

# TICONTRE

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TEORIA TESTO TRADUZIONE

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## TICONTRE. TEORIA TESTO TRADUZIONE

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## THE FLUIDITY OF THE FANTASTIC: TODOROV'S LEGACY TO LITERARY CRITICISM

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This article addresses the contemporary significance of Tzvetan Todorov's seminal essay *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. The enduring contribution of Todorov's essay to literary theory and criticism is examined in the first part of the discussion which focuses on three key moments in the critic's argument: the defense of genre as a crucial conceptual category for literary analysis, the concept of hesitation or wavering which is at the core of the definition of the fantastic genre, and the idea that there is strong link between the fantastic genre and the acceleration of plot. It is argued that each of these moments remains richly suggestive and productively engage contemporary preoccupations about the role of literary theory and the complex inter-relation between realist and non-realist fiction, as well as the ethical dimension of literary narratives. The second part of the essay approaches *The Fantastic* as a work of rather than merely about literature. From this perspective the essay emerges as the trace of a fascinating conceptual adventure. A careful rereading of Todorov's work reveals the genesis, evolution and eventual dispersion of the critic's insights as they break out of the initial structuralist framework and open horizons that Todorov's himself did not anticipate and cannot fully control. This excess of meaning is the surest evidence of Todorov's outstanding achievement.

L'articolo vuole mettere in luce l'attualità dell'influente saggio di Tzvetan Todorov sulla *Letteratura fantastica*. Il contributo teorico del testo di Todorov è discusso nella prima parte dell'articolo che riflette in particolare su tre momenti chiave nell'elaborazione. Il primo momento comporta una risoluta presa di posizione a favore del ruolo fondamentale dei generi letterari nell'analisi critica; il secondo è la scoperta del concetto di esitazione che permette a Todorov d'inaugurare una concezione affatto nuova del fantastico; ed il terzo è una riflessione sul legame tra il fantastico e un'accelerazione dell'intreccio narrativo. Si sostiene che questi tre momenti rappresentano gli spunti tuttora più suggestivi nel discorso di Todorov in quanto permettono di intervenire in dibattiti di forte attualità quali quello sul rapporto dialogico tra realismo e non-realismo e quello sulla dimensione etica della forma narrativa. Nella seconda parte dell'articolo, si vuole evidenziare la letterarietà del testo di Todorov che in quest'ottica rende testimonianza di un'eccezionale avventura critica. Un'attenta rilettura della *Letteratura fantastica* permette di individuare l'affascinante genesi, sviluppo e ultima dispersione delle intuizioni di Todorov che sfuggono all'iniziale impostazione strutturalistica, aprendo orizzonti che l'autore stesso non ha anticipato e non domina pienamente. Questo eccesso di significato è il segno più autentico del singolare valore del saggio di Todorov.

Originally published in French but quickly translated in German (1972), Spanish (1972), and English (1973) as well as a little later in Italian (1977), Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* was a rare accomplishment: it provided a definition of the fantastic genre that was conceptually clear, rigorous, elegant and systematic. Todorov's intervention sparked an international debate on the fantastic in literature and, weathering four decades of seismic changes in literary theory and criticism, has remained an inescapable point of reference for any scholar entering the field.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on these cir-

<sup>1</sup> Richard Howard's English translation (originally published in 1973 and reprinted in 1975 by Cornell University Press) was the most influential in promoting a wide international debate about Todorov's work. While perhaps not the most elegant rendering of Todorov's style (as noted by Robert Scholes's "Foreword"), Howard's prose has the merit of being clear and direct. The choice of title, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, is undoubtedly bold but effectively identifies Todorov's theoretical approach (structuralist) and intent (the definition of a literary genre). For ease of reference, the short English title *The Fantastic* will be used in the discussion.

cumstances, the contemporary critic is bound to ask: how is this possible? How can *The Fantastic* continue to have such an impact when the structuralist and semiotic approach, which its author embraces and which the essay exemplifies, have been largely superseded by new theoretical orientations that have placed into question the very project undertaken by Todorov? It might be tempting to reply to this question by asserting that *The Fantastic* is today mostly of historical significance, a place to start in a theorization of the fantastic which will necessarily reach very different conclusions. There is a degree of truth in this reply: no critic today would propose merely to apply Todorov's categories to a particular corpus. Yet even a quick look at the most recent anthology of articles on the fantastic<sup>2</sup> reveals that Todorov's contribution, while certainly subject to criticism, remains pivotal to the discussion: no new work has emerged to rival Todorov's essay, whose suggestiveness remains unsurpassed. We must return, then, to the original question and look for a more convincing explanation for the enduring appeal of a study whose theoretical presuppositions seem today so questionable.

It is well known that "classic" works, whether of literature or of criticism, become monumentalized and so widely discussed that it becomes difficult to encounter them on their own terms. Critical debate elucidates and deepens one's appreciation of these texts but also creates a barrier of mediations (expectations, known interpretations, assumed discursive contexts, theoretical perspectives) which at times it is useful to break through or at least struggle against in the effort to experience the "classic" work afresh. This is what I intend to do in this essay and I make this move in the belief that it is only through a renewed direct engagement with Todorov's text that the enduring hold of *The Fantastic* on the critical imagination can be accounted for. My re-reading will not, however, and cannot be innocent. I will be guided by two key concerns. First, I will seek to de-emphasize the long-standing and on-going debates and allow a contemporary critical sensibility (namely, my own) to respond directly to Todorov's central argument. My objective in this case is to focus on the strengths of the essay, on the intuitions, concepts and observations that stand out as fundamental and of lasting value. Second, I will approach *The Fantastic* as a work of literature rather than only about literature. My goal here is to trace the way in which Todorov's formulations immediately began a life of their own and, even within the work that gave them birth, led the discussion in directions that the author struggled to reconcile with his central argument. This analysis makes it possible to see *The Fantastic* as a much richer book than Todorov's stated intentions imply, and reveals the author's irrepressible curiosity and critical sensibility, which would not be denied or contained even by categories of his own making.

## 1 THE FANTASTIC AND THEORY: GENRE, WAVERING, SPEED

*The Fantastic* contains an exceptionally wide-ranging discussion of literary theory. The term "introduction" in the original title points precisely to the fact that the essay is canvassing a whole problematic, rather than zeroing in on a particular issue (an aspect

<sup>2</sup> CLAIRE WHITEHEAD (ed.), *The Fantastic*, Ipswich (MA), Salem, 2013.

that is lost, not without consequences, in the English translation).<sup>3</sup> From the opening pages, Todorov demonstrates his determination to tackle head-on established theoretical positions (Frye, thematic criticism, etc.) but also squarely face the problems that his own approach raises. This uncompromising approach clearly conveys the message that the reader is being guided through a treacherous terrain by an author who is firmly in command of the material and possessed of a well-defined theoretical position: the problems encountered are clarified and resolved or, when an answer is not given, the reason for postponing it is convincingly provided. Given the contemporary critical temper, this self-assurance may antagonize as much as reassure with the result that the engagement with the text may be unduly coloured by the desire to find fault and catch Todorov in a contradiction, incoherence, etc. I will resist this temptation, especially in the first part of this essay, insofar as the goal is to reflect on the contributions Todorov's essay can make to contemporary literary criticism and theory. Such contributions cluster around three main foci: the theory of literary genres, the concept of "hesitation" or, as I prefer to translate it, "wavering", and the connection between the fantastic and speed.

