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Critical-Literary Taxonomies of Non-mimetic Literature*

In the present article the most important literary-critical proposals or discussions, relating more or less directly to the issue of the taxonomy of non-mimetic¹ literature, will be summarized. However, before I start my survey, two important reservations have to be made.

* This article was originally written in 2012 and submitted in 2013. It was subsequently extended and modified in 2014 to become included in the author's book *Worlds So Strange and Diverse: Towards a Genological Taxonomy of Non-mimetic Literature* published in 2015 as part of Chapter 2.4.

¹ Terms such as "mimetic" or "non-mimetic" literature seem to be a source of remarkable confusion and many controversies, as they are frequently used by various researchers in totally different meanings and contexts. Therefore, it is, perhaps, highly advisable to explain at the very beginning of the present paper how exactly they are used here. Namely, they are applied within certain specific methodology and refer directly to Andrzej Zgorzelski's conception of supragenological types of fiction (see, especially, A. Zgorzelski, 'Theoretical Preliminaries: On the Understanding of the Fantastic', [in:] idem, *Born of the Fantastic*, Gdańsk 2004, pp. 11–27, and idem, 'Fantastic Literature and Genre Systems', [in:] idem, *Born of the Fantastic*, pp. 28–41). In other words, they are used, in a manner of speaking, in a purely "technical" way, they should be viewed only in the context of the specific methodological system they refer to, and they are not supposed to convey any additional meanings (for example, "non-mimetic literature" is not meant here as "literature having no connection to reality," as it is often assumed). Summarizing Zgorzelski's ideas (as there is no room to explain them in more detail within this short article), non-mimetic literature encompasses four supragenological types (antimimetic, paramimetic, fantastic and exomimetic) that are (in their own respective ways) opposed to the mimetic supragenological type which, in turn, "pretends that the fictional universe is a copy of the phenomenal one" (A. Zgorzelski, 'Fantastic Literature...', p. 32). Generalising, the category of non-mimetic literature covers the whole body of works in which the textual universe, conversely, does not pretend to be the copy of the phenomenal one. It roughly corresponds to the popular Polish notion of "fantastyka" or English notions of "fantastic literature" or "fantasy literature" (obviously in the broadest possible meanings of all these terms, that is encompassing SF, horror and all other types of literature which includes (to a lesser or larger degree) elements that might somehow be perceived by readers as "fantastical"). Thus, a truly comprehensive taxonomy should include all those, often very diverse, generic categories.

Firstly, it is strictly the taxonomical issues, not the general theories of fantasy or the fantastic for their own sake, that are central to my present approach. This is why I will cover only those discussions that — at least partially — have resulted in sketching out proposals pertaining to methodologically coherent classifications of non-mimetic literature (or at least fantasy in a wider or a narrower meaning, as specified by a given researcher) and I will ignore those which — despite their critical or cognitive merit — have not resulted in similar proposals. In other words, I will discuss Tzvetan Todorov,² but not Eric Rabkin,³ Darko Suvin,⁴ but not William Robert Irwin⁵ or Brian Attebery⁶. This is not because I value some theories or debates over others, but simply because I find some arguments more relevant in the context of my present subject.

Secondly, as it has been said, all those holistic theories will not be analyzed for their own sake. The objective of most of the research up-to-date has been to discuss the vital but extremely confusing denominations of “fantasy” or “the fantastic.” Those denominations have been defined in various ways, with the help of varied methodological apparatuses and approached from different angles. They have been analyzed as a mode, a worldview, a cognitive strategy or a genre. On many occasions not only the literary-theoretical, but also wider cultural, anthropological, psychological or philosophical perspectives have been taken. The theories summarized here have proposed certain specific understandings of the terms in question and introduced certain complex concepts. They also, in numerous cases, have provoked a lot of polemical discussion, if not overt critique, proving to be at least as much controversial as insightful. I believe they have all — at varying degrees — contributed to a better understanding of this complex phenomenon that (differently understood) “fantasy literature” is, and provided us with useful insights about the role “the fantastic” mode plays in culture. It is, however, not my intent to evaluate these theories for their real merit or actual aspirations (which are perhaps as much cultural as literary-theoretical), but only to inspect the potential usefulness of concrete taxonomical suggestions in the context of the genological approach I have adopted. Thus, I will not discuss in depth or compare various (and usually conflicting definitions) of “fantasy” or “the fantastic” introduced by the particular researchers, as they are only marginal to my present interests.⁷

² T. Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, New York 1975.

