
**The Way of the World “No More”:
The Limits of the Female Bildungsroman in
Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains***



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Among recent critics of the classical literary bildungsroman, there is no question that Franco Moretti has offered the most comprehensive and coherent reading of the symbolic form of the genre called the “classical bildungsroman”.¹ Yet Moretti’s groundbreaking 1987 study, *The Way of the World*, acknowledges that his literary-historical survey does not “account for” more recent versions of the bildungsroman: “[t]he bildungsroman”, he adds, “seemed to have its own private ideology” (2000: xii). The “ideal” genre his study deals with therefore belongs to another time (mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century), another place (Europe – mainly Germany, France, then England), and “necessarily” to the male gender, though *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch* squeak in as legitimate examples of post-classical instances of the form. While Moretti allows for readings of post-classical bildungsroman texts up to the twentieth century as far as 1914 – that is, as far as the advent of Modernism – by his lights, this is the logical end of a “purist” history of the bildungsroman. Given his valuable statement that “formal patterns are what literature uses in order to master historical reality, and to reshape its materials in the chosen ideological key” and that “if form is disregarded, not only do we lose the complexity (and therefore the interest) of the whole process – we miss its strictly political significance too” (*idem*, xiii), he might have more usefully responded to the ongoing history of the bildungsroman than by writing off the works by “women, workers, African-Americans” (*idem*, ix-x).

Even before Moretti’s “magisterial” study came out in 1987, studies of female bildungsroman narratives were beginning to appear and continue to do so.² Todd Kontje, no

doubt in response to Moretti and his predecessors (Jost, for instance), warns that we are as likely, if not more so, to “grow impatient” with definitions of the female bildungsroman as with “the aesthetic and ideological conservatism of earlier definitions of the male Bildungsroman. (...) In fact, searching for positive female role models in the Bildungsroman threatens to play into the hands of those who would continue to marginalize women’s fiction as ‘trivial’ literature” (Kontje, 1993: 226). However, Susan Gubar notably remarks that women’s writing generally, and women’s novels of education in particular, develop a “utopian imperative” in rejecting obsolete literary forms, especially the nineteenth-century novel’s commitment to linear plotting and realist mimesis, and pursuing postmodern goals of deconstruction and reconstruction with “characters’ awakenings to new understandings of their functions and identity” (1998: 331) – and the form itself being challenged to adapt to those new understandings. If “plot differences among the bildungsroman novels [generate] meanings” (*ibidem*) – about history, about time, about identity – what meanings can we ascribe to recent narratives of development that clearly “affiliate with”, if they do not replicate, or even parody, that original form?

The text I focus on here is not typically thought of as a “female bildungsroman” narrative, as critics focus more on its catastrophic vision of our future. But Angela Carter’s *Heroes and Villains* (1993) is clearly, and self-consciously, a bildungsroman describing the formation of a woman at the edge of time. With the novel’s nearly post-historical setting, the ideal and ideological teleologies of the Moretti paradigm of a classical bildungsroman text are intentionally destabilized. This will naturally have profound implications for the “symbolic form” of this text. The speculative mode of her novel, animated as well by the claims of the bildungsroman form, problematizes the bildungsroman’s ideal narrative of individual improvement and social progress, with its utopian trajectory of paradise lost and regained, and its endorsement of the private. Rather, *Heroes and Villains* re-orientates that teleological imperative to trace a less “predictable” vision of the “*emergence*” of individual and civilizational history (Bakhtin, 1986: 23; emphasis added) – though “into what” is the central, open question. Additionally, the interanimation of speculative and bildungsroman fiction prompts a return to the problem of education. The bildungsroman’s “specific pedagogical ideal” (*ibidem*) adherent to the genre evolves, reflecting the emergence of new ways of learning about and conceiving of the individual and/in history. This too will be

reflected in an evolving form that highlights not the “comfort of civilization” under the pretense of stable ideological conditions, but the discomfort of living at a crux time. If Marianne can be said to find any “ego ideal” by the end, it is only because she recognizes that such an ideal is least of all accomplished through a narcissistic collapse of distinction between the real and imaginary spaces. That distortion Tobias Boes calls the necessary “topology” of the bildungsroman as it “becomes the mirroring surface that aids in the construction of imagined communities” (Boes, 2007: 117) would be a real failure. Instead, however, Marianne grounded her self-identity in her abandonment of the imaginary space at the border of “the realm of bare life”.³

