

Monstrosities in a Cold Climate. Stacey Levine and the Postmodernist Fantastic.



Ib Johansen, lektor, mag.art . Institut for Sprog, Litteratur og Kultur, Afdeling for Engelsk Filologi, Århus Universitet.

1. Introduction.

The fantastic may be viewed in purely *formal* terms, such as it is the case in Tzvetan Todorov's classic approach to the topic in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (*The Fantastic*, 1970, 1972), when this scholar defines the fantastic in the following manner, i.e. by opposing natural and supernatural codes to each other, focusing in this context on the (implicit) role or position of the *reader*: "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person [i.e. in this case the reader and/or the protagonist] who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event".¹

But the fantastic can also be related to its larger *cultural* context, and in this connection the interesting (theoretical) question concerns its socio-historical and/or *political* bearings or connotations. To what extent does the fantastic represent a *critique* of the project of Modernity (such as it is defined, e.g., by Habermas and others)?² Critics tend to disagree with regard to this issue. Thus Rosemary Jackson in her classic study *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion* (1981) emphasizes what she regards as the *transgressive* potentials of this type of fiction: "The modern fantastic, the form of literary fantasy within the secularized culture produced by capitalism, is a subversive

literature. It exists alongside the 'real', on either side of the dominant cultural axis, as a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other. Structurally and semantically, the fantastic aims at dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient".³ But Rosemary Jackson's view has been contested by other critics, e.g. by José B. Monleon in *A Specter is Haunting Europe. A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic* (1990): "...the exposition of the repressed is not necessarily a subversive act, if by subversion is meant a challenge to the causes of repression, a defiance of order, an assault on dominant ideology. As I argue in this book, the fantastic played exactly the opposite role: that is, the defense of the status quo and the preservation of economic order. If anything, it served precisely to help modify hegemonic discourse in order to justify the survival of bourgeois society, a fact that also explains why the fantastic appeared only after the bourgeoisie had consolidated its power".⁴

Of course, such an approach to the fantastic is very similar to what we frequently come across in the *critique of ideology* prominent in the 1970's (usually applying a *Marxist* methodology to its materials). And it also reminds us of what Aram Veesser in *The New Historicism Reader* (quoting David Simpson) has called the "strong containment thesis": "The charge of quietism, based on NH's [i.e. New Historicism's] alleged strong-containment positions and its demonstrations that all subversive moves were doomed to be contained by and perverted to serve the uses of power, remains...very much alive..."⁵

However much this and other similar approaches to the fantastic⁶ seem to limit the subversive potentials of this type of fiction, it nevertheless still appears to be possible to re-conceptualize (or re-invent) its *transgressive* dynamics, such as it is done more recently, for instance, in Lucie Armit's *Theorising the Fantastic* (1996), where this critic focuses on the *melancholy* aura of fantastic literature, but also on its *utopian* bearings: "Melancholy, in seemingly projecting towards a fantasy rooted beyond the parameters of the symbolic [in this case more or less synonymous with the *patriarchal* order, the law of the father], propels itself...towards an endlessly receding horizon. What it searches for at that liminal place is the unattainable, infinitely desirable and uncontainable other. This has always been the place and space of utopia".⁷

According to Tzvetan Todorov, what happens to the fantastic in the twentieth century - with Kafka as a representative example of this paradigm shift - is that narrative *anomalies* (to the extent that such events are experienced by fictional characters and/or the reader) are no more *problematized* in the same manner as in

classic fantastic fiction, where the emphasis is definitely on the (unresolved) opposition between natural and supernatural codes (cf. above, see note 1); to a certain extent all these anomalies simply tend to be *absorbed by the structures of everyday life*, inasmuch as these phenomena no longer make the reader *hesitate*, when he or she is confronted with them, however "weird" they may be, if they are judged by "classic" standards: "In Kafka, the supernatural event [such as it is presented to us, for instance, in "The Metamorphosis", 1912] no longer provokes hesitation, for the world described is entirely bizarre, as abnormal as the very event to which it affords a background...[Kafka] treats the irrational as if it were part of a game: his entire world obeys an oneiric logic, if not indeed a nightmare one, which no longer has anything to do with the real. Even if a certain hesitation persists in the reader, it ceases to affect the character: and identification, as we have previously noted it, is no longer possible";⁸ however, here we must bear in mind - as Todorov has pointed out himself earlier - that this is not a requirement that *has* to be fulfilled, not even in "classic" versions of the fantastic.⁹ As a matter of fact, even though Todorov's characterization of Kafka's poetological premises in the passage quoted above is, on the whole, plausible, his reference to a logic "which no longer has anything to do with the real" appears to *beg the question*, for he does not *problematize* the notion of the real (a somewhat questionable and often thoroughly *ideologized* concept), which he might have done, for instance, by asking himself to what extent the notion of the real is based on (variable) *cultural norms*. However that may be, a similar "oneiric logic" (cf. above) can be found in other examples of the fantastic belonging to the canon of *high modernism* (or to *the theatre of the absurd*, cf. Martin Esslin's study).¹⁰