### 1.1 GENRE

The first fundamental question that Todorov's *The Fantastic* raises is the pertinence and usefulness of the concept of a literary genre. The contemporary reader may be inclined to consider this a curiosity. The issue is not that the term "genre" has dropped out of critical usage but on the contrary that it has become so ubiquitous and encompassing as to lose specificity. Young adult literature is a genre, no less than fantasy or romance and a reviewer today may well feel little compunction saying that the last volume of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Saga belongs to all of these three genres and perhaps a few more (horror, bildungsroman, the adventure story, etc.). If, acknowledging today's increasingly dominant visual culture, we cast our gaze beyond the written text and include the fiction film, we would see that the "genres" of cinematic production have also proliferated. Navigating any content provider's website we would also realize that in most cases the same film is listed in a number of different "categories." This evidence suggests that (a) there is a widespread general understanding of what we can expect from a work categorized and commercialized as fantasy, romance, or horror, and (b) this organization of material is eclectic, i.e., based on a variety of incommensurable principles (different orders of generality: fantasy vs horror; quantitatively and qualitatively different criteria: "family" film vs classics; etc.). Turning to a more critically informed discourse, contemporary reflection on genre is characterized by the emphasis on the transgression of generic boundaries and registers. The resulting admixture, contamination, coalescence, creolization of genres within a single work is considered one of the key ingredients in the ironic playfulness that is the hallmark of post-modern literature. In his *Evaporating Genres*, Wolfe has noted the risks but also the opportunities that this playfulness entails:

The writers who contribute to the evaporation of genre, who destabilize it by undermining our expectations and appropriating materials at will, with fiction

<sup>3</sup> The main consequence is a kind of peremptoriness that informs the entire translation but is less evident in the original.

shaped by individual vision rather than traditions or formulas, are the same writers who continually revitalize genre: A healthy genre, a healthy literature, is one at risk, one whose boundaries grow uncertain and whose foundations get wobbly.<sup>4</sup>

In Wolfe's view, while contemporary practices of contamination run the risk of causing the dissolution of genres into indeterminacy, postmodern playfulness also contains the potential of a constant dynamic reinvention and reinvigoration of genres. Unfortunately, however, Wolfe does not explain the circumstances under which generic evanescence can be turned into an asset rather than a liability.

These brief observations about the current predicament of genre and genre criticism are useful to establish that we still need a theory of genre at least for two basic reasons: (a) to attempt a systematization of the plethora of "genres" which populate cultural production (literary and otherwise) – this is a kind of conceptual housecleaning aimed at clarifying what we mean, why it is appropriate, and to what extent it is useful to employ the term "genre" to describe both the bildungsroman and the sonnet; and (b) to explore the productive and dynamic role that genres have in shaping a vibrant literary scene – this may be described as an issue of "genre literacy" and of the impact of such competence on the production and reception of literature (and other forms of artistic production). Approached from these standpoints, Todorov's resolute defense of genre is no longer a curiosity but rather a contribution to an important, and, if we accept Wolfe's suggestions, possibly urgent task.

The key moves in Todorov's argument about genre are contained in the last pages of the first chapter of *The Fantastic*.<sup>5</sup> They may be summarised as follows. First, a theory of genre can only be solid if it is grounded in an idea of literature. I came to the same conclusion, from a rather different critical perspective, about two decades ago when I published one of my first articles, "From Literariness to Genre: Establishing the Foundations for a Theory of Literary Genres",<sup>6</sup> which, as the title suggests, arrived at a definition of genre after an exploration of the notion of literariness. For our purposes in this context, it will suffice to say that a theory of genre requires the critic to make explicit her or his fundamental assumptions about the nature of literature itself – a daunting task in the fragmented contemporary theoretical landscape. Todorov proposes to consider the literary text as a system of signification characterized by the interaction of three basic layers: the verbal, the syntactic and the semantic. It is certainly possible to disagree with Todorov's terminology and his description of these three layers, but it still seems reasonable and compelling to hold that literature is fundamentally a system of signification and that this system is based on the interaction between discrete elements, their organization and their relation to a posited world (fictional and actual).

4 GARY K. WOLFE, *Evaporating Genres. Essays on Fantastic Literature*, Middletown (CN), Wesleyan University Press, 2011, p. 51.

5 TZVETAN TODOROV, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1975, pp. 19-23; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, Seuil, 1970, pp. 24-27.

6 EUGENIO BOLONGARO, *From Literariness to Genre. Establishing the Foundations for a Theory of Literary Genres*, in "Genre", xxv (1992), pp. 277-312.

Second, for Todorov the fundamental role of genre is to account for an abstract “structure”, which determines or at least strongly regulates the nature, organization and relationship to the posited world of a particular literary discourse. This second move is for Todorov absolutely central insofar as it defines his structuralist approach and methodology. From a contemporary perspective, the problem with this approach is not the positing of an underlying “structure” capable of generating the observable surface phenomena (though one may prefer using a less compromising terms such a frame, matrix, pattern) insofar as abandoning the idea of such a “structure” entails a surrender to the singularity of each utterance and therefore logically the abandonment of any intelligible project for criticism and theory. Rather the issue is what kind of “structure” are we looking for. Todorov’s reliance on scientific discourse and his criticism of Frye’s incoherences communicate a confidence in the definiteness and stability of his conceptual categories that we cannot share (and that in fact is belied by the essay itself, as we shall see). In particular, while Todorov injunction to proceed in a logically rigorous rather than eclectic and impressionistic manner (*à la Frye*) remains valid, it is precisely theoretical rigour which lead us to require a more dynamic and fluid concept of genre in general and of the fantastic in particular. In terms of his methodology, Todorov’s insistence on the constant need to move back and forth from the empirically observable data from which to develop a hypothesis which has to be logically coherent but then verified by confronting new data, and this without solution of continuity, must be seen as a literary application not only of the basic inductive/deductive method practice by modern science but also, and perhaps more interestingly, of the progressive/regressive method carefully explored in Sartre’s *The Problem of Method*.<sup>7</sup> This is a sophisticated tool, which has lost none of its pertinence to the human sciences.

Third, Todorov’s final argument about genre seeks to mitigate the rigidity of his understanding of structure by introducing a historical component. Todorov acknowledges that theoretical genres must be related to historical genres but concludes that: “Everything suggests that historical genres are sub-groups of complex theoretical genres”.<sup>8</sup> This conclusion is indeed hurried but it opens a path that we may today pursue especially as we seek to develop a more supple and dynamic understanding of genre. The relationship between theoretical and historical genres need not be merely hierarchical and vertical with simple theoretical genres combining to produce more complex generic units and eventually surfacing in historically specific principles of textual organization. The notion of history introduces the notion of diachrony and therefore of development. Historical genres point to a history of genres in which simple and complex theoretical genres and pre-existing historical genres can all play a role, possibly entering dialogical and even dialectical relations with each other. Todorov himself argues that the fantastic was born with the end of a predominantly religious and superstitious world-view and the emergence of the scientific outlook of the Enlightenment. He also argues that the advent of psychoanalysis condemns the fantastic to decay and eventually even to disappearance in the twentieth century. A genre was born, developed, and died, therefore, but also per-

7 JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *The Problem of Method*, London, Methuen, 1963.

8 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 21; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 25.

haps in the course of its existence, it influenced other genres, and/or evolved, mutated became other than it was while still allowing the critic to discern some of its traits in the genesis of a new genre. As we shall see the interest and significance of Todorov's suggestive analysis of Kafka's work in the last pages of *The Fantastic* can be grasped precisely in this perspective.

