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Mimesis and Fantasy: Literary Genres Discourse and Dissension

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Literature which appears to be a solemn, sublime and harmonious territory from outside consists of certain tensions which decompose it into a multiplicity of sub-discourses and lends a complexity to its overall texture. One such discourse is that of 'Mimesis' and 'Fantasy'—two most discussed and debated modes of narration— one castigated in *Republic*, other run down in *Phaedrus*: former, a worthy 'Abel' and latter a degraded 'Cain'. One real and rational and the other irrational and fake. Despite the rivalry between two modes the discourse of one is necessary for the other to exist.

The fantastic is important precisely because it is wholly dependent on reality for its existence. Admittedly the fantastic is reality turned precisely 180 degrees around (Rabkin 1977:28).

Their interdependence has however been beneficial to mimesis, which since antiquity has been the favourite of writers. It was with Plato's attack on poesi and Aristotle's defense of mimesis that the general castigation of fantasy took off.

For Plato poetry was divine madness, a bad influence and not worthy of consideration in his ideal state. In *Republic* he goes on to banish poetry and poets from his ideal state on the charges that it is thrice removed from reality (truth):

'And what about the carpenter? Doesn't he manufacture a bed?' 'Yes.'

'And what about the artist? Does he make or manufacture?' 'No.'

'Then what does he do?'

'I think that we may fairly claim that he represents what the other two make.' 'Good,' said I. 'Then you say that the artist's representation stands at third remove from reality?' 'I do.'

'So the tragic poet, if his art is representation, is by nature at third remove from the throne of truth; and the same is true of all other representative artists.'

... our defence, then, when we are reminded that we banished poetry from our state, must be that its character was such as to give us good grounds for so doing and that our argument required it (Tak 2004:16-24)

While the imitative poet is banished, the fabulist is hardly worth consideration.

...Gorgons and winged steeds flow in apace, and numberless other inconceivable and impossible monstrosities and marvels of nature...absurd indeed, if while I am still in ignorance of myself I were to be curious about that which is not my business. And therefore I say farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me (Sandner 2004:15).

Here Plato directly, though briefly considers the matter of fantasy by dismissing mythologically inspired supernatural tales as simply 'absurd' and "not my business". The philosopher's business is to follow the Delphian inscription "know myself" and fantasy, by telling us about things that did not happen and are not, leads us astray.

Aristotle's criticism contradicted his teacher Plato's position by discovering the production of art to be a fundamental activity basic to humanity's "desire to know". Though Aristotle follows his mentor's valorization of the mimetic in poetry, his emphasis on form and composition allows a place for the marvelous as appropriate to the generic structure and purpose of the tragedy or epic: "the irrational (or illogical), which is the chief factor in the marvelous, and which must so far as possible be excluded from tragedy, is more freely; admitted in the epic," (Aristotle 1993:XiX) The use of the word irrational for marvelous (which includes everything from the simply absurd to poetical tales about gods) establishes mimesis as rational, pragmatic and aesthetically far better than fantasy.

This general bias against fantasy by the originators of western critical thought continued and marred the works of later critical thinkers. The attack became more vehement in the seventeenth century with the rational turn of thought. The Newtonian world viewed fantasy with much disdain. In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1888), David Hume disparages literary fantasy as a threat to sanity. Romances, he claims deal with nothing but "winged horses, fiery dragons and monstrous giants" and he fears that "every chimera of the brain is as vivid and intense as any of those inferences which were formerly dignified with the name of conclusions concerning matters of fact and sometimes as the present Impression of senses" (Hume 1888:123).

Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) concedes that impenetrable armor, enchanted castles and flying horses were apparently not as displeasing to the ancients as they should be to men of good sense in his own day. Hobbes goes on to suggest that those who read Romances and identify with their heroes suffer a loss of self (Hobbes 1998:4-5). Even Torquato Tasso, a sixteenth century Italian poet argued against the intrusion of classical mythology in poems on the grounds that it jarred with verisimilitude.

...if we...have recourse to the same ones as were invoked by the ancients, by that plan we are deprived of the probable and the credible. . . . I speak of the enchanted rings, the flying horses, the ships turned into nymphs, the ghosts that interfere in battles, the burning sword, the garland of flowers, the forbidden chamber if these miracles, or' prodigies rather, cannot be brought about by the power of nature, it is necessary that the cause be some supernatural force or some diabolical power, and if we turn to the deities of the pagans, we for the most part give up the lifelike and the probable, or rather I would say the credible(Wimsatt and Brooks 1957:188)

This attitude is exemplified in a more extreme form in an anonymous essay titled "The Progress of Fiction as an Art" which appeared in the *West-minister Review* in 1853. The author argues that art, like technology progresses from more primitive to more sophisticated forms and "a scientific and somewhat skeptical age has no longer the power of believing in the marvels which delighted our ruder ancestors"(Wolfe 1986:XVII).

George Eliot shared the ideas of her age and lambasted fantasy in *Adam Bede*:

Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult, the pencil is conscious of a delightful facility in drawing a griffin—the longer the claws and the larger the wings, the better; but that marvelous facility which we mistook for genius is apt to forsake us when we want to draw a real unexaggerated lion (George Eliot 1961:176).

The realist is hailed as genius and fabulist is denigrated as facile. The tradition continued with E M Forster's *The Aspects of Novel*. Forster dedicated a full chapter to the discussion of fantasy and its working in the works of some great novelists like Thomas Sterne,, Melville and James Joyce but called it "a side show in an exhibition where you can pay... Some readers pay with delight, ... others refuse with indignation, and these have our sincere regards, for to dislike

the fantastic in literature is not to dislike literature”.¹In his habitual wit he appeals for an additional adjustment to grasp the contents of “side show”(Forster 2004:92).