In high modernism the mimetic code as such tends to be *underplayed*, even if the impact of the process of *normalization* is stressed in various ways: what we witness is a series of events, where everyday characters are emphatically turned into *pawns* in a more or less incomprehensible game (cf. Todorov above); and simultaneously we encounter within this literary tradition a conspicuous element of cultural pessimism, an emphasis on *the decline of the West*. And however much their *postmodernist* descendents in the literary field in the last decades of the twentieth century attempt to leave behind all these gloomy perspectives and adopt a much more *playful* attitude vis-à-vis existential issues, many of these writers are nevertheless still haunted by similar doubts and misgivings, when it comes to pinpointing the human condition...

2. Towards a Postmodernist Fantastic: Reflections on Stacey Levine's Short Fiction.

According to Brian McHale in his epoch-making study *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987, 1989), "postmodernist fiction has close affinities with the genre of the fantastic, much as it has affinities with the science-fiction genre, and it draws upon the fantastic for motifs and *topoi* much as it draws upon science fiction. It is able to draw upon the fantastic in this way because the fantastic genre, like science fiction and like postmodernist fiction itself, is governed by the ontological dominant".¹¹ Thus the question of *Being* (with a capital "B") is definitely on the agenda in postmodernist fiction, i.e. if we adopt Brian McHale's perspective on these matters. What is focused is the position of human beings vis-à-vis a world, where they appear to be placed within an increasingly *alienating* set-up. "Who are we?" is the question raised over and over again, when it comes to attempting to assess our position, our existential *plight*. But in this connection we must also bear in mind that Tzvetan Todorov is rather inclined to define the fantastic as governed by an *epistemological* dominant (his focus is on *knowledge* or *cognitive competence* rather than *Being*). "What can we *know* about our world?" is the question Todorov prefers to focus on. How can these conflicting perspectives on the fantastic be reconciled to each other?

For one thing, Brian McHale points out that neither "the absence of a hesitant character *within* the fictional world" (*pace* Todorov) nor "the unfantastic banality of that world" necessarily leads to the conclusion that the text is *not* fantastic, for "neither of these are *necessary* criteria of Todorov's fantastic, but mere optional ones" (cf. above, note 9).¹² Furthermore, McHale regards *banality* as one of the structural characteristics of the postmodernist variety of the fantastic, inasmuch as we come across "many postmodernist fantastic texts whose tone is unfantastically banal and whose characters, like Kafka's Gregor Samsa and his family [in "The Metamorphosis"], are impossibly blasé in the face of miraculous violations of natural law".¹³ An example of this type of fiction is, according to McHale, T. Coraghessan Boyle's short story "Bloodfall" (from *Descent of Man*, 1980), where "blood begins inexplicably raining from the sky, yet the comfortable counterculture types who people this story seem to be unable to muster any reaction more vigorous than vague irritation".¹⁴ McHale calls this phenomenon the "rhetoric of contrastive banality" and explains its effect in the following manner: "Far from smothering or neutralizing the fantastic effect, as Todorov

apparently believed it would, this 'banalization' of the fantastic actually sharpens and intensifies the confrontation between the normal and the paranormal. Normality in the hippie household of 'Bloodfall' or on the country estate of [Julio Cortázar's] 'Bestiary' is *exaggeratedly* normal, normal to the point of boredom...; therefore any encroachment of the fantastic upon it will be felt as supremely disruptive, provoking the sharpest dialogue between normal and paranormal".¹⁵

Similarly sharp dialogues between normal and paranormal narrative elements are, as a matter of fact, characteristic of Stacey Levine's fiction. In order to accommodate those who are unfamiliar with her work I should point out that Stacey Levine (who was born in 1960 and lives in Seattle, Washington) has published one collection of short stories, namely *My Horse and Other Stories* (1993), and a Kafkaesque novel, *Dra* (1997). Apart from this she has been active as a critic, contributed to various reviews, and produced dramatic work. Her second novel, *Frances Johnson*, will be published in early 2005. As a matter of fact, she has also visited Denmark in 1995, where she took part in a literary arrangement (PROSA 95) at Glyptoteket, organized by Janus Kodal and Henrik Fuglsang.¹⁶

