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## The Politics of Fantasy in Recent American Women's Novels

**Abstract.** This essay explores the fantastic as a mode of writing in women's novels which departs from the realism usually employed to transport feminist attitudes in fiction. The analysis of these imaginative texts makes it obvious that our critical tools have to transcend structural models of the fantastic and include both sociological and psychoanalytical approaches.

Thus fantasy can be investigated both in the author/reader's relation to society and in terms of women's individual and collective desires, fears and projections. These give rise to a wide range of »political« strategies, from mere reversals of gender dichotomies through explorations of alternatives for women to a critique of gender discourse in general.

If we look back upon the very large number of women's novels in the last two decades, and more specifically at the novels which display a special feminist concern, it is striking that most of them are realistic novels.\* They describe women suffering from an oppressive situation, female »Bildungsromane«, novels of women going through a breakdown, experiencing socialization in a patriarchal society and so on. These »novels of oppression«, as I'll label them for convenience, have a valuable function in that they point out women's conditions, take seriously their sufferings, transform narrative models which have been predominantly used for men's experience (like the novel of development), and instal women both as the subject and object of narrative. One of their important social roles has been the raising of consciousness in describing convincing, fictional yet plausible case-histories, fictional characters with whom the woman reader could identify, establish herself as a subject, see the political within the personal and gain strength in a common struggle.

It is not my objective in this paper to deal in detail with the fascinating question of whether all these novels are in fact written in a realistic manner or whether that is partly due to the dominant critical practice which provided a reading of these texts as realistic. It is indeed astonishing how often I have come across comments in criticism or advertising blurbs promising a plot »vividly true to life« in appraisal of texts which can easily be read as going far beyond this aim and thus betraying a general trend to harmonise what is potentially far more subversive if read a different way.

From the mid-seventies onwards there has been a range of women's fiction which marks a new departure from this predominant realism - an increasing use of fantasy. My intention here is to understand literary fantasy in the widest possible sense, as opposed to what is defined as realistic and plausible and situated within the framework of explicable order and naturalised systems. It is my specific aim to ask questions as to why more and more women venture into the realms of the improbable and impossible, what their motivations and intentions are and which forms this takes in their fiction.

\*Versions of this paper have been given at the 1983 Conference of the German Association for American Studies in Kiel and to friends and colleagues at Sussex University whom I want to thank for their encouragement and critical comments.

### Doing Feminist research

In the process of writing this paper I encountered typical problems of feminist research,<sup>1</sup> three of which I want to present here. They have a peculiar circularity about them.

1. The relative absence of women as *active* agents (except amazons in negative presentations) in literary fantasy: »Man« in Utopia or Science Fiction is predominantly male; he sets out for a male quest in the name of humankind. However enterprising in the field of technology, of space and time, conventional gender roles are frequently taken over into an otherwise entirely fantastic context; an »intergalactic suburbia«, as Russ calls it.<sup>2</sup> And literary criticism quietly helps to disguise this fact by hardly ever asking why sex stereotypes have such an indestructible life. The current models of structural analysis are very apt for reaffirming the status quo, as they serve to set up perfect inventories of binary oppositional features in the surface of deep structure of texts, but never tackle absences, let alone political issues.

2. The relative absence of women as authors of SF or utopias in literary criticism: We can learn from bibliographies<sup>3</sup> that this is not a real absence. Much has still to be done not only in terms of an archeology of women's texts; but even well-known novels by women like G. E. Moore or Charlotte Perkins Gilman are hardly ever included in historical accounts of fantastic literature. Not one of the existing monographs or readers on fantasy with a historic orientation includes a chapter which deals with the specific topics and intertextual relations of those texts written by women. Possible reasons for these omissions are that some of them write far less about technology, some do not offer an abstract world-view, or, like Russ and Piercy, mix categories in a confusing and creative way. Do they not fit in because genres which (to use Jameson's concept) »are literary institutions... based on tacit agreements or contracts«,<sup>4</sup> have been constructed according to a canon which consists of texts written by men? Although the question is far more complex and many more subtle arguments could be added, I think some of the vicious circles which are at work are quite evident.

3. Predominant critical interests: Literary criticism on fantasy is clearly marked by an excessive discussion of differences between the various sub-genres of fantasy and between fantastic and non-fantastic writing.