³ E. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature*, Princeton, New Jersey 1976.

⁴ D. Suvin, ‘Science Fiction and the Genological Jungle’, *Genre* 6, 1973, no. 3, pp. 251–273.

⁵ B. Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1992.

⁶ W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, Urbana, Ill. 1976.

⁷ For a comprehensive review of these concepts in contemporary criticism consult, especially: K. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis. Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York and London 1984, pp. 3–28; M. Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People. The Mythopeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L’Engle and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, N.C. and London 2008, pp. 15–28, and A. Zgorzelski, *Theoretical Preliminaries...*, pp. 11–24.

Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, which appeared first in French in 1970 and then in English in 1976, can be probably viewed as the first in the series of most influential critical proposals on the subject. The notion of Todorov's "fantastic," which the researcher claims to be a genre (although many other critics, elaborating on his theories or presenting comparable concepts denominate it as a mode rather) is primarily based on the hesitation on the part of both the character and the reader about the nature of fictitious events. "[T]he text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described [...] this hesitation may also be experienced by a character."⁸

Taking this concept of the fantastic as a starting point, Todorov evolves a classification of literature, which includes, apart from "the fantastic", the categories of "the uncanny" and "the marvelous":

The fantastic [...] lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in common opinion. At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution over the other [...]. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomenon described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.

The fantastic [...] seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny rather than be an autonomous genre.⁹

Subsequently, also two sub-genres are introduced, the fantastic uncanny and the fantastic marvelous, which "sustain the hesitation characteristic of the true fantastic for a long period, but that ultimately resolve into the marvelous or in the uncanny."¹⁰ In this typology, the true fantastic is a kind of ephemeral category occupying the frontier between the adjacent realms of the fantastic marvelous and the fantastic uncanny.

The above classification is, obviously, mainly the result of approximating the elusive notion of the specifically defined fantastic, which is in the centre of the researcher's interests. It is notable that Todorov seems to dismiss out of hand the whole realm of popular literature. He discusses mainly the works of such classic writers as Franz Kafka, Jan Potocki, Théophile Gautier, Guy de Maupassant, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe or Nicolai Gogol. In the whole study no single author is cited that could be associated with contemporary science-fiction or fantasy. Thus, Todorov's original proposal is of rather marginal relevance for any discussion concerning more widely understood non-mimetic literature, although his categories undoubtedly present a significant cognitive potential.

⁸ T. Todorov, op. cit., p. 33.

⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

Todorov's theory has been subsequently developed or modified by other researchers who attempted, at least partially, to use his typology against a larger body of texts. Probably the most prominent of such attempts is that presented in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* by Rosemary Jackson.¹¹ It must be, however, noted that Jackson's stance is more cultural than strictly literary-theoretical. It relies strongly on the psychoanalytical approach and involves a clear ideological agenda but the researcher also arrives at some interesting observations that directly pertain to our subject.

Jackson's fantastic, while upholding Todorov's major characteristics (that is the uncertainty of the reader/character about the status of the textual reality), is discussed in the social, political and psychological contexts. It is understood primarily as the literature of subversion of dominant ideologies as well as of social and cultural structures. In contradistinction to Todorov, the fantastic is here viewed as a mode (rather than as a genre) that "assumes different generic forms"¹² and is placed "between the opposite modes of the marvelous and the mimetic."¹³ This distinction between a mode (a wider category, basically describing the sort of relationship between the empirical and textual realities) and a genre (more specific, historically variable category), although rather marginal for Jackson's own argument, seems to be essential from the strictly theoretical point of view.

Of the two remaining modes delineated by Jackson, the mimetic mode includes narratives "which claim to imitate an external reality" and make "an implicit claim of equivalence between represented fictional world and the 'real' world outside the text."¹⁴

The marvelous mode, in turn, is associated by Jackson with fairy story, romance, magic and supernaturalism.¹⁵ As the researcher states:

Movement into a marvelous realm transports the reader [...] into an absolutely different, alternative world, a "secondary" universe [...] 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 Wizard of Oz*, C.S. Lewis's *Narnia*, Fritz Leiber's *Newhon*, Tolkien's Middleearth in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the realms of fairy story and of much science fiction.¹⁶

It is remarkable that — despite the dominant notions in contemporary criticism — Jackson emphasizes special affinity between science fiction texts and those that have on numerous occasions been described as secondary world fan-

¹¹ R. Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London and New York 1991.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Compare R. Scholes, *Structural Fabulation. An Essay on Fiction of the Future*, London 1975, pp. 2–7, and A. Zgorzelski, 'Theoretical Preliminaries...', pp. 11–18.