Actually, we come across an emphasis on "contrastive banality", similar to the kind of banality diagnosed by Brian McHale in writers like Coraghessan Boyle or Julio Cortázar (cf. above), in Stacey Levine's story "The Doll" (from *My Horse and Other Stories*, 1993); for here the tone is matter-of-fact, and the most incredible events are presented to the reader as if they were altogether "normal": "In the hallway of the office [where I work] a woman introduced me to a doll. The woman disappeared and the doll laughed at something I said. I joined him in stapling a stack of papers on a desk".¹⁷ The first-person narrator - who later falls in love with the doll - explicitly stresses the *normality* of the situation (normality "to the point of boredom"): "No one [in the office] acted as if anything were out of the ordinary".¹⁸ The processes of normalization of the (post)modern world are apparently capable of absorbing *anything* - whatever strange, weird, marvellous, miraculous or would-be miraculous occurrence the self-same world is confronted with: "[The doll] moved next to me and I made some kind of witticism to show that it was not unusual, his being there".¹⁹ Whereas the love-affair between Nathanael and Olympia (the automaton) in Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1815/16) has disastrous consequences for the protagonist, there is no similar dramatic climax in "The Doll" (in "The Sandman" Nathanael ends up committing suicide by jumping from the top of a tower in a fit of madness in the final episode of the novella).²⁰

In "The Doll" the all-encompassing process of normalization also implies that the love-affair between the woman and the doll simply becomes a series of *routines*. The doll himself has up to this point led an altogether inconspicuous kind of average middle-class life, with its ups and downs, but apparently also with a built-in autodestructive mechanism: "...he told me that his wife had left him and had taken their daughter to Europe. He was completely alone, he said".²¹ However, what the first-person narrator cannot overcome in connection with her erotic *liaison* with this weird divorcé is a sense of profound estrangement, insofar as "[h]e doesn't know the world, and does not move in it; and after all, I need the world. I never dreamed I could feel such hate, and that I would never understand him, or that he would despise and misunderstand me in the same way...It's as if we were from opposite ends of the earth".²² What is focused here is thus definitely the *ontological* dimensions of the fantastic (cf. above my reference to Brian McHale on "the ontological dominant" governing the postmodernist fantastic, cf. note 11). In this case it is as if the doll's very *perfection* alienates the protagonist from him and (literally) *dehumanizes* the doll, for "as I lie here on the floor, limp, smoldering, looking up at his perfect face, his hateful smoothness and symmetry, it seems that the world is mired in itself, and that time is standing still".²³ What is foregrounded in this narrative is thus an *ontological loss* - and the playful character of (some versions of) postmodernist fiction is deliberately *underplayed*. The rhetoric of the unreal no longer offers an escape route to the subject, but rather stresses the (pessimistic?) Baudrillardian thesis that we can never approach the Kantian thing in itself (the Lacanian "real"), but only a series of *simulacra*.²⁴ That the simulacrum is, in this case, capable of *imitating* or *copying* the "normal" behaviour of a human being in such a convincing manner (as Stacey Levine's doll is able to do) in the long run does not *compensate for* the above-mentioned ontological deficit!

In "The Twin" (also published in *My Horse and Other Stories*) the twin is a double or *Doppelgänger* such as we come across this motif in Poe, Wilde, Dostoevsky, and a number of other writers.²⁵ In Stacey Levine's story the twin is simply an undeveloped outgrowth on the body of the female protagonist: "He grew from her hip and since she lay in the sand face up, she could stuff him into a hole. She stuffed him into a hole all the time while she ate and talked, and it was always fine".²⁶ In a certain sense the story about this Siamese twin represents an ultra-short version of Stephen King's classic *The Dark Half* (1989, 1990), where the protagonist's Siamese double, however, in the last resort returns from the grave and *haunts* his twin brother.