The conscious rehandling of the classical paradigm in *Heroes and Villains* is signaled almost immediately by the name of Carter’s protagonist, Marianne, alluding directly to the female love-interest of Goethe’s paradigmatic *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. It is the portrait of the young woman, however, not the young man, which is drawn. Set in a post-apocalyptic period, there is evidently no national government left, no fixed borders, a waning grip on any notion of “culture” and “humane-ness” – indeed, the “comfort of civilization” is limited to a small community in which the heroine Marianne is born – and which she rejects for the wild spaces beyond the tower and walls that mark the geography of her home. Marianne is in many ways the “typical” bildungsroman hero/ine at the novel’s opening: restless, seeking “the meaning of life”, “intense” (Moretti, 2000: 46). She is given the tools for understanding herself and her life from her father, a Professor of History, who imparts to her the gems of Western civilization’s treasure of knowledge. Her classroom is within a “white tower” – call it the “ivory tower” – of steel and concrete, left from the nuclear war which has apparently reduced the world as we know it to a shadow of its former self. The Professors’ precarious but still comfortable, insulated way of life is dedicated to maintaining a precarious hold on the rich history of humanity, the whole of knowledge, the ideals of humanism, civilization itself.

Integration into this society is clearly her father’s goal for her: “He taught his daughter reading, writing, and history. She read his library of old books. (...) she looked out of the window and tried to imagine a forest of men” (Carter, 1993: 7). The professor gives her his tools to discover that “sense of belonging” (Moretti, 2000: 19) to a wider community of human beings, with the expectation that, so long as she remains safely within the walls of

the Professoriate's enclave, she will participate as a fortunately free individual in the precious continuity of humankind. As one of the Professoriate class – “the only ones left who could resurrect the gone world in a gentler shape, and try to keep the destruction out, this time” (Carter, 1993: 8) – she would enjoy the “certain privileges” of that class, such as the “deep shelters” that had allowed them to survive a nuclear holocaust. Nonetheless, her lack of “belonging” is evident in the first paragraph of the novel:

Marianne had sharp, cold eyes and she was spiteful but her father loved her. He was a Professor of History; he owned a clock which he wound every morning and kept in the family dining-room upon a sideboard full of heirlooms of stainless steel such as dishes and cutlery. Marianne thought of the clock as her father's pet, something like her own pet rabbit, but the rabbit soon died and was handed over to the Professor of Biology to be eviscerated while the clock continued to tick inscrutably on. She therefore concluded the clock must be immortal but this did not impress her. Marianne sat at table, eating; she watched dispassionately as the hands of the clock went round but she never felt that time was passing for time was frozen around her in this secluded place where a pastoral quiet possessed everything and the busy clock carved the hours into sculptures of ice. (Carter, 1993: 1)

“Time” itself imprisons Marianne, its mechanical cyclicity mocking her gaze outward toward the unknown, those “forests of men”, from atop her tower, like so many a fairy tale princess. Her father's ordered existence feels empty and cold to her, its principle of continuity coming only from the inexorable, mechanistic spring of the clock, artificial, passionless. The Professors' “Society of the Tower” in fact parallels descriptions of ideal, aristocratic societies in the earlier examples of the bildungsroman. In these aristocratic cultures, Moretti notes, there are no apparent conflicts within their walls, and the aristocracy is portrayed as “self-sufficient” – for, as Moretti puts it, “its authority merg[es] with everyday activities and relationships, exercising itself in ways that are natural and unnoticeable” (Moretti, 2000: 53). This endorsement of the aristocracy, he adds importantly, is the “hidden logic of the everyday life of the classical bildungsroman” (*idem*, 54) – and the point to which the hero must return at last.⁴ So here, a community “self-supporting at the simplest level” (*idem*, 2), pastoral, but civilized, a throw-back to a sort of Platonic Republic: “primarily a community of farmers with the intellectual luxury of a few Professors who corresponded by the trading convoys with others of their kind in other places. And the Soldiers were there to protect them all” (*idem*, 8).

Marianne's rugged sense of truthfulness, however, betrays her homeland's false naturalness from the outset. The second paragraph of the novel warns how fragile a

community the Professoriate is, not least because its inhabitants close their eyes to the dangers outside: “Beyond the farmland was nothing but marshes, an indifferent acreage of tumbled stone and some distant intimations of the surrounding forest which, in certain stormy lights of late August, seemed to encroach on and menace the community though, most of the time, the villagers conspired to ignore it” (*idem*, 1). Marianne is one villager who does not. Intent even as a child in setting herself apart, she was left out of the children’s games “but she did not care”; she also “marked all her possessions with her name, even her toothbrush, and never lost anything” (*idem*, 3). Through Marianne’s precocious discernments, however, we begin to see that this community more closely resembles the inhabitants of Plato’s cave, rather than Plato’s Republic. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Lewis Mumford, two authors featured in her father’s library, contribute to his magnum opus on “the archaeology of social theory” (*idem*, 8); but beyond their theories of social contract, urban development, “technics and civilization”, is the real question: “Is there still a living choice between Necropolis and Utopia?” (Mumford, 1968: 3).

