

The Fantastic and the Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: Inheritance of the XVIIIth century European literature, but with roots climbing, ramifying themselves, in the shadows of the time, the fantastic alleges and develops in the XIXth century, when it met a great success. In a context marked by changing ideologies, brought by numerous discoveries and achievements in all the human activities, the fantastic shows the limits and the fissures of the knowledge, pointing out a somehow paradoxical phenomenon, and at the same time a really true one: any light that wants to banish the obscurity, emphasizes even more the depth of the resting darkness.

Keywords: ambiguity; anxiety; breach; different; fantastic; uncertainty

1. Introduction

The fantastic represents impossibility, an incapacity of doing something, that is why one can only think of it in relation with a standard that one considers being real: our behaviour, our knowledge, our way of thinking.

The fantastic essentially renders *the conflict between two orders ontologically different*, defined by a series of opposite relations, such as: natural/supernatural, normal/abnormal, normal/supernormal, admissible/inadmissible, accountable/unaccountable, logical/illogical, balance/lack of balance, possible/impossible.

A possible definition for the fantastic is that of skilful machinery capable of giving a name and a face to the inexpressible, changing the clues of the attainable reality, equally evading the borders between dream and reality, between the world of the appearances and the ambiguous and fascinating universe of a „super reality” that cannot be rigorously approached.

The fantastic manifestations take very different forms, both external, tributary to the supernatural world, as well as internal, revealing the anxieties and the obsessions of the human mind. Therefore, the fantastic phenomenon always

manifests itself where it shouldn't; it has a form that shouldn't belong to it, its presence being only temporary and local: *it is and it isn't* (Grivel, 1992; p. 101).

But can one really define the fantastic?

2. The Concept of Fantastic

In the modern age, the concept of fantastic had numerous shades and theoretical substantiations, constituting, in the area of literary and esthetical researches, the object of a continuous attention. Especially in the last decades we ascertain a remarkable proliferation of the exegetics, from those concerned with coming up with a theory regarding the manifestations of the fantastic in literature or in art, to more or less occasional recordings that, most of the times, cannot resist the temptation of a definition. This theoretical and critical approach resulted in many studies that, each, brought important elements both for the understanding and the interpretation of the fantastic literature and art, as well as for their specific nature as reported to other literary and artistic phenomena. On the whole, the critical exegetics points out a diversity of points of view, assumptions and methods used, the tendencies oscillating – like many other areas of the literary theory and aesthetics- between restrained wordings and the utmost considerations. There were various theorists, such as Pierre-Georges Castex, Roger Caillois, Tzvetan Todorov, Marcel Schneider, Howard Philipps Lovecraft, Adrian Marino, Sergiu Pavel Dan, who studied this phenomenon, in order to facilitate its better understanding.

By studying the etymology of the term, we find out that it comes from the Latin „phantasticus”, that originally meant „unreal, imaginary”; in Middle Ages, the word is competed with other terms with similar meaning („phantasial, phantastique”), being reduced, among others, to the meaning of „possessed” and later, to that of „product of the alienated spirit”(Renaissance). In the XVII-th century, „the fantastic” is invested with other connotations, both negative and positive: Antoine Furetière defines it as „imaginary, unreal”, but it can also be found with an unfavourable tint, with the meaning of „strange, unbelievable, eccentric, which is beyond reality”. In the XIXth century, the term brings also the idea of „whim”, of “shallowness”, as well as that of “chimerical” (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, 1831), of thing “that only exists in imagination” and “looks like a bodily creature (*Littré*, 1863).

In day to day speech this term may have superlative meanings such as "extraordinary", "sensational", "great", sometimes with negative connotations.

3. The Mimetic and the Cultural Communication with the Fantastic

The breach and the disorder initiated by the fantastic can only be achieved beginning from a real space-time, given the fact that any distance that produces a universe too far off from that of the reader or a highly improbable representation destroys the fantastic, naturalising it or, on the contrary, converting it to the absurd. (Fabre, *op. cit.*, apud Denis Mellier, p. 15). **The fantastic stories follow, in most of the cases, a predetermined scheme, that supposes respecting two steps:** First of all, **a strong mimetic anchoring, translated through a realistic representation of the world;** secondly, **this realistic representation is abolished,** by putting into parentheses the common certainties and the agreed limits of the real.

The fantastic must first of all build a mimesis according to the rules of the most real literature possible; it must try to build an appearance of reality in order to assuage the mistrust of the reader and to easier tilt him in the irrational.

