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Debate on the merits of fantastic literature

1. Introduction

The possible "value" or "merit"[1] of "fantastic" or non-mimetic literature[2] has been the subject of an ongoing debate. Apparently, this war is being waged on at least three main fronts.

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[1] The present article develops some of the observations first made in my paper *Towards Evaluation of Contemporary Non-mimetic Fiction: Does Non-mimetic Fiction Belong to Popular Literature?* (as to date unpublished) and quotes some parts of it.

[2] The term non-mimetic literature refers to the theoretical proposals by Andrzej Zgorzelski (see idem, "Is science fiction a genre of fantastic literature?", *Science Fiction Studies* 6, 1979, pp. 296–303; and G. Trębicki, "Supragenological types of fiction vs. contemporary non-mimetic literature", *Science Fiction Studies* 41, 2014, no. 3, pp. 481–501). What I mean here by non-mimetic or fantastic literature (I will use these terms interchangeably) is an extremely broad category describing all historical and contemporary genres and texts which do not pretend to imitate the phenomenal (empirical) reality. This category can be, obviously, contrasted with all sorts of mimetic or "realistic" writings. I realize that the term "fantastic" is defined in a multitude of contradicting ways by particular scholars or critics and actually refers to various (often mutually exclusive or only partly overlapping) literary phenomena or classes of texts (compare, for example, T. Todorov's, E. Rabkin's, R. Jackson's or A. Zgorzelski's approaches; on terminological confusion see G. Trębicki, *Worlds So Strange and Diverse. Towards a Genological Taxonomy of Non-mimetic Literature*, Newcastle Upon Tyne 2015, chapter 1). I do not apply any of them within this article. In other words, I use the denomination "fantastic" (perhaps, it would be more proper to put it in inverted commas) in a strictly pragmatic, commonsensical way, as a sort of a "cultural label" describing all literature that is not "realistic" (mimetic) regardless whether it is fantasy, SF, horror or, say, Jasper Fforde.

Firstly, there is a dispute between these critics (and academics) who regard non-mimetic literature in all its generic diversity to be inferior to truly "literary" mainstream fiction and deprived of "literary merit" (and as such, perhaps, unworthy of attention of a serious critic or scholar), and those who defend it. Secondly, within the proper field of "fantastic" literature criticism there exists an interesting, largely theoretical (but partly also ideological) dispute about the merit of particular fantastic genres and cognitive modes that seem to be inherent to those genres. Finally, the status of particular works of fantastic fiction is often debated or questioned.

In my present discussion I will attempt to briefly summarize the discourses mentioned above, focusing on the first two fields, as the debate in the third one (evaluation of particular texts) seems to be largely dependent on more general assumptions. Obviously, due to the scope of critical material and number of voices involved, it would be impossible to describe the whole discourse thoroughly within a single paper; my present aim is rather to illustrate the dominant modes of discussion and meditate on the nature of the discrepancies of the evaluation of particular classes, genres, and works of non-mimetic fiction.

Hopefully, all this will prepare the ground for an attempt to approximate the potential merits of the whole of non-mimetic fiction and analyze them initially from structural, cognitive, or cultural angles. I strongly feel that such a summary — due to the confusion, various misunderstandings, and general discord shrouding the field — might prove useful.

2. Does fantastic literature possess merit?

Although since the 1950s fantastic literature has become increasingly popular in academic circles (not to mention its immense commercial and cultural appeal) there are still numerous academics and critics (as well as untold numbers of common readers)[3] who largely reject it. These opponents apparently fall into