Though Marianne consumes these texts as offered, they have little to say to an adolescent who lives in the present rather than the past, and who concludes that these books and dictionaries “had ceased to describe facts and now stood only for ideas or memories” (Carter, 1993: 7). Transgressing the town walls to wander the swamps and forests beyond, she learns to beware of lacerating and flesh-eating plants, hidden “bottomless vents in the ground”, “obese and hugely fanged rats” who nested in the ruins of a former city. That city is reduced now to a “dangerous network of caves” that hide animal and human feces and bones as well as live specimens, which Marianne had once thought were ghosts. They are “ghosts”, the narrator explains, “only in the sense that they had forfeited their social personalities” (*idem*, 8), and Marianne watches their starved figures trudge through the scape of the ruins seeking scraps of food and shelter. Looking the “picture of misery”, Marianne learns that they are hardly the force of brute nature (she had thought of them as “explosions of violence produced by the earth itself” [*idem*, 14]) which she’d taken them for during their attacks on her home town.

Marianne’s contentment with being set apart betokens her yearning to break old, useless affiliations: she actually hopes “at least a visit from the Barbarians would make some kind of change” (*idem*, 2) – though last time it brought the murder of her brother.

Watching dispassionately from a tower room where she'd been locked up for "curiously indulging her spitefulness in several ways" (*idem*, 3), she'd found the attack "very interesting" as the Barbarians slaughtered livestock, and her brother; and as women from her own village seemed to help the attackers in their plundering. Her willingness to objectively survey her surroundings as if she were disconnected from them – her acceptance of a speculative standpoint in other words – gives her the kind of attentiveness that allows her to effectively defamiliarize the entirely familiar, and to open her mind to critique. As insignificant as it seems, Marianne's refusal to play "Soldiers and Barbarians", the game of her childhood friends in which "The Soldiers are heroes but the Barbarians are villains" (*idem*, 2), is also a seed of plot prediction; she refuses as well the easy categorizations of her father and the Professoriate, whose reading of the world, she suspects, is at best irrelevant. And perhaps most importantly from the perspective of generic expectation, Marianne thoughtfully informs her father that "it was impossible for her to consider marriage with any of the young men in the community. (...) 'I don't see the point. I could maybe marry a stranger, someone from outside, but nobody here. Everybody here is so terribly boring, Father'" (*idem*, 11). With the wisdom of a maturity that can be characterized as a "*retreat from life*" (Moretti, 2000: 141), her father tells her that "chaos is the opposite pole of boredom", but, moments later, Marianne yawns at his lecturing: "She loved him but he bored her" (Carter, 1993: 11). Neither wise nor mature, she opts for history and life.

Marianne's father is not killed by a chaos-bearing Barbarian; the villain is her own old nurse who, like others in the community, had suddenly gone mad, one of those events which "[n]ow and then" broke the community "from its trance" (*idem*, 9). Remarks her uncle, "There is not enough discipline (...) That old woman was maladjusted. She should have been given treatment.' (...) 'She loved us when we were alive,' said Marianne without realizing what she was saying. Appalled, she corrects herself: 'I mean, when I was young'" (*idem*, 5). Marianne is just 16 here. After that, there is no reason for her to stay, in this posthumous existence: "there was nothing but custom to keep her in the village and nothing she wanted to take away with her; not a single one of all those things she had once possessively marked with her name now seemed to belong to her" (*idem*, 18). Among Marianne's responses: she chops her hair off, looking now "like a demented boy" (*idem*, 15); so transformed, she enjoys "with a violent pleasure" her ugliness, and decides to find

“some other violation she could perform upon herself” (*ibidem*), though she discovers that scissors and knives have been hidden. These efforts underscore her unwillingness to be absorbed into her community; not only does she turn away from the prospect of monotony (and marriage) but in the crafting of her appearance as a “*demented boy*” (emphasis added) she becomes a parody of the male initiate of the bildungsroman form.⁵ She also burns her father’s books, and finally “drown[s]” her father’s clock: “It vanished under the yielding earth, still emitting a faint tick” (*ibidem*).⁶

The Professors and Priests may struggle to retain the woof of memory that keeps the weave of this social fabric together but that veil is rent for Marianne, who is so aware of the monotony of time. Eager to escape that monotony, the next Barbarian becomes her opportunity for freedom, as she agrees to help Jewel, a Barbarian hiding in her uncle’s garage after the attack. Stealing a rare automobile, she drives out with him into what is described as a brave new world: “it seemed the real breath of a wholly new and vegetable world, a world as unknown and mysterious to Marianne as the depths of the sea; or the body of the young man who slept (...) in her lap” (*idem*, 22). Later, she notes the passing of the season, “*outside time and known space*” (*idem*, 52; emphasis added). Marianne welcomes this trial among the Barbarians as a journey of “pure potentiality” (Moretti, 2000: 44); the slate, she thinks, is clean and she walks with eyes wide open. As in the paradigmatic form, the meaning of her narrative promises to emerge with her discovery of her own meaning as the hero/ine of her quest or “ordeal”.⁷ Like so many such heroes, her period of trial is one of “becoming aware of such a state of affairs” (*idem*, 45); uncannily anticipating Moretti, the character Mrs. Green in *Heroes and Villains* blithely observes that ““Tomorrow you’ll have to sleep with Jewel, won’t you. That’s the way of the world”” (*idem*, 59).

