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FANTASY:
THE LITERATURE OF SUBVERSION

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1 INTRODUCTION

Only the perverse fantasy can still save us.

Goethe

Literature of the fantastic is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as in its various transformations or perversions.

Todorov

When our eye sees a monstrous deed, our soul stands still.

Fassbinder

The only thing you can do if you are trapped in a reflection is to invert the image.

Juliet Mitchell

Human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds and its very self ... My inquiry is purely historical; no lightning flashes any longer from the long since vanished thunder-clouds. ... The limits which my capacity for thought imposes upon me are narrow enough, but the province to be traversed here is infinite.

Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*[1]

FANTASY, both in literature and out of it, is an enormous and seductive subject. Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define, and indeed the 'value' of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its 'free-floating' and escapist qualities. Literary fantasies have appeared to be 'free' from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects,

self and other, life and death. Given this resistance of fantasy to narrow categorization and definition, it might seem self-defeating to attempt to produce a critical study which proposes to 'schematize' or 'theorize' about fantasy in literature and thereby to militate against escapism or a simple pleasure principle. Since this book does attempt such a study, it is best, perhaps, to try to clarify at the outset some of the theoretical and critical assumptions upon which it is based.

English literary criticism has been notoriously untheoretical in its approach to works of fantasy, as to other texts. Despite the growth of interdisciplinary studies in British institutions during the last decade, the impact of Marxist, linguistic and psychoanalytic theory upon readings of literature has been safely buffered by a solid tradition of liberal humanism, nowhere more so than in readings of fantasy, where a transcendentalist criticism has seemed to be justified. Literature of the fantastic has been claimed as 'transcending' reality, 'escaping' the human condition and constructing superior alternate, 'secondary' worlds. From W.H. Auden, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, this notion of fantasy literature as fulfilling a desire for a 'better', more complete, unified reality has come to dominate readings of the fantastic, defining it as an art form providing vicarious gratification. This book aims to locate such a transcendentalist approach as part of a nostalgic, humanistic vision, of the same kind as those romance fictions produced by Lewis, Tolkien, T.H. White and other modern fabulists, all of whom look back to a lost moral and social hierarchy, which their fantasies attempt to recapture and revivify.

Particularly pertinent to an argument against transcendentalist fiction and criticism is a famous passage from *The German Ideology*, in which Marx and Engels urge the importance of situating art within the historical and cultural framework from which it is produced. They write:

> In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to

> heaven. . . . The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their [men's] material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. (p.47)

Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it. The forms taken by any particular fantastic text are determined by a number of forces which intersect and interact in different ways in each individual work. Recognition of these forces involves placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants, as well as to a literary tradition of fantasy, and makes it impossible to accept a reading of this kind of literature which places it somehow mysteriously 'outside' time altogether. In a book of this length, it is impossible to consider all, or many, of these determinants in connection with every text, but my approach throughout is founded on the assumption that the literary fantastic is never 'free'. Although surviving as a perennial mode and present in works by authors as different as Petronius, Poe and Pynchon, the fantastic is transformed according to these authors' diverse historical positions. A more extensive treatment would relate texts more specifically to the conditions of their production, to the particular constraints against which the fantasy protests and from which it is generated, for 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 and loss.

In expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (according to the different meanings of 'express'): it can *tell of*, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can *expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and

continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force). In many cases fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be 'expelled' through having been 'told of' and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader. In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'. The movement from the first to the second of these functions, from expression as manifestation to expression as expulsion, is one of the recurrent features of fantastic narrative, as it tells of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence. Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, re-covering its dark areas. Since this excursion into disorder can only begin from a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the 'real' – a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference.

As a literature of 'unreality', fantasy has altered in character over the years in accordance with changing notions of what exactly constitutes 'reality'. Modern fantasy is rooted in ancient myth, mysticism, folklore, fairy tale and romance. The most obvious starting point for this study was the late eighteenth century – the point at which industrialization transformed western society. From about 1800 onwards, those fantasies produced within a capitalist economy express some of the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture. They are peculiarly violent and horrific.

This book concentrates upon literary fantasies of the last two centuries, fantasies produced within a post-Romantic,

secularized culture. One purpose of drawing together a number of different texts of this period was to see what features, if any, they had in common, and what conclusions might be drawn from their possible identification. It was in the course of reading and comparing a wide variety of fiction, from Gothic novels, through Dickens and Victorian fantasists, to Dostoevsky, Kafka, Peake and Pynchon, that a pattern began to emerge for me, a pattern which suggested that similarities on levels of theme and structure were more than coincidental.

The most important and influential critical study of fantasy of this post-Romantic period is Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). The value of Todorov's work in encouraging serious critical engagement with a form of literature which had been dismissed as being rather frivolous or foolish cannot be over-estimated, and anyone working in this area has to acknowledge a large debt to his study.

Previous French critics, such as P.-G. Castex, Marcel Schneider, Louis Vax and Roger Caillois, had tried to define literary fantasy by cataloguing its recurrent themes and motifs, taken rather randomly from various works. Schneider had claimed the fantastic as dramatizing 'the anxiety of existence', whilst Caillois described it as a form which was stranded between a serene mysticism and a purely humanistic psychology. Todorov has little time for metaphysics and he opposes impressionistic attempts to define fantasy. He is not interested in the semantic approach of many other critics (looking for clusters of subjects and for the meaning of the fantastic in these subjects), and he turns instead to a structural analysis of fantastic literature, seeking structural features which different texts have in common and which might provide a more concrete definition of the fantastic.

Nevertheless, there are some important omissions in Todorov's book, and it was in an attempt to go some way towards filling these that the present work was begun. For,

in common with much structuralist criticism, Todorov's *The Fantastic* fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms. Its attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation. It does not move outwards again to relate the forms of literary texts to their cultural formation. It is in an attempt to suggest ways of remedying this that my study tries to extend Todorov's investigation from being one limited to the *poetics* of the fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its forms.

Fantasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material that it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts. Yet Todorov repudiates Freudian theory as inadequate or irrelevant when approaching the fantastic. I take this to be the major blind-spot of his book and one which is bound up with his neglect of political or ideological issues. For it is in the unconscious that social structures and 'norms' are reproduced and sustained within us, and only by redirecting attention to this area can we begin to perceive the ways in which the relations between society and the individual are fixed. As Juliet Mitchell writes,

> The way we live as 'ideas' the necessary laws of human society is not so much conscious as *unconscious* – the particular task of psychoanalysis is to decipher how we acquire our heritage of the ideas and laws of human society within the unconscious mind, or, to put it another way, the unconscious mind *is* the way in which we acquire these laws.[2]

Psychoanalysis directs itself towards an unravelling of these laws, trying to comprehend how social structures are represented and sustained within and through us in our unconscious. Literary fantasies, expressing unconscious drives, are particularly open to psychoanalytic readings, and frequently show in graphic forms a tension between the 'laws of human society' and the resistance of the unconscious mind

to those laws. I shall discuss some of these features in the chapter on fantasy and psychoanalysis, returning to the work of Freud and referring to the writings of Jacques Lacan as providing a theoretical base in approaching the relation between ideology and unconscious life. In many ways this chapter provides the centre of my arguments and is the most crucial in trying to stretch Todorov's ideas into a more widely based cultural study of the fantastic.

This study is divided into two sections. The first section is theoretical, examining the conditions and the possibilities of fantasy as a literary mode in terms of its forms, features, basic elements and structures. The term 'mode' is being employed here to identify structural features underlying various works in different periods of time.

> For when we speak of a mode, what can we mean but that this particular type of literary discourse is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed.[3]

It could be suggested that fantasy is a literary mode from which a number of related genres emerge. Fantasy provides a range of possibilities out of which various combinations produce different kinds of fiction in different historical situations. Borrowing linguistic terms, the basic model of fantasy could be seen as a language, or *langue*, from which its various forms, or *paroles*, derive. Out of this mode develops romance literature or 'the marvellous' (including fairy tales and science fiction), 'fantastic' literature (including stories by Poe, Isak Dinesen, Maupassant, Gautier, Kafka, H.P. Lovecraft) and related tales of abnormal psychic states, delusion, hallucination, etc.

This is not to imply that an ideal theoretical model exists to which all fantasies should conform. There is no abstract

entity called 'fantasy'; there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires. Through their particular manifestations of desire, they can be associated together. The possibilities available to each particular text are determined, in many ways, by the texts which have preceded it and whose characteristic features it repeats or repudiates. Like dreams, with which they have many similarities, literary fantasies are made up of many elements re-combined, and are inevitably determined by the range of those constitutive elements available to the author/dreamer. Freud writes, 'The "creative" imagination, indeed, is quite incapable of *inventing* anything; it can only combine components that are strange to one another.'[4] Again, 'In the psychic life, there is nothing arbitrary, nothing undetermined.' Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different.

The theoretical section, then, introduces critical material on literary fantasy, both from a structuralist position, looking at the *narrative qualities* of the mode, and from a psychoanalytical perspective, considering these features as the *narrative effects* of basic psychic impulses.

The second section of the book looks at a number of texts in a little more detail. It does not attempt a comprehensive 'survey' of post-Romantic fantasy, but it does include a wide variety of diverse works to give a sense of the striking recurrence and similarity of several thematic and formal clusters. It thus reinforces the argument against any particular fantasy's 'difference' or 'peculiarity'. Detailed exposition has, unfortunately, had to be sacrificed. As to the selection of texts, there is reference to French, German, Russian and American literature, but the bias is quantitatively

towards English works, for reasons of familiarity and convenience.

Texts which receive most attention are those which reveal most clearly some of the points raised in the theoretical section – not in order to prove a hypothetical argument, but because it is in these works that the subversive function of the fantastic is most apparent. Although nearly all literary fantasies eventually re-cover desire, neutralizing their own impulses towards transgression, some move towards the extreme position which will be found in Sade's writings, and attempt to remain 'open', dissatisfied, endlessly desiring. Those texts which attempt that movement and that transgressive function have been given most space in this book, for in them the fantastic is at its most uncompromising in its interrogation of the 'nature' of the 'real'.

One consequence of this focus is that some of the better known authors of fantasy works (in the popular sense) are given less space than might be expected. For example, the best-selling fantasies by Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin or Richard Adams are not discussed at great length. This is not simply through prejudice against their particular ideals, nor through an attempt to recommend other texts as more 'progressive' in any easy way, but because they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature. The moral and religious allegories, parables and fables informing the stories of Kingsley and Tolkien move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely 'fantastic'. Their original impulse may be similar, but they move from it, expelling their desire and frequently displacing it into religious longing and nostalgia. Thus they defuse potentially disturbing, anti-social drives and retreat from any profound confrontation with existential dis-ease. Writers whose discontent is less easily repressed are given correspondingly more attention, not least because of the relative critical neglect they have suffered to date – hardly surprising in terms of the

close relation that has existed between literary criticism and a body of literature which supports orthodox behaviour and conservative institutions. By the same criterion, some novelists who are not normally thought of as working within a fantastic mode are included because of the way in which elements of fantasy enter into, disrupt and disturb the body of their texts. So alongside Mary Shelley, James Hogg, Edgar Allan Poe, R.L. Stevenson and Kafka lie George Eliot, Joseph Conrad and Henry James, as well as 'fantastic realists' such as Dickens and Dostoevsky.