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[3] In my 20-year-long academic career I have tirelessly questioned my students (as well as my fellow scholars) why they actually dislike fantastic literature (if they did so). When faced with the universal answer "because it tells about unreal things" I pointed out that, in a sense, all fiction is equally "unreal" and that, perhaps, quality non-fiction is altogether a much better source for exploring various (historical, political, social, geographical, etc.) aspects of the empirical reality. To this they usually responded by emphasizing the need for an entertaining function as well. The engaging plot and protagonists easy to identify with seemed to help them appreciate the informative function more fully. Curiously enough, the standard answer was given not only by readers honestly interested in broadening their knowledge of the surrounding world but also by those who limited their readings to the likes of *50 Shades of Grey*. In their case the answer was probably pretextual as it would be difficult to argue that the famous bestseller has a significant "informative" or cognitive content. I would also risk a statement that — in a way — non-mimetic texts are by nature more demanding for an average reader as they require more effort to reconstruct the presented world. Also, their cognitive values (if they exist) need metaphorical reflection whereas many common readers seem capable of

two main categories. First, there are those who cherish the traditional notion of the imitative function of literature and thus favour all "realistic" writing. Another group consists of proponents of fiction that might be described as "experimental" or "postmodern". They exclude from the canon of truly literary fiction most (but not all) non-mimetic writings on the grounds of their conventionality as far as the modes of storytelling are concerned. What both these groups seem to share is the conviction about the lack of strictly "literary" merit in non-mimetic works.

Moreover, fantastic literature, be it SF or fantasy, is often counted among so-called "genre fiction". Thus it is put alongside mystery, thriller, romance or western, and consequently dismissed as purely entertaining or escapist fiction. This attitude, apparently prevalent in the mainstream criticism and publicism,[4] is, perhaps, best summarised by a columnist of the *Huffington Post*:

> The main reason for a person to read Genre Fiction is for *entertainment*, for a riveting story, an escape from reality. Literary Fiction separates itself from Genre because it is not about escaping from reality, instead, it provides a means to better understand the world and delivers real emotional responses.[5]

Thus genre fiction (SF & fantasy included) can be clearly distinguished from literary fiction which, as Petite again puts it somewhat poetically, "is comprised of the heart and soul of a writer's being, and is experienced as an *emotional journey* through the symphony of words, leading to a stronger grasp of the universe and of ourselves".[6] One might try to evade these accusations claiming that they apply only to low- or middle-tier fantastic fiction whereas its masterpieces are on a par with the classics or contemporary mainstream masterpieces. Yet, the merit of even most acclaimed non-mimetic works is often questioned.

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reading texts only on a purely literal, unequivocal level. Undoubtedly, the perception of fantastic literature by various readers would constitute a very interesting subject for a deeper sociological, cultural and psychological research and analysis.

    [4] Several such approaches are quoted by B. Attebery in *Strategies of Fantasy*, Blooming-ton-Indianapolis 1992, chapter 2; and M. Oziewicz in *One Earth, One People. The Mythopeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, NC-London 2008, chapters 1–2). The notion of fantasy and SF as "genre" literature akin to romance, thriller and western, also prevails in various popular compendia or resources. See, for example, "Popular literature", [entry in:] *Encyclopeadia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/popular–art#ref236490 (access: 15.02.2018); or "Genre fiction", [entry in:] *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre_fiction (access: 20.02.2018).

    [5] S. Petite, "Literary fiction vs. genre fiction", *Huffington Post* 26.02.2014, https://www.huff-ingtonpost.com/steven-petite/literary-fiction-vs-genre-fiction_b_4859609.html (access: 20.12.2017). Among "competent" genre writers, by way of example, Petite mentions (side by side with the likes of Michael Crichton or Thomas Harris) also several fantastic literature writers such as Neil Gaiman or George R.R. Martin. At the same time, he emphasizes: "Do these types of writers sweep a reader down into their fictionalized world? Yes. But do they provide a means to stay inside reality, through the trials and tribulations of everyday life, and deliver a memorable experience that will stick with you emotionally for the rest of your life? In my opinion, no".

    [6] Ibidem.

A perfect example comes handily here. Although it might prove extremely difficult (and largely fruitless) to determine which of the great 20th century fantastic novels is the greatest, it is relatively easy to point out the most famous, which has so far received the most critical attention. This is, of course, J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (henceforth LOTR). Yet, while Tolkien's work is revered by some, it is still despised and neglected by others. There are prominent critics who, like Tom Shippey, hail Tolkien as "the author of the century"[7] and there are critics who perceive Tolkien's legacy as, perhaps, something written more skilfully and with a better taste than your average fantasy saga but definitely not on a par with genuine literary masterpieces.