While Marianne swings from helplessness to stubborn rebellion like a ship without a ballast, alternating between abjectness and violence through much of the novel, she is courageously open to every incident, thinking, interpreting, waiting for the meaning to come to her – though she is also naively eager to judge: “you”, she condescendingly informs Jewel, “are a perfect illustration of the breakdown of social interaction and the death of social systems”; then she calls him a “beautiful savage”, the “noble savage in her father’s researches” (*idem*, 24). She goes on to nominate him the “ragged king of nowhere” (*idem*, 53), obviously a bow to this novel’s utopian forbears. This assumed “brute”, however,

reveals his intelligence quickly enough, informing his family that Marianne is “the daughter of a Professor of History (...) She knows which way time runs” (*idem*, 31). Even more pointedly, when Marianne loftily informs Jewel that “[t]hinking was [my father’s] function”, he responds, “he had the time to think about things, did he? (...) Or was he a preserved brain at the best of times” (*idem*, 57).

Trying to orient herself in the intellectual landscape of Plato, Rousseau, and the Western culture learned from her father, Marianne discovers rather quickly what she already intuited and is therefore ready to accept: that “the way of the world” into which she was born is itself an anachronism. Her father’s work on Rousseau does not prepare her for her new world, where “[s]he felt herself removed to a different planet”, isolated “as though she were in quarantine” (*idem*, 41). Indeed to the Barbarians she *is* a kind of disease; she notices at the sight of her that the newly met Barbarians guard themselves by making “the sign” against the evil eye, a gesture that she recognizes, much later in the novel, as the long-forgotten sign of the cross. Given their obvious superstitions, she muses that “If time was frozen among the Professors, here she lost the very idea of time, for the Barbarians did not segment their existence” (*ibidem*). As if to drive that point home, she notices among the clothing of a little girl named Jen “a dead wrist watch on her arm, purely for decoration; it was a little corpse of time” (*idem*, 44). She muses further on this girl, who reminds her of “an Ancient Briton”: “Marianne contemplated the archaic child and wondered if her clothing were proof of the speed with which the Barbarians were sinking backwards or evidence of their adaption [*sic*] to new conditions” (*idem*, 43).

Such speculations on history and culture hardly ease her “integration” into this wild society to which she was willingly, naively, even romantically, drawn. For just here, Marianne, the self-proclaimed “virgin of the swamp” (*idem*, 50), is matter-of-factly raped by Jewel upon her first and only effort to escape. It is no accident that the primary topic of their post-coital bantering is time, interpretation, and anachronism. Coldly observing her ravisher, with his amulets and tattoos, Marianne concludes, “You are a complete anachronism”. Asked to define the last word, she responds, “A thing that once had a place and a function but now has neither any more” (*idem*, 56-57). That’s when Jewel launches the barb concerning her father’s “preserved brain”. The point is clear: not only is her father an anachronism, but so is her own attachment to the past, and to her father’s rational categories:

“words had ceased to describe facts and now only stood for ideas or memories” (*idem*, 7), we are told early in the novel – and the truth of this is what Marianne must be continually taught. Although she regards herself “the only rational woman left in the whole world”, Jewel reminds her again and again that reason serves no useful function anymore. Thus by a logic Marianne does not understand, Jewel announces that “I’ve got to marry you, haven’t I? That’s why I’ve got to take you back” (*idem*, 56); they return to the tribe to prepare a wedding, ridiculously archaic as that sounds to Marianne.

In this bildungsroman, Marianne does marry – or, to put that verb in a more appropriate voice, she “is married”. For her marriage is something done to her, secured through the violence of the rape, and then through the celebration of that rape in the grotesque parody of a marriage ceremony. Typically performed in a ceremony filled with symbolism that connects the individuals to society at large, marriage according to Moretti fits the lives of the two into a “symbolic construction” which “always ‘connects’ the ‘individual moments’ of a text with all the others: they are thus ‘preserved’ in their singularity, while simultaneously made ‘meaningful’ – they ‘point beyond themselves’” (Moretti, 2000: 62). As the touchstone of social normality the couple is a new iteration of the ideal values of the bourgeois society whose interests the novel protected throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries; the conflict between individualization and socialization dissolved in the promise of “desire”, in all of its dimensions (social, economic, sexual, moral), fulfilled. In the classic bildungsroman, marriage is a metaphor for the social contract; we know by now, however, that the Barbarian society of Jewel is a grotesque version of the utopian social contract envisioned by Rousseau. And so this marriage ceremony is as well characterized by symbols emptied of their original significances and parodically redefined. One of the novel’s ironical jokes is that Mrs. Green, mistress of this marriage ceremony, supplies among other things a decaying wedding dress that she removes from a wooden box. In that box are a few other possessions from the old days, “a few dresses, several aprons, her hairpins and a book which was no less precious to her because she had forgotten how to read it. This book was a copy of *Great Expectations*” (Carter, 2000: 37). It’s clear by now that Marianne is no Pip; but what interests Carter anyway is not Dickens’ protagonist but rather the bizarre anachronism of Miss Havesham, herself a “pun in time”, to use Marianne’s second, wonderful definition of that word. For it is Miss

