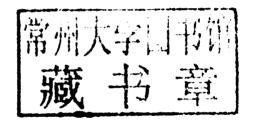# Stephen King as a Postmodern Author

Clotilde Landais

Clotilde Landais

Stephen King as a
Postmodern Author

PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Acknowledgments

Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction

If you ask anyone to classify Stephen King's genre of writing, the answer will probably be "horror fiction." But if you look up a bibliography on the internet, you will also find King's books under a genre called "fantastic fiction." Both terms refer to books such as *Carrie*, *'Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, or *The Dark Half*, which are all terrifying thanks to a supernatural component. "Horror fiction" and "fantastic fiction" thus seem to be two other denominations for supernatural fiction, as Peter Penzoldt qualifies the genre overall. However, there is a very clear critical distinction between these two appellations: "horror fiction" would belong to popular fiction whereas "fantastic fiction" would belong to mainstream fiction. This differentiation leads to a status distinction, "horror fiction" being then considered less intellectual than "fantastic fiction." Yet Stephen King's works appear in both categories. Does this mean that, depending on whether you like supernatural fiction or not, you will consider it to be literary worthy or not? Or is there more to this distinction than a simple question of literary taste?

To attempt to answer these questions, I will study two of King's narratives: the novel *The Dark Half* (1989) and the novella "Secret Window, Secret Garden" (1990). These two texts stage a fictitious writer and his doppelgänger engaged in a quest for identity through writing. This topic being largely part of what is now called "metafiction," I will apply literary analysis methods drawing upon postmodern fiction to question the critical distinction between "horror fiction" and "fantastic fiction" in Stephen King's works.

Origins of Contemporary Fantastic Fiction

According to Howard Philip Lovecraft or Peter Penzoldt, for instance, supernatural fiction in all its forms (fantastic fiction, horror fiction, but also myths, legends, and tales) has always existed in every single culture. If most agree on myths, legends, and tales, other scholars, such as Wladimir Troubetzkoy or Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay, consider that fantastic fiction is a specific branch of supernatural fiction that appeared during the 18th century. Consequently to the Enlightenment, English

authors, such as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Gregory Lewis wrote a new genre of novels, which has been called the Gothic novel. This genre would have been the expression of supernatural beliefs in a century dominated by rationality. It is based on myths, legends, and tales, and usually takes place in castles, convents or monasteries, or any other place where we are reminded of the Middle Ages. Ambiance is often melancholic with supernatural elements, and fear is a main component of the narrative. According to Troubetzkoy and Dupeyron-Lafay, Gothic novel would therefore have been the first of modern fantastic fiction narratives. Jean Fabre or Pierre-Georges Castex however support that fantastic fiction would have been born in the early 19th century under the mastery of German author Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776–1822) and his "Fantasiestücke." They then define it through two main criteria: a brutal intrusion of mystery into a rational and lifelike fictional world (Castex 8), and a necessary hesitation from the characters and the reader between a rational explanation and a supernatural one (Todorov 29).

From these different and somewhat contradictory perspectives on supernatural fiction, Denis Mellier (2000) follows an integrative one and gives the following definition: contemporary fantastic fiction is a crisis of the real, which is why it has to be set in the everyday world of its author and her/his contemporary reader. This crisis can result from a tangible supernatural phenomenon (ghost, vampire, animated object, etc.) or, on the contrary, from the uncertainty of the phenomenon's nature as long as its existence defies all rational explanations. Also, would belong to fantastic fiction a narrative which openly frightens characters and reader as well as a narrative ruled by Sigmund Freud's uncanny? This perspective is worthwhile as it takes into account the different ways of inducing fear without passing any judgment on literary quality. Moreover, it dismisses the denomination "horror fiction," for it is not necessarily supernatural. Finally, Mellier's perspective allows a distinction among the supernatural genre, between fictions where the supernatural is part of the "normal" narrative world—as in myths, legends, (fairy) tales, and contemporary heroic fantasy—and fictions where it is excluded and

where, as such, the supernatural phenomenon induces fear, as in fantastic fiction.

Fantastic Fiction: Obtuse versus Obvious

Fear, as the result of the dismissal of supernatural phenomena by characters or readers, is indeed another criterion to distinguish fantastic fiction from horror fiction. It is included in some definitions of supernatural fiction, as for Peter Penzoldt: "Fear is the basic emotion in all weird fiction" (10); or Howard Philip Lovecraft: "The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread [...]; a subtle attitude of awed listening" (23). "Fear," "dread," "awe": the use of several words to express a seemingly single emotion shows there are different levels to fear, which reflect the main two paragons of fantastic fiction since the second half of the 20th century.

First come anguish or terror, which would be the feeling's strongest intensity (and as such, the noblest) from a psychological perspective. In such narratives, the phenomenon is unspecified; nothing should be shown nor explained. What provokes anguish must stay ambiguous, because that is what makes it terrifying. This is why Jean Fabre, borrowing Roland Barthes' terminology (1982), calls this type of fantastic fiction "obtuse" (180): since the reader must never know whether the uncanny events that are narrated come under a supernatural phenomenon or under the main character's insanity, it aims at the open work, as defined by Umberto Eco (1976). It is fantastic fiction following Tzvetan Todorov's definition, and it is considered to belong to mainstream literature, with authors such as Henry James, Guy de Maupassant or Julio Cortázar.