There is a peculiar contradiction between the »stuff« that fantasy is made of, dreams, experimentation, playfulness, and the eager incorporation of this material into explanatory systems of formal precision. Todorov's distinction between the »pure uncanny/fantastic uncanny/fantastic marvellous/pure marvellous«<sup>5</sup> may serve as one example among very many others which are concerned with setting up artificial boundaries. I do not want to dispute the value of demarcation by precise criteria per se, but I do dispute their striking quantity and exclusiveness often at the cost of questions which might deal with the more disturbing qualities of fantasy. I agree with Rosemary Jackson<sup>6</sup> who criticized the general lack of psychoanalytic theory in the current explorations of the fantastic, and I am following many of her suggestions. The channelling effect of existing research should not be underrated. Although anticipating possible problems, I was tempted to abandon my initial interest in the feminist politics of fantastic texts, by the sheer force of the dominant discussion, and the fact that I would move on respectable academic grounds when joining in with this critical tendency; and I began to realize that some of the critical conventions had to be violated if I wanted to continue with this research.

In the following I will make an eclectic choice of criteria which seem to me suited to deal with the issues raised here.

1 More general remarks on feminist research in Liz Stanley, Sue Wise, *Breaking out: Feminist consciousness and feminist research*. (London, 1983).

2 Joanna Russ, »The Image of Women in Science Fiction«, in: *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. S.K. Cornillon. (Bowling Green, 1972), 81. Among the paradigms, which for example Darko Suvin employs in his structural analysis of SF, are organic/unorganic; class, space, man/animal, but not a single one which relates to gender. See Darko Suvin, *The Time Machine versus Utopia as a Structural Model for Science Fiction*, *Comparative Literature Studies* 10 (1973), 334-352.

3 L. T. Sargent, *British and American Utopian Literature: 1516-1975*. (Boston, 1979); M. B. Tynn, K. J. Zahorski, R. H. Bayer, *Fantasy Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide*. (New York, 1979).

4 Fredric Jameson, »Magical narratives: romance as genre«, *New Literary History* 7 (Autumn 1975), 133-163.

5 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard. (London, 1973).

6 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. (London, 1981).

Theoretical approaches: a sociological and a psychoanalytical model

The fantastic has been defined as a relational mode of writing in which the unreal is set against the real.<sup>7</sup> Literary fantasy signifies nothing absolute, but is fashioned in terms of an opposition to another frame of reference which points outside the text towards the social reality of author and reader. This social reality is not a given, not just extratextual, but a constructed reality which is – in more or less explicit form – inscribed in the text. Instead of merely focussing our attention on the contents of the fantastic, we are invited to look towards both positions, the »real« and the »unreal« and their relation to each other. This is the most basic common feature of definitions of the fantastic from Freud to Todorov,<sup>8</sup> and it can easily be seen how such a concept of an oppositional structure can be linked with feminist concerns: Women strive to break out of oppressive conditions, and this can only be done by transcending both the material and the conceptual limitations of a patriarchal society.

The interplay of the »familiar and the other«<sup>9</sup> offers an unlimited variety of possibilities, which can be described as transformation, displacement, distortion, perversion, etc., of the »real« through fantasy. Again, not surprisingly, in relation to women's issues, this is expressed by all sorts of reversals of gender roles and gender definitions. The fact that most descriptions of the fantastic use negative terms like »unfamiliar, impossible, unknown«, etc., stresses the relational nature of the fantastic. Although these definitions do not conceive of themselves as parts of sociological models, they can be used as such if their relational nature is emphasized. Todorov, Brooke-Rose and even Jackson, however, are more concerned with the operations of transformation themselves. Whereas their aims are directed towards a *poetics* of the fantastic, I want to explore aspects of their *politics*.

In order to avoid a naive political reading which would just be based on a comparison between the »real« and the imaginary, it is necessary to acknowledge a far more complicated relation between the two, an interplay in which the *subject* is introduced. It is the subject who takes part in both worlds, and the fantasized can be seen as the product of a psychological process. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and his essay on »The Uncanny«<sup>10</sup> have found recognition in recent discussions of fantasy. His notions of repression and wishfulfilment can be applied both on the level of the individual and on a cultural and political plane. He suggests that the uncanny, which cannot be explained on the grounds of accepted norms of plausibility, is »something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression.«<sup>11</sup> The frequent outbursts of passionate violence in recent women's fantasy for example, should be analyzed on these grounds and not in terms of simple inversions.

