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Merits of Fantastic Literature: A Proposal for Theoretical Framework

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Introduction

In my article “Debate On The Merits Of Fantastic Literature,”¹ I attempted to set ground for a comprehensive debate on the merits of non-mimetic (fantastic) literature. I summarized the previous discourse on the subject and searches for the reasons behind the confusion and various discrepancies surrounding the field. In the present paper, I will attempt to outline the issue of potential merits of fantastic literature in more textual, literary-theoretical terms. I believe that a broad range of merits of non-mimetic literature can be described in such terms; not only as subjective preferences or vague impressions, but also as precisely defined pre-suppositions, agreements between the implied reader and writer as to what literary gratifications are to be expected by the first from the reading experience. This, ultimately, should lead to a discussion about readers’ or critics’ tastes (which is partly unavoidable) as well as about certain structural dominants which are well manifested in the texts themselves.

¹ G. Trębicki, “Debate On The Merits of Fantastic Literature”, *Literatura i Kultura Popularna* 25, 2019, pp. 237–248.

Basic Merits of Non-Mimetic Fiction

In this section, I will try to propose a comprehensive, albeit very tentative list of possible merits of non-mimetic literature. Even if my observations prove trivial, I hope they will help systematize the whole discourse on values of fantastic literature.

It should be understood that the borders between the proposed categories cannot be clearly defined. They are merely approximations which may overlap to some extent. It is, perhaps, more useful to envision them as certain continua smoothly interacting with and transforming into other continua.

It would be nearly impossible to find a text constructed solely according to a single principle; however, in order to better illustrate my concepts, in each case, I will try to find texts in which one particular function visibly dominates.

1. Entertainment or “Fabulative” Merit

It is in terms of this function that fantastic fiction comes closest to its relatively unambitious mimetic counterparts such as romance or mystery and conforms to the widespread notions of “genre” or “popular” literature, quoted in the previous sections. This is the most explicitly entertaining dimension of non-mimetic prose. The focus is, then, on an adventurous, possibly fast-paced plot and providing target readers with adequate characters, settings, and situations. In the case of fantastic literature, the settings are often expected to be primarily exotic, strange, different from readers’ mundane surroundings.² In this sense, the function is definitely escapist. Moreover, these settings or characters are frequently quite formulaic; what is expected usually involves sticking to the convention rather than creating an original represented world. Such is, obviously, the case with what is often called “formula” or “genre” fantasy.³

The fabulative function constitutes the most rudimentary entertaining dimension and is present in almost all works of fantastic literature, but it is usually enhanced, modified, or subordinated by other functions. There exist, however, texts where it clearly dominates. This does not mean that such texts are

² So, quite predictably, on the most basic level, the difference between proponents and opponents of fantastic literature can be described in terms of preference for either the mundane, empirical, mimetic and known, or for the exotic, fantastical, strange and unknown — for simple *recognition* of the order of reality during reading vs. its *reconstruction*. Regardless of the fact that non-mimetic novels often facilitate understanding of the empirical reality, there is probably some escapist yearning in virtually every reader of fantastic literature.

³ See B. Attebery on “fantasy as formula” in idem, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1992, pp. 1–17, and J. Grant on “genre fantasy” — idem, “Genre Fantasy”, [in:] *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, eds. J. Clute, J. Grant, New York 1999, p. 396.

automatically deprived of any quality — they are often written very skillfully, with proper care for verisimilitude and elegant language, and there is even some effort to make the characters more complex in accordance with contemporary trends.⁴

As an example of a work in which the fabulative function dominates, I would (tentatively) suggest *The Malazan Book of the Fallen* by Steven Erikson. The main focus is clearly on the creation of a complex secondary fantasy world, in a way sophisticated but conforming to the expectations which average fans of “genre” fantasy or role-playing games have. We have, then, a multitude of continents, lands, races, extinct races, peoples, etc. Typical characters are warriors, mages, rulers, semigods, or gods (it is worth noting that “gods” here carry no real metaphysical or transcendental connotations; they are simply more powerful beings that exist within the rules of the presented world and are motivated quite similarly to mortals). The target reader is awarded by a fair number of military campaigns, battles, clashes, quests, as well as duels, both conventional and magical. The characters are — analogously to, for example, mimetic military prose — apparently complex, obligatorily unidealistic, pragmatic, selfish, down-to-earth, which helps create the impression of verisimilitude. Their dilemmas, however, are rather alien to the reader’s experience and can hardly be reflected upon — even metaphorically — in a cognitive way. The secondary world has been constructed with skill and originality; it is not simply imitative of Tolkien or RPG systems. Its depth and authenticity are quite impressive. Yet, one cannot resist the impression that all these elements have been created merely for their own sake; there are no further meanings, structures, or other functions hidden behind them. No cognition in a Scholesian sense.⁵ No overall frame. Readers’ satisfaction is, in a manner of speaking, fragmentary, “episodic” and comes almost exclusively from following more or less spectacular events, primarily ones of military character.

