

Usurping Difference in the Feminine Fantastic from the Riverplate

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The Riverplate region of Argentina and Uruguay witnessed a flowering of fantastic literature with precursors such as Leopoldo Lugones and Horacio Quiroga in the early decades of the twentieth century, and Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar as internationally acclaimed figures in the 1960s and 1970s. Borges and Cortázar transcended the marginalized position associated with a literary form which, in the predominantly realistic tradition of Latin American literature, was often considered to be second-rate and escapist. Today, the fantastic narrative has been recognized as a valid tool for the creation of a totalizing view and transcription of experience, however, while women writers from Argentina and Uruguay have had a share in the renovation and maturation of Latin America's esthetic and literary consciousness, their contributions have been studied only in isolated cases. Overshadowed and marginalized by a focus on the critically acknowledged male masters of the fantastic, women writers were not in a position to benefit from the favorable climate of the Boom and this marginalization is illustrated in the particular case of Silvina Ocampo (1906), a prolific writer of fantastic short stories whose contribution to Argentinean letters has generally been acknowledged in the country's literary circles, but whose work did not receive focused attention until a revival of the feminist movement encouraged the interest in women writers and a revision of their work.¹ Although Silvina Ocampo's fantastic stories were consequently studied with a focus on thematic and stylistic characteristics which characterize her unique brand of fantastic writing, her "feminine"

contribution appears as a remarkable singular case which not only sets her apart from what seems to be a male-dominated literary practice but also ignores the existence of a tradition that traces its origins to the nineteenth century with Juana Manuela Gorriti and which continued as the dominant narrative form in the work of women writers contemporaneous with Silvina Ocampo, such as Pilar de Lusarreta, Luisa Mercedes Levinson, Gloria Alcorta, Carmen Gándara, and Alicia Jurado in Argentina, and Gisela Zani and María Inés Silva Vila in Uruguay.² Ocampo's contribution to the flowering of the fantastic is not an exception in the body of feminine writing from the Riverplate; rather, her recognition as a female writer of the fantastic is an example of those strategies of exclusion which admit isolated cases to literary histories, thus creating the perspective, as described by Susan Bassnet, "that denies their [women's] very existence in history" (249). The intent of the present study is to outline a feminine practice of the fantastic whose strategies of subversion continue to provide an effective and perhaps unique tool for the demystification of Latin American reality. In the work of the contemporary writers Elvira Orphée, Armonía Somers, and Cristina Peri Rossi, the fantastic mode adds a facet to a literary and political enterprise which problematizes the binary oppositions that structure dominant discourses and permeate social and psychic life on all levels.

An important step towards the definition of the feminine fantastic is the examination of the narrative strategies and conventions of the fantastic narrative mode which the female writer employs for the expression of feminine concerns. For this purpose it should be pointed out that, in contrast to the notion of an inherently female narrative form solely based on the biological sex of the writers, the concept of femininity in this study aims at drawing attention to its interpretation as a construct of language and its difficult position in literary theory. An understanding of literature as the "site of political struggle," that is, as a space where social meanings are produced and interrogated, may serve as a point of departure for the analysis of the social function of the fantastic which traditionally subverts normative interpretations of reality (Weedon 24).

Most theorists of the fantastic agree on the importance of one single trait that defines the fantastic in its effect on the reader, namely the violation of the laws with which the

