; only the sexes are reversed. The 'male' fantasy, then, can also be a woman's fantasy involving an exotic man.

The narrator is aware of her own mirror trick: 'I knew him as intimately as I knew my own image in a mirror. In other words, I knew him only in relation to myself' (p. 8). The mirror metaphor here intensifies narcissistic reversal. The mirror reflects an image reversed sideways, producing the apparent opposite of the one who stands before the mirror; the mirror image, however, cannot be a radical alterity since it only reflects the negative or a derivative of one's own image, i.e., not the thing itself but an image only in relation to one's own image. Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) explores this aspect of the mirror metaphor in relation to gender and argues that the

specular logic of Western philosophical discourse represents woman as the negative of the male norm. In this view, woman serves as man's mirror, an instrument for man's narcissistic speculation of his own masculinity, as Eve is Adam's Narcissus in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, Carter's fictional and non-fictional works on Japan represent Japan as the exact mirror image of the West, and the categorical contrasts that they make, establishing a stylistically crude version of Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis, extend to virtually every aspect of life, from evaporated *non-milk* to houses so insubstantial that they can disappear overnight, or even to the expression of sexual climax signalling departure rather than arrival¹¹⁾.

Reversal, however, does not end here; the mirror of Japan also reflects the narrator's image in the other's eyes.

In the department store there was a rack of dresses labelled: 'For Young and Cute Girls Only'. When I looked at them, I felt as gross as Glumdalclitch. I wore men's sandals because they were the only kind that fitted me and, even so, I had to take the largest size. My pink cheeks, blue eyes and blatant yellow hair made of me, in the visual orchestration of this city in which all heads were dark, eyes brown and skin monotone, an instrument which played upon an alien scale. In a sober harmony of subtle plucked instruments and wistful flutes, I blared. I proclaimed myself like in a perpetual fanfare. (p. 7)

In this comic echoing of Jonathan Swift's satirical travel story, the narrator identifies herself not with Gulliver, the universal traveller, but with the nine-year-old, forty-foot-high giantess who looks after him during his stay in Brobdingnag. Like any other tourist, she puts herself in the picture she takes, but she does so in a self-deprecating parody of a self-aggrandising portrait of a European imperialist. Barthes, on the other hand, carefully excludes his own image from all the visual images inserted in his work, except in one photograph shown on a Japanese newspaper, in which he finds his face 'Japanned' by Japanese typography¹²⁾. Rather than entertaining an idea of herself 'Japanned' in an exotic picture, Carter's narrator acknowledges that she herself is seen by her lover as an exotic object of desire : 'I had never been so absolutely the mysterious other. I had become a kind of phoenix, a fabulous beast; I was an outlandish jewel. He found me, I think, inexpressibly exotic' (p. 7). Tokyo, the city of appearance, proliferates such reflections of her racial difference on its smooth surface, magnifying and multiplying her body-consciousness.

An acute awareness of racial and gender difference intensifies the heroine's self-alienation. In the Japan she visited, to live with a man meant to wait for him at home ; the whole story, which consists of her flickering reflections on her relationship with her lover, unravels while she waits for his return in front of her house. Living as his *okusan*, the Japanese word for wife meaning 'the person who occupies the inner room and rarely, if ever, comes

out of it' (p. 3), she experiences more extreme — that is, submissive/passive—conditions of womanhood than in her own country.'At least they do not disguise the situation', she states (p. 6). She compares her lover to Baudelaire's dandy, not to his Creole mistress, because he is a man, and a man in an undisguisedly male-dominated country at that. To live with him, she has to play the role of what he considers a woman. 'But', she retorts, 'I often felt like a female impersonator' (p. 7).

This feeling of being a 'female impersonator' in a female body can be related to the theory of 'gender as performance', an idea that became prominent in gender studies after the publication of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990. According to Butler, gender is not a reflection of masculinity or femininity as essence but is an *effect* produced on the body : 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'¹³⁾. As Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton claim in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, Carter's interest in the tropes of performance and theatricality certainly shows a prescient affinity with this currently dominant politics in feminism which regards gender as performance in both obligatory and liberatory senses¹⁴⁾. The metaphor of performance employed in her Japan stories complicates the problem of identification further by focusing on the point where multiple differences — gender, cultural, linguistic as well as racial — cut across one another.

The second story ‘Flesh and the Mirror’ uses the mirror metaphor to explore the interrelation between identity and performance more extensively. The text begins with a self-conscious statement about its own self-dramatisation : ‘It was midnight—I chose my times and set my scenes with the precision of the born artiste’ (p. 61). The first-person narrator is again a Carter-like woman who has just returned to Japan from a visit to England ; disappointed by the absence of her lover at the port, she wanders through the city, ‘in the third person singular, my own heroine’ (p. 62). The narrator is well aware of her own illusions about the exotic East : ‘And wasn’t I in Asia? Asia!’ (p. 63). The self-conscious narrator, who knows that she is caught in a conventional plot of exotic romance, holds on to her belief in her own theatrical mastery : ‘But all the time I was pulling the strings of my own puppet’ (p. 63).

