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Two Women, Two Paths: Angela Carter and Lorna Sage

“Unlike literary scholars who consider the Gothic a historical genre that virtually died out at the beginning of the nineteenth century” Sarolta Marinovich, in complete agreement with Ellen Moers, claims that “it is not so much a specific genre in literary history but a mode of writing to be found in novels and poems alike, which may also appear as a sub-mode in novels that have generally been called realistic” (189). In her essay Marinovich gives a thorough overview of the theoretical background, enlists the Gothic images and standard features, concluding with an analysis of three works by Flannery O’Brien, Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing, respectively, and their treatment of the topics of pregnancy, childbirth and maternity.

My aim is to take the above approach as a point of departure and apply it to my reading of semi-autobiographical/journalistic writings by Angela Carter and that of Lorna Sage’s autobiographical novel *Bad Blood*. Both of the authors record not only their individual experience as women but also express feelings and write the “Herstory” of three generations using the Gothic mode. Unfortunately, neither of them is with us anymore, in fact the term “Imperfect Past” (title of chapter in *Good As Her Word*) is a felicitous phrase to describe their career just like that of Sarolta Marinovich, in whose honour we have come together today.

Feeling “very irritated at the Gothic tag” imposed upon her by reviewers of her former books, Angela Carter said that she was determined to show them “what a Gothic novel really was” (Bedford quoted in Gamble), and she wrote *Heroes and Villains* as a retort. She did not just want to write a novel “with owls and ivy and ruins and a breathtakingly Byronic hero” (Bedford quoted in Gamble 74). As I will demonstrate later, the use of the Gothic mode is not a mere revision by Carter and Sage, but a new Gothic mode, keeping their distance from and confirming its conventions at the same time. Carter revels in parodying the heroine or innocence-in-distress, the passive but virtuous “lady” as well.

Sally Robinson questions the self-evident use of the word “contemporary” as well as of the term “woman”. According to her, when we

use the phrase “contemporary female gothic” we may advocate the idea that women’s fiction is somehow different from contemporary or postmodern fiction written by men, or that women’s fiction is a genre of feminist discourse (983). That is, alternatively, female Gothic is subversive of the male tradition or it is a source of knowledge about female identity. I think there is no dilemma here; both assumptions seem to be valid. Of course, in these writings the patriarchal constructions of femininity are challenged. Both Carter and Sage divert powerfully from the earlier Gothic devices. Typically for Carter biological surrogate mothering and utopias of feminist futures frequently recur in her fiction and non-fiction. Marinovich’s approach is useful because it answers the dilemma which Robinson raises.

Virginia Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past” can serve as a model for any female autobiography and for my reading of contemporary female Gothic. There is and should be a huge difference between autobiographical writing and life writing by females or males. According to Carter, in both categories there are women writers, such as Edna O’Brien or Jean Rhys, who only “pretend to be female impersonators” just like D.H. Lawrence in *Women in Love* (Carter 1997, 208). Drawing a parallel with the Japanese kabuki theatre, she concludes that a woman should write as a female, not as a female impersonator, which fault she confesses to having committed as a novice writer, not without a streak of misogyny (1997, 207-208). Critics usually wonder whether Carter’s autobiographical essays are fact or fiction, which question is repeatedly asked about the identity of Fevvers, the central character of *Nights at the Circus*.

Sarah Gamble has pointed out in *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* that “Carter’s autobiographical essays [paradoxically] do not give us a great deal of reliable information about her life, they do [however] relate directly to an understanding of her fiction” (13). Lorna Sage, whose expertise on Carter goes unquestioned, thinks it otherwise. She notes that



The Dr Marinovich Salorta Commemorative Conference, November 25, 2011. Ágnes Suranyi presenting her paper.

Carter's 1974 collection, *Fireworks*, "contains three stories that [. . .] are hardly fictionalized at all" (Sage 2003, 72). However, she does not claim that they should be regarded as a form of straightforward self-projection, while in *Bad Blood* Sage exposes facts from her own life that might hurt people still alive.

Female autobiography (alternatively a novel, memoir, diary, or journal), observes Peach, is a genre which enables women to speak for themselves, "challenging the traditional appropriation of women's lives by men" (133). Pam Morris is further arguing that "[a]utobiography helped women discover their emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared by other women" (quoted in Peach 133). Oral story telling by ordinary women also gained legitimacy in the 1970s.