Havesham's dress that Marianne wears – “this crumbling anachronism”, Marianne calls the gown – the very tissues of it falling to pieces as it is pulled from the box.⁸ The marriage in this novel does not function, generically, as a metaphor for the social contract; rather this marriage signifies the rending of that contract, symbolized by the tearing or “giving way” of Marianne's hymen, graphically described in the narrative.

Other intertextual puns adhere to this moment in the text: the elaborate tattoo depicting the Fall of Man traced permanently into Jewel's back, for instance. “It's hideous”, says Marianne of the tattoo, “It's unnatural’. But,” the narrator tells us, “she was lying again; the tattoo seemed to her a perilous and irresistible landscape, a terra incognita on the back of the moon” (*idem*, 86). The tattoo's symbolism holds open for her, until the bitter end, the hope that she and Jewel hold in their union the potential for a future in this fallen Eden, despite the “devils” at every turn. Here's a world she can explore, perilous but irresistible. And so she does for the remainder of the novel, “[c]ourting her own extinction” (*idem*, 87) but giving life at night, as it were, to a mutation of their own, “this erotic beast” (*idem*, 88), the “dual being they made”. Once again, what is emphasized is the “universe” of desire these two individuals create, that allows her to deny Jewel “an existence outside”, indeed to deny the existence of anything outside: “Then their bed became a cold, black, silent world and its sole inhabitants were denied all other senses but those of touch, taste and smell” (*ibidem*).

In the afterglow of these episodes, however, separating themselves “out to themselves, again, they woke to the mutual distrust of the morning” (*idem*, 89), and the contraction of their world to only “two dimensions, flat and effectless. (...) all these activities were no more than sporadic tableaux vivants or random poses with no thread of continuity to hold them together” (*ibidem*). Marianne's world is described again and again as “this disintegrated state”, and Donally reminds us, in a passage that recalls Charlie Marlow at the opening of *Heart of Darkness*, that Marianne's transcendent experience in the bedroom is countered by that contraction: “It's a small world. (...) It's as small a world as the Romans found and much smaller than Uther's, getting smaller all the time. Contracting, tightening, diminishing, shrinking” (*idem*, 95-96).

This brutal marriage does permanently change Marianne and leaves her, at least until the end, *not* “entirely without hope” (*idem*, 59). The narrative offers out something after all:

love. As they endure their wedding night, an unlikely thing happens: “the strangeness of the events of the day combined almost to subdue her”; she begins unplaiting Jewel’s long hair, slowly, “an action altogether *out of time*” (*idem*, 78; emphasis added). While Jewel mocks her with her anachronistic education – “Lead me by the hand to the gates of paradise”, he jibes, to which she responds, “Why are you putting me through this ordeal by imagery?” (*idem*, 81) – she accepts the ironized come-on. They “make love” for the first time, “clutch[ing] one another’s hands with almost the same kind of terrified relief” (*ibidem*), and in this way, the narrative concludes, “they effected a truce” (*idem*, 82).

So that is what this marriage is: hardly a permanent contract but a temporary truce at best, as if one alternative to anti-utopian despair might be the retreat to the desires of the body, and through that desire, a renewal of society. The outcome of that I shall turn to in a moment. But here, Marianne knows even this truce is a precious thing, because, for the first time, it reveals to her something that is “real”: it is her first authentic experience. Their lovemaking “bore no relation to anything she had heard, read or experienced (...) she was filled with astonishment that the room contained the world or the world had become only the room; but she put her arms around him and caressed him”. The gates of paradise indeed. “And”, this paragraph concludes, “if anything else but this existed, then she was sure it was not real” (*idem*, 83). Perhaps, but the poison that the Barbarian shaman Donally (himself a renegade Professor) tried to add to their morning breakfast was real enough to kill the puppy Mrs. Green tested it on.