There is something disturbingly intriguing about the fact that while one rarely questions the quality of such diverse "mainstream" works (whether one has read them or not and regardless of one's personal attitude towards them) as, say, *Ulysses* by James Joyce, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith or *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, the status of even the greatest fantastic novels is subject to much controversy.

The main source of this discrepancy seems to be the very criteria of evaluation. Still adhering to the representative Tolkien case I will at this point quote Brian Attebery, who thus comments on LOTR's mistreatment at the hands of some critics:

> The critics were forced to emphasize elements that conform to standard theory, even though those elements may not be characteristic of Tolkien's story as a whole: an ambiguous character here, a manipulation of point of view there, a striking verbal coinage, an allusion, a bit of irony; anything that might compare to the acknowledged values of fiction in the tradition of James or Conrad or Joyce.[8]

Attebery then mentions Burton Raffael's article *"The Lord of the Rings" as Literature*[9] as a typical instance of such an attitude:

> Raffael, who admired the work, was forced to conclude that it was, even so, not literature. It did not fit the criteria he had in mind: style, characterization, and incident. Not just any sort of style, characterization, and incident, for *The Lord of the Rings* […] certainly has a style, does present characters and incidents, but the sort of style that calls attention to its own innovations after the fashion of poetry, the sort of characterization that portrays "significant aspects of human reality" (232), and the sort of incident that seems to occur of its own necessity, rather than according to the dictates of an overall plot. By these standards, LOTR is certainly not literature.[10]

From this Attebery comes to a logical conclusion: "We must either redefine literature or exclude Tolkien — and with him much of modern fantasy".[11] He is

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[7] T.A. Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century*, Boston-New York 2000, pp. viii–x.

[8] B. Attebery, op. cit., pp. 18–19.

[9] B. Raffael, "The Lord of the Rings as literature", [in:] *Tolkien and the Critics*, eds. N.D. Isaacs, R.A. Zimbardo, Notre Dame 1968, pp. 218–246.

[10] Ibidem, p. 19.

[11] Ibidem.

seconded by Marek Oziewicz who distinguishes between "reductionist" and "holistic" criticism and accuses the first of judging fantasy by the standards that seem inadequate and fail to account for the literary and cultural appeal of this genre.[12]

Although both Attebery and Oziewicz refer basically to fantasy, especially in its mythopoeic variation, the problem they pose is valid for the whole of non-mimetic literature. It does undoubtedly possess its merits but they are specific and need a careful and unprejudiced description. They seem to be, to some extent, different from those of notable mainstream prose, either traditionally "realistic" or "experimental", and, possibly, they are also varied and by no means uniform across all "fantastic" genres or forms.

The history of defence against the two main allegations made against fantastic literature — "escapism" or the alleged refusal to deal with "significant aspects of human reality" as well as its allegedly inferior "literary" form — is nearly as long as the history of the allegations themselves. One of the first prominent voices was probably J.R.R. Tolkien himself, who in his famous essay *On Fairy Stories* (first published in 1947) defends so called "escapism" comparing it to "the Escape of the Prisoner" rather than "the Flight of the Deserter",[13] and introduces such seminal concepts as Sub-creation, Consolation and Eucatastrophy. In more scholarly language Robert Scholes states a very similar idea:

> Fiction has always been characterized to perform two functions. Some fiction accomplishes both equally, some emphasizes one, but a work which accomplishes neither must be bad fiction or no fiction at all. We may call these functions sublimation and cognition. As sublimation, fiction is a way of turning our concerns into satisfying shape, a way of relieving anxiety, of making life bearable. Sometimes this function of fiction is called a dirty and degrading word: "escapism". But it is not exactly that, any more than sleep is an escape from not being in a dream, from being wherever we are when we are asleep and not dreaming. Sleep and dreaming are aspects of life which are important because they are necessary for our functioning as waking beings. A healthy person sleeps and dreams in order to awake refreshed. As sublimation, fiction takes our worst fears and takes them by organizing them in a form charged with meaning and value. Even the label "escapist" acknowledges that fiction is connected to our actual existence by offering us relief from its problems and pressure.[14]