### 1.2 WAVERING

Of all the concepts elaborated in *The Fantastic*, the most important is without a doubt the hesitation or wavering that Todorov identifies as the fundamental *differentia* of the fantastic as a genre. The passage in which this argument is made is worth citing at some length:

Thus Alvaro [the hero of Cazotte's tale *Le diable amoureux*] hesitates, wonders (and the reader with him) whether what is happening to him is real, if what surrounds him is indeed reality [...] or whether it is no more than an illusion. [...]

Which brings us to the very heart of the fantastic. In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. [...]

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny [the first option] or the marvelous [the second option]. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.<sup>9</sup>

Over forty years after its original appearance, the reader is still struck by the boldness and brilliance of the formulation. In the first place, one should note how unexpected is the proposal. The term fantastic evokes above all the freedom of the imagination to wander and pursue its visions (whether wondrous or horrifying) without the objective constraints encountered in the actual world. But Todorov wrests the fantastic as a literary genre from this realm of easy freedom (or licence) and pins it precisely to a *cognitive problematic*. In the fantastic genre, the protagonist and the reader can either believe in what the senses and language represent but then find themselves inhabiting a (fictional) world which they can no longer claim to understand rationally, or they can reject what has been so vividly represented and keep believing that the (fictional) world can be explained by reason (and attribute their deception to a rational cause that remains to be discovered). The brilliance of this formulation lies in the fact that, far from opposing the real to the fantastic (or, to be more precise, the literary genre of the fantastic and to the literary genre of realism), Todorov makes the fantastic dependent on the real: the character and the reader must have an idea of the real because it is only against that background

<sup>9</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 24-25; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 28-29.



that the ontological status of the event witnessed can be judged and either dismissed as improbable (in which case we land in the uncanny) or accepted as disclosing a supernatural world beyond the real (in which case we land in the marvellous). If no choice between these two alternatives is possible within the fictional world, then the wavering finds no resolution and we confront what Todorov considers the pure form of the fantastic, a genre which ultimately makes the reader experience a cognitive impasse: the ontological status of the world posited in the fiction is undecidable (I hasten to add: not in the sense that it ceases to be fiction but in the sense that within this fiction it is not clear what is real and what is imaginary).

Todorov's analysis insists on the fact that the reader (understood not as the real reader but as a function integral to the text) must experience the fantastic wavering. While the presence of a character with whom the reader shares the experience is a common device for the achievement of this effect, other means are both imaginable and practiced in fantastic texts. Still, for Todorov, the reader's wavering affects the fictional world only: the reader wonders about the status of events within a world whose ultimate fictional quality cordons off the cognitive impasse and ontological wavering. In other words, the reader may wonder about whether Alvaro is in love with a supernatural being or with a woman who is manipulating him into believing that she is a supernatural being; but the reader does not wonder whether in the reader's own actual world there may be women who are supernatural beings. And yet, on further reflection, it would seem reasonable to contend that a certain seepage from the fictional world to the actual world of the reader is in fact inevitable. The stronger is the reality effect produced by a fictional world, the stronger will be not only the impact of unexplained (and possibly unexplainable) supernatural events within that world, but also the reader's inclination to ponder the possibility of such events occurring in her or his own actual world. The character and reader's wavering causes the real world itself to waver at the edge of two alternative and incompatible possibilities – a comforting return to order or a disquieting recognition of disorder. The fantastic dependence on the (reader's understanding of the) real has a reverse side: the fantastic can bleed into and contaminate the (reader's understanding of the) real. This fantastic destabilization in the fictional representation of reality infiltrates and raises doubts about the representability of reality *tout court*. The purest fantastic, then, is the genre that forces the reader to confront the possibility of a cognitive impasse not only in relation to the fictional world but also ultimately in relation to the world in general.

This gloss on the concept of the fantastic wavering makes it possible to re-elaborate the relation, which we have seen is essential and necessary, between the literary genre of the fantastic and the genre of realism. We have seen that for Todorov the former is dependent on the latter, insofar as it is only against a realist background that the fantastic can emerge. But can this relation be inverted? Can it be maintained that realism is dependent on the fantastic? A simple inversion is indefensible. It doesn't make logical sense to say that it is only against a fantastic background that realism can emerge. The first objection, among many, is that this formulation relies for its intelligibility on a slippage in the meaning of term "fantastic" used here as synonym for "supernatural". But, as we

know, Todorov's fantastic is not the supernatural *per se* but a cognitive problematic introduced by supernatural events. Is there any other sense in which realism can be seen as depending on the fantastic? In a recent article on "Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary Forms of the Fantastic",<sup>10</sup> I have argued precisely this point and proposed that realism depends on the fantastic when it encounters realities that are yet unrepresentable in realistic terms. What such realities might be is exemplified by the opening of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where Pynchon struggles to find a language adequate to the representation of an unprecedented, unimaginable event: the first experience of the impact of weapons of mass destruction. The confident contention that literary realism has at its disposal all the means necessary to describe whatever the subject may encounter is an example of a-historical hubris. Auebrach's *Mimesis* has long established the evolutionary nature of the discourse which attempts to represent reality in Western literature. No evidence suggests that the process has come to a close. It would be an interesting project to rewrite the history of realism as the process through which the discourses of the real struggle to absorb and bring within the compass of rational explanation and realistic representation experiences that initially can only be cognized and brought into language through the wavering of the fantastic.

### 1.3 SPEED

While the discussion of genre and of "wavering" is intended to restore the freshness and brilliance of formulations that have long been recognized as central to Todorov's essay and which, as a result, are heavily encrusted with critical commentary, the idea to which I now turn has been largely neglected by subsequent scholarship and needs to be rescued from relative oblivion. In the last chapter of *The Fantastic*, as Todorov proposes to discuss the function of the fantastic ("no longer 'what is the fantastic' but 'why is the fantastic?'" )<sup>11</sup> the argument takes an unexpected turn: "There exists a curious coincidence between the authors who cultivate the supernatural and those who, within their works, are especially concerned with the development of the action, or to put it another way, who seek above all to tell *stories*".<sup>12</sup> And what is the contribution of the fantastic to this narrative imperative?: "A fixed law, an established rule: that is what immobilizes narrative. For the transgression of the law to provoke a rapid modification, supernatural forces must intervene".<sup>13</sup> After a few more examples, Todorov brings the argument to a close in a typically lapidary statement:

The relation of the supernatural to narration is henceforth clear: every text in which the supernatural occurs is a narrative, for the supernatural event first of all modifies a previous equilibrium – which is the very definition of narrative; but not every narrative includes supernatural elements, even though an affinity exists

<sup>10</sup> EUGENIO BOLONGARO, *Thomas Pynchon and the Contemporary Forms of the Fantastic*, in WHITEHEAD, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 212-234.