¹⁵ R. Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

tasy,¹⁷ which is based on the creation of an autonomous “secondary” universe in the text. They are both juxtaposed with “true” fantasy texts which seem to be set in a world claiming to be empirical reality.

The usefulness of the main part of Jackson’s argument (including her discussions of particular modes) for more synthetic taxonomical objectives is limited, as the author focuses primarily on her presentation of fantasy as a literature of social and cultural subversion. The choice of texts is restricted to those supporting or central for the author’s argument. What is, however, valid for some texts and justifiable in case of an ideological or cultural argumentation, is not necessarily relevant when we attempt at a more comprehensive and non-ideological description of a vast body of non-mimetic texts. There is, for example, undoubtedly a large number of “marvelous” narratives that, by Jackson’s own standards, might be described as “subversive,” and, on the other hand, many “fantastic” narratives that can hardly be regarded as such; there are also a lot of non-mimetic texts which do not fit in either of the categories as Jackson delineates them.

Another group of literary critical discussions that I will cover in the present article is, perhaps, less concerned with multi-facial approximation or defining “the fantastic” in literature, but more openly reveals taxonomical interests per se. What is important, this taxonomical interest is clearly directed at a wider and more diverse body of contemporary texts.

William L. Godshalk poses to answer a very vital question, that some other researchers ignore, namely “how is science fiction related to fantasy?”.¹⁸ Godshalk assumes a “broader” definition of fantasy, arguing that science fiction is a sub-genre of it.¹⁹ He also proposes that there are four major subdivisions of fantasy: pure fantasy, philosophic fantasy, critical fantasy and realistic fantasy (science fiction).

Pure fantasy is described as “fantasy for the sake of fantasy”.²⁰ Godshalk argues that “here the fantasy has minimal or no ideological content, and we hunt in vain for mature ideas, critical awareness, or scientific extrapolation. The plot line means everything, and the author tries to engage our emotions without troubling our minds.” He mentions in this context writings of Lord Dunsany and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.

Philosophic fantasy, in turn, “may be derived on the one hand from Plato, and on the other from the Bible. Here fantasy is used as a vehicle for imaginatively expounding ideas [...]. There is a neat union of form and matter.” This type of fantasy is exemplified by the works of E.R. Eddison, C.S. Lewis and Olaf Stapledon.

¹⁷ See, especially, K.J. Zahorski and R.H. Boyer, ‘The Secondary Worlds of High Fantasy’, [in:] *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, ed. R.C. Schlobin, Indiana and Brighton 1982, pp. 56–80; G. Trębicki, *Fantasy. Ewolucja gatunku*, Kraków 2007, pp. 9–25.

¹⁸ W.L. Godshalk, ‘Alfred Bester: Science Fiction or Fantasy’, *Extrapolation* 16, no. 2, p. 149.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Critical fantasy, as Godshalk argues,

brings us closer [...] to science fiction, for here the fantasy is used as a way of discussing the world of objective "reality." Usually under the guise of "sword and sorcery," the author of critical fantasy discusses the world as he sees it [...]. What distinguishes this sub-division from philosophical fantasy is that the author is not merely expounding philosophy, he is offering a critique of his world. Here there is critical awareness.²¹

The researcher associates with critical fantasy such diverse writers as James Branch Cabell, Alfred Bester or Kurt Vonnegut. Finally, "realistic fantasy is science fiction. It is based on extrapolation, and the author attempts to project a future world."

As Godshalk summarizes it, "the four sub-categories of fantasy underline the four basic functions of the genre: (1) to create a world which will never exist in reality; (2) to create a world of the intellect, a philosophy; (3) to criticize the world we live in; (4) to project a possible world of the future."²²

Obviously, Godshalk's taxonomy is subject to very strong controversies as it is rather one-dimensional, strictly evaluative in nature, and based on the researcher's subjective criteria and his equally subjective assessment of the particular works. Yet, the critic's attempt to sketch out categories within the whole non-mimetic literature (referred to as "fantasy") as well as his emphasis on the need for a more precise, theoretical distinction between science fiction and other forms of fantasy/non-mimetic literature is noteworthy.