Within the category of life writing, according to Carter, journal is "the most traditional of all women's literary forms (1997, 206). This statement implies that it is her anxiety about becoming traditional that might have prompted her to blur the boundary between her fiction and non-fiction. As Linden Peach notes, in general, "after the 1970s 'life story review' was seen increasingly as one of the ways in which people could fulfil the need to make sense of their lives" (132-33). Importantly, whether an autobiography was meant for publication or not, should be taken into account as well.

Angela Carter and Lorna Sage are linked by their friendship. Sage, a prestigious literary critic, has contributed to the canonization of works by her friend, a contemporary iconoclastic writer. Sage felt the urge, as she explained, to write her autobiography following the death of her mother in 2003. Its outcome, *Bad Blood* (2001) became an overnight success, which cannot be said about her posthumously appreciated brilliant academic achievements. The title of the novel *Bad Blood* comes from the fact that as a black sheep of the family she was thought to have inherited the diabolic nature of her grandfather, a frustrated vicar. The first chapter of the book is aptly titled "The Old Devil and his Wife". The introduction of the grandfather's figure reads like the beginning of a Gothic novel: "Grandfather's skirts would flap in the wind along the churchyard path and I would hang on"(3). She reminisces further: "Domestic life in the vicarage had a Gothic flavour at odds with the house [...]. There was a word that belonged to the house 'dilapidation'. It was one of the long words I knew, for it was repeated like a mantra" (9). As the old man taught her to read and write at a premature age, she also regards herself as his "creature". She remarks that they were close allies, but in retrospection she realizes: "I was a sort of hobbler, he was my minder, and I was his" (3). The subsequent chapters are continued in the realist mode with occasional Gothic echoes.

Carter married early (to spite her mother) an industrial chemist in 1960, then in the 1970s she spent two years in Japan, which was a watershed in her literary career, making her increasingly critical of Western culture and enabling her to undermine the Eurocentric stereotypes and to look at life from an external viewpoint. The early marriage might have been an obstacle in the way of her literary career, but fortunately she chose to study at the University of Bristol in 1962-65, specialising in medieval literature. It was at this time that her interest in fairytales and folklore was aroused. As a teenager she had anorexia, in hindsight she sees herself as someone who could not fit in her restrictive environment. She got divorced in 1972, and typically for her unconventionality, later she settled down in London with Mark Pearce, several years her junior, by whom she had a son in 1982, at the age a forty-two. Her appearance had been revolting until she became a mother, then she refused to have her hair dyed or even look into the mirror. Writing about the experience of maternity she also uses the Gothic mode. She died in 1982.

Lorna Sage suffered from insomnia and allergy all her life. That is why she became a voracious reader. Unlike Carter, she gave birth to a child at the early age of 17, it was an unwanted pregnancy. She married the teenage father with whom she was admitted to the University of Durham, later she got divorced and remarried. She was not happy about the prospect of becoming a mother, as she writes, she wanted her body back. This is another part in her book where in the description of her situation the Gothic mode dominates.

The cultural and intellectual development of Carter and Sage was similar. Both wrote journalism, reviews often of books by the same authors; even their literary tastes were the same as they were brought up on “Death of the Author” by Roland Barthes. While Carter often attacked male writers (Baudelaire and D. H. Lawrence) Lorna Sage’s writing focused on twentieth century women authors. Early in her career, she was freeing herself from the accumulated meanings that literary traditions had loaded on to young women. Some characteristics of their autobiographical writings are as follows: a shift from extreme self-consciousness to self-confidence, awareness of the body, preoccupation with sex and gender, the undermining of the myths of family as a safe place, of childbirth, or saintly motherhood, and explicit treatment of taboo topics such as lesbianism, female sexual desire, and inefficient parenthood

Of the two, Carter was the more rebellious, but neither of them would censor herself. Carter would often use colloquial, outspoken (or even unacceptable) discourse in her essays and journalism. For instance, when she writes about her grandmother’s demise, she uses the word “physically

debilitated”, not just “frail” because that’s the word she finds apt to describe it. Her autobiographical essay “Family Romances” is structured according to the houses where she used to live, another Gothic feature where the Gothic mansion is replaced by redbrick buildings. On the other hand, the brilliant and perceptive scholar Sage has wrought her own idiosyncratic style to challenge the language of the male academia. Today Angela Carter is the most recognized magical realist, more dissertations have been written on her than on Virginia Woolf, and Lorna Sage’s honest and brave novel is gaining popularity.

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