fictional characters interpret their world. The clash between two realms, that of the real and the unreal or supernatural, and further the perception of them as two incompatible orders, seem to be at the heart of the fantastic and its characteristically unsettling effect. In his structural definition of the literature of the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov points to its characteristic of questioning "precisely the existence of an irreducible opposition between real and unreal" (167). With a concept taken from the field of optics, Rosemary Jackson supplies a helpful illustration of the place inhabited by the fantastic in its realistic context. Paraxis, in its technical meaning, refers to "an area in which light rays seem to unite at a point after refraction. In this area, object and image seem to collide, but in fact neither object nor reconstituted image genuinely reside there: nothing does" (*Fantasy* 19). Jackson takes this paraxial area to represent "the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two" (*Fantasy* 19). Structural and semantic implications of the paraxial position of the fantastic are the grounding of the unreal or imaginary in a realistic or 'mimetic' context, the arising ambiguity as to the interpretation of the events as objects or images, and the resulting questioning of normally accepted categories of the real. Receiving neither a supernatural nor a natural interpretation, the fantastic in Jackson's definition, "opens to a region which has no name and no rational explanation for its existence," co-existing with the realistic narrative as its "opposite version" (*Fantasy* 25). Thus Jackson argues that with the fantastic "what could be termed a 'bourgeois' category of the real is under attack," in other words, the fantastic narrative, placed in a historical framework, undermines the dominant convention of nineteenth century realism due to the ambiguity it creates in the interpretation as to what is or is not real (*Fantasy* 26). Also, in contrast to the realist narrative which creates an illusion of transparency, the fantastic text foregrounds the self-reflexivity of literary language by giving life to what cannot exist outside of language.

There is a certain ease with which the feminine connects in the mind with the fantastic, and the metonymic affinity between the two terms is revealing with regard to their problematic position in structures of difference. The dualistic structures which are at the basis of gender distinctions share with common-sense interpretations of reality a dependence on

binary oppositions in which one pole stands for those characteristics that, by law of logic, are excluded from their opposites. As Nancy Jay points out, "Hidden, taken for granted, A/Not-A distinctions are dangerous, and because of their peculiar affinity with gender distinctions, it seems important for feminist theory to be systematic in recognizing them" (47). While, as Jay explains, dichotomous logic does not allow for a third term, "everything and anything must be either A or Not-A," it bases its coherence on such an "*excluded* middle" which "holds the chaos of Not-A at bay" (45, emphasis added). This so-called "infinitezation of the negative" accounts for the complexity of a conceptualization of the feminine both in phallogentric and feminist discourse as well as for the difficulty of staking out the terms comprising a territory of the fantastic, this paraxial or empty middle space whose exclusion from rational logic supports the binary opposition of real versus unreal which is under investigation in the literature of the fantastic.

It is in the foregrounding of the unquestioned presumptions about reality that the fantastic narrative becomes relevant to the interrogation of femininity and the common ground it shares with the concept of the fantastic in discourses based on difference. As pointed out above, the elision of a middle space in dichotomous distinctions lends support to the fixing of meaning at the pole that is representative of the norm while the opposite, in its lack of the defining positive characteristics, is not only negative but also infinite and dangerously contagious (Jay 45). Feminist theorists discovered the subversive potential of this infinitezation of the negative and its strategic importance in recovering the indeterminate middle space which is excluded in dualistic thinking. In the history of feminist criticism, the initial aim of "an exposure of the discursive strategies which locate and characterize woman as absence, lack, or destructive negativity" thus evolved into the recognition "that these terms are the valorized ones (as opposed to sameness, identity, unity, presence, etc.) within modern theories of signification" (Doane et al. 11). In a parallel intent, the fantastic narrative explores what Jackson identifies as the subversive function of the fantastic which traces "the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has

been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent' ” (*Fantasy* 4). On the level of structure, the fantastic exploits to the fullest the function of “negativity” in the text which, according to Wolfgang Iser, “is the structure underlying the invalidation of the manifested reality” (229). Iser’s concept of negativity as an “enabling structure” has literal effects in the fantastic text: it foregrounds the status of the impossible, the excluded, the potentially subversive, and, it seems, offers the perfect ground for the exploration of femininity as an equally questionable, disquieting and unstable concept which, in its interrogation, inevitably raises the question of its binary relation to masculinity as the culturally accepted signifier of presence and power. In this sense, the fantastic can function as a subversive strategy which in feminist criticism has been valorized as the “disruption of systems of signification” (Doane et al. 11).