When Thad Beaumont (the protagonist of *The Dark Half*) is eleven years old, his excessive headaches make the doctors react and carry out surgery, and inside his head they find - as an undeveloped foetus - his own twin brother: "Part of this boy's twin went unabsorbed. It happened to end up in his prefrontal lobe. It could just as easily have wound up in his intestines, his spleen, his spinal chord, anywhere. Usually the only doctors who see something like this are pathologists - it turns up in autopsies, and I've never heard of one where the foreign tissue was the cause of death".²⁷ In "The Twin" there are fewer complications than in *The Dark Half*, but nevertheless the relationship between the female character and her twin brother is essentially *hostile* - just as we come across such enmity in the majority of the canonical *Doppelgänger* narratives (e.g. in Hoffmann, in Poe, in Dostoevsky, and in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891). But in "The Twin" Stacey Levine's stylistic *minimalism* turns the story in a somewhat different direction, i.e. if we compare it to other, more "classic" versions of the theme of the double; for in this case there is no poetic "justice" whatsoever involved in the development of the plot. The main character allegedly simply *kills off* her child-like twin, and that is the laconic *ending* of the narrative: "She stuffed him into a hole in the sand. He was gone".²⁸ But is he gone *for good*, we may ask ourselves?

In "Small" (from the same collection) we are reminded of the spectacular *collapse of paternal laws* that Julia Kristeva refers to in her classic study *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (1982), where she points out what a return to patriarchy may imply (in this connection a sort of *worst-case scenario* (?)): "Dostoyevsky has X-rayed sexual, moral, and religious abjection, displaying it as collapse of paternal laws. Is not the world of *The Possessed* a world of fathers, who are either repudiated, bogus, or dead, where patriarchs lusting for power hold sway - ferocious fetishes but nonetheless phantomlike?"²⁹ In "Small" the would-be symbiotic relationship between mother and son turns out to be essentially destructive (and self-destructive), for it produces a ravaging illness (a severe eating disorder) in the son. As a matter of fact, he is *insatiable*, and therefore "[h]is little mother needed to buy new furniture for the house every week because he always put everything inside him. But that was fine, everyone and the little mother always said so; it was fine to go to a store every day to buy more, for there was always more, and then he would put it all inside".³⁰ This is really *consumer society at the end of its tether!* And of course, his uneasy relationship with his mother - *un Oedipe trop gros* [*a too gross/grandiose Oedipus*] (to quote Deleuze and Guattari)³¹

- makes it impossible for him to overcome this eating disorder on a gigantic scale. (Something similar goes on in Line Knutzon's play *Torben Toben* [*Torben Twolegs*], 2000, where the protagonist finally *eats up the whole world* [including his own best friends], but in Line Knutzon's play it eventually turns out that it is nevertheless possible to write letters *from inside his stomach!* This could also be said to be *consumerism at the end of its tether*, but the twist at the end represents a strange peripety, an almost inconceivable *happy ending!* In "Small" a similar narrative twist is carried out when the son "kill[s] the little mother with [a] brick".³² After this sacrilegious act, everything goes normal, and as a matter of fact, "he quickly went to live in his own house and soon he became a judge".³³ Actually, the first-person narrator "met him about that time" (!).³⁴ A return to the Lacanian *law of the father*, if there was ever any such! Deleuze and/or Lacan would have *rotated* in their grave(s)!

3. Prisoners of Babel: the Protagonist's Kafkaesque Quest in Stacey Levine's *Dra -* (1997).

In *Dra -* (1997) Matthew Stadler notices in his review in *The Stranger* (March 9th 1997) that "the nondescript heroine of this grim, hilarious fiction, might have fallen through the same hole as Lewis Carroll's Alice, only now, 130 years later, there[']s no time for frivolity, just the pressing need to get a job".³⁵ However, the female applicant (*Dra -*) very soon *loses her way* inside the monstrous building, where the Employment Office is situated, for its architectural groundplan appears to be almost impossible to chart. When *Dra -* at a certain point in the development of the plot has got access to the *roof* of the building, even this place turns out to be infinitely more convoluted and impossible to survey than one should have thought: "The dark, miles-long roof was covered by another roof and so on, the top roof being unreachable in all ways; and as she walked towards the elevators, she passed a small niche that contained an open-walled guard station, though it did not contain a guard, but instead two figures struggling unpleasantly beneath a cloak, and she turned away".³⁶ The bureaucratic *weightiness* (and density) of the whole place is obvious: "Despite the silence of these halls, there were, she knew, thousands upon thousands of employees everywhere, not visible now, but hard at work instead, gathered in small stifled work centers, basements, and sub-basements; night stations, corridors, and portable and permanent work areas; work vaults, niches for special projects, and training hutches connected by hallways just inches across that stuttered in one direction then another