The issue of the mutual relationship between SF and fantasy lies also at the core of a more sophisticated theoretical framework proposed by Darko Suvin.²³ The researcher, who clearly declares his genological interest, proposes a certain system defined by two binary oppositions: "naturalistic" vs. "estranged" and "cognitive" vs. "non-cognitive."

Suvin's naturalistic fiction, a bit poetically described as fiction "endeavoring to faithfully reproduce empirical textures and surfaces vouched for by human senses and common sense" is equivalent to the traditional notion of realistic fiction or, simply, the mimetic fiction. Similarly, estranged fiction, "creating a radically or significantly different formal framework — different space/time location or central figures for the fable" equals to non-mimetic fiction (or fantasy or the fantastic fiction in the broadest sense).

The naturalistic fiction "has thus a straightforward relationship to the 'zero world'."²⁴ As Suvin argues, "in naturalistic fiction, as in the zero world, physics stands in no significant relation to ethics" and "it is the activity of the protagonists, interacting with other equally unprivileged figures, that determines the course of narration."²⁵ As the researcher concludes, "in such a model, relating ethics

²¹ Ibid., p. 150.

²² Ibid., p. 151.

²³ D. Suvin, op. cit.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 253.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 254.

to physics (Hollywood happy-end, say) signifies a descent into sentimentalism, into what is properly called sub-literature.”²⁶ Thus, within the naturalistic literature a distinction can be made between “realistic” literature (cognitive naturalistic literature, in which, as it has been said, physics stands in no significant relation to ethics) and sub-literature of “realism” (non-cognitive naturalistic literature, in which the course of narration is often marked by “predetermined outcome”²⁷ or sentimental solutions, breaking the impression of the verisimilitude).

An analogous distinction can be made within “estranged” fiction. In estranged fiction, too, as Suvin observes, “circumstances around the hero — according to the basic ‘literary contract’ making up a particular estranged genre — are or are not passive or neutral.” In some of it — the myth or fantasy and fairy-tale — “world is oriented positively towards its protagonist.” Those genres, “in which physics is in some magical or religious way determined by ethics instead of being neutral toward the hero or the total human population of the presented world — deny the autonomy of physics and can be properly called metaphysical.”²⁸ In contradistinction to those metaphysical (estranged non-cognitive) genres, science fiction (and the pastoral) create worlds which “are not a priori intentionally oriented toward their protagonists either positively or negatively. The protagonists may succeed or fail in their objectives, but nothing in the physical laws of a pastoral or SF guarantees either.”²⁹ Thus, SF can be described as “the literature of cognitive estrangement.”³⁰

Suvin’s taxonomy appears to be an interesting and sophisticated theoretical construct, and it undoubtedly helps perceive some of the differences between SF and other non-mimetic genres more clearly. However, when we try to apply it against a larger body of contemporary non-mimetic texts, it seems that, while it adequately describes some of them, it fails to account for others. For example, it might be argued that in a lot of texts traditionally (and quite reasonably) labeled as science fiction the universe — using Suvin’s own terms — is somehow oriented towards the protagonist, and that the ethical dimension does affect the outcome of the narration. On the other hand, many recent secondary world fantasy works attempt to reflect the ethical indifference and contingency of the universe.³¹ This does not question in any way the usefulness of Suvin’s distinction, which inter-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 255.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 256.

³¹ See G. Trębicki, ‘Fantasy — ucieczka od cudowności’, [in:] *Fantastyczność i cudowność. Wokół źródeł fantastyki*, ed. T. Ratajczak, B. Trocha, Zielona Góra 2009; idem, ‘In the Enslavement of the Formula? A Short Survey of Antagonists in Secondary World Fantasy’, [in:] *Zwizyki i “rozwiązki”*. *Relacje kultury i literatury popularnej ze starymi i nowymi mediami*, ed. A. Gemra, H. Kubicka, Wrocław 2012; idem, *Farewell to the Hero? — Structuring of the Protagonists in Recent SWF Texts*, not published yet.

estingly delineates certain modes of constructing non-mimetic narrations. I would rather argue at this point that it is simply not, on its own, a sufficient tool, for drawing out a more synthetic taxonomy, which needs to rely on a wider set of more varied factors.