Anne Cranny-Francis refers to the feminist enterprise in literature as “performing a complex aesthetic/ideological manoeuvre . . . [showing] the ideological processes (of patriarchy) in (textual) operation” (6). Again, applied to a notion of the fantastic narrative as a strategic practice, Cranny-Francis’s statement suggests an identification of patriarchy with realism while the fantastic, both in theme and structure, transgresses the limits and laws of coherence established by the dominant discourse of reason. Jackson argues in this respect for the link between feminism and “the very existence of supernatural writing by women, for it is a challenge to the dominant notions of reality and representation upheld by a patriarchal culture” (*What Did Miss Darrington see?* xvii). It should be understood, however, that it takes the rigorous application of a theoretical framework to prevent what would otherwise result in the definition of a feminine fantastic as the expression of what is essentially feminine, namely irrational, mad, imaginary and everything else that takes a negative position in a hierarchical polar opposition. The danger of such a formulation lies in its implicit confirmation of patriarchal value distinctions rather than deconstructing or foregrounding how these values and stereotypes are ideologically maintained in patriarchal culture. Although the use of the fantastic narrative as a strategy for the subversion of a realist and, implicitly,

patriarchal discourse can take a variety of forms and affect the structure of the narrative in different ways, it is in the interest of a clearly delineated approach to specify in what ways the feminine fantastic as a literary practice should alter or adhere to those characteristics that are intrinsically related to the subversive effect associated with the fantastic.

Due to its paraxial position with relation to a dominant discourse of reason, the feminine fantastic could be considered as having the function of what Lucía Guerra Cunningham defines as a “counterpractice against a literary system predominantly created from a masculine perspective” (12). However, while in realism the writer may achieve a change in perspective through a feminine-coded discourse with which the female reader can identify, simple role-reversal does not interrogate the basic patriarchal structures according to which the reader is positioned in the text. As Cranny-Francis argues, women-centered texts “tell stories about the oppression of women in which women are the major characters, but they pay little attention to other semiotic practices of their texts” (205). She further suggests that “feminist writers have to be constantly aware that the conservative (patriarchal) discourses are coded into generic conventions and that these discourses may subvert the feminist discourse and reading position they are constructing in the text” (205). This observation is especially interesting when applied to the traditional fantastic narrative whose dominant characteristic is precisely the subversion of a reading position based on a normative interpretation of reality. The conventionally inscribed first-person narrator which, according to Todorov, “most readily permits the reader to identify with the character,” also happens to be male as the nineteenth century classics examined by this critic exemplify (84). The dramatized narrators of these tales experience the fantastic effect of an uncanny hesitation in their contact with ambiguous feminine figures that could be either ‘normal’ women in love, or female personifications of the unreal. The latter defy natural laws and haunt their lovers from the afterworld, or, driven by the superhuman strength of their desire, bring their dead or petrified bodies back to life. The attack on the coherence of the masculine subject often not only arises from a supernatural force masked as feminine, but from

feminine desire which, even in earthly women, takes on a fantastic and contagious aspect. Feminine desire thus becomes synonymous with supernatural otherness and this position could, theoretically, be appropriated by women writers for feminist goals. Supernatural writing, according to Jackson, claims "women's power to look, to see, to define, to control, to make reality, however unacceptable, mad, or irrational that might appear from the male way of looking" (*What Did Miss Darrington See?* xxiv). However, it could be argued that feminine specificity aligned with supernatural otherness also coincides with a tendency identified by feminist theorists to "further dematerialize and de-realize 'woman'" (Doane et al. 12). Feminine difference then may be seen as supporting a patriarchal construction of femininity which not only lends itself to exclude woman from the symbolic order but also to subject her to it as a negative term in the construction of phallic power. An analysis of the feminine fantastic therefore has to be directed at the structure and discursive strategies of the literary text rather than at its thematics, and further needs to inquire to what extent the text goes beyond role-reversal and the simple substitution of male with female narrators or protagonists.