The hope for love seems fragile at best, and a romantic one (in the negative sense) at worst. For this reason, we are suspicious when Marianne finds herself, in the days following this apparent consummation of the marriage, surprisingly and for the first time “comfortable”. This feeling of comfort reminds her of her father and his ilk, “gathered together over their after-dinner, home-brewed blackberry brandy when they would discuss apocalypses, utopias and so on. Marianne suppressed a yawn but, all the same, she felt at home” (*idem*, 93). She has found “familiarity”. But as her new group of companions, nomads, without a home, move out toward the sea, which she has never seen, these connections continue to confuse her: “And Marianne knew in her heart that none of this was real; that it was a kind of enchantment. She was in no-man’s-land” (*idem*, 103). Furthermore,

she could find no logic to account for her presence nor for that of the people around her nor any familiar, sequential logic at all in this shifting world; for that consciousness of reason in which her own had ripened was now withering away and she might soon be prepared to accept, since it was coherent, whatever malign structure of the world (...). (*idem*, 106)

It is clear that the Moretti model for the symbolic logic of the bildungsroman, with its goals of comfort, compromise, autonomy and independence, was fully apparent to this novel's author, who, in envisioning a world in which civilization is essentially collapsed, overturns those goals time and time again. Whereas the professors "at least make the pretence of nourishing such a thing [as hope]" (*idem*, 123), Jewel, Marianne's own "unorthodox" (*ibidem*) tutor, rejects Donally's proposal of "Hope" as the dream for the future. Marianne concurs, observing that such a return to the Professors – to signal that her "researches into the *moeurs* of savage tribes [are] completed" (*idem*, 132) – is a meaningless conclusion to her education: "'The Barbarians are Yahoos but the Professors are Laputans,' she said" (*idem*, 123), both peoples, in other words, parodies of themselves and neither of them worthy of admiration. In acknowledging this, Marianne recognizes the irony of her situation and the likely uselessness of seeking existential moorings among the Barbarians, any more than from the Professors. While refusing to play Heroes and Villains, her childhood game, among the Professors, among the Barbarians the game cannot be played at all, for "I don't know which is which any more, nor who is who, and what can I trust if not appearances? Because nobody can teach me (...) because my father is dead" (*idem*, 125). The "objective foundations" (Moretti, 2000: 108) of neither society – the Barbarians' or the Professors' – can offer any positive symbolic legitimacy, and the prospect of annihilation remains the most reliable expectation.

Up to the bitter end Marianne is ambivalent, pulled between anachronistic hope and abject despair. She continues on with Jewel, at once disgusted with him and at the same time attracted: "when she perceived she and her Jewel were, in some way, related to one another she was filled with pain for her idea of her own autonomy might, in fact, be not the truth but a passionately held conviction"; she is "abashed" at her hope that simply insisting on this conviction of autonomy would make it a certainty, and ashamed at what she suspects is merely nostalgic sentimentality. Thus, as the couple reach the last real horizon, the sea, the narrator invests the final major scene with allusive ghostliness: we are brought simultaneously to the beginning of the world, with Jewel and Marianne like a first couple

standing before “all the wonders of the seashore, to which Marianne could scarcely put a single name, though everything had once been scrupulously named” (Carter, 1993: 136); and to the end of the world, on the beach, as we recall other post-apocalyptic scenarios on beaches – not only Neville Shute’s but also most uncannily, H. G. Wells’:

Losing their names, these things underwent a process of uncreation and reverted to chaos, existing only to themselves in an unstructured world where they were not formally acknowledged, becoming an ever-widening margin of undifferentiated and nameless matter surrounding the outposts of man, who no longer made himself familiar with these things or rendered them authentic in his experience by the gift of naming. Jewel and Marianne walked along the beach of this wide, unfrequented bay not as if they were discovering it, or exploring it, but like visitors who have arrived too late, without an introduction, are unsure of their welcome but, nevertheless, determined to brave it out. (Carter, 1993: 136-7)

Reaching such an indifferent horizon, the traces of their footsteps “already filling with water” (*ibidem*), she still considers beginning a new world with him, even as she skeptically predicts failure:

at best, they might begin a new subspecies of man who would live in absolute privacy in secret caves, (...) imbibing a suitable indifference to the outside with its mother’s milk. This fearless and rational breed would eschew such mysteries as the one now forcing her to walk behind the figure on the shore, dark as the negative of a photograph, and preventing her from returning home alone. (*ibidem*)

Indeed a cruel reminder is offered her at just this moment: she peers ahead past the headland to see “a time-eaten city up to its ears in the sea” (*idem*, 137) and itself a kind of negative of the place from which she came with “an enormous clock whose hands stood still” (*idem*, 138) protruding from the waves, and also a “white tower”, a lighthouse, “like a luminous finger pointing to heaven” except that “[i]ts light was put out”: “To Marianne, it looked the twin of the white tower in which she had been born and she was very much moved for, though neither tower any longer cast a useful light, both still served to warn and inform of surrounding dangers” (*idem*, 139). In a last confusion of sentimentalism, Marianne interprets these as beneficial symbols, to restore or clarify her resolution: “abhor shipwreck (...) go in fear of unreason. Use your wits (...). She fell in love with the integrity of the lighthouse” (*ibidem*). The narrator reminds us that Jewel “might regard her as more representative of the culture of the carrier of the defunct clock” (*ibidem*); and Marianne herself, at this point, views the “rotten concrete” of the ruins as conceivably “the original

blueprint”, with the existence of men and women merely a “necessary but intermediate stage of the execution of the grand design” (*idem*, 140).