All of this leaves aside the pleasures (of various kinds) of reading literary fantasy. This is really another area for psychoanalysis. I can only say that I have no desire to deprive the reader of the pleasure of the text. The reluctance to let works rest as closed or 'innocent' or pleasure-giving objects derives from a need to understand what might be going on under the cover of this pleasure. De-mystifying the process of reading fantasies will, hopefully, point to the possibility of undoing many texts which work, unconsciously, upon us. In the end this may lead to real social transformation.

PART ONE: THEORY

2 THE FANTASTIC AS A MODE

The imagination in exile

> There would be tears and there would be strange laughter. Fierce births and deaths beneath umbrageous ceilings. And dreams, and violence, and disenchantment.
>
> Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan*

THE 'FANTASTIC' derives from the Latin, *phantasticus*, which is from the Greek φα νζαστ ικο‌ς, meaning that which is made visible, visionary, unreal. In this general sense, all imaginary activity is fantastic, all literary works are fantasies. Given such an infinite scope, it has proved difficult to develop an adequate definition of fantasy as a literary kind. One critic claims that 'in no significant sense does fantasy have a history' (Irwin, p.x). It seems appropriate that such a protean form has so successfully resisted generic classification. 'The wide range of works which we call . . . fantastic is large, much too large to constitute a single genre. [It includes] whole conventional genres, such as fairy tale, detective story, Fantasy' (Rabkin, p.118).

As a critical term, 'fantasy' has been applied rather indiscriminately to any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales,

utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms 'other' than the human. A characteristic most frequently associated with literary fantasy has been its obdurate refusal of prevailing definitions of the 'real' or 'possible', a refusal amounting at times to violent opposition. 'A fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into "fact" itself' (Irwin, p.x). Such violation of dominant assumptions threatens to subvert (overturn, upset, undermine) rules and conventions taken to be normative. This is not in itself a socially subversive activity: it would be naive to equate fantasy with either anarchic or revolutionary politics. It does, however, disturb 'rules' of artistic representation and literature's reproduction of the 'real'.

An examination of some of the roots of literary fantasy reveals it to be characterized by this subversive function. Mikhail Bakhtin's study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, places modern fantasists such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Edgar Allan Poe, Jean-Paul, as the direct descendants of a traditional literary genre: the *menippea*. Menippean satire was present in ancient Christian and Byzantine literature, in medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation writings. Its most representative works were fictions such as Petronius's *Satyricon*, Varro's *Bimarcus* (i.e. *The Double Marcus*), Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (known as *The Golden Ass*), Lucian's *Strange Story*. It was a genre which broke the demands of historical realism or probability. The *menippea* moved easily in space between this world, an underworld and an upper world. It conflated past, present and future, and allowed dialogues with the dead. States of hallucination, dream, insanity, eccentric behaviour and speech, personal transformation, extraordinary situations, were the norm.

> Characteristic of the menippea are violations of the generally accepted, ordinary course of events and of the established norms of behaviour and etiquette, including

> the verbal. . . . Scandals and eccentricities destroy the epical and tragical integrity of the world, they form a breach in the stable, normal course of human affairs and events and free human behaviour from predetermining norms and motivations. (Bakhtin, p.96)

It was a genre which did not claim to be definitive or knowing. Lacking finality, it interrogated authoritative truths and replaced them with something less certain. As Bakhtin puts it, 'The fantastic serves here not in the positive *embodiment* of the truth, but in the search after the truth, its provocation and, most importantly, its *testing*' (p.94).

Bakhtin's generic definitions of the *menippea* and his discovery of similar features in the works of Rabelais, Swift, Sterne, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Gogol, are useful as an introduction to the qualities and functions of fantastic texts. He points towards fantasy's hostility to static, discrete units, to its juxtaposition of incompatible elements and its resistance to fixity. Spatial, temporal, and philosophical ordering systems all dissolve; unified notions of character are broken; language and syntax become incoherent. Through its 'misrule', it permits 'ultimate questions' about social order, or metaphysical riddles as to life's purpose. Unable to give affirmation to a closed, unified, or omniscient vision, the *menippea* violates social propriety. It tells of descents into underworlds of brothels, prisons, orgies, graves: it has no fear of the criminal, erotic, mad, or dead. Many modern fantasies continue this violently transgressive function, but there are crucial differences between the delight in misrule found in a menippean tradition and the less sanguine, less celebratory disorders found in Dostoevsky and later fantasists, differences which Bakhtin tends to minimize.

For Bakhtin, the *menippea* was conceptually linked with the notion of carnival; carnival was a public activity, a ritualized, festive event. 'In the carnival', continues Bakhtin, 'everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act . . . The carnival life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to a degree "life turned inside out", "life the

wrong way round" ' (p.101). Carnival was a temporary condition, a ritualized suspension of everyday law and order. By those means carnival dissolved differences, permitted free contact between various ranks, broke sexual taboos and merged together 'all the things that were closed off, isolated and separated in carnivalistic contacts and combinations' (p.101).

The *menippea* was a traditional form of fantastic art, and it exhibits crucial links with carnival as well as crucial differences between its celebration of misrule and the disorder found in less festive modern fantasies. Dostoevsky's tales, for example, *Bobok, The Double, The Underground Man, A Nasty Story, The Dream of a Queer Fellow*, retain many carnivalesque features. They invert rules, introduce the unexpected, tell of 'abnormal' psychological states, descend into a social underworld. But they have no communal base. Far from celebrating a temporary suspense of the law, they exist outside it. Their hallucinating subjects are isolated from a community, believing their estrangement to be peculiar to themselves. They are eccentric (ex-centric), have ceased to 'coincide with themselves' (Bakhtin's phrase), and experience themselves as double, often multiple, identities. This disintegration of personal unity is rather different from the temporary suspensions of coherence in the traditional *menippea*.

Modern fantasy is severed from its roots in carnivalesque art: it is no longer a communal form. The disunities found in Dostoevsky, Poe, Kafka or Pynchon are not the temporary ones of menippean misrule, although their grotesque manifestations are similar. Bakhtin suggests that the 'polyphonic' novel of Dostoevsky expresses a mixing together of heterogeneous social forms as one of the consequences of capitalist economy and its destruction of 'organic' order. 'Capitalism, leaving no other divisions but the division into proletarians and capitalists, caused those worlds to collide and welded them together in its own contradictory, evolving unity' (p.15). The fantastic texts of Dos-

toevsky anticipate one of the central features of modern literature: a plurality of languages, a confrontation of discourse and ideology, without any definitive conclusion or synthesis – there is no 'monologism', no 'axis'.[1] There is only a grotesque dissolution, a promiscuity.

Dostoevsky frequently writes of a fantastic literature as being the only appropriate medium for suggesting a sense of estrangement, of alienation from 'natural' origins. His fictions narrate metropolitan scenes which are 'un-natural', inhabited by disintegrated subjects, 'underground men'. Although the fantastic retains its original function of exerting pressure against dominant hierarchical systems, it is no longer an escapist form, but the only expressive mode. As Dostoevsky writes,

> But now you know that if there is no soil and if there is no action possible, the striving spirit will precisely express itself in abnormal and irregular manifestations – it will mistake the phrase for life, it will pounce upon the ready but alien formula, it will be only too glad to have it, and will substitute it for reality! In a fantastic life all functions, too, are fantastic. (Dostoevsky, cit. Linnér, p.55)

Sartre has written a defence of fantasy as a perennial form coming into its own in the secularized, materialistic world of modern capitalism. Whilst religious faith prevailed, writes Sartre, fantasy told of leaps into other realms. Through asceticism, mysticism, metaphysics, or poetry, the conditions of a purely human existence were transcended, and fantasy fulfilled a definite, escapist, function. 'It manifested our human power to transcend the human. Men strove to create a world that was not of this world' (Sartre, 1947, p.58). In a secular culture, fantasy has a different function. It does not invent supernatural regions, but presents a natural world inverted into something strange, something 'other'. It becomes 'domesticated', humanized, turning from transcendental explorations to transcriptions of a human condition. In this sense, Sartre claims, fantasy

assumes its proper function: to transform this world. 'The *fantastic, in becoming humanized, approaches the ideal purity of its essence, becomes what it had been.*' Without a context of faith in supernaturalism (whether sacred or secular), fantasy is an expression of human forces.

> It seems to be stripped of all its artifices. . . . We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own. There are no phantoms, no succubi, no weeping fountains. There are only men, and the creator of the fantastic announces that he identifies himself with the fantastic object. (pp. 59–60)

Sartre defines the fantastic as a literature in which definitive meanings are unknown: objects no longer serve transcendent purposes, so that means have replaced ends.

There was no facile transition from faith to disbelief: transformations of fantasy were slow and fluid and the survival of the 'marvellous' in twentieth-century works indicates that mode's continuing seductiveness. But the fantastic has become a narrative form which is peculiarly disenchanted (in both senses of the word). 'The period of unbelief allowed for the emergence of fantastic literature in its strictest sense.' [2] 'The fantastic is a compensation that man provides for himself, at the level of imagination [l'imaginaire], for what he has lost at the level of faith' (Lévy, p.617).

Georges Bataille writes, 'Those arts which sustain anguish and the recovery from anguish within us, are the heirs of religion' (Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, p.16). Fantasy betrays a dissatisfaction with what 'is', but its frustrated attempts to realize an ideal make it a negative version of religious myth. Fantasy is 'sovereign (only) in the desire for the object, not the possession of it' (ibid.). Without a cosmology of heaven and hell, the mind faces mere redundancy: the cosmos becomes a space full of menace, increasingly apprehended and internalized as an area of non-meaning.

The 'real' under scrutiny

> Reality is not limited to the familiar, the commonplace, for it consists in huge part of a *latent, as yet unspoken future word.*
>
> Dostoevsky, *Notebooks*

In a secularized culture, desire for otherness is not displaced into alternative regions of heaven or hell, but is directed towards the absent areas of this world, transforming it into something 'other' than the familiar, comfortable one. Instead of an alternative order, it creates 'alterity', this world re-placed and dis-located. A useful term for understanding and expressing this process of transformation and deformation is 'paraxis'. This signifies par-axis, that which lies on either side of the principle axis, that which lies alongside the main body. Paraxis is a telling notion in relation to the place, or space, of the fantastic, for it implies an inextricable link to the main body of the 'real' which it shades and threatens.