Lacan's theories<sup>12</sup> give us further clues to find out more about this crucial link between the fantasizing subject and existing cultural codes. He explores the transition of the primarily undivided self into a symbolic order, a transition which introduces a permanent split. Language plays an important role in this process of enculturalization and splitting of the self, which he has called the »mirror stage«. This rather crude simplification of one aspect of Lacan's theory may nevertheless be helpful for our purposes, in that we can see in fantasy the emergence of desires reaching back to a stage prior to the construction of the self in social and ideological terms. This desire can never be expressed wholly, as the structure of language, which has to be used as a means of expression in fiction, already incorporates the restricting cultural codes. The desires expressed through literary fantasy can only appear in form of a loss, an absence, a point of resistance, the creation of an open space.

7 By »real« I mean the empirically plausible; to signify this specific connotation, the term will appear in inverted commas throughout the essay.

8 See also Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*. (Cambridge, 1981); William R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*. (Illinois, 1976); C.N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*. (Cambridge, 1975); Irving Massey, *The Gaping Pig: Literature and Metamorphosis*. (California, 1976); Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature*. (Princeton, 1976).

9 Jackson, 52.

10 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ed. J. Strachey, vol. 4. (Harmondsworth, 1976); »The 'Uncanny'«, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17. (London, 1955), 217-256.

11 Freud, »The 'Uncanny'«, 245.

12 Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. (New York, 1968); and Lacan on women, see *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the »école freudienne«*, eds. Jacqueline Rose and Juliet Mitchell. (London, 1982).

If we look at contemporary feminist concerns we can see the variety of possibilities literary fantasy offers for their expression. In present feminism we find a shifting between, on the one hand, explicitly formulated demands in socio-economic terms, such as a rejection of the traditional division of labour, practical suggestions about childcare, equal opportunities in jobs, etc., and, on the other hand a vision which goes far beyond this. This vision is based on the experience of women throughout history who have been defined as secondary and relative to men, and the fact that the search for a more authentic identity (whatever this may mean) is barred by existing stereotypes, by distorted concepts and ultimately by language itself (as these concepts are inscribed in language which must invariably be used to establish an identity). Fantasy is potentially closer to the unconscious as it can disregard »natural« norms, rules of logic both in terms of the discursive unfolding of language and the combination of events to form a narrative plot, and it uses material like myth and dream. Feminist fantastic literature relates to both the more immediate social concerns and the psychological ones. There are constructions of alternative societies, both negative and positive ones, there are imagined transgressive acts, there is an abundance of idealized/transformed/androgynous characters. Moreover, in some fantastic writing, we find a challenging of gender discourse and playful fiction which opens up into the (virtually) unthinkable. It is within the range and tensions of these issues that I want to examine a few examples of American women's fiction.

### Some fantastic texts

Only recently have women writers introduced feminist topics into the field of science fiction, which has always been the domain of men – authors as well as readers. In Suzy McKee Charnas' *Walk to the End of the World* (1974),<sup>13</sup> the relation between the fantasized and the »real« is clearly marked. Existing gender polarizations are exaggerated and presented in a brutal male world, »Holdfast«, where extreme sadist practices correspond with demoralized masochistic patterns of subordinate women, »fems«, who perform them as a mere means of survival. In its sequel, *Motherlines* (1978) an escaped »fem« experiences a not too perfect world of amazon women and gradually gains strength to go back and fight. It is a fantasy of projected fears with a feminist message. The operations of translating specific problems into a different world are obvious, and the two novels are written in a completely conventional language. These novels – and there are very similar ones, e. g. by James Triptree or Marion Zimmer Bradley<sup>14</sup> – clearly set up an alternative to the great number of sexist SF texts and specifically to those in which male authors present horror images of matriarchal societies.<sup>15</sup> But do they achieve anything really different? They offer a radically reversed gender dichotomy, but it still remains a dichotomy whose basis is not questioned.