<sup>11</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 158; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 162-163; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 171.

<sup>13</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 165; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 173.

between them insofar as the supernatural achieves the narrative modification in the fastest manner.<sup>14</sup>

Let us ignore for the moment the semantic slippage from the “fantastic” to the “supernatural” (we will return to this in the second part of this essay), and rather reflect on the substance of Todorov’s quite extraordinary proposal.

By linking the fantastic to the development of plot, the exploration of action, movement, etc. Todorov is raising (though not pursuing) the issues of the ethical and political dimension of the genre. The fantastic is not about description and contemplation but about activity and adventure, and whenever sentient action is evoked the preoccupation of how to act individually and collectively emerges. From this perspective the “wavering” in the fantastic is not only about what is or what is not the case (a cognitive predicament), but also about what is possible, what can be done and then inevitably what ought to be done, or again what is not now the case but may yet become so – and these are ethico-political predicaments.

The connection between the fantastic and utopian/dystopian literature looms on the horizon. But, the moment the affinity between the fantastic and the utopian is contemplated, a key difference also emerges: the deliberate unfolding of utopian discourse is radically different from the irruption of the fantastic. The utopian meticulously explains how a different order is possible, the fantastic questions the established order by demanding an explanation of the inexplicable. The utopian unfolds a world, the fantastic condenses and displaces antagonism in an unexpected challenge from outside: “Indeed what could better disturb the stable situation of the beginning [of the story], which the efforts of all the participants tend to consolidate, if not precisely an event external not only to the situation but to the world itself?”<sup>15</sup> In sum, the utopian is slow, the fantastic is fast. This use of the fantastic as a means to get without delay and lengthy preliminaries to the heart of an ethical and/or political problematic is precisely what recommends the fantastic to moralist storytellers (among the most notable contemporary examples one might cite such diverse figures as Italo Calvino and Thomas Pynchon). Todorov must be given credit for having discovered one of the most compelling qualities of the fantastic, as well as one of the reasons for its enduring appeal. At the same time, Todorov has also provided the conceptual tools to grasp one of the key dangers of the fantastic. Speed has a cost: the fantastic destabilization poses a challenge perhaps even breaks the hold of the established order but the alternative is not provided and the fallout is unpredictable. To fulfil its potential, therefore, fantastic writing must steer a clear course between the Scylla of oversimplification (ultimately, escapism) and the Charybdis of irrationalism (ultimately, nihilism). Through narrative *élan*, the dynamism of the fantastic can mask superficial thinking or cognitive collapse, in both cases turning away from the ethico-political horizon the genre broaches.

One last objection: aren’t “wavering” and narrative impetus contradictory ideas? Doesn’t wavering require a halt in the diegesis, so that the character (or the reader) can

<sup>14</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 166; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 174.

<sup>15</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 165; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 173.

have the time to consider the alternatives? There are two quick answers to this objection. First, as Todorov himself points out, the fantastic wavering “maintains suspense” thus permitting “a particularly dense organization of plot”.<sup>16</sup> Second, the observations on action, ethics and politics make it possible to recognize that the representation of praxis, understood as the dialectic between action and reflection, is the engine of the fantastic: the supernatural triggers a search for explanation, meaning and order which is both cognitive and practical, both about knowledge / understanding and verification through engagement. Indeed, attention to praxis provides the fantastic writer with the surest compass to negotiate the perils mentioned earlier.

## 2 THE ADVENTURE OF THE FANTASTIC

Rereading *The Fantastic* today is an unexpected pleasure. Direct encounter revives the conceptual brilliance of the original formulations but the more substantial surprise is the (re)discovery of the literary quality of the essay. Now that the referential value of Todorov’s argument is familiar (though, as we have seen, still capable of productive defamiliarizations), we can better appreciate Todorov’s “style”, by which I’m not referring simply to Todorov’s language – what he would himself define as the “verbal aspect”<sup>17</sup> – whose qualities, in any event, are more evident in the original French than in the English translation, but rather to the overall compositional aspect of the text. It is from this perspective that the full extent of Todorov’s achievement emerges: rightly celebrated as an insightful, lucid and influential exploration of a critical category, *The Fantastic* should also be recognized as a exemplary manifestation of a critic’s gifts. Todorov’s lively curiosity, intelligence, erudition, and focus animate the analysis and propel it in novel and often startling directions. The reader struggles to keep up with the pace and range of Todorov’s investigations and it is only with some years of distance that the drama to which the book owes its enduring appeal can be named: the meteoric rise and fall of an idea. Todorov’s fantastic is born in a flash of insight, expands like a galaxy seeking to embrace the whole of literature, and finally implodes – all in the space of less two hundred mesmerizing pages. It is in this sense that Todorov’s essay is not only a *critical* but also a *literary* masterpiece.

### 2.1 SETTING THE STAGE

The opening chapter of *The Fantastic* is a bold *tour de force*. As we have seen, Todorov’s main goal is to vindicate the pertinence and usefulness of the category of literary genre but in order to do so he finds himself confronted with the need to provide nothing less fundamental than a “an hypothesis concerning the nature of the literary works”.<sup>18</sup> This task he liquidates in a few paragraphs relying on semiotics analysis of the literary sign and on the idea of “structure” which is central to the whole essay and which we have already analysed. So much for the conceptual work, but from the compositional

<sup>16</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 92; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 98.

<sup>17</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 20; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 19; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 24.

perspective that we are now adopting, the central move in the opening chapter is the attack on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* and the system of genres/modes that it elucidates. It is in carrying out this task that Todorov sets the stage for the drama that is about to unfold.

For our purposes here, the interest of Todorov's dismantling of Frye's system lies in its method and tone. Todorov begins by taking Frye at his word and summarizing the Canadian critic's six most fundamental postulates<sup>19</sup> which Todorov himself seem to adopt, while questioning their originality: "None of these ideas is entirely original (though Frye rarely give his sources) [...] The sum of these postulates, as valid for literary studies as for literature itself, constitutes our own point of departure".<sup>20</sup> He then presents the various classifications of the literary system which Frye proposes, and embarks on a point by point examination of the relations between postulates and categories, as well as among the categories themselves. The final effect of this rigorous engagement with Frye is to deliver a devastating crescendo of criticism: "Frye's classifications are not logically coherent either among themselves or individually";<sup>21</sup> Frye confuses historical genres with theoretical genres;<sup>22</sup> "Frye never makes explicit his conception of the work" and as a result his list of categories is arbitrary;<sup>23</sup> and finally Todorov's delivers the *coup de grace* "his [Frye's] classification is arbitrary, for it does not rest on an explicit theory – it is a little like those pre-Linnaean classifications of living organisms which readily constructed a category of all animals which scratch themselves...".<sup>24</sup> The giant has been felled and the field is now clear. And yet, if the first surprise is such a direct debunking of another eminent critic's position, the second surprise is the cautious and almost pensive tone on which the chapter ends:

Its [literature's] only reason for being is that it says what non-literary language does not and cannot say. Therefore some of the best critics tend to become writers themselves in order to avoid the violence wrought upon literature by non-literature; but it is a hopeless effort. [...] When the critic has said everything in his power about a literary text, he has still said nothing; for the very existence of literature implies that it cannot be replaced by non-literature.

