

The Spirit of Place in Barbara Frischmuth's *Die Mystifikationen der Sophie Silber*

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Barbara Frischmuth, one of Austria's most respected contemporary writers, spent the first ten years of her life in the heart of the Austrian Salzkammergut where, after her father failed to return from the Russian front, her mother ran a hotel.¹ She was then sent to a Catholic boarding school in Gmunden, and her hostility to a system she regarded as indoctrinating young ladies into acceptance of their role as good Catholic wives and mothers is reflected in *Die Klosterschule* (The Convent School; 1968), a novel which in conservative Austria brought her a certain notoriety overnight. She studied Hungarian and Turkish at Graz and Vienna, and her experiences while doing research in Istanbul resulted in *Das Verschwinden des Schattens in der Sonne* (Disappearance of the Shadow in the Sun; 1973), a novel which charts an outsider's disenchantment with a Turkey torn between traditional values and the pressing need for change. But having established herself as a successful novelist and writer of children's fantasy, she now divides her time between Vienna and Altaussee. Indeed she regards her own preoccupation with the values of the city and the country as fairly characteristic of contemporary Austrian writing.² And it is Altaussee that furnishes the setting for her most successful adult fantasy, *Die Mystifikationen der Sophie Silber* (The Mystifications of Sophie Silber; 1976).

Altaussee is one of the most unspoiled, restful, and hauntingly beautiful lakes in Upper Styria, a region whose social life is still regulated by the Christian calendar and by folk customs which go back to pagan times.³ The brilliant carnival of Fasching, which starts on All Hallows' Eve, or the mummerly on the feast days of St Nicholas and St Barbara, patroness of the local salt mines, are however less close perhaps in spirit to the essentially secular imaginative world of *Mystifikationen* than the customs reflecting the natural rhythms of life—the changing seasons, hunting, harvesting, birth, marriage, and death. For Frischmuth's novel is not a Christian apologetic in the retrospective mode of Tolkien or C.S. Lewis, even though Altaussee is implicitly a paradigm of the organic community. And though permeated with the spirit—and the spirits—of the place and deeply concerned with the relationship of past to present, as Donald G. Daviau points out, *Mystifikationen* is ultimately "a parable of contemporary social and environmental problems."⁴ Structurally it is a dou-

¹ See Ulrich Janetzki, "Barbara Frischmuth" in *Kritisches Lexikon zur Deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur*, II, 1; and D.C.G. Lorenz, "Ein Interview: Barbara Frischmuth," *Women in German Yearbook* 2 (1986) 23-36.

² Barbara Frischmuth, "Österreich, versuchsweise betrachtet," in *Glückliches Österreich: Literarische Besichtigung eines Vaterlands*, ed. J. Jung (Salzburg: Residenz, 1978) 70.

³ See Franz Stadler, *Brauchtum und Masken in der Obersteiermark, Bezirk Liezen, Trautenfels*, 1988.

⁴ Donald G. Daviau, "Barbara Frischmuth" in *Major Figures of Contemporary Austrian Literature*, ed. D.G. Daviau (New York: Peter Lang, 1987) 194.

ble-decker novel in which realistic and fantastic scenes alternate and mingle, much as in George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871)--a likely model since the North Wind herself makes an appearance towards the end of Frischmuth's story. The fantastic scenes are handled with a lightness and humor which invites comparison with Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1939).