The only possible ending is what Moretti calls the “implausible” kind: crisis, a divorce, death. With Marianne suspecting that the “grand design” in this world has little to do with human sociality, much less love, in their final scene together she and Jewel examine one another

with marvelling suspicion, likely heavily disguised members of a conspiracy who have never learned the signals which would reveal themselves to one another, for to neither did it seem possible, nor even desirable, that the evidence of their senses was correct and each capable of finding in the other some clue to survival in this inimical world. (*idem*, 148)

When he leaves for good, and she can see him “no more”, she suddenly feels a stranger to herself: “she was surprised to find herself dislocated from and unfamiliar with her own body” (*ibidem*). Therefore, with the death of Jewel, the narrative almost immediately shuts down. Moretti reminds us that in the classical bildungsroman “[t]he story ends as soon as an intentional design has been realized: a design which involves the protagonist and determines the overall meaning of events” (Moretti, 2000: 55). The same is true in this novel, except that the author makes it clear that the intentional design of this bildungsroman is precisely the evacuation of the utopian ideals of that classical form, a conclusion that hardly satisfies the conventional “sense of an ending”. “No more” – the words used to inform Marianne of Jewel’s death – is to be given, taken, exchanged,⁹ or demanded.

Marianne does not collapse or even weep at the news; with an irony she understands by now, this ending was too expected. In the ultimate overturning of the bildungsroman ending, where the hero “finds” him- or herself, Marianne instead catches her reflection “in a misty, cracked mirror on the wall: there stood Marianne, *unrecognizable to herself*, leaning over the cauldron” (Carter, 1993: 149; emphasis added). Visions of her entire life history parade before her in the curling steam of the cauldron, including an image of the murderous Nurse, “her (...) forgotten face grinn[ing] triumphantly for, in some sense, her prophecy had been fulfilled” (*ibidem*); that prophecy was this: “If you’re not a good little girl, the Barbarians will eat you” (*idem*, 2). But last in the stream of “visions” is her father, “who merged imperceptibly with the image of the blind lighthouse and then disappeared in the

slowly rising bubbles” (*idem*, 149), recalling the moment when the face of her father’s old watch sinks into the mud. No wonder then that Marianne’s story of development ends with her self-proclaimed inheritance of Jewel’s authority and legitimacy: ““What, will you be Queen?” says the boy Johnny; rejecting the nomenclature of aristocracy and national history, she answers ““I’ll be the tiger lady and rule them with a rod of iron”” (150). The civilized comforts of her White Tower home are devolved into the infantile terrors of the fairy-tale;¹⁰ the most one can say of her quest for self-discovery is that she does not despair in her anti-utopian¹¹ suspicion that the freedom and autonomy she sought among the Barbarians exist nowhere in this “realm of bare life” (Boes, 2007: 122), utter necessity, and contingency.

The comedic drive of the bildungsroman toward “organic integration” is undone in this novel’s endlessly self-consuming propositions. Whereas the classic bildungsroman endorses the “triumph of meaning over time” (Moretti, 2000: 55), this novel faces the triumph of time over meaning. Carter’s rigorous and unfearful speculation on the end of, if not society, certainly of Culture and Civilization with capital C’s, takes us also to the “ends” of writing: both in the sense of an “end” as a final stage of a history, and in the sense of an “end” as a purpose or goal. This speculative novel reflects most urgently on the purgatorial conditions of a life that make narrative possible. Marianne several times considered running away, even tried a few times, the narrator says, “as if somewhere there was still the idea of a home” (*idem*, 52). What Marianne knows by the final page is that there is no such thing as home, that, too, being an anachronistic notion, with no realistic function in this post-modern, post-romantic, post-historical period that Mrs. Green calls “this hell on earth”, in which only the *unheimlich* persists. No further narrative possible under these conditions, other than a tallying of the days.

Carter imagines a kind of literal post-modernity, in which it is no longer possible to imagine a temporal horizon, and in which few remember the past. This society, such as it is, has nearly lost any sense of history, so “disintegrated” it is become;¹² a new dark age is clearly dawning. Carter’s strategic choice of the bildungsroman exposes with the profoundest irony the falseness of Marianne’s own misguided naiveté and hope long before she admits it to herself. The dismal lesson Marianne learns is that her own experiment in free will and the romance of exploration was doomed, based on anachronistic myths concerning free will, love, and that most utopian of desires, hope.

