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奇幻小说

FANTASY FICTION: AN INTRODUCTION

Lucie Armitt 著



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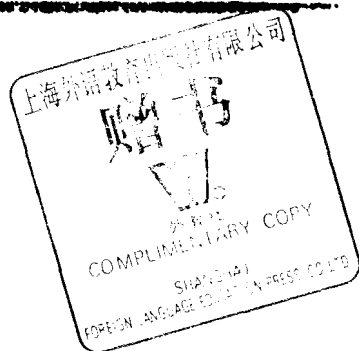
FANTASY FICTION:

AN INTRODUCTION

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Dedication



For Bethany and Rowan —
fantastic, both

‘Only the impossible is worth the effort,’
Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook*

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What Is Fantasy Writing?

'When we decide that something is unreal, the real it isn't need not itself be very real . . .'¹

Introduction

'Fantasy' is a word commonly disparaged by literary and nonliterary voices alike. Summed up in the dismissive phrase 'castles in the air,' fantasy takes on a kind of vertical trajectory that must be flattened, smoothed out, replaced with a more acceptable 'horizontal' outlook. So we are encouraged, in life, to keep our feet on the ground and our ambitions firmly anchored while fantasy writing guiltily reaches for 'blue sky.' What is fantasy writing? Utopia, allegory, fable, myth, science fiction, the ghost story, space opera, travelogue, the Gothic, cyberpunk, magic realism; the list is not exhaustive, but it covers most of the modes of fiction discussed in this book as 'fantasy.' Where fantasising is 'airy-fairy,' then, realism is 'grounded' (the recent colloquial meaning of this phrase underlying the positive implications of the distinction). It is, from this point, an easy slip-page to glide from 'realistic' to (literary) realism. Literary realism is certainly the type of fictional writing adopted most readily by the canon, seen as most fitting for serious or weighty subject matter. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine a work of fantasy attaining the *gravitas* of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–69). Then again, the same might be said for most other works of literary realism, and Milton's epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667), is far closer to fantasy than it is to real life, with Maureen Duffy going so far as to call it 'our longest and greatest romance work of science fiction.'²

What is it about literary realism that endows it with this innate privilege over fantasy? In essence, the advantage seems to reside in the perceived proximity between realism and 'the real.' The very term 'mimesis' (describing 'the imitative representation of nature or human behaviour'³) implies a documentary relationship between the world and its fictions, in the process endowing fiction with a false sense of truth. And yet, as specialists of literary realism remind us, there is no more a genuinely direct connection between realism and the real than there is between fantasy fiction and the real; fiction is fiction is fiction. As Lilian R. Furst puts it,

The realists' insistence on equating truth with illusion [fiction] means that they could achieve their aims only on the level of pretense, by prevailing upon their readers to accept the validity of their contentions and to believe without reservation in the reality of the fictive worlds they created. They were remarkably successful in doing so because they were able largely to conceal the literariness of their practices. In a sense, therefore, the realist novel can be seen as a prodigious cover-up.⁴

The first proviso we must therefore accommodate in tracing out the question 'What is fantasy writing?' is one apparently bending back upon itself: all fiction is fantasy, insofar as narrative scenarios comprise an interiorised image (one having existence only in the author's head) projected outwards onto a blank page. Through the intervention of a reader, one who brings his or her own reading fantasies to that book, we have a dynamic meeting point giving shape to the unique pleasures inherent in every readerly encounter.

Fantasy, then, is the basis upon which all reading and writing is founded. In his 1908 essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,' Sigmund Freud identifies this process in the following terms:

Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? . . . [T]he creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously . . . while separating it sharply from reality.⁵

So far so good, but our aim in this book is to establish a specific type of writing that exists as fantasy in a more rigorously defined sense. In identifying this aspect of fantasy writing, we need to be clear that Freud's word 'phantasy' is not synonymous with the word 'fantasy' as it is employed here. 'Phantasy' is a psychoanalytic term referring to that storehouse of fears, desires, and daydreams that inspire all fictions equally and that has its ultimate source in the unconscious.⁶