In the following overview of fantastic short stories by Silvina Ocampo, Elvira Orphée, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Armonía Somers, the controlling strategy for what could be called the feminine enterprise of these texts is the use of a gender-coded discourse and its subversion. The use of the first-person male narrator, for example, will often perform a meta-critical function in adhering to the traditional structure of the fantastic narrative while, on a different level, it denaturalizes the implied male-centered reader position and exposes it as one constructed by ideological processes. The fragmentation of fixed identities and the blurring of the boundaries of gender difference is the result of a structure of hesitation, that is, the interplay between a discourse of reason and presence, and the enunciation of an unresolved enigma or absence in the first-person narrative. This process may culminate in the seeming take-over of the masculine consciousness by a feminine agency as in Silvina Ocampo's "Hombres animales enredaderas" 'men animals vines,' a story which explores

thematically the thin line separating human, animal, and plant life, and, as is characteristic for the fantastic, follows this theme to its limits with the liquidation of such difference. While Ocampo's story addresses the subject of decomposition with the classic fantastic theme of metamorphosis, it is foremost concerned with the interrelatedness of language and identity, and the material aspect of language which allows the obliteration of the very mind/matter dialectic. As a result, hierarchical dualities such as culture and nature, gender and sex, are also deconstructed and shown to belong to those "strategies of domination" which support the naturalization of this ideological distinction (Butler 37). Ironically, the male narrator seems to become the victim of his disregard for distinguishing between women, animals, and plants, a confusion dictated by language but no less dramatic in its effect which successfully liquidates gender as a denominator of difference. Throughout the story, the culture/nature duality functions as a framework for a male-coded discourse in which, as it is characteristic for discourses based on binary oppositions, nature figures as feminine, while culture associates with mind, reason, and the masculine. The blotting out of the masculine consciousness as controlling agency of the narrative discourse is accompanied by a change in grammatical form as well as physical appearance, however, the final metamorphosis does not resolve the uncertainty about the gender identity of the speaking voice. Renewed readings of the text raise more questions without ever unravelling the knot where masculine and feminine positions have become hopelessly intertwined. Thus, any assumption about a definite textual authority based on gender difference is proven to be guesswork. Ocampo's narrative, independently of female authorship and unrestrained by its initially masculine speaking subject, effects a form of feminization of language in the sense of a process of decentering the gendered subject as locus of truth and meaning.

A text that reproduces the male/female dichotomy inherent in the fantastic text in order to foreground the conflicting discourses at work in literary production is Cristina Peri Rossi's short story "Los extraños objetos voladores" 'Strange Flying Objects' which features an omniscient third person

narrator and thus allows for the presentation of contradicting responses towards a fantastic object through different characters. The most prominent result of this structural variation is the division into a female and a male subject position and the eventual abandoning of the former which constitutes an important strategy for the exposing of social structures as they inform literary discourse. This enterprise works from inside the narrative structure of the classical fantastic text to reveal its preoccupation with male subjectivity as representative for cultural identity. While the impact of the fantastic appearance of a flying unidentified object effects in the male character a fantastic splitting of his face, a graphic representation of a psychological process of disintegration, the female character's approach to the alien object is one of comparison and identification. The two alternating responses clearly carry feminine and masculine signatures and encourage the reader to endorse one of the gendered discursive positions available. A sequence of inner monologues facilitates access to the woman's point of view and is instrumental in the construction of a feminine reader position, however, feminine gender identity as it is proposed in the text is not synonymous with mastery over meaning in the interpretation of the fantastic object. Significantly, it is the female reader position which is abandoned once the narrative focuses on the gradual deconstruction of the fictional universe and the subjectivity of the male character. The silencing of the female voice and the preemptive abandoning of the at times vantage point of her perspective resolves the male/female dichotomy in the stereotypical pattern of active/passive positions. It shows the male protagonist involved in an active struggle with the fantastic, while female passivity takes on the uncanny overtones of immunity from the fantastic attack, allying her with the fantastic itself. In adhering to the conventions of the traditional fantastic narrative, the story illustrates the structuring effect of an ideological reality on literary production. Nevertheless, the strategy of suppressing the female subject position privileges the masculine reading position only temporarily and in order to subvert it later. The final erasure of the phenomenological world which follows the superficially successful cure of suturing the protagonist's split face and identity, leaves both him

and the reader unable to go back to a safe point in the story. Significantly, it is also too late for the reader to adopt an alternate reading position, such as sharing María's rather than her husband's reality. The disappearance of the fantastic object itself which, as an empty signifier, had triggered the deciphering process, frustrates the final production of meaning. It undermines the reader's interpretative authority and the "status quo" of a signifying system which guarantees subjectivity based on a hierarchy of knowledge, or one that achieves closure by placing "as subordinate all the discourses that are literally and figuratively between inverted commas" (Belsey 70).