From Ursula Le Guin's novels I chose *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) (*LHD*) and *The Dispossessed* (1974) (*TD*). Both have won several awards and have been widely discussed in literary criticism. Gender definition as one of the paradigms of the »real« world, is explored, transformed and violated in their fantastic context. We find a great range of devices like temporal and spatial displacement, analogy and extrapolation,<sup>16</sup> the introduction of one person who is near to our world into an alien one in *LHD* and, conversely, of an alien into a world which resembles our own (*TD*); all these levels are intricately constructed and interlinked. Both novels are convincing in their explicit statements on gender norms, the androgynous vision in *LHD*, and the socialist ideas of shared caring and unrestricted access to education and work in *TD*. But they fall somewhat short in their translation of these ideas into the

13 Suzy McKee Charnas, *Walk to the End of the World*. (New York: Berkley edition, 1974), and *Motherlines*. (New York: Berkley edition, 1978).

14 On Marion Zimmer Bradley see Linda Leith, »Marion Zimmer Bradley and Darkover«, *Science Fiction Studies*, 7 (March 1980), 28-35. General outlines of women's achievements in the field of SF are given in the introductions to Pamela Sargent, ed. *Women of Wonder*. (New York, 1975) and *More Women of Wonder*. (Harmondsworth, 1979).

15 See Joanna Russ, »Amor Vincit Foeminam: The Battle of the Sexes in SF«, *Science Fiction Studies*, 7 (March 1980), 2-15.

16 See criticism on Le Guin's novels in J.D. Olander, H. M. Greenberg, eds., *Ursula K. Le Guin* (Edinburgh, 1979) and the special issue of *Science Fiction Studies*, 2 (1975).

discursive practice of a plot: in *TD* it is still men who are involved in the most interesting discussions and who are in the decisive positions of power (it is indeed tempting to adopt Delany's compulsive practice of counting mere numbers, the ratio of men to women in public places as well as in novels!)<sup>17</sup> The beautifully imaginative novel *LHD* presents a world of people who, being sexually neutral most of the time, come to incorporate one sex each month, in the state of »kemmer«, in order to couple with a person of the opposite sex. This notion of complementary hetero-sexuality as a naturalized ideal of sex which excludes homosexuality is transported uncritically from our norms and undermines Le Guin's androgynous concept. Another problematic feature is the use of the generic *he* when talking about these »ambisexual« persons, which gives us the impression, that the world of *Winter* is a world of men, half of whom turn to women for a few days of the month by growing breasts and behaving like women. Le Guin's argument that this utopian world is presented through the perspective of a narrator of the »old patriarchal world«, who necessarily has to use his language with its specific conceptualizations<sup>18</sup> might help us to understand the language of the novel but does not reduce our uneasiness when reading it.

Mainstream SF offers on the whole possibilities of politics which have to be seen within its limitations: SF presents universes which are constructed in a different way from our own and thus point towards new perspectives. The problem is that those imaginary societies represent systems which are closed in themselves and only bear an analogical or metonymic relationship to our own. They are not too near in a bewildering or disturbing way but near enough to express didactic purposes and initiate an intellectual game.

With Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (1975)<sup>19</sup> we have two examples in which we find far closer links between the fantasized world and our own. Russ' novel is normally categorized as SF, Piercy's as either SF or utopian. Neither of them fits into the conventions of these genres. This resistance to be read according to the rules of the genre is due to the feminist perspective of both novels and to their orientation towards a suffering/criticizing subject. In *The Female Man* four women from different times meet: Joanna, a college professor of the present, who sometimes features as the omnipresent invisible author; Jeannine, a woman from the Fifties, who acts according to prescribed gender roles but feels slightly odd (she virtually stalks through the novel on high heels and squeezed into uncomfortable clothes); Janet from *Whiteaway*, an all-women anarchy in the future, who reacts in a very »unwomanly« way when confronted with contemporary America and cannot comprehend many of the games between the sexes there; and finally, the uncanny killer woman Jael from a future in which an embittered sex-war is raging. It is impossible to summarize this novel as there is no clear-cut division between these women and their worlds; on the contrary, they can all be seen as fantasies in the mind of Joanna, but we are never quite sure. Freud's thesis of fantasy being something secretly familiar applies here. Joanna's explicit motto is: »To resolve contrarities unite them in your own person« (138). By this ambiguity Russ achieves something which can not usually be found in SF or in Utopias: the fantasized world reaches into the »real« one in a disturbing and disorganizing way, the world of plausibility and recognizable norms is constantly invaded and undermined by the polysemic processes of the text. In many chapters we only find out later who the »I« is that is narrating; Joanna, the invisible and visible author shadows the other characters, provides a super-ego for Jeannine and Janet, and even kicks them when they either violate gender norms or do not manage to act according to them - truly erratic behaviour.