before widening into empty classrooms lined by shelves full of sheets and old surgical equipment".³⁷ The convoluted spaces and *claustrophobic* atmosphere of this building, with its "hallways just inches across that stuttered in one direction then another", remind us of classic *Gothic* scenarios with their winding, subterranean corridors and secret passages, their hidden vaults and prison-cells placed down below. As it is pointed out by M.H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Seventh Edition (1999): "The locale [i.e. of Gothic fiction] was often a gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels; the typical story focused on the sufferings imposed on an innocent heroine by a cruel and lustful villain, and made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences..."³⁸ In *Dra* - we are confronted with a (slightly) *modernized* version of such a prototypical setting, where the classic *Gothic villain* has been replaced by Kristevan "matriarchs lusting for power" (in this case female managers or administrators, cf. above, see note 29); nevertheless the innocent heroine (*Dra* -) is certainly undergoing a number of trials and tribulations, including *physical pain*, before she can reach her destination (if this is what happens at the end of her quest?). As it is pointed out by Matthew Stadler in his review quoted above: "[the heroine] wanders the 'dim empty hallways with their lingering odor of toilets and chalk' looking for the Employment Manager"³⁹ (just like Kafka's protagonist K. in *Das Schloss* [*The Castle*, 1926] attempting over and over again to get in touch with the authorities of the Castle). As a matter of fact, quite a few reviewers of Stacey Levine's novel tended, when it was published back in 1997, to stress its "Kafkaesque" elements (cf. for instance Jessica Winters in the December 1997 / January 1998 issue of *Boston Review*, where she argues that Levine "retreads Kafka rather than reimagining him" and a reviewer in *Publishers Weekly*, who refers to "the darkly comic tones of a Kafka novel and a landscape reminiscent of 1984").⁴⁰

In connection with these Kafkaesque over- and undertones in Stacey Levine's work we must bear in mind, as Harold Bloom points out in *The Western Canon* (1994, 1995), that in our time "'Kafkaesque' has taken on an uncanny meaning for many of us; perhaps it has become a universal term for what Freud called 'the uncanny', something at once absolutely familiar to us yet also estranged from us. From a purely literary perspective, this is the age of Kafka, more even than the age of Freud".⁴¹ If we take into consideration Kafka's inevitable role as the great (modern) *precursor* (to adopt another Bloomian term), and if we bear in mind his essential contribution to our

epochal (self-)consciousness (cf. above), it is no wonder that we come across his structural and thematic *impact* in so many different places (from Borges to Soderbergh); but nevertheless Stacey Levine's *Dra* - appears to be *more* "Kafkaesque" than so many other contemporary *chef-d'oeuvres*!

Anyway, at the same time - and this makes all these "Kafkaesque" convolutions and accommodations rather special in the present context - all sorts of *bodily sensations* play an immensely important role in the novel, where Dra - is repeatedly prevented from seeking medical assistance (i.e. from visiting either "Dr. Billy" or her *Nurse*) or does not have time enough to do so, when her back-pain troubles her. Physical exertions and exercises, the excretions of the human body, etc., etc., are focused over and over again, and at the same time the *toilets* of the government building likewise play an important thematic role in the novel. Near the end of the novel Dra - and her Administrator's young assistant Frida thus enter a room "as large as a gymnasium, misty and bare, with toilets along the far wall in a row so long it faded from sight, and in the corner nearest them sat a small, neat office".⁴² Here toilet-training (or whatever we should call it) has thus become a matter of *public* concern, and it might even be argued that what Norman O. Brown in former times (in his study *Life Against Death*, 1959) termed "the excremental vision" dominates the whole *bureaucratic* universe!⁴³ Anyway, we notice an *obsessive* focus on these bodily functions (and the places where they are exercised, under the auspices of the "gentle goddess *Cloacine*") in the subsequent passage, for "[n]ext to the office was a special type of toilet that appeared to be able to fold out from the wall in any number of configurations so that users might position themselves according to desire. Nearby, a few heavy ropes hung from the ceiling and gently brushed the floor".⁴⁴ And thus going to the loo becomes an *art*, neither more nor less! (Your heart's desire becomes synonymous with the thrust of your bowels (!)).