I have noted that 'phantasy' is not the same as 'fantasy'; nevertheless, those same fears and longings upon which our unconscious is founded frequently find their most resonant surface manifestations in fantasy literature. Fantasy enjoys—along with the unconscious—a greater freedom from that overdetermination to order, organise, and package the chaotic set of experiences we call 'real life' than classical literary realism can. There is, however, a third element of interest in Freud's words, which is the natural relationship he identifies between children and phantasying. For those of us who work in the field of literary fantasy, we are all too aware of the tendency to dismiss fantasy writing as childish: children read fantasy; adults read realism. Nor would we wish to deny that some of the most influential fantasy narratives *were* written for children: Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books (1865 and 1871), Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56), and most recently, of course, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books (1997–present). Nevertheless, this is not the same as identifying all fantasy as innately childlike.

What literary fantasy and psychoanalysis have in common is their shared need to construct narratives to explain the utterly inexplicable: what drives us, what terrifies us and why, and what our greatest desires might be. In examining, as we will in this book, texts such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, or Shelley's *Frankenstein* (among others), we know we are not reading children's literature. Nevertheless, it is perhaps *as* children that the kind of questions these narratives raise ('What do we most fear?' 'What is the most exotic place we can imagine?' 'Who are we?' 'What will become of us if . . . ?') loom largest, and when we are most receptive to them. As we mature,

the questions remain, but our philosophising on them becomes more complex and our response to their irresolution more intense. What we also realise is that while, as children, we pose these questions as individuals, as adults we know them to have a collective social and cultural significance. Similarly, although as children we believed there might be a precise geographical location where such dream worlds reside ('Second to the right and then straight on till morning'⁷), on reaching adulthood we need to discern locations of a more philosophical kind. It is here that we return to our differentiation between vertical and horizontal axes. The desire to fly is a common childhood fantasy, one that narratives such as *Peter Pan* exploit to good effect. But the challenge facing fantasy writing for adults is to take that vertical trajectory and give it a more grounded dimension while still enabling it to take flight. One of the means by which it does so is in its use of the horizon itself.

Beyond the Horizon

In his fine essay on utopia, Louis Marin examines the horizon as a symbol of simultaneous limit and infinity: 'The conquest through the discovery of mountain landscape at the end of the eighteenth century, of higher and higher viewpoints, moved the horizon further and further back, until it vanished . . .'⁸ Though capable of being pinpointed with mathematical precision, absolute in its refusal to allow access beyond it, the horizon can never be reached, for it continually recedes as we approach. For Marin, this is the essence of utopia: a vista onto unknowable promise. It is in this same complex relationship between geometric precision and an utter sense of the impossible that the essence of fantasy fiction in general is born: a hyperbolic, endlessly expansive desire for the uncontainable, trapped within the constraints of a literary genre in which narrative closure is ruthlessly effected.

Though not all utopias are fantasy narratives as such (More's, as we shall see in Chapter 5, is not, and critics such as Louis James happily embrace Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* [1719] as a utopia, though it is difficult to accommodate under the generic term 'fantasy'), it is easy to see how those early encounters with 'scientific investigation[s] of the habitat and lifestyles of alien peoples'⁹ paved the way

for later subgenres such as science/speculative fiction. As James himself observes, one of the many intertextual influences *Crusoe* can be seen to have had on subsequent adventure narratives includes the making of cult sci-fi films such as *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964).¹⁰ When, as is so often the case, fantasy utopias do amalgamate fictive futurism with a utopian rereading of ancient mythological sources such as Eden or classical Greek legends, they become enabled to carve out spaces no longer beholden to time, allowing for a thorough deconstruction of the basic structural principles of realism.

Many of the points Marin makes about sea travel are equally valid for space travel, so much of the terminology of space navigation being of maritime origin. Hence the notion of a journey into the unknown, interrupted by forces unforeseen, epitomises the plot of H. G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). Whilst by no means a 'no place' (not least because the moon is a specific location familiar to us all—if only from a distance), the difference between the moon and the Earth, combined with a perceived difficulty in the ability to return to Earth, results in Earth being considered utopian by contrast in the minds of the central protagonists:

'Daylight!' cried I. 'Daybreak, sunset, clouds, and windy skies! Shall we ever see these things again?'