These skeptical reflections need not discourage us; they merely oblige us to become aware of limits we cannot transcend. The goal of knowledge is an approximative truth, not an absolute one.<sup>25</sup>

The last paragraph seeks to reassure the reader who, after all, still has the whole book to read, but the passage sounds a warning about the paradoxes that even Todorov's impeccable logical rigour cannot hope to resolve – even if he wanted to, which remains to be seen.

19 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 9-11; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 13-15.

20 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 10; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 15.

21 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 12; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 17.

22 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 12-15; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 18-20.

23 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 15-16; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 20-21.

24 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 19; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 23.

25 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 22-23; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 27. Howard's translation does not modify the original to achieve gender inclusivity. The masculine is always used. It seems more appropriate to point out this fact generally rather than add editorial comments [sic] in each citation.

## 2.2 THE DISCOVERY

The core of the argument developed in *The Fantastic* is found in Chapter 2: “Definition of the Fantastic” and Chapter 3: “The Uncanny and the Marvelous.” Todorov opens this central phase with a startling change of pace. The tightly argued theoretical discourse used to expose Frye’s inconsistencies to task is replaced by the analysis of fictional text (Cazotte’s *Le diable amoureux*) supported by extensive plot summaries and citations. This is the first in a long series of close readings which bear witness to Todorov’s commitment to the dialectical interaction between literary practice and literary theory, but also (and from our point of view more importantly) enable the reader to develop a much more concrete grasp of the literary phenomenon under consideration. While Todorov does not always take the time to elucidate all the examples he mentions (e.g., a reader unfamiliar with *Le Horla* would not find Todorov’s references to Maupassant’s short story very illuminating), the sustained analyses of a few key texts (*Le diable amoureux*, *The Saragossa Manuscript*, various tales from *Arabian Nights*, *Aurélia*) and the substantial citations from many other sources achieve the overall effect of proving the practical pertinence and usefulness of the categories the critic is elaborating. The citations and summaries also play the important role of evoking the narrative pleasure that it is one of the functions of Todorov’s discussion to address. From a compositional perspective, the most important contribution of the passages Todorov devotes to the analysis of fictional texts is to break the rhythm of argumentation. They introduce a shift in discursive gear which opens the possibility of reflecting and assimilating the information given up to that point but also of testing that information, questioning it or even discovering new issues which steer the theoretical discussion in a new direction. In sum, the summaries and citation are not mere illustration of a conceptual point, they are a movement from one level of the discussion (the abstract) to another (the concrete) which pursue each other without solution of continuity.

This constant dynamic back and forth was announced in the methodological discussion in the first chapter and is perfectly illustrated in the opening of Chapter 2. The first two paragraphs describe at some length the predicament of Alfonso (the protagonist of *Le diable amoureux*) and draw from it the questions: “The ambiguity [experience by Alfonso] is sustained to the very end of the adventure: reality or dream? truth or illusion?” which leads to the resounding rejoinder “Which brings us to the very heart of the fantastic”.<sup>26</sup> And the definition that follows delivers the entire concept in the pithy formulation cited earlier. This is the first *coup de théâtre* in an essay that, as we shall see, contains many. Still, Todorov does not allow the reader to rest and meditate, rather he puts something more on the table, though deferring its treatment: “The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary: and the latter deserve more than a mere mention. But we shall postpone their discussion for the last chapter of our study”.<sup>27</sup> The statement, and especially the comment about the imaginary needing more than a mere mention, is as intriguing as it is puzzling. What is Todorov driving at? The supernatural introduces a wavering between an explanation

<sup>26</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 25; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 25; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 29.

that confines the event to the realm of the imaginary and one that accepts it as real (albeit in a world other than the conventional one). *Obviously*, therefore, the fantastic wavering is related to the imaginary and the real: what more is there to say? And why would the relation to the imaginary be particularly worthy of attention? The reader has barely been confronted with an astonishingly simple definition only to be told that there is more to the story, but it won't be revealed until the last chapter. The suspense is palpable!

The remainder of Chapter 2 is devoted to a fleshing out of the definition of the fantastic wavering which Todorov carries out through a confrontation with both primary and secondary sources. The reader is given a chance to digest Todorov proposal and appreciate the way it develops (rather than contradict) existing scholarship, while reflecting more accurately the narrative strategies in the fictional texts. Todorov moves with ease through the material, conveying a sense of reassuring mastery which relaxes the cognitive tension produced by the shock of the initial definition. And yet, on a careful rereading, it becomes clear that the progress of the argument is not quite as smooth as it appeared at first.

At times, Todorov introduces as a matter of fact concepts and distinctions which on second thought beg for clarification. Two occasions stand out: the claim that an allegorical or poetical reading is incompatible with the fantastic insofar as it defuses the reader's wavering<sup>28</sup> and the argument that the wavering may be not only between the real and the illusory but also between the real and the imaginary.<sup>29</sup> The former distinction will be clarified in Chapter 4, which indeed is entirely devoted to it, while the latter will not be developed further though the previous allusion to the imaginary creates an instability. As we noted above, the reader was told this business of the imaginary would be dealt in the last chapter but it surfaces here again, providing the occasion for an exploration of the relationship between the fantastic and madness. Todorov's observations are compellingly drawn from the analysis of a series of fictional text but their theoretical significance remains unclear: why is it important to draw the distinction between these two types of cause (illusion vs imagination) for the hesitation of the reader? Logic economy would suggest that it is sufficient to explore the essential and necessary components of a category but Todorov cannot help himself noticing other aspects of the corpus he is examining and investigating directions that begin to put into question the solidity and rigour of his definitions. Nonetheless, Chapter 2 ends on a confident note: "*Aurélia* constitutes, then, an original – and perfect – example of the fantastic [...] What we are concerned to know (and it is on this point that the hesitation turns) is whether or not madness is actually a higher reason. The hesitation previously concerned perception; now it concerns language"<sup>30</sup> The reader is encouraged to feel that the efforts necessary to grasp the definition of the genre and the range of its manifestations have been rewarded.

28 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 32; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 36-37.

29 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 36; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 41.

30 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 40; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 45.

### 2.3 CONCEPTUAL WAVERINGS

The opening of Chapter 3 delivers a new shock to the reader who might have been lulled into complacency by the ending of the previous chapter. After a brief recapitulation of his definition, Todorov writes: “The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre”.<sup>31</sup> All of a sudden, the genre whose characteristics we have painstakingly established vanishes under our very eyes! The fantastic is doomed to surrender in the end to the neighbouring genres of the uncanny and the marvelous, and in the diagram of the three-partite generic system Todorov has worked out, the fantastic is represented as the median line which “corresponds perfectly to the nature of the fantastic, a frontier between two adjacent realms”.<sup>32</sup> In this statement the critic allows the impetus of his new argument to lead him into a questionable isomorphism. The conceptual logic (the generic system) and the semantic logic (the kind of story that these genres tell) are fused in a formulation that at best seems tautological: the fantastic talks about the wavering between two types of explanations and now it turns out that it is a genre hovering between two other genres, but that’s like saying that tragedy, which is defined as involving characters who are of a higher status than the average theatre-goer, is a higher genre than comedy, which is defined as involving characters who are of a lower status than the average theater-goer. In sum Todorov’s statement does not add anything to the original definition but rather provides a rhetorical compensation for the thinning out of the original definition.