Despite the general derision of fantastic, there have had been efforts by writers and scholars to establish it as a distinct genre. However, most of these efforts are defenses rather being the individual study and appreciation of fantasy. Philip Sidney in his *An Apology for Poetry* made one such effort. Sidney wrote his apology as a justification of all poetry against growing puritan suspicion of art, especially art that did not praise Christian piety. Sidney famously claimed that the poet whose name means “maker” might transcend nature and creatively produce something different and possibly superior to nature (Sandner 2004: 19).

The influence of Sidney’s brief comment excerpted here has been foundational to the later defense of fantasy. But it was Coleridge’s famous distinction between ‘imagination’ and ‘fancy’ that did much to establish the legitimacy of the fantasy as genre. Indeed according to Stephen Prickett, “by 1825 something very extraordinary had happened. From being terms of derision or descriptions of day dreaming, words like ‘fantasy’ and ‘imagination’ suddenly began to take on new status as hurrah-words” (Prickett 1979: 2).

G K Chesterton in his 1908 essay “The Ethics of Elfland,” defended fantasy according to what he calls the ‘Doctrine of Conditional Joy’—the notion that a great reward might depend on not violating some apparently arbitrary taboo, thus implying a universe governed by human actions rather than by coldly mechanistic forces (Chesterton 2004: 74).

In Twentieth century Fantasy writers like J R R Tolkien and C S Lewis started to construct the theoretical examinations of the nature of their craft. Both these writers through a polemic tried to re-instate the status of fantasy.

The Oxford philologist J R R Tolkien in 1938 delivered a lecture titled “On Fairy Stories” at the university of Saint Andrews, this lecture outlined a number of concepts that have since become the staples in Fantasy theory (Tolkien 1966: 26). Tolkien at the outset calls fantastic writer a sub-creator and fantasy a sub-creation—the secondary world with its own rules and laws—“secondary world” demands literary or “secondary beliefs,” and the artist who creates such a world becomes, on the model of the deity, a “sub-creator” (Ibid).

Fantasy according to Tolkien offers four principal psychological functions for the reader. Fantasy itself is the first of these—the purest form of human creativity, and one that enhances rather than undermines reason, since it depends on the reader’s exercise in distinguishing the real from the not-real. “Recovery” is Tolkien’s term for the regaining of a clear view or an innocent perspective; and “Escape” is a kind of coping mechanism exemplified by the symbolic escape from death in many fantasies. Finally “consolation” is provided by the tale’s happy ending or “eucatastrophe”, “the true form of the fairy-tale, and its highest function” (Tolkien 1976:81), Tolkien maintains that all fairy tales must possess consolation. Tolkien describes it as follows:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’ (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist,’ nor ‘fugitive’. In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glance of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. It is the mark of a good fairy-

story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality (Tolkien 1976:82).

Tolkien concludes his essay by identifying this eucatastrophe with the Christian Story citing that the Gospels contain a fairy-story that "embraces all the essence of fairy-stories":

I would venture to say that approaching the Christian Story from this direction, it has long been my feeling (a joyous feeling) that God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind, which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: 'mythical' in their perfect, self-contained significance; and at the same time powerfully symbolic and allegorical; and among the marvels is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the 'inner consistency of reality'. There is no tale told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or wrath. (Tolkien 1976:83-84)

C S Lewis in his collection of Essays titled *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (1966) addressed many of the issues related with Fantasy. Taking Cue from his friend Tolkien Lewis called fantasy the purest form of storytelling. In his 1961 *An Experiment in Criticism* he considered myth as most powerful of all stories not only of its extra-literary appeal but also of its fantastic elements.

Despite the strong polemic of Tolkien and Lewis for fantasy critics in major English journals remained skeptical of the uses of the fantastic in the works of fiction (Wolfe 1986:xix). Fantastic elements were widely considered as superstitions and were tolerated only if supported by moral didactic purpose or actual belief.

In spite of the general denigration of the genre there have had been writers who departed from reality and turned to fantasy. The question that strikes a discerning mind is what makes a writer to depart from the realistic mode? every writer has his reasons. For Jonathan Swift, the misanthropic satirist, who had proposed himself the chief end of vexing the world in all his labors, fantasy provided a vehicle to present the human race its 'Yahoo image', to peel away layer by layer the pretensions of human kind and to bring home the idea that human kind needs saving but it has to save itself. H. G. Wells turned from the realistic depiction of *The History of Mr. Polly* to the science fantasy of *Time Machine* to propitiate the scientific vision; to depict the capacity of science to transform the world in accordance with human desire, to plead for a scientific outlook, to understand the world as naturally as possible, to stir the spirit of scienticism in modern man. George Orwell took to fantasy to give expression to the dangers of totalitarian regimes and politics that puts human freedom to risk and human privacy to surveillance.

Fantastic mode approaches the truth from another route. The rules are totally different; an artist is granted more freedom; he can push the limits according to his own need; he can create new worlds, imbibe myth and religion, make use of science and magic, comment on science and politics, and distance them by placing them in futuristic environment. Grotesque and bizarre is allowed, new symbols are created, language is manipulated, opens up an abyss of meaning questions self and society. Fantasy is of course bound by the ideologies of its author by its means

of production, by its politics and prejudices but at the same time it is as much rooted in reality as “realistic novel” it deals with human condition. Fantasy is deeply concerned with human experience and is relevant to human living. Its major difference from the realistic novel is that it takes account of such areas of experience as imaginative, visionary and sub-conscious which free the human spirit to range beyond the limits of empirical primary world of reality—his own time structure, his own social and political order, but at no time does this apparent freedom permit the author to escape from contemporary reality. Indeed the fundamental purpose of a serious fantasy is to comment upon the real world and to explore moral, philosophical and other dilemmas posed by it.

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