In the course of the novel the »real« world of Joanna and Jeannine becomes more fantastic than the fantasized one, by the introduction of scenes which are well known to all of us and in which gender is foregrounded. There is, for example, a party chorus of women called Lamentissa, Wailissa, Sacharissa, Aphrodisa etc. (35) or »The great happiness contest« (116), another party-game, or »four variations of

17 Samuel Delaney, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Essays on Science Fiction*. (Berkeley, 1978).

18 See Le Guin, »Is Gender Necessary?« in: *The Language of the Night* (New York, 1982), 158-159 and Pamela J. Annas, »New Worlds, New Words: Androgyny in Feminist Science Fiction«, *Science Fiction Studies*, 5 (1978), 143-156.

19 Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1975); Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*. (New York, 1976); I quote from the Women's Press edition (London, 1979).

the dominance game« (93); there are numerous variations of scenes of chatting up, of love-making (even a very absurd reversal of roles), of »you-ought-to-be-a-dutiful-daughter« and of »we only-want-what's-best-for-you« scenes with sex education and parental advice. The language of these discourses, which can themselves be recognized as conventional, is adapted with mocking imitation and parody, from the rhetoric of party talk, of psychoanalysis, journalese, from the language of confidential letters to that of literary criticism. This deconstruction of gender concepts in institutionalized discourse is interspersed with fragments of calm description of Janet's world, *Whileaway*. Yet there is no hierarchy of worlds and discourses established, no solution in terms of new definitions of women or the presentation of *one* better world as an alternative. Russ shows clearly that the desired can only be seen as an absence, its full expression being blocked by language itself. Bakhtin's view of fantasy as »dialogical and interrogating single or unitary ways of seeing«<sup>20</sup> is fully realized in this novel.

Whilst *The Female Man* is a furious attack on established gender norms which uses and parodies SF effectively<sup>21</sup> and to a great extent operates on a level of intellectual play, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* employs the genre of utopia, and its force lies in the presentation of extreme suffering. It is the story of Consuelo, a Chicano woman living in New York, her child taken away, her lover killed, with no resources and comfort, who is taken into a mental hospital and chosen for electric experimentation. When the situation becomes unbearable for her, she escapes into the future world of Mattapoisets, a society of androgynous individuals in which all communication is based on mutual respect and care. The utter despair in the reality of the hospital is repeatedly confronted with the beauty of communal and peaceful living in Mattapoisets. One of Consuelo's projections leads her by mistake into a nightmare world of extreme gender polarizations and thus the tensions between the utopian future and the present oppressive society are heightened. In the end, Consuelo decides to act: »War she thought, I'm at war. No more fantasies, no more hopes« (338) and poisons the staff of the hospital who are about to do another operation on her.

Although we find in this novel two closed worlds set against and commenting on each other, the link between the fantasized and the real one is stronger than usual in both SF and utopia. The fantasy is – though never explicitly stated – clearly located in the mind of a tormented woman, is seen as her wish-fulfilment, a necessary resource of an inner balance. Fantasy both works against and heightens the realistically described situation, by opening up into a world of dream and by ultimately pointing back to the suffering in the »real« world. The violent act at the end of the novel, and as a part of the realistic section of the novel, reminds us that fiction has the status of fantasy, anyway, however realistic its modes may be. Similar fantasized violence appears increasingly in women's art; see for example the recent Dutch film *A Question of Silence* or Joan Barfoot, *Dancing in the Dark*.

*Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Female Man* represent two rather different examples of feminist fantastic works, different both in their poetics and politics. There is much to examine in terms of the devices they use, e. g. the doubling, the use of mirrors, of visibility and invisibility, the various forms of displacement and their language (Piercy offers »person« and »per« as personal pronouns as a solution to the problems discussed above). Their great range of androgynous characters marks a new departure from androgynous visions created by men which – from Jung to Lawrence – present basically men supplemented by culturally neglected »female« characteristics. In their feminist politics these novels lay different stress on exploring alternatives, challenging old and resisting new gender definitions, and questioning even the basis of categorizations themselves.

It will be a very interesting task to find out more about fantasy which is integrated in otherwise realistic novels. In June Arnold's *Sister Gin* (1975), for example, Su, a successful editor of a magazine column on women's books, finds daring notes, articles and letters written by sister Gin among her own very composed writing. She finds this disturbing at first but gradually comes to realise that it is her own hidden self, the transgressive half, turns to writing in the same way as this unruly sister Gin (a pun on the self that emerges after loosening control through alcohol) and gets fired. This use of fantasy to

<sup>20</sup> See Jackson on Bakhtin, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Russ ironizes SF both implicitly and explicitly; however, the book is still classified as SF by the publisher, as there seems no other slot into which it could fit easily.

display divided identities and double perspectives in one mind is further exploited in Joanna Russ, *On Strike Against God* (1980), a lesbian coming-out novel written in the realistic mode. Here fantasizing and day-dreaming become wonderfully cheeky and liberating, expressing spiteful resistance to the usual gender-polarised viewpoints.

A similar interweaving of different modes of writing can be found in Lois Gould, *A Sea Change* (1976)<sup>22</sup> where a successful fashion model undergoes a gradual but radical transformation into a more authentic being (which includes a sex change). It can be read both as a realistic narrative and a fantastic and mysterious one.<sup>23</sup> I could quote many other American examples, like James Triptree (pseudonym), Vonda McIntyre in SF, Dorothy Brian's *Kin of Ata*, a utopia, and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* which strangely drifts away from realistic writing.<sup>24</sup>

### Critical outlook: Transgression and/or escape?

Structural analyses of fantasy have pointed out that its most effective activity is that of loosening the link between signifier and signified, or, in Todorov's terms, a lack of meaningful signification. This process can be clearly seen at work in feminist fantasies, where women as signifiers are divorced from their usual signifieds, and conversely, »woman« as signified is no longer comprehended by the use of conventional signifiers. But I would not like to stop at this point, as precisely this act of non-signification signifies – on another level of communication – something concrete and meaningful and points towards the social relevance of this act. In a less complicated form: if in fictional texts women dissolve habitualized concepts of gender, then this dissolution itself is a meaningful and political process.

Another closely linked question concerns the transgressive nature of fantasy in literature. The act of non-signifying itself can surely not be seen as transgressive, as it has become conventionalized at least since modernist literature.<sup>25</sup> It seems that by selecting material which is confined to a certain time span and which shares specific intentions, the problem of an intrinsic transgressive nature of fantasy<sup>26</sup> could be dealt with more easily. And indeed, it is an obvious empirically proved fact for feminists that it is the *social act of reading* which provides a meaning. Although linked with what the text *offers* for reception, this meaning will vary according to consciousness and (possibly) gender of the recipient. Another generalized assumption which we can meet frequently, is that fantasizing through literature might possibly be a harmonizing activity of translating something socially unacceptable into something harmless and palatable, a product for escapist consumption which serves to distract from social realities. Yet the single fantastic text should not be seen as isolated but in the context of wider cultural activities in the production and reception of feminist art and in the context of the general feminist debate. If this larger framework is considered, the liberating value of a single text will surely receive a different interpretation from one which is the result of a separate treatment through literary criticism. Moreover, even if we can intellectually analyse acts of questioning and displacing cultural structures in these feminist fantasies, there is a whole range of hardly explored reactions attached to fantasizing (whether literary or not), such as the releasing of emotions of joy, fear and desiring. (Literary fantasies

22 Lois Gould, *A Sea Change*. (New York: Avon 1977)

23 See the jacket of the hardback edition: »From a beautiful, deeply loving woman – every man's fantasy creature – Jessie Waterman becomes ... something else. That something else, the mystery that is at the heart of this novel, is more ominous than the reality she left behind.« It is at the same time more ominous and more real.