The way in which the fantastic is now conceptualized as bleeding into the uncanny and the marvelous is, in fact, contagious. The boundaries of the two adjacent genres are also destabilized: “the uncanny is not a clearly delimited genre, unlike the fantastic. More precisely it is limited on just one side, that of the fantastic; on the other it dissolves into the general field of literature”;<sup>33</sup> “There exists, finally, a form of the marvelous in the pure state which – just as in the case of the uncanny in the pure state – has no distinct frontiers”.<sup>34</sup> What emerges from these formulations is a rather odd picture: the better defined genres are the admixture of fantastic-uncanny and fantastic-marvellous while the pure fantastic is only a boundary and the pure uncanny and pure marvelous bleed into more or less undifferentiated zones of literature: the uncanny in “general” literature (the reference to Dostoevsky’s novels suggest that by “general” Todorov means “realist” literature) and the marvelous in what we might term imaginative literature, which Todorov subdivides in four main types (hyperbolic, exotic, instrumental, and scientific).

One thing is becoming clear: the conceptual coherence of the structure is wavering and one might be tempted to mount against it an attack not unlike the one Todorov himself launched against Frye’s system. Yet, such temptation is better resisted because it

<sup>31</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 41; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 44; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 49. To be precise, Todorov’s system involves an additional complication: between the “pure” uncanny and the “pure” marvelous lie two subgenres the “uncanny-fantastic” and the “marvelous-fantastic.” The “pure” fantastic therefore is the frontier between these two subgenres.

<sup>33</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 46; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 53; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 59.



would presupposes the endorsement of the rigorous “scientific” model Todorov invoked by citing Popper in the first chapter, a model, however, that in a post-structuralist vein appears ultimately indefensible. The fact of the matter is that, over and above Todorov’s initial protestations of scientificity, the weakness in the “structure” can now be seen as a merit rather than a flaw in the articulation of the fantastic. Rather than finding fault with Todorov for not meeting the standards he initially established, we should praise his curiosity and intellectual honesty, which lead him to propose a much more flexible and fluid system than it might have appeared at first. The fantastic, the uncanny and the marvellous are not airtight categories but rather a porous configuration whose heuristic and explicatory value can be increased rather than lessened precisely for being porous. What is lost in conceptual sharpness can be more than compensated by the gains in reach, i.e., in the breath of material encompassed and in the depth of the engagement with particular works. At the end of Chapter 3, then, the reader begins to realize that Todorov has developed a toolbox, which should be evaluated for what it can accomplish in the analysis of a wide range of literary texts, rather than on the basis of the “purity” of its conceptual apparatus.

#### 2.4 THE PROLIFERATION OF THE FANTASTIC

The uncertainties introduced in the discussion of the uncanny of the marvelous take a back seat in the discussion of poetry and allegory which occupies Chapter 4. As we have seen, this discussion is a clarification of the statement made earlier about the incompatibility between the fantastic and an allegorical or poetical reading. Todorov’s treatment is interesting in two respects: (a) the clear distinction drawn between the fantastic wavering (a movement internal to the fictional world of the text) and interpretation (a movement in which the relation of the fictional world to the reader’s understanding of her/his “real” world is examined); and (b) the lively analysis of Gogol’s famous story “The Nose”, which uncovers a text that, by teetering on the edge of the allegorical and the fantastic, can be seen as ushering in a new and, in Todorov’s view, distinctly modernist genre. Overall, however, there are no major surprises and the reader takes a well-deserved break from the complications introduced in the discussion of the uncanny and the marvelous.

The ensuing six chapters represent half of the whole study and yet they are the least easily remembered because, somewhat paradoxically, both more technical and diffuse. Chapter 5 sets out the discursive strategies that are necessary or most conducive to achieve a fantastic effect: the use of figurative language, the presence of a dramatized narrator, irreversible temporality. The style follows closely the pattern established in Chapter 4: a number of issues are raised and dealt with mostly relying on citations from primary sources but also with the occasional reference to critics the reader has by now become familiar with (e.g., Penzoldt). Todorov keeps the reader attention by proceeding at a good pace.

With Chapter 6, the discussion enters a new phase: the themes of the fantastic. This is the most extensive section of the essay; indeed one could almost speak of an essay within the essay given that Todorov bookends it with an introductory and concluding chapter. The length of the section is in part justified by the fact that Todorov needs to address an

important orientation in literary studies, namely thematic criticism. Unlike the opening chapter, however, when Todorov found in Frye a worthy opponent and the attack was as stimulating as it was devastating, Richard, Callois, and Ostorowsky fold too easily and quickly under Todorov's scrutiny and as a result the discussion languishes. At one point a kind of desultoriness creeps into Todorov's presentation:

When we raise the question of themes, we put the 'fantastic' reaction in parenthesis, in order to be concerned solely with the nature of the events that provoke it. In other words, from this viewpoint, the distinction between the fantastic and the marvelous is no longer of interest, and we shall be concerned with works belonging to one genre or the other without differentiation. Nonetheless the text may emphasize the fantastic (i.e., the reaction) so strongly that we can no longer distinguish the supernatural which has provoked it: the reaction makes it impossible to grasp the action, instead of leading us back to it. Putting the fantastic in parentheses then becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible.<sup>35</sup>

This passage is more than a little confusing. We begin with putting the fantastic within parenthesis only to discover at the end that it is impossible to do so. As if aware of this momentary lapsus, Todorov picks up the pace in the ensuing paragraph with a long citation from the dramatic conclusion of Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot": the brilliance of Hoffmann's prose revives the reader that might well have grown a little disoriented. Still, this is the low point in the adventure of the fantastic and it is with some apprehension that the reader embarks on the next chapter entitled "The Themes of the Self".

The first two pages of the new chapter are enlivened by the summary of a story from the *Arabian Nights*. Todorov's talent as a story(re)teller is once again vindicated. The reader is easily seduced by the tale of the young prince and princess persecuted by a wicked genie. The analysis of the story begins with a protestation of impotence which paves the way for a rather extraordinary development: "In the face of this apparent thematic variety, we are at first perplexed. How to describe it? Yet [...]"<sup>36</sup> "Yet" indeed, given that over the next few pages Todorov educes from this tale, and few others, the most sweeping conclusion yet:

Let us sum up: the principle we have discovered may be designated as the fragility of the limit between matter and mind. This principle engenders several fundamental themes: a special causality, pan-determinism; multiplication of the personality; collapse of the limit between subject and object; and lastly, the transformation of time and space. [...] It has been evident, in any case, throughout this analysis that there is a correspondence between the themes of the fantastic grouped here, and those categories we use to describe the world of the drug-user, the psychotic, or the infant. Hence a remark by Piaget's seems to apply word for word to our object: "Four fundamental processes characterize this intellectual revolution effected during the first two years of existence: these are the constructions of the categories of the object and of space, of causality and of time".<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 103; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 109-110.

<sup>36</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 109; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 120; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 126.