In Jonathan Swift's poetic output there is, according to the Swift scholar Greenacre "a kind of linking of the written or printed word with the excretory functions".⁴⁵ This is worth-while bearing in mind, when we take into consideration the role of the written word in *Dra* - , such as it is thematized in a passage with an emphatically *Borgesian* ring to it (at this point the heroine has just discovered "an enormous old book lying nearby"): "The book seemed to be a descriptive index of all jobs everywhere, charting and cross-referencing them in so many dozens of ways that it seemed, she thought, beginning to flip through, ludicrous - as was the book's

gnatlike print which grew smaller and smaller as the chapters progressed, until it disappeared into the grain of the paper itself".⁴⁶ Here we are certainly reminded of Jorge Luis Borges' famous story "The Library of Babel" (1941), where the universe as such is envisaged in terms of a gigantic library, but this universal library - existing from the beginning of time or rather: *ab aeterno* - can also be regarded (such as it is formulated in a famous footnote) as accessible in a *one-volume version*, for "[s]trictly speaking, *one single volume* should suffice: a single volume of ordinary format, printed in nine or ten type body, and consisting of an infinite number of infinitely thin pages".⁴⁷ But whereas the Borgesian librarian appears to be absorbed one hundred percent by his *epistemological* mission (his project is to collect knowledge), Stacey Levine's protagonist is rather in the grips of the Protestant work ethic (unless you get a job, you are *nothing*). In that sense her Administrator's promise is ominous, for it anticipates an *apocalyptic ending*: "We'll talk and talk, for years if you like, about our relationship, and other people, and about the way bodies work; we'll talk and talk until there is nothing left but ashes all around us".⁴⁸ This is a consummation devoutly to be *unwished!*

Male-female relations are, in a certain sense, *marginalized* in *Dra* -: at certain intervals the heroine comes across a character called "the Man with No Hair, despite the fact that he had hair, though not much".⁴⁹ On one level of meaning, his lack of hair connotes weakness (it is, in Freudian terms, related to the castration complex). In that sense *Dra* -, whose lack of self-confidence is also obvious, is placed in a superior position vis-à-vis "the Man with No Hair"; but nevertheless this character continues to provoke *fear* in the heroine. At the end of the narrative, when female/matriarchal power (represented by the Administrator) triumphs over all its internal and/or external enemies/opponents, the "Man with No Hair" has no other outlet for his sense of outrage (provoked by his utter powerlessness) than carrying out a series of altogether *meaningless* gymnastic exercises: "...he was lying above them in a hammock-like net suspended from the ceiling by two long black cords. The net rocked slightly with the man's weight, and positioned on his stomach, he lifted his head toward them, smiling tightly with obvious anger".⁵⁰ In this manner the *conflict* between the male and the female pole has come to a kind of (involuntary) standstill, insofar as the male character is here definitely *trapped*.

Stacey Levine's *oeuvre* clearly represents a female version of what has been termed the "Kafkaesque", and in this respect she might be compared to the British writer Anna Kavan (who died in 1968), even if it may be said that Anna Kavan embodies a

much *earlier* literary culture, in this case associated with high modernism rather than with *postmodernism*. In Anna Kavan's novel *Eagle's Nest* (1957) - echoing and/or quoting, like Stacey Levine's *Dra -*, Kafka's *The Castle* - a similar quest is carried out, but here the first-person narrator's and protagonist's final *defeat* vis-à-vis the powers that be is much more clear-cut than in *Dra -* (or, for that matter, in Kafka's novel). In *Eagle's Nest* the male protagonist attempts without success to penetrate into an inaccessible fortress ("Eagle's Nest"), in this case in order to meet his former benefactor and future employer; but in the end he realizes that his project has no chance of being carried out: "A shudder goes through me...it's all over...now I must go, and the sooner the better, back to where I belong...I've no place in this room...in this house...in this world, for that matter..."⁵¹ We do not come across a similar *universal pessimism* in *Dra -*, but in many ways the heroine's prospects are equally dreary, i.e. if we compare her exit to what the protagonists confront at this point in *Eagle's Nest* or *The Castle*, for at the end of the narrative she is just as dependent on authorities and/or "matriarchs lusting for power" as she was at the beginning of the narrative. Even if the ultimate outcome of the heroine's quest is highly dubious, we notice, however, that though desolation is the order of the day at this point, the Man with No Hair offers a positive counter-example, challenging as it were, like Camus' Sisyphus, the outrageous status quo by confronting his own impossible human condition, rocking "imperceptibly above them [i.e. *Dra -* and the Administrator]" and singing "quietly to himself, as if that helped him negotiate his exhaustion!"⁵²

Ib Johansen.