Obviously, as noted at the beginning of this section, the fabulative component surfaces in almost all works of non-mimetic fiction, although it often forms only the lowest level of narration on which other functions are superimposed. J.R.R. Tolkien’s, Stephen R. Donaldson’s or Ursula K. Le Guin’s novels do not

⁴ It should be stressed that the relative absence of merits other than entertainment — or, in other words, a certain lack of cognitive or existential ambitions — does not necessarily imply poor literary style. Joe Abercrombie, for example, a bestselling commercial heroic fantasy author, is not a bad writer. He possesses adequate stylistic skills, his characters are vivid, round, and convincing, and he succeeds at avoiding clichés so typical of “genre” fantasy. On the other hand, his ambitions apparently do not exceed delivering intelligent entertainment for hardcore fantasy fans. Paradoxically, it might be argued that as far as strictly literary or stylistic competence is concerned, he is a much better craftsman than, say, Philip K. Dick, whose writing — ingenious and conceptually brilliant as it is — is often rather crude stylistically and compositionally.

⁵ See my discussion of Robert Scholes’ concepts in G. Trębicki, op. cit.

lack colorful settings, events, or characters, but they constitute a background for other narrative and semantic structures. In Dan Simmon's *Hyperion Cantos*, the fast-paced plot serves the exposition of sophisticated scientific and metaphysical ideas.

However, probably the best example to compare Erickson's cycle with is George R.R. Martin's famous *Song of Ice and Fire*. Both series are similar in many respects. Martin's narration focuses on very much the same elements as Erickson's — multitude of lands, peoples, clashes, and the brutality of harsh reality. Yet, in Martin's saga, all this — to a large extent — paves the way for historiosophical reflection. This difference cannot be described in "0–1" terms (total absence vs. all-pervading presence of historical reflection), it is rather a question of degree and intensity than of simple contrast, but it definitely exists.

At the same time, we may also find texts in which the fabulative aspect is significantly reduced. This is, for example, the case in Daniel Keyes' classic *Flowers for Algernon* as well as many new-wave "psychological" writings or several novels by Christopher Priest such as *The Separation* or *The Adjacent*. The narrative strategies here seem to parallel those of the philosophical or psychological mimetic novel. Due to the relative absence of the fabulative/entertaining merit such novels have actually very little to do with "popular" or "genre" literature as it is usually described.

2. Emotional-Cognitive Merit

This term refers partly to Scholes' concept of sublimation⁶ (which in my typology is, in a way, split into two categories — the entertaining/fabulative and the emotional-cognitive), but also to Tolkien's ideas of "escape" and "eucatastrophe,"⁷ or even to such ancient notions as "catharsis." I have decided to put into a single category all receptive psychological aspects connected with a deeper reaction a text evokes from the reader. I called it "emotional" but it should be understood that it implies a more refined reception than simple escapism or pure sublimation delivered by the entertaining/fabulative function — hence the second part of the term: cognitive. I assume here, however, a broad meaning of the latter — this cognition will more often refer to intuitive understanding and "emphatic experiencing" than to intellectual rationalization. It cannot always be adequately described in strictly ideological or scientific terms.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Presented in J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories", [in:] idem, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Ch. Tolkien, London 2006, pp. 109–161.