And almost immediately he also confronts the second allegation:

> In its cognitive function, fiction helps us to know ourselves and our existential situation. Because fiction does function in this way, it has sometimes been assumed that it must offer us a record of experience or a picture of real life. This is the realistic fallacy, which so much of contemporary critical thought has labored to expose. For fiction offers us not transcriptions of actuality but systematic models which are distinct from reality, though they may be related

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[12] M. Oziewicz, op. cit., pp. 3–5, 39–64.

[13] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On fairy stories", [in:] *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Ch. Tolkien, London 2006, p. 148.

[14] R. Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Future of Fiction*, South Bend, IN 1975, pp. 4–5.

to it in various ways. […] All fiction contributes to cognition […] by providing us with models that reveal the nature of reality by their very failure to coincide with it.[15]

Scholes' words are echoed by Andrzej Zgorzelski, who notices that we can observe

the rising status in the genological hierarchy of the 20th century of those texts which, instead of meticulously trying to create an artistic copy of reality, openly present a world model, provoking the reader to a more active search for the meanings of the fictional universe and, ultimately, his/her own universe.[16]

For the past forty years numerous researchers or critics delivered similar arguments in defence of science fiction or fantasy but the gist of the discussion is probably again best formulated by Scholes when he tries to define his concept of "structural fabulation". Especially one observation seems vital for understanding the merit of fantastic literature in relation to both "high" or "literary" modern prose and contemporary purely commercial "popular" or "genre" fiction. Since, Scholes persuades, "the dominant realistic novel has abandoned the pleasures of narrative movement for the cares of psychological and social analysis, a gap in the system has developed".[17] As a result

all forms of adventure fiction, from western, to detective, to spy, to costume — have come into being in response to the movement of "serious" fiction away from plot and the pleasures of fictional sublimation […] Thus the vacuum left by the movement of "serious" fiction away from storytelling has been filled by 'popular' forms with few pretensions to any virtues beyond that of narrative excitement. But the very emptiness of these forms […] has left another gap, for forms which supply readers' needs for narration without starving their needs for intellection. […] We require a fiction which satisfies our cognitive and sublimative needs together.[18]

As we see, the accusations of "escapism", providing narrative entertainment or adhering to classical storytelling conventions, instead of deconstructing them and chasing radical experiment is not really repelled in the discussion presented above. It is rather stressed that all those elements, connected with the sublimative aspects, are, perhaps, unfairly scorned and sophistically reduced to their own parodies by many critics. In fact, they perform vital literary and cultural functions related to the very core of storytelling. After all, is not the desire to make sense and construct order in apparently non-sensical and chaotic reality one of the most universal drives behind creating literature, shared both by Homer and James Joyce? And, it might be additionally argued, that due to its explicitly speculative character as well as its freedom in constructing its fictional universes and grande-scale cosmic plots, which is largely unachievable in contemporary mainstream fiction, fantastic literature is naturally predestined to fulfill such desires.

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[15] Ibidem, pp. 5–7.

[16] A. Zgorzelski, *Fantastyka, utopia, science fiction. Ze studiów nad rozwojem gatunków*, Warszawa 1980, p. 186.

[17] R. Scholes, op. cit., p. 39.

[18] Ibidem, pp. 40–41.

