

...CARTERLY-CONSTRUCTED (AUTO)-BIO-GRAPH-ICAL FEMALE
NARRATIVEs...

...NARRATIVAs (AUTO)-BIO-GRÁF-ICA-S FEMININAS POR ANGELA CARTER...

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RESUMO: Principalmente tipificada pela ausência de escritoras e a característica diversidade de vozes e experiências da narrativa delas, a autobiografia tradicional é com muito prazer apropriada pela escritora inglesa Angela Carter a fim de a um só tempo instalar e solapar sua individualidade radical, tipicamente masculina, que normalmente age em detrimento do sujeito feminino. Carter não apenas dá visibilidade àqueles que têm sido relegados ao esquecimento pelo cânon autobiográfico através de sua pós-moderna ‘presentificação’ do passado, mas ela também abre caminho para possibilidades alternativas futuras por ter em conta dimensões da vida humana anteriormente ignoradas.

Palavras-chave: Pós-modernismo; (Auto)biografia; Sujeito feminino.

ABSTRACT: Mainly typified by the absence of female writers and the characteristic diversity of voices and experiences of their narratives, traditional autobiography is most pleasurably appropriated by the English writer Angela Carter in order to at once install and undermine its typically male-centred radical individuality and exclusionary practices which very often work to the detriment of the female subject. Not only does Carter give visibility to those who have been relegated to oblivion by the autobiographical canon by means of her postmodern ‘presentification’ of the past, but she also paves the way for alternative future avenues by taking into account dimensions of human life formerly ignored.

Keywords: Postmodernism; (Auto)biography; Female subject.

I being addicted from my childhood [...] to write with the pen [rather] than to work with a needleⁱ
Margaret Cavendish

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue / Who says my hand a needle better fitsⁱⁱ
Anne Bradstreet

There is no one woman, no one truth in itself about woman in itselfⁱⁱⁱ
Jacques Derrida

[T]he truth is that when we write of a woman,

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*everything is out of place [...];
the accent never falls where it does with a man*^{iv}
Virginia Woolf

Among all the genres the English writer Angela Carter appropriates and installs in *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* just to critically undermine and subvert them in the end, perhaps the one from which she derives more pleasure and enjoys playing with is the traditional autobiography. For one thing, owing to her personal dislike of it attendant on its form and matter-of-fact way of portraying reality, as well as its unsuitability and even unwillingness to convey the plurality and variety of female experiences (SAGE, 2007, p. 52). For another, due to the fact that if autobiography has one landmark with regard to gender, it is that the female subject is noticeable for its absence as writer and bearer of meaningful existences (STANTON, 1998, p. 131-32). Notwithstanding, it does not mean that women were not writing relevant autobiographies, it is just that their production was simply relegated to the margins by the canon. Effectively, the autobiographical canon has very often historically regarded several other modes of life writing and experiences other than that of ‘the great men’ unworthy of any sort of consideration.

Nonetheless, in Carter’s deft hands that sort of literary and critic evaluation does not take place for she devises a manner to go against the grain and empowers her female characters by endowing her narrators/protagonists Fevvers and Dora with the phallic pen. In this way, Carter’s fictional (auto)biographers can contest the genre’s monolithic nature and the borderlines patriarchy imposes to it. To this end, Fevvers, the winged *aerialiste*, and Dora Chance, the illegitimate septuagenarian, gregariously assemble the experiences of the marginalised and dispossessed as well as their diverse practices of life writing so as to give them a chance to collectively write themselves into the very history that has always ignored them. Hence, they furnish the reader with a polyphonic narrative whose shape and content thoroughly oppose those invariably provided by the white, Western and male-centred perspective. In other words, as Swindells describes below:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working-class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. [...] In this context, autobiography can appear the most direct and accessible way of countering silence and misrepresentation (SWINDELLS, 1995, p. 7).