When Attebery,⁸ Oziewicz,⁹ Walker,¹⁰ or Archell-Thomson¹¹ conduct their respective defenses of fantasy¹² or emphasize its cultural (and psychological) significance, they primarily refer to this very aspect. But the emotional-cognitive function is by no means limited to fantasy. It appears everywhere where a meaningful story manages to deeply move and inspire the reader. Steven Petite¹³ might be unwilling to apply his words to non-mimetic fiction, but in fact, one may argue that, since the contemporary mainstream literature has abandoned “the pleasures of fictional sublimation,”¹⁴ it is the more sophisticated fantastic fiction that can “deliver real emotional responses.”¹⁵ Its plot structures may be rather conventional, the verisimilitude may not exactly conform to our modern notions of what reality is like, and the universe may be “oriented towards the protagonist,”¹⁶ but these characteristics should not be simply scorned. The narration of most fantastic texts does not confirm meaninglessness, chaos, and randomness of the empirical reality (which mainstream prose nowadays usually takes for granted), but instead transforms or even dismisses it entirely. It simply makes sense, or perhaps even (in a Tolkienian manner of speaking) “Sense.” In this meaning, it is strongly metaphysical, transcendental, or mythical. For its subject it often takes the struggle between good and evil on a cosmic scale, which it may narrate in mythopoeic or extrapolative terms (Tolkien’s *LOTR*, Le Guin’s *Earthsea Saga* or Simmons’s *The Hyperion Cantos* to provide only a few examples). Alternatively, it may focus on a more personal spiritual journey (*Volkhavaar* by Tanith Lee or *Nightwings* by Robert Silverberg) where the reader identifies with the protagonists and undergoes “a rite of passage” with them.¹⁷ Not accidentally are plots of SF and fantasy often modeled on mythic structures. At any rate, due to the emotional-cognitive function — similarly to ancient dramas — readers’ emotions are purged and purified, and a profound therapeutic effect is achieved.¹⁸

⁸ B. Attebery, op. cit.

⁹ M. Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People. The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, NC-London 2008.

¹⁰ J.M. Walker, “Rites of Passage Today: The Cultural Significance of *The Wizard of Earthsea*”, *Mosaic* 13, 1980, pp. 180–191

¹¹ P. Archell-Thompson, “Fairytale, Myth and Otherness in Andre Norton’s Juvenile Science Fiction”, *Foundation* 70, 1976, pp. 25–31.

¹² See also my discussion in G. Trębicki, op. cit., section 3.

¹³ S. Petite, “Literary Fiction vs. Genre Fiction”, *Huffington Post*, 26 February 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/steven-petite/literary-fiction-vs-genre-fiction_b_4859609.html (accessed: 20.12.2017). See my comments on Petit’s essay in G. Trębicki, op. cit.

¹⁴ R. Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Future of Fiction*, South Bend, IN 1975, p. 41.

¹⁵ S. Petite, op. cit.

¹⁶ D. Suvin, “Science Fiction and the Genological Jungle”, *Genre* 1973, no. 6 (3), pp. 254–257.

¹⁷ Cf. J.M. Walker, op. cit., passim.

¹⁸ Cf. J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, London 1998, p. 115.

Emotional cognition seems to be inherently connected with the fabulative function — it conveys its messages on top of entertaining, fast-paced plots and protagonists easy to identify with. This is the case for the aforementioned fantasy and SF masterpieces. This relation is, obviously, only one-directional: the presence of the fabulative function within a particular text does not necessarily imply its emotional-cognitive merit.

3. Speculative/Extrapolative Merit

This function might be alternatively labeled as “intellectual-cognitive” in contradistinction to the “emotional cognitive” merit described in the previous section. It will, predictably, refer to scientific (again, in the broadest possible meaning of this word, including also “soft” or humanistic sciences), technological, sociological, political, economical, etc., speculation or extrapolation. It will encompass both SF models proposed by Suvin — the extrapolative and the analogical.¹⁹ When he (and many other prominent critics) speaks about “cognition,” they most frequently refer to this aspect. As it appeals more to the intellect than to emotions, it is relatively easy to grasp and verify and, in a manner of speaking, better describable in “objective” terms. It is this merit which since the very beginnings of the genre has dominated ambitious SF and has been most appreciated by critics such as Suvin or Lem²⁰ as well as many award-distributing gremia.