Referring to progressive stages in the strategies of feminist criticism, Jonathan Culler mentions a moment in which theories begin to investigate "the way our notions of the rational are tied to or in complicity with the interest of the male" (58). Interpretative strategies often mirror the narrative structure of a text in its aim to produce or defer meaning and narrative closure, and the fantastic narrative which inscribes uncertainty in its very structure, seems particularly apt to challenge the reader's preconceived notions of reality and gender identity. Elvira Orphée's story, "Su demonio privado" 'Her Personal Demon,' addresses the issue of the female reader and identification by exposing subjectivity and the associated position of authority and coherence to be intimately linked to a structure of gender difference which encodes the feminine as opposite pole in the conventional binary system underlying patriarchal constructs of masculinity and femininity. However, rather than reproducing a naturalized image of gender difference as balanced and symmetrical, the narrative conventions of the fantastic in the story problematize the concept of a feminine subject as reference point for the female reader. The leading strategy is the dialogic structure of the text which features the first-person male narrator's involvement in the deciphering of an enigmatic female other. In the course of the story, the narrator enters a dialogue with a rivaling fantastic presence who competes with him in the interpretation and possession of the feminine object of desire. Initially, this competing fantastic rival appears as the imagined personification of feminine desire, an ideal which the

narrator and lover aims to imitate. In a process of repositioning the feminine desiring subject as the object of a male-coded love story, this imaginary rival comes to stand for the masculine gaze which participates in the framing of the feminine object. In a plot which requires of femininity to take a passive and masochistic stance, feminine desire is ultimately neutralized as a force that will turn against itself. This implies the acceptance of the beloved's madness and desire for death, and the complicity of the reader in selecting an interpretation of the fantastic which best serves narrative coherence and the stability of a masculine subject position. In its self-consciously repressive gesture of creating an image of femininity that mirrors woman's deathlike rigidity in representation, the story achieves an effect of reader distancing which reveals the paradox of predetermined mechanisms of identification. In particular the female reader of "Su demonio privado" will find herself confronted by her own demon, one she faces each time the reading process demands her cooperation and the taking of a position within the limits of the polar opposites that structure experience.

It has been argued that the position of feminine desire in discourse is a complicated if not impossible one, limited by generic conventions which traditionally position the female in relation to a desiring male subject. Feminist theories about feminine sexuality and desire are manifold and often contradictory. They may conjecture an essential natural female essence, or aim at separating the concept of femininity from the female body, both intending strategic steps towards the undermining of an oppressive ideological power structure. In the literary structure of the fantastic, the expression of desire may serve such a subversive function. Feminine desire and the fantastic share a transgressive potential due to their negative position in relation to an established norm. Speaking from the underside of the real, as the un-real, the fantastic narrative seems the perfect vehicle for the expression of "an indomitable desire, a longing for that which does not yet exist, the unheard of, the unseen, the imaginary, as opposed to what already exists and is permitted as 'really' visible" (Jackson, *Fantasy* 91). Psychoanalytical approaches to the fantastic, therefore, often conceptualize its uncanny effect as the return

of the repressed, the expression of unconscious desire. Describing an experience of limits, the fantastic could, it seems, become the vehicle for the expression of what is dangerously excessive and consequently suppressed in an hierarchical order, for, as Jackson points out, "fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence or loss" (*Fantasy* 3). While such an hypothesis is helpful in examining the fantastic in relation to its socio-cultural context, it is important to keep in mind the problematic position of desire in systems of representation. Born out of language, at the moment of the self's entry into the symbolic order and irreversible separation from the real, desire constitutes a movement towards filling a gap which is forever beyond reach and fulfillment. As an absence or primordial lack in the constitution of the subject, "desire functions much as a zero unit in the numerical chain—its place is both constitutive and empty" (Rose 31). Identical with the unconscious, desire works on language through the endless displacement and substitution of signifieds and the deference of meaning. In the literature of the fantastic, unconscious desire is expressed in this impossibility, in the hollowing out of meaning and being. The subversive potential of the fantastic narrative therefore seems not so much linked to the expression of transgressive desire but to its representation of desire as an effect of an unconscious point in the origin of the subject and the consequent subversion of the normative concepts which describe its reality.