In order to point out how outrageous this historical scenario is, maybe it is a good idea to have a bird's eye view of the origin of modern Western autobiography. To begin with, even though the English working-class writer Ann Yearsley is the first person to use the word autobiography in the eighteenth century, Robert Southey is for the most part considered the one responsible for the coinage of the term by anglicising the Greek words *autos*, *bios* and *graphe* – self, life and writing, respectively – in 1809. Earlier on, the illiterate medieval mystic Margery Kempe had an amanuensis write the very first autobiography in English circa 1432. In 1656, Margaret Cavendish wrote the first important secular life narrative by a woman (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 1, 2, 93-94; MASON, 1980, p. 209, 211-212). However, what are all these female remarkable feats in comparison with those of 'the great men', which have been legitimised as role models for the writing of autobiographies?

In what can possibly be one of the most gendered genres Carter incorporates, different from today's disposition towards the writing of autobiographies by women and other minority groups, in the past women's life narratives were usually deemed as of neither cultural nor historical relevance. As a result, these marginal texts were rarely investigated (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 118, 128), and that is hardly the case that the female writers were unaware of it, as Cavendish well attests: "Why hath this lady writ her own life? since [sic] none cares to know whose daughter she was or whose wife she is, or how she was bred, or what fortunes she had, or how she lived, or what humour or disposition she was of" (CAVENDISH, 2000, p. 63). Indeed, such a mood in which unexpected recognition is taken for granted is not dissimilar to Dora's concerning her (auto)biographical narrative:

I, Dora Chance, in the course of assembling notes towards my own autobiography, have inadvertently become the chronicler of all the Hazards, although I should think that my career as such will go as publicly unacknowledged by the rest of the dynasty as my biological career has done for not only are Nora and I, as I have already told you, by-blows, but our father was a pillar of the legit. theatre and we girls are illegitimate in every way – not only born out of wedlock, but we went on the halls, didn't we! (CARTER, 1993b, p. 11).

Neither to Fevvers's who at a certain moment refers to her contributions to Walser's interview as "scarcely credible narrative" and even doubts they will be published: "[c]ome on, sir, now, will they let you print *that* in your newspapers? For these were women of the *worst class* and *defiled*" (IBID, 1993a, p. 21, 84). Actually, the point is that patriarchy has always legitimised certain autobiographical writings and not others on the basis of gender. Thereby, women's self-referential discourse is historically fragmented, ambivalent, it is typified by this

double-voiced structure in which they concomitantly crave for public appreciation and fear to taint their image of feminine propriety by excessive self-exposure. Cavendish, for instance, allows her husband to overshadow her as she only prepares her autobiography after doing him the honour of writing his biography (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 12; IBID, 2001, p. 93-94). Despite all that, just like the Chance sisters who at first hesitate to go to Melchior's party, soon female writers would perceive that "Memory Lane is a dead end" and would throw "cautions to the wind" and face the hazards of their writing as the only means to envisage better future possibilities: "[e]xpect the worst, hope for the best!" (CARTER, 1993b, p. 190).

According to the canon, life narratives should follow in Saint Augustine's and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's footsteps if they are to be successful (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 86). First, Augustine wrote *Confessions*, widely accepted as the first autobiography in the modern Western world, around 397 AD (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 85). Lest one loses himself in the eyes of God, Augustine fosters the inward-turning gaze in opposition to that turned to the outside world, which is a peculiar feature of canonical texts. Further, he believes that one is likelier to have pointless irreverence towards the law when in company of friends than alone (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 18-22). In short, he was certainly someone who would only do things by 'The Book': "[d]o not be misled [from the path of 'Truth']. Bad associations spoil useful habits" (1 CORINTHIANS 15:33).

Nevertheless, that is not the way Carter's carefree contributors to Dora's narrative see things since they always make room for others and the diverse experiences they bring along – even the ones who *might* fall: Ma Chance gives shelter to the penniless orphan Kitty and does not throw her out even when she gets pregnant of Melchior Hazard: "[p]erhaps Mrs Chance's house was even a haven to her". Later on, it is Our Cyn's turn: "'I wasn't planning on running a hostel for fallen women,' said Grandma in a huff". Yet again, 49 Bard Road receives homeless Wheelchair. But this time it is the Chance sisters who reach out a helping hand. With reference to *Nights at the Circus*, things are not different. Proof thereof is the episode in which Lizzie's sister Isotta receives the refugees from Madame Schreck's museum with open arms (CARTER, 1993b, p. 25, 34, 178-80; IBID, 1993a, p. 84). Therefore, Carter is clearly in favour of the proliferation of experiences in her (auto)biographical narrative rather than the radical individuality Augustine upholds. In fact, regardless of minor or major characters, Carter examines every single one of them to a greater or lesser degree and brings to the spotlight dimensions of human life which the canon would rather leave consigned to oblivion.