The mimetic anchoring is realised, first of all, through an **abundance of signs used for the historical and geographical contextualisation** to which one can add **the socialization of sceneries**, in other words, by giving them the necessary real effect, through the detailed description of settings. Therefore, one can find in this kind of stories, places such as Paris (to Balzac, Gautier, Maupassant and later to Claude Seignolle), the Pyreneys (to Prosper Merimee), the foggy shores of the Senne or the Saint-Michel Mountain (to Maupassant), the Saint Petersburg (to Gogol and Dostoyevsky), London (to Stevenson), regions from Switzerland or from the Far North (to Shelley), the African continent (to Merimee or Maupassant). Usually, the setting where the fantastic adventure takes place is a closed and isolated space (provinces and villages far away from the civilization, castles surrounded by semi-wild sceneries, ships in the middle of the ocean, etc), gifted with the necessary effects in order to create the realistic effect. Both the space and the fantastic time are characterised by referential objectivity that represents the standard to which the subversion will report itself.

The idea of truth-like, as an implicit category of the fantastic, already asserted by Nodier, can be also found to other modern theorists, such as Max Milner. He

defines the fantastic art as "the art of inserting (without going too violently beyond the truth-like) the supernatural in a small bourgeois background (Max Milner, p. 479), the truth-like criterion being very closely related to the "breach" theory, by the emergence of an incompatible element into the order of a coherent and intelligible universe.

The truth-like category is strongly related to an art which is very much aware of its own means, and which can be also characterised as a "realistic" art. , and according to which the passage from "real" to the other ontological order, must be progressive and hardly noticeable. The surprise (or the shock) will, consequently, be the result of minute changes, through minute accumulations of details, the fantastic being conditioned by the insensible passage from one ontological order to the other, the author reaching that result "though a great deal of logic, accuracy, truth-like details, being correct, scrupulous, realistic" (Caillois, 1958, p. 11)

The "abolition" of the realistic representation is realised by the introduction, in the fantastic text, of some phenomena which are capable to impress, such as *the distortion, the deviation, and the difference* (Grivel, 1992, p. 5), any breach in the familiar world, any contradiction of its laws being perceived as a threat, as a fatal premonitory sign. The fantastic must deny (under all circumstances) and not necessarily bring something new: an accident, an omitted detail, something which is not where it should be, the forms of the abnormality, the extravagance, the rare, they all seduce with the condition that they can't be explained. Therefore, it is considered fantastic everything that goes beyond the real, everything that excludes any possibility for comparison. Having the possibilities given by the supernatural, the fantastic will be articulated as a discourse on the real, which brings out questions on its limits.

The fantastic enjoyed a big success in the XIXth century, when the human kind, gradually, discovered that the world – external and internal was different from the one they had known so far, that the borders which separate the certainty from the mystery were transparent and moving and that already established standards, such as the religion, the science and the ethics were starting to shake, allowing doubt to enter. The ambiguity and the anxiety of the modern man, consequently, generated a proper "soil" for the need of having revelations, so that the fantastic appears as "une sorte de regard jete vers l'inconnu" (a kind of look thrown towards the unknown), becoming a way of expressing the questions that mark such an uncertain period. The fantastic literature proposed a world adjacent to the real one, with which to communicate through many gaps, permanently denying and

surpassing it. The fantastic started to represent a means of expression adjusted to illustrate the big questions of the age. And when these questions, at least partially, received the answer, starting with the 1880s, the fantastic took different forms. Therefore, the stories of Guy de Maupassant and Henry James, had a more formal character, becoming both an exercise of style as well as the object of a deeper theoretical reflection.

The end of the XIXth century was marked by rewritings and parodies of the existing fantastic stories: *The last one of the Valleries* by Henry James is nothing else but the repetition of Merimee's story, *Venus d'Ille*, while *Arria Marcella* by Gautier was "rewritten" by Jensen, with the title of *La Gradiva*, etc.

Despite its popularity, the fantastic will not be able to hide itself from becoming obsolete. In the XXth century, it had to turn itself to other thematic recipes, such as the physical sciences, or to renew the old forms, in order to enjoy the same prestige.

The fantastic can be, pointedly seen, as an „overthrow” of the world, of the life and values, approach that tries to bring out- with the help of the narrative- of everything that is generally hidden, censored and carefully kept deep down. It, consequently, reveals the other side of the material world and that of the human mind, as well as the back-hand of the sacred, very often leading to sacrilege. In a more and more repressive and shallow society, the fantastic predictably demonstrates its evasive function and for channelling the anxieties, the uneasiness and the uncertainties of the human kind, giving him back something of the depth and the lost sensitivity.

4. References

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