Notes.

1. Todorov, Tzvetan: *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Translated from the French by Richard Howard (Cleveland/London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), p. 25.
2. Concerning Jürgen Habermas' comments on the project of Modernity cf. Jürgen Habermas' article "Modernity - An Incomplete Project", in: *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, Second impression, 1985), pp. 3-15. Cf. also Jürgen Habermas: *Die Moderne - ein unvollendetes Projekt. Philosophisch-politische Aufsätze 1977-1992* (Leipzig: Reclam-Verlag, 2., erweiterte Auflage, 1992).
3. Rosemary Jackson: *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 180.
4. José B. Monleon: *A Specter is Haunting Europe. A Sociohistorical Approach to the Fantastic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 14 (my ellipsis).
5. Cf. *The New Historicism Reader*. Edited by Aram Veesser (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 3. Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 7, where Veesser refers to various kinds of opposition to New Historicism and notices that the "charge of quietism...remains...very much alive..." (my ellipses).
6. Cf. e.g. on the fantastic as a "reactionary" literary form also the Swedish writer Lars Gustafsson's classic essay "Om det fantastiska i litteraturen. Ett orienteringsförsök" ("On the Fantastic in Literature. An Attempt to Come to Terms with a Concept", 1968, 1969 (first published in *BLM* 6, 1968)): "My argumentation must...finally lead to the following conclusion: this attitude [i.e. the attitude characteristic of fantastic art and fantastic literature, such as you come across it, for instance, in Piranesi or Jules Verne] corresponds primarily to a reactionary moral position...Fantastic art constitutes a dangerous, intellectual ambience, threatening to human beings. It embodies what is most freezing in terms of aesthetic climate..." (my translation, my ellipses). (Lars Gustafsson: *Utopier och andra essäer om "dikt" och "liv"*, Stockholm: Bokförlaget PAN/Norstedts, 1969, pp. 23-24).
7. Cf. Lucie Armitt: *Theorising the Fantastic* (London, etc.: Arnold, 1996), p. 184 (my ellipsis).
8. Tzvetan Todorov: *The Fantastic*, *op. cit.*, p. 173 (my ellipsis).
9. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 33: "The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described [the classic example would here be Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw" (1898), where the reader is unable to decide whether the ghosts are "real" or whether the governess is simply *hallucinating*]. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work - in the case of a naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character.

Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations [in this manner neither an allegory like Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1675, 1678, nor an example of poetic prose like, say, Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris ou Petits Poèmes en Prose*, 1869, can be classified as *fantastic texts* (!)]. However, the boundaries between these literary categories are not always altogether watertight, for some texts appear to be simultaneously *both* fantastic *and* allegorical (like some of Hawthorne's narratives), and in other cases the fantastic text is definitely submitted to a "poetic" *turn* (cf. e.g. Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia*, 1855).

10. Cf. Martin Esslin: *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), p. 289, where Esslin focuses on the non-mimetic or anti-mimetic character of the Theatre of the Absurd, "in which the world is seen as a hall of reflecting mirrors, and reality merges imperceptibly into fantasy".

11. Brian McHale: *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, Reprinted 1989), p. 74 (McHale's italics).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 74 (McHale's italics).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77 (McHale's italics, my ellipsis).

16. See on this arrangement Hans-Erik Larsen's article in *Standart*, No. 3 (August-October 1995): "Det ville Tjerkhov aldrig gøre..." ("Czekhov would never do this...").

17. Stacey Levine: *My Horse and Other Stories* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993), p. 33.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

20. Cf. my reading of Hoffmann's tale in "The Monster and the Automaton. Variations on the Grotesque and the Sublime in Science Fiction", in: *Media Fictions*, edited by Michael Skovmand (*The Dolphin*, No. 17, n.d.), pp. 107-09. It is also worth-while bearing in mind that Freud discussed Hoffmann's novella in his famous essay "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), focusing in particular on what he saw as Hoffmann's thematization of the *castration complex* in this text.

21. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 35 (my ellipsis).