The idea of puppetry here seems to be derived from Bunraku, the Japanese traditional puppet theatre in which puppets half the size of a human are manipulated by unmasked puppeteers on the stage. Significantly, Bunraku is a prime example of Japan’s uniqueness for Barthes, who sees in this ‘string-less’, therefore ‘God-less’, puppet theatre the triumph of the sign over everything else that is supposed to have meaning in Western theatre ; in Bunraku, claims Barthes, neither the actor’s action nor the narrative voice precedes the puppet’s ‘gesture’ (p. 49). As he says of the Japanese way of wrapping gifts which reverses the priority of the inside to the outside, on the Bunraku stage meaning is not

hidden beneath the surface since ‘there is nothing there to read’ (p. 62).

Carter’s narrator makes an attempt at pulling the strings of the puppet that is herself, but, of course, there are no such strings, and the puppet master ‘I’ merges with the puppet ‘she’ when she and a stranger arrive at a hotel with a mirror on the ceiling, where the I-narrator is beset by the reflection of ‘a hitherto unconsidered notion of myself as I’ in the mirror (pp. 64–65). Mirrors, she speculates, are in complicity with women in their performance by reflecting male images of femininity. However, ‘this mirror refused to conspire with me ; it was like the first mirror I’d ever seen. It reflected the embrace beneath it without the least guile. All it showed was inevitable. But I myself could never have dreamed it’ (p. 65). Although her immediate response to this sight is to feel she ‘acted out of character’, she soon realizes that she is not sure what that ‘character’ is (p. 65). Then the mirror starts to crack, blurring the features of her lover whom she created ‘solely in relation to myself, like a work of romantic art, an object corresponding to the ghost inside me’ (pp. 67–68). As she becomes a foreigner to her own body, the exotic city of Tokyo itself vanishes : ‘it ceased, almost immediately, to be a magic and appalling place. I woke up one morning and found it had become home’ (p. 70). The magic mirror of Japan breaks not simply because, as Susan Fisher suggests, ‘she cannot find an authentic way to be in Japan’¹⁵⁾, but, more fundamentally, because she realizes that there is no natural self to return to : ‘The

most difficult performance in the world is acting naturally, isn't it? Everything else is artful' (p. 70).

The ending of 'A Souvenir of Japan' may sound less ironic. The last remembrance of Japan given in the story is 'the intangible reflections of ourselves we saw in one another's eyes, reflections of nothing but appearances, in a city dedicated to seeming' (p. 11). Here the other's eye is seen not as a window of the soul but as a mirror-like surface which reflects one's self. Likewise intrigued by the Japanese eye, Barthes describes it as an 'elliptical slit' exempt from the Western 'mythology of the soul, central and secret'¹⁶⁾. Unlike Carter's narrator, however, Barthes looks at the slit eyes of the Japanese actor Kazuo Funaki in the two photographs he chose to open and close his book on Japan, apparently without imagining the possibility that his own image — looking through the eye of the camera, in this case — may be reflected there.

Despite this 'most moving' image of endless mirroring of each other in the lovers' eyes, however, 'A Souvenir of Japan' closes with a tragic note: 'try as we might to possess the essence of each other's otherness, we would inevitably fail' (p. 11). The same tragic tone of the European moralist is heard in the last line of *Empire of Signs*: 'there is nothing to grasp'¹⁷⁾. A desire to 'grasp' and to 'possess' the other, apparently eschewed by both narrators from the outset, emerges at the very end of both texts rather abruptly, albeit as an inevitably ungratified desire. A happier, more light-hearted ending for Carter is postponed until her 1984

novel *Nights at the Circus*, in which the heroine, a bird-woman aerialist, goes through a picaresque journey that breaks up her sense of the self and gradually begins to give birth to her new subjectivity as the image of herself reflected in the other's eyes triggers her introspection. The final image given in 'A Souvenir of Japan' seems to foreshadow the emergence of a definitive Carteresque model of the eye-as-mirror stage, which places more emphasis on the interdependence between self and other in the construction of the subject.