It is rather easy to find numerous texts in which the speculative function dominates at all stages of the non-mimetic literature development. It is, perhaps, most visible in many early “Golden Age” SF novels where narration is often pretextual, the characters flat, and all elements somewhat awkwardly subordinated to the illustration of a particular scientific or futuristic idea. But we could also find more modern examples. Such would be, arguably, the case of Ian Watson’s *Jonah Kit* or Robert R. Sawyer’s *Terminal Experiment*. Both novels include prominent fabulative elements (such as a sensational plot or murder mystery) but they are clearly subordinated to the presentation of the underlying concepts. The characters are round and psychologically convincing but they hardly inspire any profound emotional response in the reader — their dilemmas primarily serve to better present the concepts in question.

Children of Time, a recent novel by winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award Adrian Tchaikovsky, is constructed in a similar vein. For its main subject it takes the human-induced evolution of intelligent spiders on a terraformed planet against the background of a “descent into barbarism of a starship crew searching

¹⁹ D. Suvin, op. cit., pp. 262–265.

²⁰ See my discussion in G. Trębicki, op. cit., section 3.

for a new home.”²¹ The story covers a span of several hundred years and features numerous generations of spider protagonists introduced to present a particular stage of the species’ development. Human protagonists — portrayed with some psychological insight — serve primarily as a contrast to their insect counterparts and help emphasize the issue of cognitive estrangement resulting from the clash between two species completely alien to each other. The fabulative function does certainly exist here, as the story features a fast-paced, easy to follow plot with an adequate culmination point and satisfying denouement which — arguably — also possesses some sublimative quality. Yet, all this is clearly subordinated to the traditional SF merits described above.

A different case is posed by Robert K. Morgan’s “Takeshi Kovacs Trilogy” (*Altered Carbon*, *Broken Angels*, *Woken Furies*). At first sight, the fabulative function dominates here. The novels feature sensational, fast-paced and hard-boiled plots, full of sudden twists and violent clashes. To enhance their entertaining quality, the books vastly implement elements of cyberpunk, space opera, technothriller, or detective noir story. The reader primarily focuses on following the exploits of the ruthless but charismatic main character until the reading is done. Yet, afterwards, when we start to reflect on the novel and its messages, we discover deep layers of cognitive, explorative quality; profound and brilliant reflection on technological and economical advancements as well as the way they affect the very idea of human identity. Both aspects — the fabulative and the cognitive, seem to be woven almost seamlessly, enhancing each other and creating a new quality.²²

The already mentioned Dan Simmons’s *Hyperion Cantos* is an even more spectacular example of a successful fusion of the aforementioned functions. Similarly to “Takeshi Kovacs Trilogy,” it skillfully joins a fast-paced, attractive plot, reminiscent of hard SF adventure novels and space operas, with daring social and technological extrapolation as well as fascinating speculation about the very nature of the universe, inspired by modern cosmology and quantum physics. But to all this, it also adds a significant sublimative, almost semi-metaphysical dimension and eucatastrophe, arguably on par with that included in Tolkien’s LOTR.

Texts such as *Hyperion Cantos* also seem to suggest that the greatest and most universal merit is, perhaps, achieved where several of the aspects/functions are joined skillfully so as to achieve a particular equilibrium between them; a state where the whole — the new structure, means much more than their individual summarized value.

²¹ P. McAuley, “Tale of World of Supersmart Spiders Takes Clarke SF Award”, *New Scientist*, 25 August 2016, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2102623-tale-of-world-of-supersmart-spiders-takes-clarke-sf-award/> (accessed: 22.02.2018).

²² See my discussion of Morgan’s work in G. Trębicki, “Distinct Yet Analogous: Visions of Posthumanism in Richard Morgan’s Takeshi Kovacs Trilogy and Masaaki Yuasa’s *Kaiba*”, *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 26, 2013, no. 2, pp. 1, 4–9, and idem, “Human Identity In The World of *Altered Carbon*”, [in:] *The Projected and Prophetic: Humanity in Cyberculture, Cyberspace and Science Fiction*, ed. J.J. Copeland, Oxford 2011, pp. 119–126.