Moreover, Suvin's description of the "metaphysical" estranged genres such as fairy-tale or fantasy as "non-cognitive" might be viewed as too evaluative and controversial as well. As, for example, S. Casey Fredericks observes, fantasy is

"escapist" in a technical sense since its fictive alternate worlds are portrayed as radically unlike the real world, but this cannot preclude an authentic cognitive dimension to Fantasy. Darko Suvin's notion of "cognitive estrangement" in SF may still be accurate as long as it does not consign Fantasy to some absolute non-cognitive area; that is, Fantasy and SF may involve different modes of cognition or sources of cognition.³²

The review of the critical discussions on the taxonomy of non-mimetic literature presented in this article — although by no means exhaustive — hopefully illustrates in a sufficient way the most typical approaches towards the issue that can be found in contemporary discourse. Despite the unquestionable cognitive merit and sophistication of some of those theories or arguments, they also exhibit considerable shortcomings if their potential usefulness is to be analyzed in the context of creating of a more synthetic and comprehensive taxonomy of the whole non-mimetic literature. The most significant of those shortcomings (or, perhaps, rather incompatibilities) could be recapitulated in the following way:

1. Frequently the discussions are based on a relatively limited set of texts that reflects the researcher's interest and approach but does not reflect the richness and diversity of contemporary non-mimetic literature (for example, Todorov, to a lesser degree Jackson, Godshalk and Suvin).

2. Many of the critical taxonomies unquestioningly take for granted the cultural division of non-mimetic literature into fantasy and science fiction (or even ignore science fiction in their discussion), and, as a result, fail to specify the exact relationships between particular groups of texts (for example fantasy vs. SF) within broadly understood non-mimetic literature.

3. In several cases, the taxonomical proposals are based on a single factor or a very limited set of factors (Todorov, Jackson, Suvin) or on criteria that are highly evaluative in nature, whose application is bound to manifest the researcher's own subjectivity or bias (Godshalk, Suvin).

On the other hand, the presented discussions include also many insightful observations or contain useful suggestions that can be applied while elaborating a strictly genological taxonomy of non-mimetic literature. The most important conclusions can be summarized at this point as well:

³² S.C. Fredericks, 'Problems of Fantasy', *Science Fiction Studies* 5, 1978, p. 42.

1. Potential taxonomy of non-mimetic literature should be based on a widest possible range of non-mimetic texts, regardless of the researcher's critical preferences.

2. It is essential to devote special attention to the description of different modes of creating fictitious worlds in terms of their exact relationship to the mimetic mode. There also seems to be a need for an intermediate supragenological categories directly related to those modes, that find their realizations in various particular historical generic forms.

3. The final taxonomy should be understood not as a closed classification but rather an open referential pattern,³³ enabling to discuss a broad range of non-mimetic texts in new, cognitively useful ways.

Critical-Literary Taxonomies of Non-mimetic Literature

Summary

The present article summarizes most popular, characteristic or interesting British and American literary-critical discussions that have taken place over the last 40 years and concerned — more or less directly — issues connected with the taxonomy of non-mimetic (fantastic) literature. In particular, the article focuses on the proposals of Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, William L. Goshalk and Darko Suvin. All those works have been discussed from a typically genological and literary-theoretical positions, as assumed by the author. The main objective has been to verify their usefulness for the attempt to create a possibly synthetic and comprehensive, strictly genological taxonomy of the whole non-mimetic literature.

Krytycznoliterackie taksonomie literatury niemimetycznej

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi przegląd najbardziej popularnych, charakterystycznych czy też interesujących dyskusji krytycznoliterackich przeprowadzonych w ciągu ostatnich 40 lat na gruncie brytyjskim i amerykańskim, a dotyczących — mniej lub bardziej bezpośrednio — kwestii związanych z taksonomią literatury niemimetycznej (fantastyki). Skupiono się w szczególności na propozycjach Tzvetana Todorova, Rosemary Jackson, Williama L. Goshalka oraz Darko Suvina. Wszystkie te pozycje przeanalizowano z pozycji typowo genologicznych i teoretycznoliterackich, przyjętych przez autora. Starano się zbadać ich przydatność przy potencjalnej próbie stworzenia możliwie syntetycznej i kompletnej, ściśle genologicznej taksonomii całej literatury niemimetycznej.

³³ See A. Zgorzelski, 'Fantastic Literature...', p. 33.