In the eighteenth century, Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) is posthumously published, and it becomes another important landmark in the history of traditional autobiography, reinforcing yet more these exclusionary practices on account of its characteristic selfishness and egotism (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 96):

I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator. I want to show my fellow-men a man in all *the truth* of nature; and this man is to be myself. *Myself alone*. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any of that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different. As to whether nature did well or ill to break the mould in which I was cast, that is something no one can judge until after they have read me (ROUSSEAU, 2000, p. 5, our emphasis).

As a matter of fact, Rousseau's claim illustrates well the typical all-male monolithic speech and standpoint Carter strives to undercut in *Nights at the Circus* the moment Fevvers and Lizzie graft their plural voices and more fluid sense of self into the journalist Jack Walser's narrative: "the girl [Fevvers] never missed a beat of her narrative but went smoothly on a different tack" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 56). Similarly, in the way Fevvers relativises with authorial dexterity the concept of (auto)biographical 'truth' by tacitly joking with her reminiscences: "'Oh, Lizzie, the gentleman must know the truth!' And she fixed Walser with a piercing, judging regard, as if to ascertain just how far she could go with him" (IBID, 35). Curiously, it is exactly this tendency of Carter's narrators to 'stretch' the truth that is traditionally seen as making women's autobiographies "too windy and unreliable" in terms of autobiographical writing (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 4-5).

In order that Fevvers's and Dora's life writings can fit into the boundaries of patriarchy's 'truthful real' and have greater credibility, one of Carter's strategies is to set her narrators' (auto)biographical components against a historical backdrop and make reference to historical figures. That is why "not just Lautrec but *all* the post-impressionists vied to paint her [Fevvers]", and "during his [Ranulph Hazard's] Macbeth, Queen Victoria gripped the curtains of the royal box until her knuckles whitened. Regicide, no fun for a reigning monarch". In similar fashion, as Mr Rosencreutz states, that women ought not to "be bothering their pretty little heads with things of *this* world, such as the Irish question and the Boer War". Also, the importance World Wars I and II have as landmarks in the Chance sisters' life on account of the recurrent references to them in the novel: "[i]n the war, in the mornings after air raids, you saw people look like Brenda looked, just then" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 11, 79; IBID, 1993b, p. 14, 29, 50, 163; JOHNSON, 2007, p. 76).

It is also noteworthy in Rousseau's excerpt above the conversational tone which makes implicit the presence of an interlocutor in accordance with the convention which dictates that "the 'I' is confirmed in the function of permanent subject by the presence of its correlative 'you', giving clear motivation to the discourse" (STAROBINSKI, 1980, p. 77). Not surprisingly, Carter installs this 'I/you-reader' convention in *Wise Children* in order to give credibility to Dora's (auto)biographical narrative. In this way, every now and then there is this conspicuous interruption in the narrative flow so that there can be interaction between narrator and reader: "[b]ut, truthfully, these glorious pauses do, sometimes, occur in the discordant but complementary narratives of our lives and if you choose to stop the story there, at such a pause, and refuse to take it any further, then you can call it a happy ending" (CARTER, 1993b, p. 227). In *Nights at the Circus*, though, Carter seems to save this interplay to the ambiguous 'you' uttered by Fevvers when Walser queries the acrobat about her efforts to convince him she was the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world" and Fevvers bursts into laughter: "'I fooled you, then!' she said. 'Gawd, I fooled you!'". Does it not appear that this 'you' applies to Walser and the reader at once? (IBID, 1993a, p. 294; JOHNSON, 2007, p. 81).