As I spoke, a little picture of our world seemed to rise before me, bright and little and clear, like the background of some old Italian picture. 'The Sky that changes, and the sea that changes, and the hills and the green trees and the towns and cities shining in the sun. Think of a wet roof at sunset . . . Think of the windows of a westward house!'¹¹

It is perhaps primarily when horizon meets ocean or space, rather than land, that utopianism fulfils its most alluring potential, for like water running through our hands, no matter how hard we try to shape it, horizons trace the point at which sea strives to become air but fails to be either. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Romantic Gothic ballad 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1797–98), the shooting of the albatross propels the mariner and his crew into an obsessive relationship with that imaginary line of navigation:

All in a hot and copper sky,
 The bloody Sun, at noon,
 Right up above the mast did stand,
 No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,
 We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
 As idle as a painted ship
 Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,
 And all the boards did shrink;
 Water, water, every where,
 Nor any drop to drink.
 (lines 111–22)

While the horizon is literally absent for Coleridge's reader (no mention being made of it in these lines), its presence, paradoxically, is insisted upon through the immense but still ocean framed by the horizon in the same manner in which the 'painted ship' and 'painted ocean' are framed by (again, literally absent) wood. Marin identifies a more characteristic pattern emerging in literature from this period:

The limitless horizon is one of the main characteristics of the Romantic landscape, and seems to be related to the attempt to display transcendence: at this extremity it seems possible to glimpse the other side of the sky, a 'beyond-space' which can be encountered through the poetic and rhetorical figure of twilight—through which a bridge is established between the visible and the invisible. Then beyond the horizon, in the imagination, appear Utopias.¹²

Arguably, faced with the uncanny aspects of Coleridge's poem, it is the view across the 'horizon' into the delights of marriage that proffers (no place!) the possibility of bliss. The encounter takes place on the very brink of this new world: the ceremony over, 'The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide . . . The guests are met, [and] feast is set' (lines 5 and 7). Hence the wedding guest can see the party but is prevented from joining in. Stuck upon the boundaries of that vision of promise, by the end of the poem he turns away

without partaking, and 'went like one that hath been stunned . . . A sadder and a wiser man' (lines 622 and 624).

Nor is this vision of the horizon only applicable to spatial interpretation; it also has relevance to our understanding of time. As Susan Stewart puts it, a typical and contradictory pattern describes our shared relationship with time whereby, on the one hand, we 'see events as discrete, having discernible beginnings and endings,' while on the other we see 'time itself as infinite, beyond any knowledgeable origin or end.'¹³ Similarly, left to its own devices there is an inherent structural paradox in fantasy writing. While it projects us beyond the horizon on the level of content, creating what J. R. R. Tolkien calls the 'Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible,'¹⁴ it harnesses us within clearly defined constraints on the level of narrative structure. Multiple 'Secondary' worlds may proliferate, but the boundaries established around those worlds must remain constant in order for the narrative to succeed. This static identification enabled Vladimir Propp, in 1928, to execute an entire project dependent upon identifying a finite list of what he calls key narrative 'functions' within the fairy tale. Basing his work on a scientific breakdown of 450 fairy tales, he discovered he could identify a set of 150 such functions spanning the entire corpus. Paring down these functions, he claimed they cohere into one single common function pairing, prohibition versus violation or, as he refers to it elsewhere, the 'principle of freedom' set against 'little use of this freedom.'¹⁵ Herein lies the difference between modes of genre fantasy such as fairy tale, science fiction, fable, and allegory and more disruptive, open-ended narratives of the literary fantastic such as magic realism and certain types of supernatural/ghost narrative. Where genre fantasy imposes absolute closure, the fantastic opens up onto Marin's 'fraying edge.'