On the mimetic level the novel is about a career woman returning to the scenes of her childhood after twenty years and taking stock of her life. (Frischmuth is no writer of negative capability, and there is an autobiographical strain in all her work). Sophie Silver, *née* von Weitersleben, is the last in a long line of women who have given birth only to daughters, and have brought them up without a father. Sophie herself is a successful actress who, after years in the provinces performing fairy-tale pantomimes, has at last secured a contract in the capital. And she has lived up to the family tradition, at least to the extent of being unsure which of her repertory of lovers eighteen years ago had sired the child she had been forced to put up for adoption. Thus both as artist and liberated woman, Sophie Silver is a pointed refutation of the traditional feminine virtues embodied in her namesake Sophie Silberkern, the loyal, long-suffering wife of the misanthropist in Raimund's romantic comedy *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind* (The King of the Alps and the Misanthropist; 1828)--a play likewise concerned with the relative merits of nature and civilization in which elemental spirits come to the aid of man.⁵ But as Sophie Silver unwinds and the soothing spirit of Altaussee begins to work its magic on her harassed urban soul, she starts to come to terms with whole areas in her personal life that she has repressed for twenty years. Her mother's deathbed screams come back to her, and she realizes she is now the same age as her mother when she died. She recalls her adolescent crush on her mother's lover Saul Silver, a Jewish businessman addicted to E.T.A. Hoffmann and to collecting fossils, and how he had held her tactfully at bay. After her mother's death, we learn, the situation was reversed and for years she had fended off Saul's diffident advances, and had eventually capitulated, only for him to expire on their first night in a classic *Liebestod*. We also learn that Sophie has reestablished contact with the child she had sacrificed to art. And the fact that it is not a daughter in the von Weitersleben tradition but a son, who at 18 seems to Sophie more mature than her and who to her dismay already has a girlfriend, seems to intimate the possibility of a future rapprochement between the sexes.

What mystifies Sophie Silver in Altaussee is her mildly uncanny fellow lodgers at the hotel. There is no hesitation on the reader's part as to whether they are real or supernatural beings of the kind that Todorov regards as essential to true fantasy, so that in his terms the work remains unambiguously in the mode of the marvellous.⁶ For we quickly gather that they are indeed fairies connected both with nature and--as creatures of the imagination--with art and civilization, who feel increasingly out of touch with modern life. And since Sophie Silver is artistic and has deep ties with the region, they have selected her to bring them up to date, and as she relaxes, she gradually begins to under-

⁵ Daviau, 113.

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard (1970; Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975) 41-57.

stand their elemental fairy language. The principal fairies are all spirits of place, each with his or her native element and humor, and together they form a kind of regional pantheon. The Jovial Alpinox, King of the Alps and the melancholy Neptune figure von Wasserthaal each has his enchanted elemental palace. The lame and choleric dwarf von Drachenstein labors at his forge within the mountain, and the more complex Amaryllis Sternwieser, though installed in a cottage by the lake, is always out and about extolling the freshness of the mountain air. Particularly felicitous is the way these figures interact as in a Raimund comedy—Alpinox is gently courting Amaryllis, but she is more interested in von Wasserthaal, who however already has an entire seraglio of water nymphs attending him. Moreover their status as figures from a bygone era is nicely underlined by the way they observe all the old-fashioned social graces—the hand-kissing and flirtatious compliments—that are a traditional part of Austrian life.

At the same time Frischmuth is at pains to emphasize that this is also an international fairy congress, assembled to consider issues of international importance. Pari Banu from the *Arabian Nights* and a Chinese fairy exiled since the Boxer Rebellion are for instance present, and an intertextual troupe of Celtic fairies have migrated from MacDonald's fairy story *Carasoy* and taken up residence in the vacant narcissi growing beside the tiny Ostersee at the head of the main lake. Banished first to Cornwall and now to Altaussee for stealing children, they are up to their old tricks again, and a rescue operation mounted by Amaryllis and von Wasserthaal thus helps to keep the fantasy narrative in motion. We also hear in retrospect that when the elemental spirits had gone into exile during the Nazi period they had been hosted by the North Wind, and that Alpinox had felt a natural affinity for her chilly attractions, which almost compensated for Amaryllis's indifference. Unlike the old Teutonic gods, who are conspicuously absent, Frischmuth's gentle tutelaries are all horrified by war, and by making them at once regional and international spirits she emphasizes that the human imagination, while rooted in particular experience, transcends all national barriers.

Amaryllis Sternwieser, dressed in her Styrian *Dirndl* and accompanied everywhere by her little dachshund Max Ferdinand, is both symbolically and narratologically a key figure, and to some extent she steals the show from Sophie. Not only is she Sophie's guardian spirit, and thus an intermediary between her and the other "long-lived" elementals, but she has also been the guardian of the entire matriarchal line of her von Weitersleben ancestors, not to mention a succession of Max Ferdinands. She is thus a "living" link with the past, and it is through her that we learn about these ancestors and about the culture of the region. Particularly amusing is the way she intervenes when Sophie's grandmother Sidonie von Weitersleben's lesbian preferences threaten extinction of the line. Amaryllis has Sidonie dress up as a huntsman during Fasching and steers her resolutely toward a visiting nobleman masquerading as a Gypsy girl—only to be swept off her feet herself by a procession of drummer wives and into the arms of the despised, disguised Alpinox.