The term paraxis is also a technical one employed in optics. A paraxial region is 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.
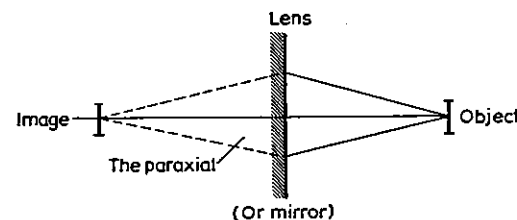
This paraxial area could be taken to represent the spectral region of the fantastic, whose imaginary world is neither entirely 'real' (object), nor entirely 'unreal' (image), but is located somewhere indeterminately between the two. This

paraxial positioning determines many of the structural and semantic features of fantastic narrative: its means of establishing its 'reality' are initially mimetic ('realistic', presenting an 'object' world 'objectively') but then move into another mode which would seem to be marvellous ('unrealistic', representing apparent impossibilities), were it not for its initial grounding in the 'real'. Thematically too, as we shall see, the fantastic plays upon difficulties of interpreting events/things as objects or as images, thus disorientating the reader's categorization of the 'real'.

The etymology of the word 'fantastic' points to an essential ambiguity: it is *un*-real. Like the ghost which is neither dead nor alive, the fantastic is a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness. It takes the real and breaks it. Coleridge's famous distinction between Imagination and Fancy (employed interchangeably with Fantasy) in his *Biographia Literaria*, emphasizes this dissolving activity, this re-creating of the real: 'Fancy has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites ... It is a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and place, blended with and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word *choice*' (p.167). J.A. Symonds writes similarly, linking it to the grotesque: 'The fantastic .... invariably implies a certain exaggeration or distortion of nature. What we call fantastic in art results from an exercise of the capricious fancy, playing with things which it combines into arbitrary, non-existent forms. Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that 'real' world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite.

The best theoretical study of fantasy as a mode defined by its 'relationality', i.e. by its positioning in relation to the real, is Irène Bessière's *Le Récit fantastique: la poètique de l'incertain* (1974). The fantastic is seen by Bessière as intimately linked to the real and rational: it is not to be equated with

irrationality. Anti-rational, it is the inverse side of reason's orthodoxy. It reveals reason and reality to be arbitrary, shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinizes the category of the 'real'. Contradictions surface and are held antinomically in the fantastic text, as reason is made to confront all that it traditionally refuses to encounter. The structure of fantastic narrative is one founded upon contradictions.

Formalist theories of literary structure, identifying different narrative kinds as corresponding to different linguistic tropes, can be applied to the fantastic. What emerges as the basic trope of fantasy is the *oxymoron*, a figure of speech which holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing towards synthesis. Several literary critics have gestured in more general terms towards this kind of antinomical structure of fantastic texts. 'Fantasy is that kind of extended narrative which establishes and develops an antifact, that is, plays the game of the impossible . . . a fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility' (Irwin, p.ix).

There is a general agreement that this impossibility is what defines the fantastic as a narrative, though not until Bessière's study was an antinomical structure understood to be a formal determinant. Rabkin claims that 'The truly fantastic occurs when the ground rules of a narrative are forced to make 180 degree reversal, when prevailing perspectives are directly contradicted. . . . The fantastic exists only against a background to which it offers a direct reversal' (pp. 197, 216). The problem with Rabkin's definition is its rigidity: his paradigm is *Alice Through the Looking-glass*, but more fluid fantasies do not fit his scheme. Other general definitions, such as Caillois's, 'The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality' (*Images, Images*, p.15) do not examine narrative structures. Closest to Bessière's structural definition is Joanna Russ's notion of 'negative subjunctivity':

Fantasy embodies a 'negative subjunctivity' – that is, fantasy is fantasy because it contravenes the real and violates it. The actual world is constantly present in fantasy, by negation ... fantasy is what *could not have happened*; i.e. what *cannot* happen, what *cannot* exist ... the negative subjunctivity, the *cannot* or *could not*, constitutes in fact the chief pleasure of fantasy. Fantasy violates the real, contravenes it, denies it, and insists on this denial throughout. (Russ, p.52)

Marcel Brion regards the fantastic as that kind of perception 'qui ouvre sur les plus vastes espaces' (which opens onto the widest spaces) (cit. Hellens, p.67). It is this *opening* activity which is disturbing, by denying the solidity of what had been taken to be real. Bataille has referred to this kind of infraction as 'une déchirure', a tear, or wound, laid open in the side of the real. The same violent 'opening' of syntactic order can be found in Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Surrealism, Artaud, etc. and from this perspective, fantastic works of the last two centuries are clear antecedents of modernist texts, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, with their commitment to disintegration.

Titles of many fantasies indicate this 'opening' activity, often linking it to notions of (1) invisibility, (2) impossibility, (3) transformation, (4) defiant illusion. For example: (1) Mary Shelley's *The Invisible Girl*, Wells's *The Invisible Man*, Margaret Armstrong's *The Man with no Face*, G.M. Winsor's *Vanishing Men*, E.L. White's *The Man who was not There*, Marcel Aymé's *Le passe-muraille*. (2) Mary Shelley's *The Mortal Immortal*, Arthur Adcock's *The World that Never Was*, John Kendall's *Unborn Tomorrow*, W.O. Stapledon's *Death into Life*, Neal Fyne's *The Land of the Living Dead*, A. Stinger's *The Woman who couldn't die*. (3) Brockden Brown's *Wieland, or The Transformation*, Gautier's *Avatar, or the Double Transformation*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, George MacBeth's *The Transformation*. (4) Alfred Noyes's *Walking Shadows*, C.A. Smith's *The Double Shadow*, Abraham Merritt's *Dwellers in the Mirage*, Ursula Le Guin's *The City of Illusions*, William Barrett's *The*

Shape of Illusion, The Shadows of the Images.

In other works the 'real' world is re-placed, its axis dissolved and distorted so that temporal and spatial structures collapse: F. Anstey's *Vice Versa*, C. Brown's *The Disintegrator*, W. Barrett's *The Edge of Things*, Elizabeth Sewell's *The Dividing of Time*, etc.

Bessière's poetics of fantasy directs attention to the structures behind these themes. The presentation of impossibility is not by itself a radical activity: texts subvert only if the reader is *disturbed* by their dislocated narrative form. The fantastic, as Bessière understands it, cannot be closed off. It lies inside closed systems, infiltrating, opening spaces where unity had been assumed. Its impossibilities propose latent 'other' meanings or realities behind the possible or the known. Breaking single, reductive 'truths', the fantastic traces a space within a society's cognitive frame. It introduces multiple, contradictory 'truths': it becomes polysemic.

> The impossible is a realm of polysemy and of the inscription of another meaning, one which cannot be said. This meaning is produced by a relativizing process which grows out of the play upon ambivalences. Because it is a narrative structured upon contraries, fantasy tells of limits, and it is particularly revealing in pointing to the edges of the 'real'. (Bessière, p.62)

Presenting that which cannot be, but *is*, fantasy exposes a culture's definitions of that which can be: it traces the limits of its epistemological and ontological frame.

Definitions of what can be, and images of what cannot be, obviously undergo considerable historical shifts. Non-secularized societies hold different beliefs from secular cultures as to what constitutes 'reality'. Presentations of otherness are imagined and interpreted differently. In what we could call a supernatural economy,[3] otherness is transcendent, marvellously different from the human: the results are religious fantasies of angels, devils, heavens, hells,

promised lands, and pagan fantasies of elves, dwarves, fairies, fairyland or 'faery'. In a natural, or secular, economy, otherness is not located elsewhere: it is read as a projection of merely human fears and desires transforming the world through subjective perception. One economy introduces fiction which can be termed 'marvellous', whilst the other produces the 'uncanny' or 'strange'. On the one hand, there are 'marvellous' works which invest otherness with supernatural qualities – magical narratives are of this kind, from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or *The Sleeping Beauty* to *The Lord of the Rings*. On the other hand, there are 'uncanny' stories where strangeness is an effect produced by the distorted and the distorting mind of the protagonist – the evidently hallucinating mind of the narrator of Maupassant's *Horla*, for example:

> I am certain now ... that an invisible creature exists beside me ... which can touch things, pick them up and move them about, which is therefore endowed with a material nature, imperceptible though it may be to our senses, and which is living like myself beneath my roof. ... I would seem to be suffering from hallucinations while remaining perfectly sane.[4]

From Gothic fiction onwards, there is a gradual transition from the marvellous to the uncanny – the history of the survival of Gothic horror is one of progressive internalization and recognition of fears as generated by the self.

It is hardly surprising that the fantastic comes into its own in the nineteenth century, at precisely that juncture when a supernatural 'economy' of ideas was slowly giving way to a natural one, but had not yet been completely displaced by it. Todorov's diagrammatic representation of the changing forms of the fantastic makes this clear: they move from the marvellous (which predominates in a climate of belief in supernaturalism and magic) through the purely fantastic (in which no explanation can be found) to the uncanny (which

explains all strangeness as generated by unconscious forces). Thus:

MARVELLOUS ⟶ FANTASY ⟶ UNCANNY
Supernatural   Unnatural   Natural

The fantastic opens on to a region which has no name and no rational explanation for its existence. It suggests events beyond interpretation. As Bessière describes it, amplifying Todorov's scheme: 'Fantastic narrative is presented as a transcription of the imaginary experience of the limits of reason. It links the intellectual falseness of its premises to a hypothesis of the unnatural or supernatural', gradually arriving at a position in which these hypotheses are untenable so that the fantastic introduces 'that which cannot *be*, either in a natural or supernatural economy' (p.62).

During the nineteenth century, then, the fantastic began to hollow out the 'real' world, making it strange, without providing any explanation for the strangeness. Michel Guiomar has termed this effect *l'insolite* – the unusual, the unprecedented – and he has described the negating activity of the fantastic as being one of dissolution, disrepair, disintegration, derangement, dilapidation, sliding away, emptying. The very notion of realism which had emerged as dominant by the mid-nineteenth century is subjected to scrutiny and interrogation.

The fantastic exists as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel's closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection. Hence their symbiotic relationship, the axis of one being shaded by the paraxis of the other. The fantastic gives utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence within a dominant 'realistic' order. Fantastic tales proliferate during the nineteenth century as an opposite version of realistic narrative: the literature of the fantastic is 'nothing more than the uneasy conscience of the positivist nineteenth

century' (Todorov, p.169). It is all that is not said, all that is unsayable, through realistic forms.

The fantastic is predicated on the category of the 'real', and it introduces areas which can be conceptualized only by negative terms according to the categories of nineteenth century realism: thus, the im-possible, the un-real, the nameless, formless, shapeless, un-known, in-visible. What could be termed a 'bourgeois' category of the real is under attack. It is this *negative relationality* which constitutes the meaning of the modern fantastic.