In this view fantastic literature appears as fiction in its own right, which in most general terms, has the potential of joining cognitive and sublimative functions in a way that enhances them both. Although it shares traditional narrative techniques with contemporary commercial "genre" fiction (to which it is often included), it is distinguished from it by the presence of a cognitive element (needless to say, we are talking here about a certain "potential" which may be realized — or not — to varying degrees and intensity). It is capable of providing "a means to better understand the world"[19] and portraying "significant aspects of human reality"[20] albeit it does it in a mode clearly different from "mainstream" prose. As Scholes concludes, "fabulation […] is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way".[21]

3. The battle of merits: SF vs. fantasy

Even those who are willing to accept the line of argumentation presented in the previous section and gladly admit the existence of a thus outlined significant "potential of merit" in fantastic literature in general, often deeply disagree when it comes to estimating this potential in particular genres or classes of fantastic literature (and, in consequence, in particular texts as well).

The main front line lies, as one might expect, between the great domains of SF and fantasy (regardless of how we may want to define these genres). Already in 1975 William L. Godshalk proposed a sort of provisional taxonomy of whole non-mimetic writing. He divided it into four categories — "pure fantasy", "philosophic fantasy", "critical fantasy", and, finally, "realistic fantasy" which he identifies with science fiction.[22]

This taxonomy is rather simplified as each category is described by basically only one characteristic. Moreover, one feels that the outlined classes are hardly precise and mutually exclusive despite what the author suggests. It is, however, symptomatic that while categories of philosophic, critical, and realistic fantasy (SF) seem to possess some merit — they are, for example, used "as a vehicle for imaginatively expounding ideas" or "as a way of discussing the world of 'objective' reality" or, finally, they are "based on extrapolation, and the author attempts to project a future world, the fourth category — pure fantasy — to which belong the writings of Dunsany and Tolkien exhibits minimal or no ideological content, and we hunt in vain for mature ideas, critical awareness, or scientific explanation. The

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[19] S. Petite, op. cit.

[20] B. Raffael, op. cit., p. 232.

[21] R. Schools, op. cit., p. 29.

[22] W. L. Godshalk, "Alfred Bester: Science fiction or fantasy", *Extrapolation* 16, 1975, no. 2, p. 149.

plot line means everything, and the author tries to engage our emotions without troubling our minds".[23]

The qualitative taxonomy of fantastic or (in the researcher's own idiolect) "estranged" literature and the relationship between fantasy and SF is also a recurring theme in the works of a prominent American critic, Darko Suvin. He is probably the most representative proponent of the approach that favours SF over fantasy. In his 1973 seminal essay *Science Fiction and the Genological Jungle*[24] he proposes a genological system characterized "by using the two parameters or binary oppositions of naturalistic/estranged, and cognitive/non-cognitive".[25] Estranged literature is thus divided into two categories — "estranged cognitive", that is mainly SF, and "estranged non-cognitive" encompassing myth, folk tale, and fantasy. The classification also suggests a certain affinity of both "estranged" categories to their "naturalistic" counterparts — in case of SF to cognitive realistic nature, and in the case of fantasy to non-cognitive sub-literature of "realism". As Suvin puts it, "SF shares with naturalistic literature, and naturalistic science, and naturalistic or materialistic philosophy a common sophisticated, dialectical, and cognitive approach"[26] whereas fantasy, although out of its shortcomings has made tremendous virtuous, is still confined by certain limitations.[27]

This stance is further confirmed in two papers — *Considering the Sense of "Fantasy" or "Fantastic Fiction": an Effusion*[28] and *On U. K. Le Guin's "Second Earthsea Trilogy" and its Cognitions: a Commentary*[29]. In the first one Suvin observes that "Fantasy creates a world where one or more all-important individual agents intimately interact with a spacetime not only radically different from the author's historical moment of life but also, and primarily, denying history as socio-economic lawfulness".[30] In the latter he explains:

> I've been for ever and a day committed to the split between SF and Fantasy […]. The reason for it is the presence vs. absence of cognitiveness in these two genres. By cognition I mean a transitive understanding, which the readers can transfer from the pages of fiction to their own personal and collective lives […]. As for Fantasy in particular […] its general absence of cognitiveness is bound up with denial or repression of key elements of earthly history, which we usually classify as political and economic interpersonal regularities, tendencies, or strictures.[31]

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[23] Ibidem, p. 150.