The reader is stunned into momentary silence but once speech returns may want to ask: can the fantastic actually bear all of this conceptual weight? Is there much left for other genres to do? Also a careful reader will have noticed that in the course of this discussion, Todorov's terminology has become fluid. The terms fantastic, uncanny, and marvelous begin to bleed into each other: for example, the *Arabian Nights*, once marvelous, are now "fantastic"<sup>38</sup> and so is Gautier's work, which formerly belonged to the uncanny.<sup>39</sup> It seems now established that the genre in issue is no longer the fantastic proper described in Chapter 2, but rather the fantastic constellation described in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 8, the expansion and proliferation of the fantastic continues unabated. The theme of sexuality is explored and the Freudian problematic which hovered at the edges of the argument is now directly confronted. The fantastic emerges as the literary discourse capable of voicing transgressive desire. This revelation is not particularly surprising since the presence of sexuality in the majority of the tale extensively cited was so obvious that the direct identification of the issue has a belated quality. A more interesting discovery is that while the themes-of-the-self examined in the previous chapter "could be interpreted as so many definitions of the relation between man and the world, or the perception-consciousness system", the themes-of-the-other in this chapter "concern [...] the relation of man with his desire – and thereby with his unconscious".<sup>40</sup> In other words, the themes of the self are outer-directed, while the themes of the other are inner-directed: a rather paradoxical situation which the subsequent chapter will attempt to elaborate (with limited success, as we shall see). More important for our purposes, however, is the fact that the terminological "bleeding" which we have begun to notice continues with a vengeance. Not only does the term "fantastic" now refer to a generic constellation but even the term "supernatural" resurfaces as a passable synonym. Compare the statement in Chapter 3:

The other series of elements that provoke the sense of the uncanny is not linked to the fantastic but to what we might call "an experience of limits",<sup>41</sup>

with the statement in Chapter 8:

We are in the presence here of an experience incomparable, in its intensity, to any other. It will not be surprising, then, to discover its relation to the supernatural: we know already that the supernatural always appears in an experience of limits, in "superlative" states.<sup>42</sup>

Or consider the smooth flow from "fantastic" to "supernatural" to "uncanny" in the following passage:

Beyond this intense but "normal" love for a women, the literature of the fantastic illustrates several transformations of desire. Most of them do not truly be-

<sup>38</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 110; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 116.

<sup>39</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 49; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 50.

<sup>40</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 139; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 146.

<sup>41</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 48; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 53.

<sup>42</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 127; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 134.

long to the supernatural, but rather to a social form of the uncanny. Incest constitutes one of the most frequent varieties.<sup>43</sup>

The terminological wavering has in fact intensified to the point that the term “genre” itself seems on the verge of losing its pertinence: “The supernatural does not manifest itself with equal intensity in each of these cases: it makes its appearance in order to give the measure of sexual desires which are especially powerful and in order to introduce us into life after death”<sup>44</sup> – faced with this kind of formulation the reader begins to wonder whether it would not be better to return to Frye and begin speaking about a fantastic “mode” which can appear in any literary text whatever its “genre” might be.

In the last chapter of the series on the themes of the fantastic, Todorov valiantly attempts to draw all the strands of his argument together and convey to the reader a sense of synthetic unity and pragmatic relevance. The first move is to vindicate the systematic nature of the discussion of themes (the two “thematic complexes” explored are not only different but also incompatible) thus reassuring the reader about the coherence of a rather diffuse discussion. But the most important point in the first part of Chapter 9 is to remind the reader of the commitments entailed by the structural method proposed in Chapter 1. By distinguishing between *poetics*, whose goal is to identify structures, and *interpretation*, whose goal is to explore meaning, and restating that *The Fantastic* falls in the former category rather than the latter, Todorov returns to the postulates he originally enunciated: his approach is less ambitious than the task of interpretation (cannot tell us what the literary texts means) but is more objective and scientific (can tell us how the text is constructed, can identify the underlying matrix that made it possible to produce it). It then becomes clear that for Todorov, a genre is fundamentally “an inventory of options. But a work’s inclusion within a genre still teaches us nothing as to its meaning. It merely permits us to establish the existence of a certain rule by which the work in question – and many other as well – are governed”.<sup>45</sup> This is an extremely useful clarification insofar as it demonstrates that the structural approach is oriented to practice, or in other words to understanding the range of possibilities which a given literary system makes available so that individual manifestations can be seen as dynamic interventions within that system.

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to connecting the typology of themes of the fantastic to larger societal issues and predicaments. The discussion moves from connecting the themes of the self and themes of the other with the Freudian description of psychosis and neurosis respectively. This leads Todorov to engage with psychoanalytic literary criticism and distance himself from it: in essence Todorov finds Freudian categories useful as long as they enable the literary critic to identify textual structures (e.g., what determines the production of a particular set and sequence of figures in the text), but not useful if they lead the literary critic to attempt a diagnosis of a particular psychological condition (e.g., the author’s). Fair enough, though the insistence that the autonomy of the language of literary analysis must be preserved against the temptation of adopting the languages of other disciplines (such as psychoanalysis) is beginning to

43 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 131; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 138.

44 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., pp. 138-139; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 146.

45 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 141; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 149.

sound like a cry of desperation rather than a useful postulate.

As a matter of fact, at the end of the chapter, Todorov himself surrenders to the paradox inherent in the object of study: “a verbal formula concerning literature always betrays the nature of literature, because literature is itself paradoxical, constituted of words but signifying more than the words, at once verbal and transverbal”.<sup>46</sup> This is a startling admission. Rather abruptly Todorov underwrites not only the “impossibility” of criticism as the meta-discourse about literature, but also the “impossibility” of literary discourse itself, which is born precisely out of the contradictory claim to be both only about itself (self-referential, autotelic, etc.) but also ultimately about the world or worlds (real and imagined). The fantastic has finally reached its maximum extension; it has brought the critic and the reader face to face with the insuperable limit of the theoretical enterprise undertaken in Chapter 1. The clarification and systematicity of critical concepts cannot resolve this final paradox: the intelligibility of a genre like the fantastic depends only in part on logical configurations internal to the literary system, it also depends on the genre’s capacity to reach out and organize socio-cultural realities which obey quite a different “logic”. The most striking aspect of Todorov’s formulation of this paradox (which, as he freely admits, is by no means an original discovery) is its tone: the reader senses a kind of fatigue, a “surrender” (as I put it earlier) to the paradox, as if it were a wall that defeats any attempt to go beyond. The confident energy that was so much in evidence in the initial critique of Frye is now spent, and the reader cannot but look back on it with some nostalgia. The adventure of the fantastic has come to an end. Or is it?

## 2.5 UNDOING OF THE FANTASTIC

The conclusion of Todorov’s essay begins in the most traditional way: the ground covered is pithily summarized in a single paragraph. Is there anything more to say? Surprisingly, yes! In spite of the somewhat disconsolate tone at the end of the preceding chapter, it turns out that the “transverbal” dimension of the genre can be seen as defining not only a limit but also a new field of investigation. This is where Todorov asks the question of the function of the fantastic and begins to answer it with a new discovery (derived in part from Penzoldt and Freud): “the fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it”<sup>47</sup> and a little later “the function of the supernatural is to exempt the text from the action of the law and thereby to transgress the law”.<sup>48</sup> To a contemporary reader these statements seem ideally suited to re-launching the discussion: so far transgression has played a role only in relation to the sexuality (in the themes-of-the-other section) but now it acquires a new scope and potential for elaboration in many other directions. Unfortunately, no sooner has Todorov opened this possibility that its potential is summarily shut down. It turns out that the only pertinent transgression is indeed related to sexuality and this leads the critic to arrive at the astonishing conclusion that: “psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby has

46 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 156; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 164.