The marvellous, mimetic and fantastic

> The distinction between natural and supernatural, in fact, broke down; and when it had done so, one realized how great a comfort it had been – how it had eased the burden of intolerable strangeness which this universe imposes on us.
>
> C.S. Lewis, *Voyage to Venus*

Critics have traditionally defined fantasy in terms of its relation to the 'real', and in literary terms this meant that the fantastic tended to be understood through its relation to realism. Todorov's study was the first to question this classification and to offer a systematic formulation of the poetics of fantasy, which refuses to borrow from extra-literary categories to 'account for' or explain the emergence and existence of the form. Rather than turning too far to philosophical or psychological explanations, Todorov relies upon an analysis of the text in its own terms, so arriving at a theoretical rather than a historical definition of the genre of fantasy. I shall summarize his main ideas before proceeding to suggest a few modifications that might be made.

Given that there seemed to be a common agreement that the fantastic was to do with some kind of existential anxiety and unease, Todorov sought an understanding of *how* literary fantasies produce such an effect. He discovered the

kernel of his theories in the writing of a nineteenth-century Russian critic, Vladimir Solovyov, who formulated this definition: 'In the genuine fantastic, there is always the external and formal possibility of a simple explanation of phenomena, but at the same time this explanation is completely stripped of all internal probability.' Interestingly Dostoevsky had arrived at a similar definition himself, when he described Pushkin's tale, *The Queen of Spades* (1834), as 'a masterpiece of fantastic art' in that it was impossible to settle the anxiety aroused by the apparent unreality of events narrated:

> You believe that Herman really had a vision . . . however, at the end of the story, i.e. when you have read it through, *you cannot make up your mind*. Did this vision come out of Herman's nature or was he really one of those who are in contact with another world, one of the evil spirits hostile to mankind? (cit. Linnér, p.179)

True fantasy, according to Dostoevsky, must not break the hesitation experienced by the reader in interpreting events. Tales which are too incredible to be introduced as 'real' break this convention; he dismisses the story of a man with (literally) no heart as mere nonsense, for it breaks the limits of possibility and the agreement between reader and author that the text sets up. 'The fantastic', writes Dostoevsky, 'must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it' (p.178).

Todorov saw that Solovyov's definition could be extended into a more rigorous and extensive means of approaching the fantastic. The tale which introduces 'strange' events permits no internal explanation of the strangeness – the protagonist cannot understand what is going on – and this confusion spreads outwards to affect the reader in similar ways. According to Todorov, the purely fantastic text establishes absolute hesitation in protagonist and reader: they can neither come to terms with the unfamiliar events described, nor dismiss them as supernatural phenomena.

Anxiety, then, is not merely a thematic feature, but is incorporated into the *structure* of the work to become its defining element. Todorov insists that it is this systematic writing in, or *inscription*, of hesitation which defines the fantastic.

> The fantastic requires the fulfilment 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 supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is entrusted to a character . . . the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. (p.33)

The first and third of these conditions are claimed to constitute the genre, whilst the second is an optional constituent. We can find an example of a tale which incorporates its own scepticism as to the credulity of its contents in Gogol's short story *The Nose* (1836), which influenced Dostoevsky's *The Double*. The narrator deflects the reader's disbelief by confessing to his own and by making explicit the impossibility of understanding the tale in rational terms. The protagonist, Ivan Yakovlevich, discovers 'a very familiar nose' in his morning loaf of bread – a nose which assumes a life of its own. The narrator comments, 'We can see that there is a great deal that is very far-fetched in this story . . . it's *highly* unlikely for a nose to disappear in such a fantastic way and then reappear in various parts of the town dressed as a state councillor.' [5] What is crucial here is that *within the text itself* supernatural and natural explanations of strangeness are made redundant; there is a foregrounding of the impossibility of certainty and of reading in meanings.

Todorov's paradigmatic text is a short story by Cazotte, *Le Diable Amoreux* (1772), often claimed to be the first purely fantastic tale. Its hero, Alvaro, is in love with a woman called

Biondetta, who turns out to be the devil. Alvaro can never decide who Biondetta is – she is human *and* superhuman, ambiguously both, and drives Alvaro mad with indecision. His inability to define her, to know her, breaks the rational means by which he had ordered the world, and he becomes totally confused as to the nature of the 'real' and his own identity. He is split between a primitive faith in the possibility of supernatural events occurring (Biondetta as the devil) and a deep incredulity that there is anything other than the merely human (Biondetta as a woman). This epistemological uncertainty – often expressed in terms of the madness, hallucination, multiple division of the subject – is a recurrent feature of nineteenth-century fantasy; and as Todorov points out, it is dramatized by the text itself as it produces a similar un-knowingness on the part of the reader. The best example, perhaps, of a fantasy expressing profound uncertainty on the part of the main protagonist (again an uncertainty as to the status of a 'devil' figure) is James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, a work which is literally divided into two sections – one by an editor, one by the confessor – which neatly demonstrate Todorov's theory as to the inscription of double views within the fantastic text.

Hogg's *Confessions* makes it impossible for the reader to arrive at a definitive version of truth. Any accurate account of events, or reliable interpretation, recedes further and further into the distance; or, rather, it is an equivocal truth which is foregrounded as the very subject matter of the tale. Todorov sees this kind of equivocation as one which is produced by a tension between the voice of a 'he' (in Hogg's version, this would be the editor's story) and of an 'I' (this would be the sinner's story). In other words, the hesitation which the story produces is created by a confusion of pronouns and of pronoun functions: the reader is never returned to a position of confidence in relation to the tale such as would be found in a third-person omniscient narrative, where an 'objective', authoritative (authorial) voice, know-

ing all, tells the meaning of events. Cazotte's story, for example, permits no restoration of certainty for the reader – there is no return to an impersonal voice separate from Alvaro's. The reader is *kept uncertain* as to whether what was given in the name of 'true' experience was true or not. The narrative voice is that of the confused/confusing 'I' at the centre of the tale.

The uncertain vision of the protagonist of the fantastic is spread to the reader through a conflation of narrator and hero. The protagonist's blurred vision and ignorance is the most 'objective' perspective that is possible. And at the same time, it is not possible to distance his experience as being merely the product of his fevered mind, for the narrative voice is frequently a 'he' rather than an 'I', thus ruling out the dismissal of the story as peculiar to that individual mind or subjectivity. The dizzying effect of a tale such as Kafka's *Metamorphosis* derives from this inability to push away the hero's experience as delusory: it is not the dream of an 'I', but the reality of a 'he' in terms of its presentation. Gregor's 'unreal' transformation is 'real': he *is* another being than himself, with his reason intact.

> He would have needed arms and hand to hoist himself up; instead he had only the numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them it was the first to stretch itself straight . . . he watched his little legs struggling against each other more wildly than ever and saw no way of bringing order into this arbitrary confusion. . . . (pp.12–13)

This confusion between an 'I' and a 'he' through the narrative voice has as its cause and effect an uncertainty of vision, a reluctance or inability to fix things as explicable and known. The fantastic problematizes vision (is it possible to trust the seeing eye?) and language (is it possible to trust the recording, speaking 'I'?). Interestingly, in the translation of a 'fantastic' genre into cinema, these problems are re-

focused around the vision of the camera 'eye' which can produce similar conflation of 'objective' or documentary recording and an implication of 'subjective' vision through a character in the narrative. Or there can be a presentation of 'unreal' combinations of objects and events as 'real' through the camera eye itself – in this sense, the cinematic process itself could be called 'fantastic'. Mark Nash, writing an analysis of Carl Dreyer's film, *Vampyr*, has drawn attention to the need for a study of the relations and differences between literary and film presentations of the fantastic, and has pointed out that it is the obscuring of a clear vision of a recognizable 'he' or 'I' (with whose eye the reader or spectator can rest secure) that is one of the features common to both.

> The reader's uncertainty as to whether what was given in the name of 'I', of experience, was true or not, suspends his decision as to the register to which he is to assign the pronouns representing the narrating subjectivity. This play with the expectation of coming down one way or the other is far from the open assumption of the separation in the modern text. *It does, however, constitute the play of pronoun functions as a privileged element of the fantastic as a genre.* (Mark Nash, '*Vampyr* and the fantastic', p.37)

This problem (and problematization) of the perception/ vision/knowledge of the protagonist and narrator and reader of the fantastic text is not considered by Todorov in any historical perspective, yet it is part of an increasing attention to questions of knowing and seeing which preoccupies much Romantic and post-Romantic thought. Even Todorov's sliding scale of different kinds of fantasy points to its historical contextualization – the purely fantastic, he claims, exists between the purely marvellous (events are supernatural, superhuman, magical) and the purely uncanny (events are understood to be strange because of the deceiving mind of the protagonist). This corresponds to a shift in ideas from supernaturalism towards an increasingly

scientific and rationalistic world view. Todorov represents the different kinds of fantasy diagrammatically:

PURE UNCANNY	FANTASTIC UNCANNY	FANTASTIC MARVELLOUS	PURE MARVELLOUS

The area of the pure marvellous indicates narratives such as fairy tales, romance, much science fiction; next to it, the fantastic-marvellous includes works like Théophile Gautier's *La Morte Amoreuse* and Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Véra*. These present inexplicable effects which are eventually given supernatural causes. The fantastic-uncanny includes Jan Potocki's *Saragossa Manuscript* (1804), in which strange events are seen as having some subjective origin. Todorov places Poe's tales in the pure uncanny. Closest to his indeterminate, median line of the purely fantastic are Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoreux* and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, where the fantastic occupies a duration of uncertainty, whilst the reader is left in doubt over the origins of 'ghosts' as supernatural or natural presences. The purely fantastic 'may be represented by the median line separating the fantastic-uncanny from the fantastic-marvellous. This line corresponds perfectly to the nature of the fantastic – a frontier between two adjacent realms' (p.44).

This scheme is useful for distinguishing certain kinds of the fantastic, but its polarization of the marvellous and the uncanny leads to some confusion. For to see the fantastic as a literary form, it needs to be made distinct in literary terms, and the uncanny, or *l'étrange*, is not one of these – it is not a literary category, whereas the marvellous is. It is perhaps more helpful to define the fantastic as a literary *mode* rather than a genre, and to place it between the opposite modes of the marvellous and the mimetic. The ways in which it operates can then be understood by its combination of elements of these two different modes, as I shall explain.

The marvellous

The world of fairy story, romance, magic, supernaturalism is one belonging to marvellous narrative. Tales by the Grimm brothers, Hans Andersen, Andrew Lang and Tolkien all belong to this mode. If we take the opening of a story by Grimm, called 'Hans the Hedgehog', we find that the voice is impersonal and that events are distanced well into the past: 'There was once a country man who had money and land in plenty. . . .' [6] Similarly the opening of Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies*: 'Once upon a time there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom.'[7] These openings are working in similar ways, repeating the formulaic device which opens traditional fairy tales: 'Once upon a time there was. . . .' The narrator is impersonal and has become an authoritative, knowing voice. There is a minimum of emotional involvement in the tale – that voice is positioned with absolute confidence and certainty towards events. It has complete knowledge of *completed* events, its version of history is not questioned and the tale seems to deny the process of its own telling – it is merely reproducing established 'true' versions of what happened. The marvellous is characterized by a minimal functional narrative, whose narrator is omniscient and has absolute authority. It is a form which discourages reader participation, representing events which are in the long distant past, contained and fixed by a long temporal perspective and carrying the implication that their *effects* have long since ceased to disturb. Hence the formulaic ending too, 'and then they lived happily ever after', or a variant upon this. The effect of such narrative is one of a *passive* relation to history. The reader, like the protagonist, is merely a receiver of events which enact a preconceived pattern.