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37 (my ellipsis).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 37. Cf. on the puppet or marionette as an embodiment of aesthetic perfection Heinrich von Kleist: "Über das Marionettentheater" (1810), where Kleist praises the "grace" ("Grazie") of the marionette at the cost of the human dancer: "We

see that to the same extent as reflection becomes obscurer and weaker in the organic world, its grace at the same time appears to be more splendid and powerful" (my translation): "Wir sehen, dass in dem Masse, als in der organischen Welt die Reflexion dunkler und schwächer wird, die Grazie darin immer strahlender und herrschender hervortritt" (*Heinrich v. Kleists Werke*. Neue Illustrierte Ausgabe. Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. K. Macke. Illustriert von Hermann Tischler, Berlin: Verlag von W. Herlet, n.d., p. 391). Cf. also my comments on this issue in "The Monster and the Automaton. Variations on the Grotesque and the Sublime in Science Fiction", in: *Media Fictions*, *op. cit.*, p. 108. And cf. my reading of the Danish writer Dorrit Willumsen's short story "Modellen Coppelia" ("The Model Coppelia"), in: *Sfinksens forvandlinger. Fantastiske fortællere i dansk litteratur fra B.S. Ingemann til Per Højlholt* (*Metamorphoses of the Sphinx. Storytellers within the Fantastic Tradition in Danish Literature from B.S. Ingemann to Per Højlholt*, Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 1986), pp. 191-98, where the "perfection" of the doll-like main character is explicitly associated with the project of Modernity, i.e. with the idea of the process of civilization as *pathogenesis*, associated in this case with sterility as well as with desexualization. As far as its cultural criticism is concerned, Dorrit Willumsen's "Modellen Coppelia" (1974) certainly reminds us of Stacey Levine's "The Doll" (cf. also Dorrit Willumsen's treatment of a similar motif in "Voksdukken" ["The Wax Doll", 1978], cf. *Sfinksens forvandlinger*, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-08).

24. Cf. on this problematic Jean Baudrillard: "La précession des simulacres", in: Jean Baudrillard: *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1985 (first published in 1981)), pp. 9-68.

25. Cf. Otto Rank: *The Double. A Psychoanalytic Study*. Translated and Edited, with an Introduction by Harry Tucker, Jr. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

26. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 39..

27. Stephen King: *The Dark Half* (Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent: New English Library, 1990), p. 10.

28. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

29. Cf. Julia Kristeva: *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 20.

30. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

31. Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1975), pp. 17-28.

32. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

35.

See.

<http://www.baby->

3.com/Dra_New_American_Fiction_Series_39_1557132887.html, p. 1.

36. Stacey Levine: *Dra* - (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1997), p. 60.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

38. Cf. M.H. Abrams: *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Seventh Edition (Fort Worth, etc.: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p. 111 (my ellipsis).

39. Cf. the source quoted in note 35, pp. 1-2 (Matthew Stadler's review of *Dra* - in *The Stranger*, March 9th 1997).

40. Cf. <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR22.6/prose.html> plus a review in *Publishers Weekly*, i.e. <http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?isbn=1557132887&itm=19>, p. 2.

41. Harold Bloom: *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 448.

42. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

43. Cf. Norman O. Brown: *Life Against Death. The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (London: Sphere Books Ltd., Reprinted November 1970), pp. 163-81. According to Norman O. Brown's Freudian reading of Western history, anality and the excremental vision are intimately linked up with *Protestantism* as such - at least since Luther's famous *Thurmerlebnis* (in the Protestant reformer's own words: "[t]his knowledge [viz.concerning justification by faith alone, i.e. one of the essential tenets of Protestant theology] the Holy Spirit gave to me on the privy [in the tower]", where it is worth-while bearing in mind that this religious *epiphany* actually took place *accompanied by the* (unholy?) *odours of a shit-besmirched loo!* Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 182 ff. If we furthermore believe (with Max Weber and others) in a kind of *liaison dangereuse* between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism in the Western world, Stacey Levine's (would-be) idiosyncratic focus on American (?) toilet culture in *Dra* - can obviously be related to contemporary consumerism, its countless bureaucratic outgrowths, and its *discontents!*

44. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

45. Quoted from Norman O. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

46. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

47. Jorge Luis Borges: *Fictions*. Edited and with an Introduction by Anthony Kerrigan (London: John Calder, 1985), p. 80.

48. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 150 (my ellipsis).

51. Anna Kavan: *Eagle's Nest* (London: Peter Owen, Reprinted 1976), p. 179 (Anna Kavan's ellipses). Cf. what I write about Anna Kavan in "Anna Kavan og Angela Carter: fra fantastisk til science fiction" ["Anna Kavan and Angela Carter: from Fantastic Fiction to Science Fiction"], 2, in: *Amazing Space*, Nr. 55/56 (Vinteren 1990/91), pp. 27-31.

52. Stacey Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 150.