[24] D. Suvin, "Science fiction and the genological jungle", *Genre* 6, 1973, no. 3, pp. 251–273.

[25] Ibidem, p. 255.

[26] Ibidem.

[27] Ibidem, p. 257.

[28] D. Suvin, "Considering the sense of 'fantasy' or 'fantastic fiction': An effusion (1999–2001)", *Academia.edu. — Share Research*, https://www.academia.edu/14688975/CONSIDERING_THE_SENSE_OF_FANTASY_OR_FANTASTIC_FICTION_AN_EFFUSION_1999-2001_21_780_words_ (access: 10.02.2017).

[29] D. Suvin, "On Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Second Earthsea Trilogy' and its cognitions: A commentary", *Extrapolation* 47, 2006, no. 3, pp. 488–504, Findarticles.com (access: 14.02.2010).

[30] D. Suvin, "Considering…", pp. 13–14.

[31] D. Suvin, "On Ursula K. Le Guin's…".

On some level Suvin is definitely right — what most fantasy neverlands lack is the direct (or at least indirect but nevertheless meaningful) relation to earthly history, sociology, psychology, economy, or science. Due to its "estrangement" and speculative power, ambitious SF is capable of creatively exploring dilemmas that are deeply rooted in our mundane experience or reflect on them metaphorically. This is true for both models of SF that Suvin proposes in his earlier writing — the extrapolative and the analogical ("Science Fiction" 262–264). This — let us call it — speculative or extrapolative aspect is, however, missing in most of literature usually labeled as fantasy (even in genres' masterpieces such as LOTR).[32] Viewed from this angle fantasy does seem intellectually unambitious. It is also undoubtedly escapist in the way SF is not.

Does it then automatically follow that fantasy is by definition inferior to SF? Not necessarily. We can assume that it may possess other merits than those critics such as Suvin or Lem focus on. Already in 1978 S.C. Frederics entered a polemics with Suvin stating that

> Fantasy is not bad science, nor failed SF […]. It is, of course, "escapist" in a technical sense since its alternative 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.[33]

Perhaps, then, there exists some cognition (or at least some merits) beyond scientific (technological, sociological, political, economical, etc) speculation or extrapolation? Does the negation of "socio-economic lawfulness" (which undoubtedly does characterize a large part of fantasy, including Tolkien) make fantasy inferior? Is it, after all, possible — using Suvin's own words — "to talk about evil without talking about wage slavery?".[34]

Even if straightforward cognitiveness in fantasy was questioned we are still left with its sublimative function. Arguably — largely freed from the intellectual speculative burden which by necessity dominates plots in "extrapolative" SF novels — fantasy can more fully concentrate on its emotional and "fabulative" aspect. But numerous positive answers have also been given over the years to the dilemma specified in the previous paragraph by several critics and scholars. One of the first prominent voices was, probably, Ursula K. Le Guin herself who notices that

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[32] Admitting some unquestionable merit of Tolkien's masterpiece, Suvin is, however, far from the enthusiasm (see "Considering…", pp. 14–16; comp. "On Ursula K. Le Guin's…"). A similar view is expressed by Stanisław Lem ("Afterword", [to:] U.K. Le Guin, *Czarnoksiężnik z Archipelagu*, Kraków 1983, p. 198). Interestingly, both critics write very highly about Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Saga which — in their opinion — presents a merit analogous to great SF works.

[33] S.C. Fredericks, "Problems of fantasy", *Science Fiction Studies* 5, 1978, no. 1, p. 42.

[34] D. Suvin, "Considering…", p. 15.