The mimetic

Narratives which claim to imitate an external reality, which are mimetic (imitating), also distance experience by shaping

it into meaningful patterns and sequences. Classic narrative fiction, which is exemplified by so many 'realistic' nineteenth-century novels, represents as 'real' the events it tells, using as mouthpiece a knowing third-person voice. Thus the opening of Thackeray's Victorian novel, *Vanity Fair* (1848): 'On one sunshiny morning in June, there drove up to the great iron gate of Miss Pinkerton's academy for young ladies, on Chiswick Mall, a large family coach. . . .' Or consider Elizabeth Gaskell's 'historical' novel *Mary Barton* (1848): 'There are some fields near Manchester, well known to the inhabitants as "Green Heys Fields", through which runs a public footpath to a little village about two miles distant.' These openings make an implicit claim of equivalence between the represented fictional world and the 'real' world outside the text.

The fantastic

Fantastic narratives confound elements of both the marvellous and the mimetic. They assert that what they are telling is real – relying upon all the conventions of realistic fiction to do so – and then they proceed to break that assumption of realism by introducing what – within those terms – is manifestly unreal. They pull the reader from the apparent familiarity and security of the known and everyday world into something more strange, into a world whose improbabilities are closer to the realm normally associated with the marvellous. The narrator is no clearer than the protagonist about what is going on, nor about interpretation; the status of what is being seen and recorded as 'real' is constantly in question. This instability of narrative is at the centre of the fantastic as a mode. Thus the circles of equivocation in Poe's stories, such as the opening of 'The black cat':

> For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses

reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream.[8]

Between the marvellous and the mimetic, borrowing the extravagance of one and the ordinariness of the other, the fantastic belongs to neither and is without their assumptions of confidence or presentations of authoritative 'truths'.

It is possible, then, to modify Todorov's scheme slightly and to suggest a definition of the fantastic as a mode, which then assumes different generic forms. Fantasy as it emerged in the nineteenth century is one of these forms. It seemed to become a genre in its own right because of its extremely close relation to the form of the novel, a genre which it undermined. As Bakhtin writes, the novel emerged as a form dominated by a secular vision, a narrow monological consciousness, whose view is, 'All that has significance can be collected in a single consciousness and subordinated to a unified accent; everything which is not amenable to such a reduction is accidental and unessential' (p.66). Subverting this unitary vision, the fantastic introduces confusion and alternatives; in the nineteenth century this meant an opposition to bourgeois ideology upheld through the realistic novel.[9]

Lewis Carroll pointed towards this situation of the fantastic as existing between the realistic and the marvellous in his Preface to *Sylvie and Bruno* (1893). Carroll distinguished between three kinds of mental states, which could be seen as related to the three modes (mimetic, fantastic and marvellous) which we have described. The first condition Carroll terms 'ordinary', the second is 'eerie' and the third is 'trance-like'. In an ordinary state of mind, man sees a 'real' world, in an eerie state he sees a 'transitional' world and in a trance-like state he sees an 'imaginary' world. These roughly correspond to mimetic, fantastic and marvellous literary forms. The fantastic exists in the hinterland between 'real' and 'imaginary', shifting the relations between them through its indeterminacy.

A point needs to be made here about the relation between those works which are termed fantastic and those which have been designated surrealistic. Obviously it would be hair-splitting to over-schematize such distinctions, since surrealism has so much in common with fantasy, especially in its use of similar *themes*, such as the disintegration of objects and the fluidity of discrete forms, but there are crucial differences. These are best understood in terms of narrative structure and the relation of the text to the reader. Surrealistic literature is much closer to a marvellous mode in that the narrator himself is rarely in a position of uncertainty. The extraordinary happenings told do not surprise the narrator – indeed he expects them and records them with a bland indifference, a certain neutrality. The opening of a short story by Benjamin Péret, for example, 'A life full of interest', introduces weird events with the same kind of unconcern and authoritative detachment that is to be found in old fairy tales: 'Coming out of her house early in the morning, Mrs Lannor saw that her cherry trees, still covered with fine red fruit the day before, had been replaced during the night by stuffed giraffes.' [10]

The surrealistic then is closer to the marvellous – it is super-real – and its etymology implies that it is presenting a world *above* this one rather than fracturing it from inside or below. Unlike the marvellous or the mimetic, the fantastic is a mode of writing which *enters a dialogue with the 'real' and incorporates that dialogue as part of its essential structure*. To return to Bakhtin's phrase, fantasy is 'dialogical', interrogating single or unitary ways of seeing. The issue of the narrative's internal reality is always relevant to the fantastic, with the result that the 'real' is a notion which is under constant interrogation. The text has not yet become non-referential, as it is in modernist fiction and recent linguistic fantasies (such as some of Borges's stories) which do not question the crucial relation between language and the 'real' world outside the text which the text constructs, so much as move towards another kind of fictional autonomy. The represen-

tational means of realism are discovered to be endlessly problematic in many fantasies, from Carroll and Poe to Calvino. They are drawn towards that discourse of the marvellous which Novalis described as 'narrative without coherence but rather with association, like dreams . . . full of words, but without any meaning and coherence . . . like fragments' but they do not escape into it. In their *waking* dreams, it is the strange relation between the 'real' and its representation which is their concern.

Non-signification

> The literature of the fantastic leaves us with two notions – reality and literature – each one as unsatisfactory as the other.
>
> Todorov, *The Fantastic*

A reluctance, or an inability, to present definitive versions of 'truth' or 'reality' makes of the modern fantastic a literature which draws attention to its own practice as a linguistic system. Structured upon contradiction and ambivalence, the fantastic traces in that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation or that which is represented as 'untrue' and 'unreal'. By offering a problematic re-presentation of an empirically 'real' world, the fantastic raises questions of the nature of the real and unreal, foregrounding the relation between them as its central concern. It is in this sense that Todorov refers to fantasy as the most 'literary' of all literary forms, as 'the quintessence of literature', for it makes explicit the problems of establishing 'reality' and 'meaning' through a literary text. As Bessière writes, 'Fantastic narrative is perhaps the most artificial and deliberate mode of literary narrative . . . it is constructed on the affirmation of emptiness . . . uncertainty arises from this mixture of too much and of nothing' (p.34).

The impossibility of verification of events, found in Hoffmann's tales and in Hogg's *Confessions*, becomes central

to post-Romantic fantasies. Perception becomes increasingly confused, signs are vulnerable to multiple and contradictory interpretation, so that 'meanings' recede indefinitely, with 'truth' as a mere vanishing point of the text. Bellemin-Noël's critique of Todorov argues that it is this lack of meaningful signification which is the major defining feature of the fantastic, being of equal importance to structural equivocation and suggesting the same trouble in representing or reaching a 'real', absolute signified. Bellemin-Noël claims that:

> one could talk of a rhetoric of the *unsayable* . . . the fantastic activity often returns to a creation of 'pure signifiers' . . . All these lexical units, marked by a sort of 'insignification' on the communicative level of language, do have some kind of signified, but it is an approximate one: one could say that they signify by connoting without denoting; or that, failing to be circumscribed by a definition, they install a (short)-signifying-circuit because they are connected up with a network of limitless images. (my translation, pp. 112–13)

That gap between sign and meaning which has become a dominant concern of modernism is anticipated by many post-Romantic works in a fantasy mode. Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1959), registering a final disjunction between word and object – 'There could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names' – is an expression of a severance of connecting lines of meaning, a severance given graphic form in many fantasies. A gap between signifier and signified works both ways in the modern fantastic. On the one side, there is a presentation of 'nameless things'. In nineteenth century tales of fantasy and horror, from MacDonald's *Lilith* and *Phantastes*, Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni* and *Strange Story*, Maupassant's *Horla* and *He*, to Poe's stories and the beginning of Stoker's *Dracula*, there is an apprehension of something unnameable: the 'It', the 'He', the 'thing', the 'something', which can have no adequate articulation

except through suggestion and implication. H.P. Lovecraft's horror fantasies are particularly self-conscious in their stress on the impossibility of naming this unnameable presence, the 'thing' which can be registered in the text only as absence and shadow. (In film, the 'unseen' has a similar function.) Lovecraft's *The Mountains of Madness* (1939), for example, circles around this dark area in an attempt to get beyond language to something other, yet the endeavour to visualize and verbalize the unseen and unsayable is one which inevitably falls short, except by drawing attention to exactly this difficulty of utterance:

> The words reaching the reader can never suggest the awfulness of the sight itself. It crippled our consciousness completely . . . What we did see . . . was the utter objective embodiment of the fantastic novelist's 'thing that should not be' .... a terrible, indescribable thing. (pp. 106–7)[11]

Lovecraft's fragmented story *The Transition of Juan Romero* works similarly, leading to a climax which declares itself as impossibility:

> In that moment it seemed as if all the hidden terrors and monstrosities of earth had become articulate in an effort to overwhelm the human race . . . I had arrived at the abyss . . . I peered over the edge of that chasm which no light could fathom . . . At first I beheld nothing but a seething blur of luminosity; but then shapes, all infinitely distant, began to detach themselves from the confusion, and I saw . . . but God! I dare not tell you what I saw! . . . Some power from heaven, coming to my aid, obliterated both sights and sounds in such a crash as may be heard when two universes collide in space.[12]

Lovecraft's ghost and horror fiction makes explicit the problem of naming all that is 'other', all that is designated 'unreal' by what he derides as 'prosaic materialism,' and 'the common veil of obvious empiricism'. 'I am not even certain how I am communicating this message. While I know I am

speaking, I have a vague impression that some strange and perhaps terrible mediation will be needed to bear what I say to the points where I wish to be heard.' [13]

On the other side of Beckett's formulation lie 'thingless names', also recurring in the fantastic as words which are apprehended as empty signs, without meaning. Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books and his *Hunting of the Snark* and *Sylvie and Bruno* reveal his reliance upon portmanteau words and nonsense utterances as a shift towards language as signifying nothing, and the fantastic itself as such a language. His snark, boojum, jabberwocky, uggug, like Poe's Tekeli-li, Dostoevsky's 'bobok', or Lovecraft's Cthulhu, Azathoth, Nyarlathotep, are all mere signifiers without an object. They are inverted and invented 'nonsense' (non-sense) words, indicating nothing but their proper density and excess. The signifier is not secured by the weight of the signified: it begins to float free. Whereas the gap between signifier and signified is closed in 'realistic' narrative (as it is in classic narrative cinema), in fantastic literature (and in the cine-fantastic) it is left open. The relation of sign to meaning is hollowed out, anticipating that kind of semiotic excess which is found in modernist texts. From Carroll, through Kafka, to modern writers such as J.L. Borges in *Labyrinths* and Malcolm Bradbury in his fantasy *Rates of Exchange*, there is a progressive dissolution of any predictable or reliable relation between signifier and signified. Fantasy becomes a literature of separation, of discourse without an object, foreshadowing that explicit focus upon problems of literature's signifying activity found in modern anti-realist texts.