Effectively, Carter is very postmodern in the manner she challenges the sovereignty and universality of this unified self Rousseau's *Confessions* helps perpetuate. First and foremost, Fevvers and Dora straddle 'high' and 'low' cultures from the outset in the way they (help) develop their (auto)biographical narratives with both working-class and middle-class autobiographical structuring features. That is, the narrators or those who contribute to the narrative make clear the protagonists' working-class ordinariness, but they also furnish a (putative) family lineage along with a date of birth – or at least the day of arrival in Fevvers's case –, which is typical of middle-class narrative. Moreover, in opposition to what is taken as a general rule in terms of parent-child relations, the sort of protection, love and tenderness Fevvers receives at the brothel does not seem to differ much from that of the conventional bourgeois family towards their offspring. Neither does the amount of attention and dedication the Chance sisters receive from Ma Chance and uncle Peregrine, even if they are not that lucky with respect to their biological father: "[o]ur father might have reneged on the job but we *did* have a right old sugar daddy in our Uncle Perry and well you know it. We never knew our mother but Grandma filled the gap and you can say that again" (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 267; CARTER, 1993a, p. 1, 12-14, 22; IBID, 1993b, p. 1, 11-40, 189, 193).

Last, unlike the peculiar linearity which typifies most middle-class autobiographies, the novels begin *in media res* and, thereby, rely considerably on flashbacks to relate past events and to introduce characters, settings and conflicts. Indeed, it comes as no surprise as soon as Dora herself admits that: “[t]here I go again! Can’t keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 158).

Furthermore, Carter is well aware that there is politics both in remembering and forgetting, at personal and collective levels. That is why she fights traditional collective forms of cultural remembering by means of the postmodern strategy of ‘presentification’ of the past and tries to provide her readers with alternative memories and meanings by filling in the gaps left for forgetfulness and silence in the attempt to manipulate collective memory (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 17-18; LE GOFF, 1986, p. 12; HUTCHEON, 1990, p. 19-20). In a way, such a procedure is in tune with bell hook’s opinion that “[...] autobiography is a personal story telling – a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them” (HOOKS, 1998, p. 430). In the same way, Carter retrospectively invests with the status of worthiness the multiple and discontinuous experiences which were not heretofore considered as such by the patriarchal hegemonic discourse. In fact, that is what allows her to speculate on the historical difficulty the suffragettes have to obtain the right to vote: besides showing what lies behind Mr Rosencreutz’s intolerance of women’s emancipation since it is of his particular interest that the caged birds be not set free, she gives utterance to Fevvers’s predicament in his hands (CARTER, 1993a, p. 74-83).

Actually, it is impressive the extent to which Carter deconstructs from within a number of the major assumptions which define and circumscribe the genre. As a contemporary postmodern writer, she blurs boundaries twice as much because not only does she mix biographical and autobiographical narratives, making the divide between them more permeable or mobile, but also further confuses the distinction between life narrative and fictional novel narrated in the first person. For instance, despite *Wise Children*’s narration in the first person and its aspect of life narrative, Carter is not *really* writing about her own life, she is just a novelist who does not necessarily have to cling to her personal memories, as opposed to the (auto)biographical narrator Dora. By doing so, Carter rids herself of the burden of Philippe Lejeune’s ‘Autobiographical Pact’ which besides dictating that authorial signature, names of narrator and character have to match, would surely prevent her from subverting ‘the truth’ as patriarchy sees it for Carter herself would have to make claims to ‘the truth’ (RAK, 2009, p. 17). In like manner, she is freer to write in several other different

practices of life writing not recognised by conventional autobiography (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 7-9).

Given that Carter's main purpose is to disclose the 'other' side of the coin, she incorporates, for example, the mode known as prison narrative to report the incidents at the panopticon prison for female criminals run by Countess P. Although enforced silence prevails at this authoritarian institution which dehumanises the inmates and turns them into invisible and powerless beings, the convict Olga Alexandrovna and her wardress and to-be lover Vera Andreyevna contrive a manner to deceive the tyranny of a place in which "all was visible to the eye of God" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 212). Hence, by using menstrual blood and all sorts of body fluids there takes place the exchange of love words between them. Shortly after, it becomes a collective enterprise that ends up in an insurrection that opens all the cages and leaves the prisoners free to write their narratives without any sort of state coercion: "[t]he white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished" as fully human beings (IBID, p. 218). Nonetheless, maybe the most important element about this episode is that only by fighting for deliverance from the imposed speechlessness to their life narratives that Alexandrovna's history of domestic violence, rape and impossibility of relishing motherhood can come to the fore (CARTER, 1993a, p. 211, 214-15; SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 201).