But like the masked witchlike Berthas in the local folk festivities, Amaryllis is associated with death as well as with fertility. She ministers to Sophie's dying mother and to a peasant trapped beneath the tree he has felled, and the amaryllium she brews has opiate powers. As Christa Gürtler has astutely no-

ticed, she is also closely associated with the moon and comprehends both the dying and the procreative functions of earlier lunar deities.⁷ One of the most remarkable episodes in the fantasy sequence is the Feast of Remembrance, which takes place "every seven, seventy and seven hundred years" and is held deep underground like the St Barbara rituals in Altaussee. This year Amaryllis officiates and after ceremoniously raising the goblet of amaryllium and passing it thrice around the assembled fairies, she goes into a kind of trance in which her mind reaches back to the dawn of time. Memories of the many dying heads she has held *Pieta*-like in her lap lead to very Catholic reflections on her role as a guide through death to a new life, and on the gruesomeness of death as distilling the tears of remorse and pity that replenish the spiritual wasteland. She then casts her mind further back to a time before the advent of such patriarchal figures as Alpinox and von Wasserthaal when she was the only deity, a prolific Venus Genetrix or Magna Mater spawning endlessly without regard to death, and beyond that to a state in which she was an undifferentiated life force surging through all trees and plants and animals. Both the folk rituals of Altaussee and the von Weitersleben matriarchy are thus extended back into primordial times, and the primacy and creative powers of matriarchal cultures underlined.

On another plane Amaryllis seems to be intended as a normative figure, an ideal of psychic integrity unalienated from nature toward which the recuperating Sophie is aspiring, and to this extent not only her guardian but also her double. In the course of a whirlwind tour of various Celtic haunts with the North Wind during their Nazi exile, Amaryllis leaves her fairy companions to debate the world's great issues in the stone circle of Ys and crosses the water to the Arthurian paradise of Avalon. And in a very effective scene of transformation, she wanders through apple trees in bloom along a path that soon becomes a stream, and as she stoops and drinks she turns into the amaryllis or fire lily she is named after.

It is towards this unity, harmony, and spontaneity of being that Frischmuth also seems to be propelling her titular heroine in the closing episodes, where fantasy and realism come together. The snatches of her mysterious fellow lodgers' conversations Sophie overhears at dinner reflect her own (and Frischmuth's) doubts and deliberations both as a human being and as an artist. In the face of accelerating change past traditions are seductive, but is there any going back? Is art—and particularly fantasy—escapist or does it point the way to man's salvation? If life and art impose many roles on us and personal growth means change, is ego-stability really possible? But later, after a walk in the adjacent park—emblem of nature methodized—when she settles in an alcove with fantastic murals and the conversation again mingles with her thoughts, Sophie comes closer to a more positive insight. For the fairy house-guests in their Styrian costumes are debating whether or not to abandon their human form divine and return to their elements as inanimate beings. And they roundly declare that if they are forced to sever all ties with human nature, human nature's lack of imagination will be to blame. The novel ends with a moonlit ceremony at the head of the lake in which these fairies grant Sophie a deeper insight into the evils of contemporary society. Technology has replaced

⁷ Christa Gürtler, *Schreiben Frauen Anders?* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag, 1985) 300.

traditional wisdom and man's inventions have turned against him. Atrocities have been committed because the sense of community has disappeared. Imagination has degenerated into idle curiosity. The elementals have tried in vain to moderate man's greed and envy. Above all man can no longer face the thought of death, declares Amaryllis. Fortunately, this strident tone is relieved considerably by the light-hearted banter the fairies engage in, advocating the pressing need for love. And the scene ends beautifully with the waters of the lake rising in a fairy circle around them, in token of the purification and renewal the spirit—and the spirits—of Altaussee have brought about in Sophie Silver's soul.