In Armonía Somers' short story, "El hombre del túnel," the fantastic and the confessional narrative join forces in the foregrounding of feminine sexuality and desire as cultural constructs and structuring forces in the fictions of identity which shape the subject's place in society and its destiny. The confessional narrative, in its dramatization of desire as a product of language and the cultural representations which sustain it, fulfills an important function in the interrelationship between the discourse of the unconscious and the fantastic. In the recapitulation of a life story, the reader becomes witness to progressive stages of isolation and alienation in the female narrator's search for a lost object of desire which

fantastically takes shape and reappears throughout life as “el hombre del túnel,” an unchanging savior/violator figure and ambiguous signifier of unfulfilled wanting. As a characteristic of the fantastic text, the gap between signifier and signified is never breached; the apparition is neither savior or violator, victim or victimizer, but displays the paradoxical attraction of imaginary identifications. Although the end of the story effects the fantastic subversion of linear plot, chronological time, and the boundaries separating life and death, the absolute meaninglessness implied in the return to a figurative tunnel, destroys any aspect of the fantastic as a tool for the satisfaction of feminine desire. Instead, it confirms a disturbing resistance to meaning, and illustrates a dominant characteristic of the modern fantastic which, according to Jackson, “reveals itself to be less and less able to assume a transcendental role or to invent superworlds” (*Fantasy* 79). It is, however, possible to conceive of a different function of the fantastic and its relation to feminine desire, one which departs from an essentialist notion and proposes to reveal femininity and desire as a fiction and a construct of language and cultural mediation. In “El hombre del túnel,” both the confessional and the fantastic narrative are complicit in the foregrounding of the power relations arising out of the inscription of feminine desire in discourse. These power relations are shown to be based on an imaginary opposition between fantasy and reality and a pitting of feminine desire against life, to be reenacted each time a woman undertakes the articulation of the unspeakable. This gesture of identifying feminine desire as textual may fall short in directing its force beyond the phallus, but it does prevent its naturalization in discourse.

On the basis of the hypothesis that the feminine fantastic—as presented in the discussion of some of the manifestations it takes in the work of Latin American women writers—fulfills the important function of exploring and undermining the cultural and patriarchal constructs which define reality and subjectivity, I would argue that it adds a facet to the literary and political enterprise which problematizes the dualistic thinking that permeates social and psychic life on all levels. Due to their commitment to the dismantling of binary structures and to the reshaping of the relation between the imagi-

nary and the symbolic, writers of the feminine fantastic transgress the confined area associated with feminine writing not only in their own countries but universally. In the joint project of showing how writing in the language of the fantastic can become a form of feminization of language, these writers perform the important gesture of opening up a hegemonic male-dominated discourse on Latin American reality for interrogation and change. Female absence or invisibility, which has always inspired masculine creativity and literary production, receives a sometimes literal, and in all instances, a challenging reinterpretation in the feminine fantastic from the Riverplate and its multi-faceted spectrum of strategies and themes.

Notes

1. Helena Araújo argues that, due to sexist manipulations in the critical and editorial world, the work of women writers remained unaffected by the boom. See her essay "Escritoras latinoamericanas: ¿Por fuera del 'boom'?" "Latin-American Women Writers: Outside of the 'boom.'" *Quimera* 30 (abril 1983): 8-11.
2. I am relying here on entries in the *Enciclopedia de la literatura argentina*, eds. Pedro Orgambide and Roberto Yahni, (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1970), and the *Nueva antología del cuento uruguayo*, ed. Arturo Sergio Visca, (Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1976).

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