Likewise, Carter also appropriates the (auto)pathography, a practice of life writing whose focus is on the disabled body or "those who have been assigned the cultural status of the unwhole, the grotesque, the uncanny" (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 108). Needless to say, that is Wheelchair's case in that her life writing portrays chiefly her disability and its limitations since this "dreadful quarrel over funds that transformed the whilom Lady A. into our Wheelchair and left her homeless, penniless, reliant on the left-hand line" (CARTER, 1993b, p. 182). Obviously, another category this mode subsumes is that of the diseased or abnormal bodies such as those in Madame Schreck's "lumber room of femininity": "[d]ear old Fanny Four-Eyes; and the Sleeping Beauty; and the Wiltshire Wonder, who was not three foot high; and Albert/Albertina, who was bipartite, that is to say, half and half and neither of either; and the girl we called Cobwebs" (CARTER, 1993a, p. 59-60) whose formerly hidden life stories Fevvers narrates. First of all, what is notable about this mode is the visibility it endows these characters with. Moreover, the pivotal role the (auto)pathography plays in the empowerment it promotes by undermining their stigmatisation as aberrant bodies or social burdens in the very same manner Carter does once she brings Wheelchair back to life and

gives a chance in society to the ex-members of the “chamber of imaginary horrors” (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 187-88; CARTER, 1993b, p. 209; IBID, 1993a, p. 85-86).

Still with regard to the ‘Autobiographical Pact’, it does not necessarily follow that Dora adheres strictly to it owing to the narrative artifices she clearly utilises to liberate her from such a commitment. First, she fills in the gaps by making up memories in the way she prefers to believe she was conceived: “I’d like to think it went like this [...]” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 24). Next, she admits her reminiscences might not be trustworthy: “[i]t was a strange night, that night, and stranger still because I always misremember. It never seems the same, twice, each time that I remember it. I distort” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 68, 157, 196). At last, she gives in that she might choose to withhold information: “[a]t my age, memory becomes exquisitely selective” (IBID, p. 195). In fact, a good example is her refusal to talk in details about the war time: “[y]es, indeed; I have my memories, but I prefer to keep them to myself, thank you very much. Though there are some things I never can forget” (IBID, p. 163). In a similar vein, how can Fevvers claim the *absolute* status of an authoritative source of truth to her narrative if all the while she paves the way for the reiteration: “[i]s she fact or is she fiction?” (CARTER, 1993a, p. 7).

In addition, once the writer is somewhat implicated in the work, which is Carter’s situation in several respects, it is barely the case that the work is not going to resonate to a greater or lesser extent with the writer’s personal historical records (ANDERSON, 2004, p.1). Thus, as soon as the reader obtains external information about the historical author Carter, s/he is unavoidably going to see some of her personal experiences underlying both novels. To begin with, Ma Chance’s protective posture during the war echoes significantly Carter’s grandmother’s evacuation with her grandchildren from South London to the village of Wath-upon-Deerne in wartime England (PEACH, 1998, p. 16-17):

When the bombardments began, Grandma would go outside and shake her fist at the old men in the sky. She knew they hated women and children worst of all. She’d come back in and cuddle us. She lullabyed us, she fed us. She was our air-raid shelter; she was our entertainment; she was our breast (CARTER, 1993b, p. 29).