4. The Aesthetic Merit

On encountering such texts as, for instance, Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, one perceives primarily their fabulative aspect. There is no decent scientific, technological, or sociological speculation here — the characters are picturesque but pretty flat and quite repetitive within certain dominant conventions; the plot consistently draws on the picaresque tradition. Yet, one feels intuitively that there is more to this text than simply entertainment, or that it somehow surpasses other purely “entertaining” works. For some reason, we are prone to qualify Vance's collection as — at least to some extent — literary art, whereas we would never concede this status to other apparently similar fantasy novels. This quality is more difficult to grasp or define than the ones we have discussed so far. It is, however, somehow connected with the particular poetic use of language; emphasis put on creating certain subtle moods, the ability to make the secondary world truly exotic and magical. I propose to denominate this merit/function simply as “aesthetic” one.

The aesthetic aspect may obviously co-exist with the extrapolative or sublimative ones (it is undoubtedly present in Tolkien's LOTR), but for the sake of providing a clear example, I chose Vance's work which, I believe, is (relatively) deprived of the latter two. Other good examples include Patricia McKillip's “Riddle-Master Trilogy” or Ray Bradbury's classical *Martian Chronicles*. In the latter case, one might argue (since even the fabulative aspect is at times rudimentary here) that the collection's strength lies almost solely in its aesthetic merit and the ability to create a feeling of nostalgia in the readers.

Sometimes this aspect not only is manifested at linguistic/stylistic level, but also permeates the whole narrative structure. Such would be the case of Peter Beagle's *Innkeeper's Song*, where Faulkner-like subjective first-person narration by a multitude of alternating characters brings a new artistic dimension to seemingly petrified fantasy conventions. Or we could mention numerous short stories and novels by Gene Wolfe, whose strange literary landscapes also possess peculiar artistic quality.

Finally, we come to non-mimetic texts whose narrative structures are primarily determined by certain formal experiments — often quite analogously to postmodern prose. In this case, it is these formal operations — stylistic, narrative, linguistic, etc. — which define the merit of a given text. We could mention here *Troika* by Stepan Chapman or *The Orphan's Tales* by Catherynne M. Valente, or Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, which mimics the conventions of the 19th-century English novel, emphasizing the very literalness of the text. Thus, literary play for its own sake becomes the main objective behind the construction of a text.²³

²³ See A. Zgorzelski's definition of metaconventional literature in idem, “Is Science Fiction a Genre of Fantastic Literature?”, *Science Fiction Studies* 6, 1979, pp. 296–303 and my description

Conclusions

In the previous section, I proposed four “merits” of non-mimetic literature which I regard as the basic and most intuitive ones. I would argue that it is these merits (or their preferred combinations) that virtually all readers of fantastic fiction search for. As I suggested at the very beginning, they can be also alternatively viewed as functions determining the whole structure of particular narratives or presuppositions — unwritten agreements between the implied reader and writer as to what literary (and extra-literary — cultural, psychological, etc.) gratifications the reading process should bring to the latter.

Once again, I would like to stress that the categories I have described rarely (or hardly ever) appear in complete isolation — although I have tried to prove that in each case, some texts can be found where one particular function dominates. More often than not they co-exist side by side, modifying and enhancing one another. The borders between them are not strict either. Sometimes it is difficult to determine where the purely entertaining function ends and the more sophisticated emotional cognition begins; frequently one seamlessly merges into the other. Similarly, it is often impossible to draw exact borders between the emotional-cognitive and the aesthetic functions. After all, does the beauty of Bradbury’s prose not induce some sort of profound emotional experience in the reader?

Finally, the proposed four merits are — admittedly — rather general categories. They, of course, could be split into narrower concepts or described more thoroughly. As I noted at the very beginning of my paper, they are certain initial approximations which need further development. My purpose here is not to propose a strict typology but rather to inspire debate. Even so, I hope that this contribution has been useful. If this provisional summary sparkles further discussion on the merits of fantastic literature, my efforts will be rewarded.

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Merits of Fantastic Literature: A Proposal for Theoretical Framework

Summary

The paper attempts to set ground for a comprehensive debate on the merits of non-mimetic (fantastic) literature, tentatively proposing a system of four basic merits — the entertaining/fabulative, the emotional-cognitive, the speculative/extrapolative, and the aesthetic. These merits can also be alternatively viewed as narrative functions, precisely defined presuppositions, agreements between the implied reader and writer as to what literary gratifications are to be expected by the reader from the reading experience. They constitute structural dominants which are well manifested in the texts themselves. The author's proposals should be read merely as certain initial approximations, albeit hopefully useful ones, capable of inspiring further debate.