In closing, I would like to discuss what to make of Carter's own summation of her journey : 'in Japan I learnt what it is to be a woman and became radicalised'¹⁸⁾. This statement is often quoted by her critics to show how Carter became a radical feminist by witnessing the situation of women in Japan, where women's social position was diminutive in comparison to the Western world. Living with a Japanese man and working even as a bar hostess, she certainly learned what it is to be a woman in an unabashedly male-dominated society, which must have stimulated her to rewrite conventional stories from an emphatically female-centred perspective as she does in 'A Souvenir of Japan' and 'Flesh and the Mirror'. However, this statement also seems to imply less ironically that her experiences in Japan gave her more positive if conflicting views on the inextricable relationship between love and the construction of the subject, what it is to be a woman. The metaphorical mirrors in Carter's Japan stories are designed to enhance such vacillating effects because the mirror is ambivalent

in its nature as what reflects *and* constructs the symbolic, and ambivalence becomes a predominant feature of her works after her stay in Japan.

The most dazzling effect of Carter's mirroring, then, is its capacity to engender a feeling of 'unease' resulting from ambivalence; in her 'Afterword' to *Fireworks*, Carter states that the tale 'retains a singular moral function — that of provoking unease'¹⁹⁾. The narrator of 'A Souvenir of Japan' feels 'the beginnings of unease' when she recalls the love suicide scene in Bunraku performed in a highly stylised manner by 'the most passionate puppets in the world' (p. 11). In the interstices of the Japanese sign system, Carter saw not emptiness, as Barthes did, but 'passions': 'repression does not necessarily give birth only to severe beauties. In its programmed interstices, monstrous passions bloom' (p. 10). Unlike Barthes, who fantasised Japan as a pre-Oedipalised culture that knows neither sin nor repression, Carter found that such an absolute rule of signs can be just as repressive as the absolute rule of interiority, depth and meaning. The undercurrent of pain is concomitant with the narrator's relationship with her lover: 'If he valued me as an object of passion, he had reduced the word to its root, which derives from the Latin, *patior*, I suffer' (p. 11). This notion of passion as love and pain recurs in her 1977 novel *The Passion of New Eve*, in which a young Englishman is transformed into a woman during his journey through the American continent and comes to learn the ambivalence of passion in his/her relationship with a female

impersonator modelled on an *onnagata*, a Kabuki actor who plays female roles. As in 'A Souvenir of Japan', it is not in the mirror but in the other's eyes that New Eve loses and finds herself as a 'real' woman. In an interview, Carter, looking back on the time she spent alone with her lover in a country which she called 'a cold hall of mirrors', said: 'I felt I was really living'²⁰⁾.

Notes

* This is a revised version of the paper presented at the International Conference of the British Comparative Literature Association held at the University of Wolverhampton on 13 September 2005.

- 1) *Nothing Sacred: Selected Writings*, rev. edn (London: Virago, 1992), p. 28.
- 2) 'Truly, It Felt Like Year One', in *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s*, ed. by Sara Maitland (London: Virago, 1988), pp. 209–16 (p. 211).
- 3) *Nothing Sacred*, p. 28.
- 4) *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 3–4.
- 5) *Fireworks* (London: Virago, 1988), p. 62. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- 6) *De Profundis and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 82.
- 7) *Angela Carter* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), p. 26.
- 8) 'Supernatural Interactions, Eastern Ghosts, and Postmodern Narrative : Angela Carter's "Fireworks"', *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 30: 3 (1999), 63–85 (pp. 84 and 79).
- 9) Barthes also makes a brief mention of Loti's work to contrast its old-school orientalism with his own: 'Someday we must write the history of our own obscurity — manifest the density of our narcissism, tally down through the centuries the several appeals to difference we may have occasionally heard, the ideological recuperations which have infallibly followed and which consist in always

- acclimating our incognizance of Asia by means of certain known languages (the Orient of Voltaire, of the *Revue Asiatique*, of Pierre Loti, or of *Air France*)' (p. 4). [0]
- 10) Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, trans. by Laura Ensor (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1973), p. 328.
- 11) See 'My Maugham Award', in *Shaking A Leg : Collected Journalism and Writings* (London: Vintage, 1998), pp. 203–04 (p. 204), and 'The Quilt Maker', in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 444–457 (p. 453).
- 12) Barthes, p. 90.
- 13) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 25.
- 14) Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton, eds, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism* (London: Longman, 1997), p. 14.
- 15) 'The Mirror of the East: Angela Carter and Japan', in *Nostalgic Journeys : Literary Pilgrimages between Japan and the West*, ed. by Susan Fisher (Vancouver: Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia, 2001), pp. 165–77 (p. 169).
- 16) Barthes, p. 99 and p. 102.
- 17) Barthes, p. 110.
- 18) *Nothing Sacred*, p. 28.
- 19) 'Afterword to Fireworks', in *Burning Your Boats*, pp. 459–60 (p. 459).
- 20) William Bedford, 'Connoisseur of Unreality', *London Magazine*, October / November 1992, p. 55.

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