24 There are also the Canadian writers Margaret Atwood and Joan Barfoot, there is Doris Lessing, and British women like Michèle Roberts, Emma Tennant, Penelope Mortimer (only in her novel *Long Distance*) who mix modes of writing to produce new and sometimes disturbing effects. The most striking use of fantasy may be found in Angela Carter's novels about which I shall write elsewhere.

25 Christine Brooke-Rose's concept of transgression still follows in many ways this idea of modernist transgressive formal experimentation. See *The Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, especially of the Fantastic*. (Cambridge, New York, 1981). Any closer study of the fantastic can find a wealth of suggestions for further analysis in this book.

26 Julia Kristeva, for example, tends to emphasise the effectiveness of literary transgression, an effectiveness which is due to a general shattering of codes. See *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. (Oxford, 1980).

of transgressive violence, for example, showed me my own hitherto unadmitted similar ones.) And they certainly do not always fit into new stereotypes of »woman«. Indeed, it is not surprising, if this unconscious material uncovers psychic contents which both confirm *and* resist traditional gender roles.<sup>27</sup> What I want to suggest is that a closer look at women's fantasies could reveal something which might be disturbing even for feminists. All those considerations should play an important role in further discussions of the politics of fantasy in women's literature.

I want to conclude by looking at these texts from a historical perspective. As I have tried to show in this paper, literary fantasy is a fluid, ambiguous mode of writing which connotes rather than denotes, opens up rather than closes, and thus it is open to multiple interpretation. All those more explicit means of enforcing a specific reaction from the reader which are used in abundance in realistic feminist novels<sup>28</sup> have been abandoned in feminist fantasy in favour of a venture into exploration and experimentation. The didactic hold on the reader in order to be effective in a straight-forward way is loosened. We find this more and more in recent women's fiction, and, I think this is due to the general development in feminism in the last fifteen years. After an initial phase of clearing the ground for a new feminist movement, a phase of programmatic statements, there is more self-assurance now, which provides a basis for exploring new notions of gender, for more diversity and plurality in women's art.

27 There is a growing conviction that a lively feminist movement should acknowledge all those contradictions which reflect our experience of being women who have been both socialized in a patriarchal society and who make efforts to resist it. See Alison Light, »Feminism and the Literary Critic«, *LTP: Journal of Literature Teaching Politics*, 2 (1983), 61-80.

28 See for example Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, with its semantic overdetermination for the sake of its didactic intention.

Bernd-Peter Lange

## Die politische Vorgeschichte von Orwells »1984«

**Abstract.** The article shows how the major contradictions of Orwell's late antiutopia *1984* developed in the author's writings from the early thirties. It sees in Orwell's works a tension between a changing political stance and a dualistic polarity

between rebelling and submission, hope and resignation, idyll and nightmare, alienation and solidarity, power and futility. These two forces between them generate the problematic texture dynamic that reverberates in today's reception of *1984*.

### I

Offener als andere Schriftsteller zehrte Orwell in seiner literarischen Arbeit von seinen eigenen Erfahrungen. Zur politischen Vorgeschichte seines letzten Buches gehören bei einem so autobiographisch orientierten Autor daher alle lebens- und zeitgeschichtlichen Materialien, die in *1984* eine Spur hinterlassen haben.<sup>1</sup> Ich möchte mich jedoch in einer wohl vertretbaren Einschränkung auf Orwells Entwicklung als politischer Autor beziehen, d. h. auf seinen Eingriff in den literarischen und politischen Diskurs der britischen Öffentlichkeit seit 1933. In diesem so begrenzten Sinn beginnt die politische Vorgeschichte von *1984* mit der Publikation der ersten dokumentarischen Texte Orwells.

Betrachtet man Orwells Werk unter der Leitfrage: Wie kam es zur späten Antiutopie?, so fällt eine Kontinuität bestimmter Gestaltungs- und Argumentationsmuster zunächst ebenso auf wie die Sprünge im Werk, die offensichtlich im Kontext der Wirklichkeit gesehen werden müssen, auf die sich Orwell bezieht. Diese Wirklichkeit wird bestimmt von der Weltwirtschaftskrise mit ihren Folgen in

<sup>1</sup> Dazu mein Aufsatz »Lebensgeschichte und Zeitgeschichte in Orwells *1984*«, *Gulliver* 14, (1984), 7-18.