This sense of fraying can be usefully developed in relation to Tzvetan Todorov's pivotal understanding of the literary fantastic, a mode of writing distinct from genre fantasy in two main ways. First, where genre fantasy deals in enclosed worlds, the literary fantastic deals in disruptive impulses. Second, where genre fantasy implies complicity on the part of readers, the literary fantastic actively seeks out reader hesitancy as a means of building in competing readings

of the text, typically revolving around two choices, the psychological or the supernatural. As Marin expounds his theory of the limit, he brings in a more complex sense of the finite. Taking the Latin term *limes* ('a path or a passage, a way between two fields'), he continues by noting what happens to this sense of a limit, once two distinct edges track each other without meeting: 'The limit [becomes] at the same time a way and a gap . . .'¹⁶ In maintaining plural readings, possible choices track each other—perhaps on occasions veering towards one or another—but while hesitancy remains, so does this fraying edge of semantic possibility.

How, then, can texts as diverse as the biblical Book of Genesis, Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott,' Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*, J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan*, and Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* all shelter under the same literary umbrella, fantasy? The answer lies in the fact that they share two primary characteristics. First, as already implied, they deal in the unknowableness of life. A reader of Doris Lessing's realist first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950), may find she can relive at least an element of that literary experience by reading up on or even visiting present-day Zimbabwe, but none of us can holiday in the Garden of Eden. A child who delights in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) may try to recapture that pleasure through learning to ride, but no reader of *Animal Farm* can teach beasts to speak, any more than they can make pigs fly. To reiterate: fantasy sets up worlds that genuinely exist *beyond* the horizon, as opposed to those parts of our own world that are located beyond that line of sight but to which we might travel, given sufficient means.

Epic Space

Second, a fantasy narrative threatens infinity in the manner described by Stewart in *On Longing*: it conveys 'a world not necessarily known through the senses, or lived experience.'¹⁷ One supreme instance of this lies in the potency of legends and myths, the primary instance of which—at least in the Anglo-American tradition—are those relating to the tales of King Arthur. Indeed, there is a sense in which Arthur himself is a fantasy narrative: lacking any clear anchor point in historical reality, writers and readers return endlessly to

Arthurian legend as if driven by the impossible need for closure. A paradox is clearly at work here. Though there are those like Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman, who have embarked on a quest to find the historical figure behind the legend (in their case, painstakingly tracing it back to Owain Ddantgwyn 'the Bear,' a sixth-century Prince of Gwynedd in North Wales), legend it remains.¹⁸ In this dynamic, we see a replication of longing and miniaturism, for by taming Arthur in text after text, we 'cut him down to size' and at the same time render him larger than life. Explication also miniaturises Arthur. Phillips and Keatman draw attention to the fact that 'their' Arthur came from the Votadini, a tribe sympathetic to the Romans at a time when the Britons as a whole were divided. As such, they suggest he

may well have adopted a name which personified both [Briton and Roman] sympathies in order to avoid any implication of favouring one faction more than the other. If his tribal title was the Bear, he may not only have used the Brythonic word *Arth*, but also the Latin word for bear, *Ursus*. His original title may therefore have been *Arthursus*; later shortened to *Arthur* . . .¹⁹

Here, however, pinning King Arthur down to one individual identity comes immediately into conflict with the endowment of a battle name. For if Arthur is a battle name, it further contributes to his larger-than-life hyperbolic status, in the same way that pseudonyms such as the Black Panther or the Yorkshire Ripper mythologise serial killers. It is perhaps through this concertina-like desire to aggrandise and reduce, accompanied by the inability to reconcile both, that Arthur becomes the stuff of dreams, shifting out of focus however hard we peer. Hence, satisfactorily indistinct, Arthur can become his own text, across which we inscribe projections of heroism, cultural struggle, leadership, and romance. For (and here is the crux of the 'beyond the horizon' aspect of fantasy) despite impressive studies such as Phillips and Keatman's, the quest for Arthur must remain open, fantasy ending at the moment of realisation.

How, then, do we reconcile this view of Arthur with the fantasy formula already offered, in which each world functions as a discrete entity in order for the formula to work effectively? To some extent,