Sartre's essay on Maurice Blanchot's early Kafka-esque fantasy, *Aminadab* (referred to previously) defines the modern fantastic as a *language* of peculiarly empty utterances, of non-signifying signs. These signs, claims Sartre, no longer lead anywhere. They represent nothing, compelling recognition only through their own density. They are means without ends, signs, tokens, signifiers, which are super-

ficially full, but which lead to a terrible emptiness. The 'object' world of the fantastic, found, for example, in Kafka's fiction, is one of semiotic excess and of semantic vacuity. Thus Sartre writes of this world as being one which is pregnant with emptiness:

> The law of the fantastic condemns it to encounter instruments only. These instruments are not . . . meant to serve men, but rather to manifest unremittingly an evasive, preposterous finality. This accounts for the labyrinth of corridors, doors and staircases that lead to nothing, the signposts that lead to nothing, the innumerable signs that line the road and that mean nothing. In the 'topsy-turvy' world, the means is isolated and is posed for its own sake. (p.62)

The fantastic, then, pushes towards an area of non-signification. It does this either by attempting to articulate 'the unnameable', the 'nameless things' of horror fiction, attempting to visualize the unseen, or by establishing a disjunction of word and meaning through a play upon 'thingless names'. In both cases, the gap between signifier and signified dramatizes the impossibility of arriving at definitive meaning, or absolute 'reality'. As Todorov points out, the fantastic cannot be placed alongside allegory or poetry, for it resists both the conceptualizations of the first and the metaphorical structures of the second. It tends towards the non-conceptual, or pre-conceptual. (As Blanchot puts it, 'the quest of literature is the quest for the moment which precedes it'.) When it is 'naturalized' as allegory or symbolism, fantasy loses its proper non-signifying nature. Part of its subversive power lies in this resistance to allegory and metaphor. For it takes metaphorical constructions literally. Donne's famous metaphor 'I am every dead thing', for example, is literally realized in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and in Romero's film *Night of the Living Dead*. It could be suggested that the movement of fantastic narrative is one of metonymical rather

than of *metaphorical* process: one object does not *stand for* another, but literally becomes that other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability. As Lacan has pointed out, 'What do we have in metonymy other than the power to bypass the obstacles of social censure? This form . . . lends itself to the truth under oppression.' [14] The fact that most fantasies recuperate or naturalize this process by pulling their narratives into conceptual, often quasi-allegorical or romance structures (as in *Dracula*, or *Jekyll and Hyde*, or Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy) indicates the disturbing thrust of the fantastic in its resistance to the endings and meanings of closed, 'signifying' narratives.

Topography, themes, myths

> Hell is the place of those who have denied;
> They find there what they planted and what dug,
> A Lake of Spaces, and a Wood of Nothing,
> And wander there and drift, and never cease
> Wailing for substance.
>
> W.B. Yeats, *The Hour-Glass*

The topography, themes and myths of the fantastic all work together to suggest this movement towards a realm of non-signification, towards a zero point of non-meaning. The represented world of the fantastic is of a different kind from the imagined universe of the marvellous and it opposes the latter's rich, colourful fullness with relatively bleak, empty, indeterminate landscapes, which are less definable as places than as spaces, as white, grey, or shady blanknesses. Movement into a *marvellous* realm transports the reader or viewer into an absolutely different, alternative world, a 'secondary' universe, as Auden and Tolkien term it. [15] This secondary, duplicated cosmos, is relatively autonomous, relating to the 'real' only through metaphorical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it. This is the place of William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*, Frank Baum's

Wonderful Land of Oz, C.S. Lewis's *Narnia*, Fritz Leiber's *Nehwon*, Tolkien's Middlearth in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the realms of fairy story and of much science fiction.

Such marvellous narratives have a tangential relation to the 'real', interrogating its values only retrospectively or allegorically. Ursula Le Guin's science fiction fantasies, for example, construct a whole galactic civilization through a number of planets incorporating different aspects of human culture, magnifying certain features and diminishing others. They build up *another* universe out of elements of this one, according to dystopian fears and utopian desires, rather like Swift's satirical methods in *Gulliver's Travels*. Their other world, however new or strange, is linked to the real through an allegorical association, as an exemplification of a possibility to be avoided or embraced. The basic relation is a conceptual one, a linking through ideas and ideals. The fantastic, by contrast, is moving towards the non-conceptual. Unlike faery, it has little faith in ideals, and unlike science fiction, it has little interest in ideas. Instead, it moves into, or opens up, a space without outside cultural order.

The notion of 'paraxis' introduced optic imagery in relation to the fantastic and it is useful to return to it in considering topography, for many of the strange worlds of modern fantasy are located in, or through, or beyond, the mirror. They are spaces behind the visible, behind the image, introducing dark areas from which anything can emerge.

The topography of the modern fantastic suggests a preoccupation with problems of vision and visibility, for it is structured around spectral imagery: it is remarkable how many fantasies introduce mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes – which see things myopically, or distortedly, as out of focus – to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar. E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* derives its dislocated sense of the 'real' from the confused vision of its

protagonist Nathaniel, whose apprehensions, terrors and phobias are all related to his *eyes*: the fear of loss of sight, of no longer being able to see (and so control) things clearly is at the centre of the tale. Many Victorian fantasies employ the device of a lens or mirror to introduce an indeterminate area where distortions and deformations of 'normal' perception become the norm. Lewis Carroll's Alice moves *through* the looking-glass into a paraxial realm, where anything can happen. 'Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now . . . It'll be easy enough to get through.' [16]

Similarly, George MacDonald's fantasies rely heavily upon mirrors, portraits, doors, apertures which open into another region found in the spaces of the familiar and the known. Vane, the narcissistic hero of *Lilith*, has access to his imaginary realm through the mirror in his bedroom, 'I touched the glass; it was impermeable . . . I shifted and shifted the mirrors . . . until at last . . . things came right between them . . . I stepped forward, and my feet were among the heather'.[17] Not only mirrors, but all apertures lead Vane elsewhere. 'How could I any longer call that house *home*', he asks, 'where every door, every window opened into – Out'.[18] All openings transport him into 'a world very much another than this'. H.G. Wells's short story *The Door in the Wall* (1906) contains a 'real' door leading a man to 'immortal realities', hidden 'in the margin of his field of vision'. It promises him an unknown life, as he grows older '*coveting*, passionately desiring, the green door'.[19] Another example of this entrance into a fantastic landscape via an aperture or reflection is Valery Brussof's strange tale *The Mirror* (1918). Here, a woman loses her identity when she is literally replaced by her mirror image and she herself steps through into the area behind the mirror, an area she describes as 'this protracted actuality, separated from us by the smooth surface of glass, [which] drew me towards itself by a kind of intangible touch, dragged me forward, as to an abyss, a mystery'.[20]

Frequently, the mirror is employed as a motif or device to introduce a double, or *Döppelganger* effect: the reflection in the glass is the subject's other, as in R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*: 'when I looked upon that ugly idol in the glass, I was conscious of no repugnance, rather of a leap of welcome. This, too, was myself. It seemed natural and human.' [21] The painted portrait in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* functions similarly, as an iconographical establishment of difference, illustrating self as other, and suggesting the inseparability of these devices and mirror images from fantastic themes of duplicity and multiplicity of selves.

Unlike marvellous secondary worlds, which construct alternative realities, the shady worlds of the fantastic construct nothing. They are empty, emptying, dissolving. Their emptiness vitiates a full, rounded, three-dimensional visible world, by tracing in absences, shadows without objects. Far from fulfilling desire, these spaces perpetuate desire by insisting upon *absence*, lack, the non-seen, the unseeable. The seeker of Italo Calvino's abstract fantasy *Invisible Cities* (1972), for example, declares the impossibility of fulfilment: invisibility, or threatened invisibility, removes certainty and disturbs the premises and the promises of the 'real': 'Elsewhere', he writes, 'is a negative mirror. The traveller recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and never will have.' [22]

An emphasis upon invisibility points to one of the central thematic concerns of the fantastic: problems of vision. In a culture which equates the 'real' with the 'visible' and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that which is in-visible. That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes 'I see' synonymous with 'I understand'. Knowledge, comprehension, reason, are established through the power of the *look*, through the '*eye*' and the '*I*' of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision. In fantastic art, objects are not

readily appropriated through the look: things slide away from the powerful eye/I which seeks to possess them, thus becoming distorted, disintegrated, partial and lapsing into invisibility.

From about 1800 onwards, one of the most frequent landscapes of fantasy has been the hollow world, one which is surrounded by the real and the tangible, but which is itself empty, mere absence. William Morris's *The Hollow Land* (1856), for example, narrates a quest for an area known only by its insubstantiality and difference, somewhere approached through the interstices of solid things, 'between the rift of rocks'. Morris's protagonist seeks this hollow region as being a realm before time, before separation into self and other, before the establishment of distinct identities or genders, before the 'fall' into difference and a conscious-ness of ego, of the 'I': 'Yet beyond, oh such a land! . . . a great hollow land . . . reaches and reaches of loveliest country . . . I know, that *we* abode continually in the Hollow Land until *I* lost it! [23] (The shifting pronouns here, making the loss equi-valent with a progression from *we* to *I*, indicate that the ideal, imaginary, hollow land is a realm of integration, pre-ceding separateness and division of self from other.)

Classical unities of space, time and character are threatened with dissolution in fantastic texts. Perspective art and three-dimensionality no longer hold as ground rules: parameters of the field of vision tend towards indetermi-nacy, like the shifting edges of Kafka's *The Burrow*, or the infinitely receding passages and labyrinthine extensions of Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* and Borges's *Labyrinths*, or the soluble walls of Ursula Le Guin's *City of Illusions*. It is as though 'the limited nature of space', to which Kant referred in his *Distinctions of Regions in Space* (1768), had inserted into it an additional dimension, where 'incongruent counter-parts' can co-exist and where that transformation which Kant called 'a turning over of a left hand into a right hand' can be effected. This additional space is frequently narrowed down into a place, or *enclosure*, where the fantastic has

become the norm. Enclosures are central to modern fan-tasy, from the dark, threatening edifices and castles of Gothic fiction and Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, through the threatening architecture of nineteenth-century tales of terror, to new enclosures of metropolitan nightmare in Dic-kens, Kafka and Pynchon. Poe's *House of Usher*, Stoker's *Dracula*, Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, etc., all rely upon the Gothic enclosure as a space of maximum trans-formation and terror.