That would also somehow help explain the absence of mothers in Carter’s novels for not only was she separated from her mother during the war, but just like the twin sisters’ biological mother Kitty, despite being younger than Carter’s father, the author’s mother died first (SAGE, 2007, p. 5-6). By the way, another relative of Carter’s whose life resounds in *Wise Children* is her Aunt Kit who was expected to ‘go on the Halls’, that is, to act in slightly

lewd musical performances. In spite of that, she ended up as a clerkess and “had a miserable life and a bleak death”. For this reason, the Chance sisters are, in a way, a recreation of Carter’s Aunt Kit. But this time with a far more thrilling life (CLAPP, 1991, p. 26).

Similarly, Carter much probably obtained inspiration to create the giantess Fevvers during her two years in Japan, a place in which her physical features such as height, hair and complexion made her stand out in the crowd and increased dramatically her sense of being the ‘other’. According to Lorna Sage, “Japan confirmed her in her sense of strangeness” (SAGE, 1994, p. 29). But Japan also endowed Carter with her fascination for *irezumi* (tattooing) on which she wrote a journalistic article and whose influence is crystal clear in some of her works (SAGE, 2007, p. 27-8). In *Wise Children*, the one who comes immediately to mind is Gorgeous George and this “enormous statement” he embodies that is the British Empire tattooed in brilliant pink across his torso (CARTER, 1993b, p. 66-67). Incidentally, Carter’s experience as a journalist who made attempts at writing from a male viewpoint certainly bears a considerable influence on the way she produces Walser (SAGE, 2007, p. 25):

I was, as a girl, suffering a degree of colonialisation of the mind. Especially in the journalism I was writing then, I’d – quite unconsciously – posit a male point of view as the general one. So there was an element of the male impersonator about this young person as she was finding herself (CARTER, 1983, p. 71).

Finally, as “the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline” (IBID, p. 73), Carter’s perceptions of post-war Britain emerge in *Wise Children* by means of the inevitable association between the decadence of the British Empire and that of the formerly “Clown Number One to the British Empire”, Gorgeous George, who begs in the streets while displaying on his now aged and wrinkled body the grim fact that “the yellow streetlamps took all the pink out of his continents” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 196). However, Carter is certainly more interested in the bright side of Britain’s decreasing importance in the world scenario: “[t]he sense of limitless freedom that I, as a woman, sometimes feel *is* that of a new kind of being. Because I simply could not have existed, as I am, in any other preceding time or place” (IBID). Actually, is it not precisely how the Chance sisters feel once they recurrently realise the waning power of erstwhile legitimate symbols of the empire?: “[I]o, how the mighty have fallen”, in clear allusion as well to the ruined “Royal Family of the theatre”, to wit the Hazards. In short, it appears that for analogous reasons Carter, Dora and Nora eventually conclude: “[w]hat a joy it is to dance and sing!” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 10, 16, 37, 196, 232; 2 SAMUEL 1:27; PEACH, 1998, p. 14).

Therefore, even though both novels cannot be labelled self-referential writing, strictly speaking, but just in terms of structure, there certainly takes place an intersubjective interplay between Carter and her readers by means of “processes of communicative exchange and understanding” which typify the reading of life narratives depending on how one reads them (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 13). Effectively, as Mitchell puts it: “memory is an intersubjective phenomenon, a practice not only of recollection of a past *by* a subject, but of recollection *for* another subject” (MITCHELL, 1994, p. 193). In this way, in a sort of transpersonal identification with those who have been victimised and denied by patriarchy for “[s]he had an instinctive feeling for the other side, which included also the underside” (ATWOOD, 1992, p. 61), Carter gives voice to disregarded memories in an intersubjective act of sharing the social past in order to, if not reshape the future, at least offer projections of alternative future avenues (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 20-21). To put it simply, as Carter gives voice to the speechless women of yore, her own personal experience is also woven into the (auto)biographical narratives of her last two novels. Nevertheless:

In literature the autobiographical is transformed. It is no longer the writer’s own experience: it becomes everyone’s. He is no longer writing about himself: he is writing about life. He creates it, not as an object that is already familiar and observed, as he is observed by others, but as a new and revealing object, growing out of and beyond observation. Thus characters in a novel are based on the novelist’s observation of real people and of himself. Yet they would not be “living” if they were just reported. They are also invented – that is new – characters, living in the scene of life that is his novel, independent of the material of real observation from which they came (SPENDER, 1980, p. 117).