47 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 158; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 166.

48 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 159; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 167.

made useless) the literature of the fantastic”.<sup>49</sup> The assertion produces a cognitive short circuit. What does this mean? Does “useless” simply mean that the fantastic has now lost its original function of manifesting repressed sexual desires? But did it not have or can it not acquire any other function? Does it mean that the fantastic, being useless, is now effectively dead? But then doesn’t that imply that the viability of the genre is reduced to its social function at a particular time in history and in that case the whole essay is merely of historical significance, since its object is a historical relic? Does that mean that the life of literature as a whole is ultimately reducible to social utility, which would make of literary discourse an epiphenomenon of other social discourses and therefore any claim to autonomy pathetic in addition to indefensible? The reader is deeply puzzled and perhaps even irritated at the way the significance of the whole enterprise in which she/he has been drawn is suddenly evaporating.

Todorov does little to assuage the reader’s concerns when he insists on the fragility of the fantastic:

It [the fantastic] appeared in a systematic way around the end of the eighteenth century with Cazotte; a century later, we find the last aesthetically satisfying examples of the genre in Maupassant’s tales. We may encounter examples of the hesitation characteristic of the fantastic in other periods, but it is exceptional when this hesitation is thematized by the text itself. Is there a reason for this short span? Or again: why does the literature of the fantastic no longer exist?<sup>50</sup>

The passage is disconcerting because it seems to ignore the point that has been made just a few pages earlier and which provides an obvious answer to the question: the literature of the fantastic no longer exists because it has been made useless by psychoanalysis. And yet, the very fact that Todorov asks the question anew suggests that he is now ready to give a different answer.

The ensuing eight pages are among the most interesting and suggestive of the entire essay. In a final *coup de théâtre* Todorov returns to the paradox he outlined at the end of Chapter 9 and gives it a radically new interpretation:

It is of the very nature of language to parcel out what can be said into discontinuous fragments; a name, in that it selects one or several properties of the concept it constitutes, excludes all other properties and posits the antithesis: *this* and *the contrary*. Now literature exists by words; but its dialectical vocation is to say more than language says, to transcend verbal divisions. It is, within language, that which destroys the metaphysics inherent in all language. The nature of literary discourse is to *go beyond* – otherwise it would have no reason for being; literature is a kind of murderous weapon by which language commits suicide.<sup>51</sup>

Within this dialectic, the role of the fantastic is recast:

Whence the ambiguous impression made by fantastic literature: on the one hand, it represents the quintessence of literature, insofar as the questioning of the

<sup>49</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 160; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 169.

<sup>50</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 166; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 175.

<sup>51</sup> TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 167; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., pp. 175-176.

limit between real and unreal, proper to all literature, is its explicit centre. On the other hand, though, it is only a propaedeutics to literature: by combating the metaphysics of everyday language, it gives that language life; it must start from language, even if only to reject it.<sup>52</sup>

But then, how can such an obviously important genre have died? Todorov's answer is now much more nuanced. Through a compelling reading of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (which draws from the equally compelling reading of Gogol's "The Nose" in Chapter 4) Todorov argues that the fantastic has not ceased to exist but rather has undergone a mutation: the fantastic hesitation before the supernatural event turns into adaptation; the other-worldly transcendence of the marvelous triggered by the supernatural turns into shock at the inexplicability of the immanent world from which there is no escape; and finally the strangeness of the uncanny becomes the norm: "the fantastic becomes the rule not the exception".<sup>53</sup> In the end, Todorov argues that "With Kafka, we are thus confronted with a *generalized fantastic* which swallows up the entire world of the book and the reader along with it".<sup>54</sup> The contemporary situation of the fantastic, therefore, is that it has undergone a radicalization: the fundamental distinction between the real and the unreal, which is central to the genre and to literature in general, is simultaneously maintained and undermined, it remains under erasure we might say using the language of post-structuralism. Through this radicalization, the fantastic vanishes but only to be disseminated across and contaminate the entire field of literature. The final paradox in Todorov's essay is that the fantastic is impracticable today because it has become the basis for all contemporary literary practice: the undoing of the fantastic genre is due to the triumph of the fantastic sensibility (albeit in the mutated form which Todorov traces back to Gogol and Kafka).

### 3 CONCLUSION

Nabokov famously said that "One cannot read a book; one can only reread it".<sup>55</sup> (*Lectures of Literature* Nabokov was referring to fiction, rather than to literary criticism or theory, but there is no compelling reason to take his statement narrowly. There is a prior question, however, which Nabokov's unflinchingly elitist approach took evidently for granted, a book must be worth reading in the first place and that is a paradoxical statement insofar as in order to know whether a book is worth reading one must (or should) read it at least once. Perhaps, therefore, it would be better to amend Nabokov's dictum and say: "One cannot read a *good* book; one can only reread it". I hope that the analysis offered in this essay succeeds at least in demonstrating that Todorov's *The Fantastic* is a good book, indeed an excellent book, and therefore a book worthy of being reread. I also hope that the gambit of attempting a re-encounter without direct reference to the

52 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 168; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 176.

53 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 173; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 182.

54 TODOROV, *The Fantastic*, cit., p. 174; *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, cit., p. 182.

55 VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980, p. 3.

massive literature that *The Fantastic* has inspired has proved fruitful both in identifying the enduring critical contributions Todorov has made and in exposing the literary quality of his work. The value of the former is easily conceded but as to the latter it may be useful to reflect on it a little in this concluding remarks.

One way of understanding the paradox of literature that Todorov ultimately confronts in his essay, is to consider the principle, by now widely accepted in all the sciences, that the investigator can never completely disengage him/herself from the object she/he studies. Indeed, to study means to engage: to observe, to describe, to interpret are all forms of engagement with the subject/object of study. It is the activity of study that produces a subject and an object, i.e., a certain relation or, better still, a process of relating of which, in the case of literary criticism, the text is the manifestation, the record, the trace. Todorov himself might have had and might still have today some difficulty with such a relational epistemology but his book on *The Fantastic* provides an excellent example of how focusing only on the abstract conceptual level and neglecting the actual practice makes it impossible to appreciate the full value and impact of a work of criticism. Above and beyond the elucidation of a literary genre, Todorov's book offers a vision of literature that is all the more impressive because it is to some extent practiced. The adventure of the fantastic that I have attempted to trace is the adventure of a critical language that struggles with the knowledge of its insufficiency and deploys narrative strategies to overcome that insufficiency, all the while knowing that those strategies will ultimately expose it. The final undoing and dissemination of *The Fantastic* is as much the product of Todorov's own efforts as the "objective" destiny of the genre. And this means that Todorov has not simply given us a concept but also contributed to producing some of the most innovative and exciting textual practices in contemporary literature. That is a rare achievement.

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### PAROLE CHIAVE

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