Chronological time is similarly exploded, with time past, present and future losing their historical sequence and tending towards a suspension, an eternal present. 'My memories are very confused. There is even much doubt as to where they begin; for at times I feel appalling vistas of years stretching behind me, while at other times it seems as if the present moment were an isolated point in a grey, form-less infinity . . . just what the year was, I cannot say; for since then I have known many ages and dimensions, and have had all my notions of time dissolved and refashioned.' [24] Fantasies of immortality, increasingly popular in post-Romantic fiction, conflate different temporal scales so that centuries, years, months, days, hours and minutes appear as arbitrary and insubstantial units which, like Salvador Dali's dissolving watches, are made flexible and fluid. C.R. Matu-rin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* moves through time, his days a society's decades; Mary Shelley's Wandering Jew of *The Mortal Immortal* is outside time, unable to be located within a familiar temporal structure. [25] Time is indefinitely sus-pended in Nerval's *Aurélia* in a chapter urging 'Do not believe chronometers: time is dead; henceforth there will be no more years, nor months, nor hours; Time is dead and we are walking in its funeral procession.' [26] A gradual seduction into a fantastic landscape is made equivalent with a loss of chronological sequence in many texts: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* witnesses Jonathan Harker's meticulous time-keeping ('3 May. Bistritz – left Munich at 8.35 p.m., on 1st May, arriving at Vienna early next morning; should have

arrived at 6.46, but train was an hour late . . . I feared to go very far from the station, as we had arrived late and would start as near the correct time as possible') gradually made ineffective in measuring or charting events ('It seems to me that the further east you go the more unpunctual are the trains.') [27]

Kafka's *Metamorphosis* slowly erases clock time as the intervals between episodes (marked by hours and minutes) expand and become central. With time, as with space, it is the intervals between things which come to take precedence in the fantastic: part of its transformative power lies in this radical shift of vision from units, objects, and fixities, to the intervals between them, attempting to see as things the spaces between things.

Themes of the fantastic in literature revolve around this problem of making visible the un-seen, of articulating the un-said. Fantasy establishes, or dis-covers, an absence of separating distinctions, violating a 'normal', or common-sense perspective which represents reality as constituted by discrete but connected units. Fantasy is preoccupied with limits, with limiting categories, and with their projected dissolution. It subverts dominant philosophical assumptions which uphold as 'reality' a coherent, single-viewed entity, that narrow vision which Bakhtin termed 'monological'. It would be impossible to arrive at a comprehensive list of all the various semantic features of the fantastic, but it is possible to see its thematic elements as deriving from the same source: a dissolution of separating categories, a foregrounding of those spaces which are hidden and cast into/as darkness, by the placing and naming of the 'real' through chronological temporal structures and three-dimensional spatial organization.

That inscription of hesitation on the level of narrative *structure*, which Todorov identified as fantasy's defining feature, can be read as a displacement of fantasy's central *thematic* issue: an uncertainty as to the nature of the 'real', a problematization of categories of 'realism' and 'truth', of the

'seen' and 'known' (in a culture which declares 'seeing is believing'). Fantasy's ambiguous literary effects, on the level of form, enact its thematic uncertainties and hesitations, through a sliding of thematic into structural equivocation.

Themes can be clustered into several related areas: (1) invisibility, (2) transformation, (3) dualism, (4) good versus evil. These generate a number of recurrent motifs: ghosts, shadows, vampires, werewolves, doubles, partial selves, reflections (mirrors), enclosures, monsters, beasts, cannibals. Transgressive impulses towards incest, necrophilia, androgyny, cannibalism, recidivism, narcissism and 'abnormal' psychological states conventionally categorized as hallucination, dream, insanity, paranoia, derive from these thematic concerns, all of them concerned with erasing rigid demarcations of gender and of genre. Gender differences of male and of female are subverted and generic distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral are blurred in fantasy's attempt to 'turn over' 'normal' perceptions and undermine 'realistic' ways of seeing.

Uncertainty and impossibility are inscribed on a structural level through hesitation and equivocation, and on a thematic level through images of formlessness, emptiness and invisibility. That which is not seen, that which is not said, is not 'known' and it remains as a threat, as a dark area from which any object or figure can enter at any time. The relation of the individual subject to the world, to others, to objects, ceases to be known or safe, and problems of apprehension (in the double sense of perceiving and of fearing) become central to the modern fantastic. A text such as James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* graphically depicts the emergence of this difficult relation of self to world in fantasies of the late Romantic period. The subject's relation to the phenomenal world is made problematical and the text foregounds the impossibility of definitive interpretation or vision: everything becomes equivocal, blurred, 'double', out of focus.

At the heart of this confusion is the problematic relation

of self to other, the 'I' and the 'not-I', the 'I' and the 'you'. Todorov divides the contents of fantastic literature into two groups: the first dealing with themes of the 'I', and the second dealing with themes of the 'not-I'. Fantasies in the first group are constructed around the relationship of the individual to the world, with the structuring of that world through the I, the consciousness which sees (through the eye), perceives, interprets, and places self in relation to a world of objects. This relation is a difficult one in the fantastic: vision can never be trusted, senses prove to be deceptive, and the equation of 'I' with the seeing 'eye' proves to be an untrustworthy, indeed frequently a fatal affair.

Fantasies of subjective dislocation exemplify this problematic relationship of self to world (Hogg's *Confessions*, Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, Nerval's *Aurélia*, Maupassant's *Horla*). Their subjects are unable to separate ideas from perceptions, or to distinguish differences between self and world. Ideas become visible, palpable, so that mind and body, mind and matter merge together. As Todorov notes, 'a generating principle of all the themes collected in this first system [is that]: the transition from mind to matter has become possible'. Behind metamorphosis (self becoming another, whether animal or vegetable) and pan-determinism (everything has its cause and fits into a cosmic scheme, a series in which nothing is by chance, everything corresponds to the subject), the same principle operates, in a sense of correspondence, of sameness, of a collapse of differences. Doubles, or multiple selves, are manifestations of this principle: the *idea* of multiplicity is no longer a metaphor, but is literally realized, self transforms into selves. 'The multiplication of personality, taken literally, is an immediate consequence of the possible transition between matter and mind: we are several persons mentally, we become so physically' (Todorov, p.116). Other persons and objects are no longer distinctly other: the limit between subject and object is effaced, things slide into one another, in a metonymical action of replacement. Todorov cites

Gautier: 'By a strange miracle, after a few moments' contemplation, I dissolved into the object I gazed at, and I myself became that object.'

All these thematic clusters revolve around difficulties of perception and knowledge: the question of vision and the control of the 'eye'/'I' of the subject. From ambiguities of vision derive all those thematic elements associated with fantastic narratives focussed upon the self, the 'I', and his/her problematic differentiation from the 'not-I'. To quote Todorov:

> the principle we have discovered may be designated as the fragility of the limit between matter and mind. This principle engenders several fundamental themes: a special causality, pan-determinism; multiplication of the personality; collapse of the limit between subject and object; and lastly, the transformation of time and space ... this list collects the essential elements of the basic network of fantastic themes ... 'of the self'. (p.120)

Fantasies in the second group are structured around the 'not-I'. In Mark Nash's words, this second class concerns

> the dynamic relations of human action in the world through the mediation of others, and are characterized in the fantastic through themes of discourse and desire, the latter in excessive forms as well as in its various transformations (perversions) in themes of cruelty, violence, death, life after death, corpses, and vampires. (Nash, '*Vampyr* and the fantastic', p.65)

Whereas themes of the self, the 'I', deal with problems of *consciousness*, of vision and perception, themes of the other, the 'not-I', deal with problems generated by desire, by the *unconscious*. The relation of self to other is mediated through desire, and fantastic narratives in this category tell of various versions of that desire, usually in transgressive forms. Sadism, incest, necrophilia, murder, eroticism, make explicit the unconscious desires structuring interrelation-

ship, the interactions of 'I' and 'not-I' on a human level. Todorov insists upon the centrality of language in this cluster of fantastic themes, for it is language which structures relationship: 'themes of discourse' are inextricably bound up with these 'themes of the other', just as 'themes of vision' are bound up with 'themes of the self'.

Various motifs, then, are variations upon these basic semantic elements of the 'I' and the 'not-I', and of their interrelations. One of the central thrusts of the fantastic is an attempt to erase this distinction itself, to resist separation and difference, to re-discover a unity of self and other. Its attempts to establish a state of undifferentiation, of unity of self and not-self, reveals itself differently in different periods. In order to contextualize the modern fantastic, it is worth considering a few determining factors and pointing out some contrasts with older forms of fantasy.

Fantasy has always provided a clue to the limits of a culture, by foregrounding problems of categorizing the 'real' and of the situation of the self in relation to that dominant notion of 'reality'. As Fredric Jameson argues in his article, 'Magical narratives: romance as genre', it is the identification, the naming of otherness, which is a telling index of a society's religious and political beliefs.

The concept of evil, which is usually attached to the other, is relative, transforming with shifts in cultural fears and values. Any social structure tends to exclude as 'evil' anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction, and this conceptualization, this naming of difference as evil, is a significant ideological gesture. It is a concept 'at one with the category of otherness itself: evil characterizes whatever is radically different from me, whatever by virtue of precisely that difference seems to constitute a very real and urgent threat to my existence' (Jameson, p.140). A stranger, a foreigner, an outsider, a social deviant, anyone speaking in an unfamiliar language or acting in unfamiliar ways, anyone whose origins are unknown or who has extraordinary powers, tends to be set

apart as other, as evil. Strangeness precedes the naming of it as evil: the other is defined as evil precisely because of his/her difference and a possible power to disturb the familiar and the known.

Namings of otherness in fantasies betray the ideological assumptions of the author and of the culture in which they originate, and Jameson emphasizes the need for understanding these identifications, since they inscribe social values within the text, often in hidden or obscure ways, for the link between the individual work and its context is a deep, unspoken one.

> Any analysis of romance as a mode will then want to come to terms with the intimate and constitutive relationship between the form itself, as a genre and a literary institution, and this deep-rooted ideology which has only too clearly the function of drawing the boundaries of a given social order and providing a powerful internal deterrent against deviancy or subversion. (Jameson, p.140)

In its broadest sense, fantastic literature has always been concerned with revealing and exploring the interrelations of the 'I' and the 'not-I', of self and other. Within a supernatural economy, or a magical thought mode, otherness is designated as otherworldly, supernatural, as being above, or outside, the human. The other tends to be identified as an otherworldly, evil force: Satan, the devil, the demon (just as good is identified through figures of angels, benevolent fairies, wise men). In religious fantasies and in pagan ones, this context of supernaturalism/magic locates good and evil *outside* the merely human, in a different dimension. It is a displacement of human responsibility on to the level of destiny: human action is seen as operating under the controlling influence of Providence, whether for good or for evil.