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Notes

¹ Todd Kontje describes the Bildungsroman in similar terms, as "the meta-discourse in which we witness the birth of man. (...) But evidently *not* the birth of women" (1993: 222). Writing contemporaneously with Moretti on this topic, John Smith also ties the bildungsroman to a masculinist ideology: "*Bildung*, and its narrativization in the Bildungsroman, is not an 'organic' but a social phenomenon that leads to the construction of male identity. (...) The strict gender codification at the basis of *Bildung* (...) makes female *Bildung* a contradiction in terms" (1987: 216 and 220).

² The studies began with a 1984 article in *Women's Studies* on nineteenth-century American female bildungsroman, by Beverly Voloshin, and an article two years later by Mikhael M. Bakhtin. Esther Kleinbord Labovitz's full-length study, *The Myth of the Heroine*, appeared in 1986, followed by Susan Fraiman's important monograph, *Unbecoming Women*, in 1993. Further books appeared by Feng (1997) and Lorna Ellis (1999) as well as various articles. Susan Midalia similarly characterizes the female bildungsroman as embracing a "politics of optimism" (1996: 89) based on its "emancipatory nature" (*idem*,

90), though she accurately concedes that “from a feminist perspective [it] in fact encompasses ideologically diverse, even antithetical, positions” (*idem*, 91).

³ This phrase is Giorgio Agamben’s, but its application to the theory of bildungsroman is introduced by Tobias Boes (2007), the most recent and certainly most intellectually provocative critics of the genre. See his discussion of Agamben in *Conradiana*, vol. 39, pp. 122-23.

⁴ For Wilhelm, according to Moretti, “There is the warning of the Society of the Tower that accompanies him constantly – it almost torments him: ‘Remember to live!’ Not to live in one way or another, but simply to live. What is important is not to establish a goal and concentrate all of one’s forces for the moment in which it draws close, the moment of the trial. What is important is to be able to dispose of one’s energies *at every moment* and to employ them for the countless occasions or opportunities that life, little by little, takes upon itself” (45).

⁵ Moretti notes that the protagonists of such narratives [the post-ideal bildungsroman] “act” in order to “be”: they are “basically ‘dynamic’ and ‘theatrical,’ but that also means (...) that they incline to ‘unnaturalness’ and ‘parody’” (2000: 106). This is relevant to Marianne’s urges to escape and to masquerade as a boy.

⁶ Sarah Lefanu notes this novel’s “obsession with time” and the presence of clocks at its beginning and ending (for her full discussion of this novel, see Lefanu, 1989: 79-83).

⁷ Here is Moretti: “in the course of the *Prüfungszeit* [the hero] is on hold, at zero degree, just as time in fact is on hold. The ‘trial’ of initiation consists precisely in accepting that time stop and that one’s own identity vanish. It consists in being willing *to die* in order to have the possibility *to be reborn*. The only virtue put on trial is courage in the sense of ‘patience’, the virtue of exceptional circumstances” (2000: 45).

⁸ The marriage is thus much more specifically nuanced than Sarah Lefanu suggests, in describing it as a “grotesque parody of a fairy-tale wedding” (1989: 80). In case we miss the joke the first time, the dress is burned after the wedding, though *without* its wearer inside it. Marianne demands its destruction, and Mrs. Green, who herself alternates between sentiment and callous indifference, does the honors. The myth, the fairy tale, goes up in smoke.

⁹ I use this word intentionally, because it is one that Moretti associates with the symbolic logic of the bildungsroman. There it is associated with the bourgeois underpinnings of the form, and results in the “exchange” in which “comfort” is gained – and freedom is lost (see Moretti, 2000: 52-56 and 65-67).

¹⁰ Scholars have written quite extensively of Carter’s employment of fairy tale structures and tropes. But in the context of my reading, Moretti once again is relevant, as he speaks of the very short life of the “classical *Bildungsroman*” and the posthumous versions and perversions of it: “Formation as a synthesis of variety and harmony; the homogeneity of individual autonomy and socialization; the very notion of the novel as a ‘symbolic’ and organic form – all these beliefs are now dismissed as so many fairy-tale illusions” (2000: 75). Indeed, Carter’s novel goes a long way to dismiss those “beliefs”.

¹¹ See Levitas: “Anti-utopianism involves the active denial of the merits of imagining alternative ways of living, particularly if they constitute serious attempts to argue that the world might or should be otherwise” (1990: 30).

¹² See Lucy Sargisson on Carter (as well as on Cixous) as “profoundly disintegrationist”. She is referring here to their “subversion or inversion of the fairy tale as a unifying force [that] has the effect of shattering established myths and universals” (1996: 45), thus opening the way toward alternative narratives. She emphasizes that the “functional like” between utopian literature and fairy tales is not in the “shared pursuit of universal solutions”, but rather simply the “shared use of the fantastic”, which means a shared employment of what she calls “tactics of separation” (*ibidem*). Elaborating on this point further in a later section on the “transgression of stereotypes and codes of social normality” Sargisson refers specifically to *Heroes and Villains* as well as to *The Passion of New Eve* (see *idem*, 202-203).