> The great fantasies […] speak from the unconscious to the unconscious, in the language of the unconscious — symbol and archetype. Though they use words, they work the way music does: they short-circuit verbal reasoning, and go straight to the thoughts that lie too deep to utter. They cannot be translated fully into the language of reason, but only a Logical Positivist, who also finds Beethoven's Ninth Symphony meaningless, would claim that they are therefore meaningless. They are profoundly meaningful, and usable — practical — in terms of ethics; of insight; of growth. […] Fantasy is the natural, the appropriate, language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul.[35]

Since then a similar defence of fantasy has been conducted by, among others, Pauline Archell-Thomson,[36] Jeanne Murray Walker,[37] Brian Attebery[38] and Marek Oziewicz.[39] All those critics emphasize that the potential strength of fantasy lies not so much in logical speculation or extrapolation but rather in performing a culturally (and psychologically) significant role, in a way analogues to the ancient rites of passage, that is, assisting in emotional growth and integration of an individual by symbolic participation in protagonists' quests. This, is, of course, still closely related to the sublimative function as Scholes defines it, but in its more sophisticated aspects, touching ethical and metaphysical issues.

4. Conclusions

The above discussion does not describe all facets of the confusion and disagreement regarding the merit of non-mimetic literature and, obviously, it does not include all prominent voices. The problem has many more angles to look upon and the war is waged on several more battlefronts.[40] Hopefully, it has been however, demonstrated that the discrepancies in the discourse result primarily from different criteria applied, which are in turn determined not only by arbitrary tastes, but first of all, by methodological, aesthetic, cognitive, and ideological approaches. Obviously, it does not make much sense to try and negotiate between, say, Suvin's Marxist and Tolkien's semi-religious (or at least highly metaphysical) stances. The worldviews behind various systems of evaluating non-mimetic literature are often mutually exclusive and it is virtually impossible to reconcile them. One may, however, take them all into careful consideration and try not to make

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[35] U.K. Le Guin, "The child and the shadow", [in:] *The Language of the Night. Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. and with introduction by S. Wood, New York 1982, pp. 52, 59.

[36] P. Archell-Thomson, "Fairytale, myth and otherness in Andre Norton's juvenile science fiction", *Foundation* 70, 1976, pp. 25–31.

[37] J.M. Walker, "Rites of passage today: The cultural significance of "The Wizard of Earthsea", *Mosaic* 13, 1980, pp. 180–191.

[38] B. Attebery, op. cit.

[39] M. Oziewicz, op. cit.

[40] In this section I considered the "cognitive" facet of the argument but there is also an ideological one — here we could compare positions of, for example, Rosemary Jackson (*Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, New York 1991) and Marek Oziewicz (op. cit.) regarding Tolkien's legacy.

oneself blind to any kind of possible merit that non-mimetic literature may offer. Even if we do not regard particular "merits" highly ourselves, it is useful to realize their existence (and attractiveness for the vast crowds of readers) as they shape the evolution of fantastic literature. They are important both for the construction of the individual texts and the development of particular genres.

In my following research I will attempt to approximate the issue of potential merits of fantastic literature in more textual, literary-theoretical terms.

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Debate on the merits of fantastic literature

Summary

The possible "value" of "fantastic" or non-mimetic literature has been the subject of an ongoing debate. There is, obviously, the dispute between these critics (and academics) who regard non-mimetic literature to be inferior to truly "literary" mainstream fiction and deprived of "literary merit" and those who defend it. Additionally, within the proper field of "fantastic" literature criticism there exists an interesting, largely theoretical (but partly also ideological) argument about the merit of particular fantastic genres and cognitive modes that seem to be inherent to those genres. Finally, the status of particular works of fantastic fiction is often debated or questioned.

The present paper attempts to initialize a comprehensive discussion on the merits of non-mimetic (fantastic) literature. It summarizes the previous discourse on the subject and searches for the reasons of various discrepancies and confusion shrouding the field. It also undertakes to demonstrate that these discrepancies result primarily from different criteria applied, which are, in turn, determined not only by arbitrary tastes, but, first of all, by methodological, aesthetic, cognitive, and ideological approaches.

The whole discussion will, hopefully, prepare the ground for an attempt to approximate potential merits of the whole of non-mimetic fiction and analyze them initially from structural, cognitive, or cultural angles.