Early romance fantasies define and confine otherness as evil and diabolic: difference is located 'out there', in a

supernatural creature. Histories of a devil figure in litera-
ture point to its supernatural categorization in religious
myth, medieval romances, fairy tale: disembodied evil came
to be incarnated in a traditional black devil. Blackness, night,
darkness always surrounded this 'other', this unseen pre-
sence, outside the forms and visible confines of the 'ordi-
nary' and 'common'. Narratives of diabolism, as Bessière
argues, are still crucial indices of cultural limits: they might
seem empty discourses now, but they are still pertinent, for
they return us to an encounter with that area which has been
'silenced by culture'.

One of the namings of otherness has been as 'démonic'
and it is important to recognize the semantic shifts of this
term, since they indicate the progressive internalization
of fantastic narrative in the post-Romantic period. J.A.
Symonds saw all fantastic art as characterized by an obsession
with the demonic. He referred to Shakespeare's Caliban,
Milton's Death, and Goethe's Mephistopheles as 'products
of fantastic art', and in earlier fantasies it is easy to see that
the demonic and the diabolic were more or less synony-
mous. The term *demonic* originally denoted a supernatural
being, a ghost, or spirit, or genius, or devil and it usually
connoted a malignant, destructive force at work.

The modern fantastic is characterized by a radical shift in
the naming, or interpretation, of the demonic. One of the
signs of this shift is a transformation in the use of the
demonic in the Faust myth, one of the most widely dissemi-
nated fictions exemplifying the relation between man and
'devil'. Whereas Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1596–1604) had
introduced demons who appeared on stage to drag Faustus
to hell – the reward for having sold his soul for impossible
knowledge – versions of Faust from the late eighteenth
century onwards are much more equivocal, much less able
to locate the devil 'out there', apart from the subject. Many
Romantic texts are structured around Faustian themes and
figures, but they increasingly hesitate between supernatural
and natural explanations of the devil's genesis, often inscrib-

ing this split between transcendentalist and humanistic
reasoning into the text itself. Charles Brockden Brown's
Wieland, or the Transformation (1798), Chamisso's *Peter
Schlemihl* (1813), C.R. Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*
(1820), James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a
Justified Sinner* (1820), E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Elixirs of the Devil*
(1813–16), Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoreux* (1772), all revolve
around demonic pacts, yet equivocate as to the nature of the
demonic. They give an impression of uncertainty as to the
genesis of the dark 'other', introducing doubt as to whether
it is self-generated, or undoubtedly external to the subject.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, fantasies
structured around dualism – often variations of the Faust
myth – reveal the *internal* origin of the other. The demonic is
not supernatural, but is an aspect of personal and interper-
sonal life, a manifestation of unconscious desire. Around
such narratives, themes of the 'I' and the 'not-I' interact
strangely, expressing difficulties of knowledge (of the 'I')
(introducing problems of *vision*) and of guilt, over desire,
(relation to the 'not-I') articulated in the narrative (introduc-
ing problems of *discourse*), the two intertwining with each
other, as in *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is the
first of many fantasies re-deploying a Faustian tale on a fully
human level. From then onwards, fantastic narratives are
clearly secularized: the 'other' is no longer designated as
supernatural, but is an externalization of part of the self.
The text is structured around a dialogue between self and
self *as* other, articulating the subject's relation to cultural law
and to established 'truths', the truths of the establishment.
By the time of Heine's version of Faust, the supernatural
reading of the demonic is made uneasy: Faust is mocked by
demons whispering, 'we always appear in the shape of your
most secret thoughts', and by the time of Dostoevsky, the
function of the demonic as a projection of an unconscious
part of the self is confirmed. Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* and
Brothers Karamazov represent the 'devil' as self assuming the
voice of another, thus Ivan Karamazov rebuking his demon:

It's I, *I myself, speaking, not you* . . . Never for one minute have I taken you for reality . . . You are a lie, you are my illness, you are a phantom . . . You are my hallucination. You are the incarnation of myself . . . it is really I myself who appear in different forms.[28]

Because of this progressive internalization of the demonic, the easy polarization of good and evil which had operated in tales of supernaturalism and magic ceased to be effective. Romance narratives, especially classic fairy tales, represented all action unfolding under the influence of good or evil powers, with persons in the drama functioning as mere agents of this metaphysical battle. A loss of faith in supernaturalism, a gradual scepticism and problematization of the relation of self to world, introduced a much closer 'otherness', something intimately related to the self. During the Romantic period, the sense of the 'demonic' was slowly modified from a supernatural meaning into something more disturbing, something less definable. Goethe's articulation of this demonism is apposite to an understanding of the modern fantastic, in its apprehension of otherness as a force which is neither good, nor evil. In his autobiography, Goethe writes:

> He thought he could detect in nature – both animate and inanimate, with soul or without soul – something which manifests itself only in contradictions, and which, therefore, could not be comprehended under any idea, still less under one word. It was not godlike, for it seemed unreasonable; not human, for it had no understanding; nor devilish, for it was beneficent; nor angelic, for it often betrayed a malicious pleasure. It resembled chance, for it evolved no consequences; it was like Providence, for it hinted at connection. All that limits us it seemed to penetrate; it seemed to sport at will with the necessary elements of our existence; it contracted time and expanded space. To this principle . . . I gave the name of *Demonic* . . . (Goethe, p.321)

Goethe's *Faust* (1808) moves towards this apprehension of the demonic as a realm of non-signification. His Mephistopheles is much more complex than a stock representation of evil: 'he' introduces a negation of cultural order, insisting that there is no absolute meaning in the world, no value, and that beneath natural phenomena, all that can be dis-covered is a sinister *absence of meaning*. 'His' 'demonic' enterprise consists in revealing this absence, exposing the world's concealed vacuity, emptiness, and its latent pull towards disorder and undifferentiation. Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947) employs the Faust myth in a similar way: the 'demonic' spirit is one which reveals everything as 'its own parody', and which sees through forms to the formlessness they conceal. Through Leverkühn, the artist, a demonic voice calls nature 'illiterate', mere vacancy, and the universe a space filled with signs deprived of meanings. Transformations of the Faust myth epitomize the semantic changes undergone by fantasy in literature within a progressively secularized culture. The demonic pact which Faust makes signifies a desire for absolute knowledge, for a realization of impossibility, transgressing temporal, spatial and personal limitations, becoming as God. But this desire is represented as increasingly tragic, futile and parodic. In a general shift from a supernatural to a natural economy of images, the demonic pact comes to be synonymous with an impossible desire to break human limits, it becomes a *negative version* of desire for the infinite. In the modern fantastic, this desire expresses itself as a violent transgression of all human limitations and social taboos prohibiting the realization of desire. In these versions of Faust, the naming of the demonic reveals a progressive pull towards a recognition of otherness as neither supernatural nor evil but as that which is *behind*, or *between*, separating forms and frames. 'Otherness' is all that threatens 'this' world, this 'real' world, with dissolution: and it is this opposition which lies behind the several myths which have developed in the modern fantastic.

Starting from Todorov's identification of two groups of fantastic themes, those dealing with the 'I' and those dealing with the 'not-I', or the 'other', it is possible to see two kinds of myths in the modern fantastic. In the first, the source of otherness, of threat, is in the *self*. Danger is seen to originate from the subject, through excessive knowledge, or rationality, or the mis-application of the human will. This pattern would be exemplified by *Frankenstein*, and is repeated in H.G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau*, R.L. Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Ligeia*, Bulwer Lytton's *The Haunted and the Haunters*, etc. Too extreme an application of human will or thought creates a *destructive* situation, creates dangers, fears, terrors, which can be countered only by correcting the original 'sin' of overreaching, of the mis-application of human knowledge or scientific procedure. This Frankenstein type of myth could be represented diagrammatically as:
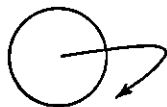

Figure 1   *Source of metamorphosis or strangeness within the self*

where the circle of the self generates its own power for destruction and metamorphosis.

In the second kind of myth, fear originates in a source external to the subject: the self suffers an attack of some sort which makes it part of the other. This is the type of appropriation of the subject found in *Dracula* and tales of vampirism: it is a sequence of invasion, metamorphosis and fusion, in which an external force enters the subject, changes it irreversibly and usually gives to it the power to initiate similar transformations. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is of this type, as are many films which have developed in a fantastic genre, such as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. This could be seen as:

Figure 2   *Source of metamorphosis external to self*

with external forces entering the subject, effecting metamorphosis and moving out again into the world. Unlike the Frankenstein type, this Dracula type of myth is not confined to the individual subject: it involves a whole network of other beings and frequently has to draw upon a mechanical reproduction of religious beliefs or magical devices to contain the threat. In *Dracula*, there is a recourse to Christian devices (the crucifix, the Bible) and to magic (garlic, incantations) to defeat the fear of a complete invasion by vampiric figures, and in *Night of the Living Dead*, a recourse to scientific explanation (radiation, which galvanized the dead into the un-dead) and military/technological power to destroy the half-living zombies activated by a radiation leakage.

In the Frankenstein type of myth (of which Faust is a variant), self becomes other through a self-generated metamorphosis, through the subject's alienation from himself and consequent splitting or multiplying of identities (structured around themes of the 'I'). In the Dracula type of myth (of which Don Juan is a variant), otherness is established through a fusion of self with something outside, producing a new form, an 'other' reality (structured around themes of the 'not-I'). This second type centralizes the problem of *power*: Dracula, like Romero's zombies, collects conquests, collects victims to prove the power of possession, to try to establish a total, self-supporting system. Both the Frankenstein and Dracula myths push towards a state of undifferentiation of self from other. In the following sections, some psychoanalytic theories will be introduced in an attempt to articulate some of the unconscious drives behind these two mythical patterns which dominate and determine

the modern fantastic, but the second type, the Dracula myth, is far less easy to 'contain', far more disturbing in its countercultural thrust. It is not confined to *one* individual; it tries to replace cultural life with a total, absolute otherness, a completely alternative self-sustaining system.

3 PSYCHOANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

ONE of the major shortcomings of Todorov's book on the fantastic is its reluctance to engage with psychoanalytic theory and, related to this, a relative lack of attention to the broader ideological implications of fantastic literature. Ideology – roughly speaking, the imaginary ways in which men experience the real world, those ways in which men's relation to the world is lived through various systems of meaning such as religion, family, law, moral codes, education, culture, etc. – is not something simply handed down from one conscious mind to another, but is profoundly *unconscious*. It seems to me that it is important, when dealing with a kind of literature which deals so repeatedly with unconscious material, not to ignore the ways in which that material re-presents the relations between ideology and the human subject. Todorov adamantly rejects psychoanalytic readings, insisting that 'Psychosis and neurosis are not the explication of the themes of fantastic literature' (p.154). Yet his attention to themes of self and other, of 'I' and 'not-I', opens on to issues of interrelationship and of the determination of relations between human subjects by unconscious desire, issues which can only be understood by turning to psychoanalysis. As