In summary, although in *Nights at the Circus* Walser writes out of duty, for communicative ends, there clearly pervades his narrative a certain intentionality to construct the *aerialiste* Fevvers textually as fake and/or a freak. Indeed, that is exactly what propels both the trapeze artist and her minder Lizzie into taking part in the narrating/writing process. Besides the good time they have at the cost of the journalist’s uneasiness, of course. With regard to Dora, in *Wise Children*, in spite of being not very clear about her motives to write and even showing a certain lack of enthusiasm in the process at first, the fact is that, historically speaking, some music hall performers did write their autobiographies to make money by catering to the readers’ avid desire to vicariously relish the stage performers’ alternative lives, something Dora even jokes about: “[r]omantic illegitimacy, always a seller. It ought to copper-bottom the sales of my memoirs” (CARTER, 1993b, p. 11; SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 266-67). However, one thing is unquestionable about both novels: once

the female protagonists/narrators take up the phallic pen, they *do not* follow the canon's stylistic propriety. Much on the contrary, they aesthetically profane the male canonical autobiographical shrine in many ways.

Likewise, these narrating and narrated subjects take up the phallic pen so as to give voice to a multitude of experiences to which has been denied historical utterance in order to unveil the opaque mechanisms patriarchal society utilises so that it can 'naturally' perpetrate all sorts of atrocities against women. Thus, perhaps Carter's incorporation of the past can be apprehended in terms of a deformation of the totalising patriarchal autobiographical narrative so as to re-form, rework it. Nevertheless, this time making room for multiple other voices previously turned down by the canon. Little wonder, then, that the contradiction immanent in female discourse is not so much a threat to its characteristic "we-ness" as a sign of regard and respect for the diversity and variety of experiences which compose it (SMITH; WATSON, 1998, p. 192). Of course, Carter's life narrative is also part of this interweaving of disparate voices. Albeit Carter's narrative in *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* is not precisely that of self-disclosure, once the reader gets in touch with some epitextual materials, such as interviews, it is unquestionable that there is a certain degree of self-representation on her part underlying the (auto)biographically-structured plots of both novels.

Furthermore, Carter's novels show from the start that any sort of attempt to find any correspondence between patriarchal ideology, as well as its attempt to produce a monological autobiographical narrative, and the plurality of female fragmented experiences is bound to failure, as Mason points out:

Nowhere in women's autobiographies do we find the patterns established by the two prototypical male autobiographers, Augustine and Rousseau; and conversely male writers never take up the archetypal models of Julian^v, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet^{vi} (MASON, 1998, p. 321).

Ultimately, no matter how much canonical autobiography may try to establish firmly delineated boundaries and enforce its 'truths', the fact is that this utopian obsession to attain an unbreakable unity only makes patent its unstable nature as a genre and its postmodern suitability, as Olney attests: "I fear that it is all too typical – indeed it seems inevitable – that the subject of autobiography produces more questions than answers, more doubts by far (even of its existence) than certainties" (OLNEY, 1980, p. 5). In addition, once the writing of an autobiography depends on the self-observation of its writer, it is by nature open-ended, always in process. Maybe that is why Carter chooses the (auto)biographical narrative for her

last two novels: besides being indisputably open-ended, it mirrors this never-ending construction of the postmodern subject (IBID, p. 25).

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ⁱ CAVENDISH, 2000, p. 57.

ⁱⁱ BRADSTREET, 1967, p. 16.

ⁱⁱⁱ KAMUF, 1991, p. 372.

^{iv} WOOLF, 2005, p. 549.

^v Dame Julian of Norwich was “the first English woman to protest that she *would* speak out about herself” so as to make known the spiritual revelations she had on 13 May, 1373 (MASON, 1980, p. 207, 213).

^{vi} “Anne Bradstreet, born in Cavalier England [...], ended her life in the far-off American colonies, [...] what she saw as God’s providence and accepted the complex fate of being an American and a member of the Puritan community as her destiny”. Bradstreet wrote a very brief spiritual autobiography (MASON, 1980, p. 211, 227).