Second is what Fabre—again borrowing Barthes' terminology—calls the "obvious" fantastic fiction, which responds to the feelings of fear and horror. These feelings are defined by Noel Carroll as follows: fear "i.e. of being frightened by something that threatens danger" and horror which "is compounded by revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (1987, 53) provoked by the direct encounter with the phenomenon. Stephen King's novels, as well as Dan Simmons' or Clive Barker's usually follow this model which,

by analogy with one of the feelings it induced, is often called "horror fiction." Because such narratives are centered on the supernatural phenomenon, its manifestation and its consequences, obvious fantastic fiction is considered to belong to popular fiction.

Obtuse and obvious fantastic fictions are therefore opposed because they function on opposite modes: uncertainty versus obvious, ambivalence versus acknowledgment. This opposition is also readable in the narratives' aesthetic, between a non-figurative writing and a figurative one: obtuse fantastic fiction plays on litotes and sobriety whereas obvious fiction seeks the phenomenon's visibility through hyperbole, the very figure of extreme. Yet, both types of fantastic fiction aim at the same goal: question mankind and its relation to reality through a crisis of the real.

Both obtuse and obvious fantastic fictions actually follow the same scheme: they begin with an initial situation where everything is balanced; an everyday life situation anchored in the contemporary world of the author. Then insignificant but weird incidents multiply: the narrative enters a transitional zone where the supernatural spread progressively to the everyday life. Finally, the supernatural asserts itself: evil—psychological or supernatural—happens and characters have to fight it to reach a new equilibrium.

It is interesting to underline that, although contemporary characters and readers may partially accept the eeriness of the phenomenon, this partial acceptance does not turn the narrative into a fairy tale. It is rather a sign of fantastic fiction's evolution, a result of readers' intertextual culture: if in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Van Helsing could identify the Count as a vampire, how could Stephen King pretend in *'Salem's Lot* (1975) that his characters could not identify Barlow as such? Acknowledging a supernatural phenomenon does not diminish the destruction of the lifelike world and the fear it induces: the very existence of the phenomenon stays intolerable, and contemporary characters have to respond to the intrusion according to its nature.

Success of the supernatural effect is thus based on verisimilitude through the creation of what Roland Barthes calls a reality effect (1968). The reality effect is a "seemingly functionless detail [...] presumably

mentioned for no other reason than the fact that it is part of the reality represented" (Prince 81–82). It is produced through an abundance of connotations of the real which create a lifelike effect: descriptions and details to make a place familiar or identifiable to the reader, precise time and space of the narrative, and coherent characters' textual identity and psychology. The reality effect also happens in dialogs: vocabulary and syntax have to be in adequacy with the situation, the age or the social identity of the characters. Stephen King for instance is well-known for his ability to reproduce Maine's different accents and dialects in his dialogs.

Fantastic fiction is therefore not about the supernatural, but about realism. This probably explains why great authors of both obtuse and obvious fantastic fiction are realist writers above all: Honoré de Balzac and Guy de Maupassant in 19th-century France, Nicolaï Gogol in Russia, or Stephen King in the 20th-century USA. As Roger Caillois indeed underlines, the more rational and lifelike the initial fictional universe, the easier it will be destroyed by the supernatural (10). For that reason, the narrator or the main character of fantastic fiction has to be openly incredulous toward the supernatural in order to guarantee his objectivity, condition for the reader to willingly suspend his disbelief (Coleridge). S/he is deeply anchored in a rational world, and her/his education puts her/him above superstitions, which is why most are scientists (mostly psychiatrists), detectives, teachers, and writers.

The Possibility of a Metafictional Obvious Fantastic Fiction

The fictitious writer is thus a main figure in fantastic fiction. It is usually identified as a character who stages reading, writing, and creation inside her/his reality. S/he also multiplies its meaning through intertextuality, and therefore tries to re-define her/himself through writing. The latter also links fictitious writers to the *Künstlerroman*—the artist-novel, a branch of the *Bildungsroman*, to which supernatural fiction is affiliated, as myths, legends, and fairy tales of course, but also their contemporary counterpart, heroic fantasy, and fantastic fiction portray the main character's initiation. In fantastic fiction, his/her quest starts when the supernatural phenomenon disrupts the initially balanced situation. S/he

then has to go through multiple trials before reaching a new equilibrium. *Künstlerroman* is doubtlessly the only narrative in which the author's representative and his/her fictitious work are neither an allegory nor a metaphor; if the reader can picture a painter's or sculptor's work from a written description, s/he can read bits of the fictitious writer's work, as Stephen's poetry in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. As it intrinsically embodies a reflection on writing, the fictitious writer is therefore considered to be a main feature of metafiction, which Linda Hutcheon defines as "fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1980, 1).

Although self-representation already exists in 19th-century literature, as illustrated in some texts by E.T.A. Hoffmann, metafiction has become synonymous with postmodern fiction because contemporary literature tends to be essentially self-reflexive, as notably noticed by Patricia Waugh (2), who lists criteria to define a fiction as metafictional or postmodern:

> [T]he over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator […]; ostentatious typographic experiment […]; explicit dramatization of the reader […]; Chinese-box structures […]; incantatory and absurd lists […]; over-systematized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices […]; total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative […]; infinite regress […]; dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names […]; self-reflexive images […]; critical discussions of the story within the story […]; continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions […]; use of popular genres […]; and explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or non-literary […]. (21–22)

Metafiction would consequently be marked by a profusion of terms from critical discourse, by intertextuality, mises en abyme, metaphors, as well as images or objects symbolizing writing or reading, as it explores "a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (Waugh 2). When the narrative stages a fictitious writer, these strategies reflect the character's quest for her/his artistic identity. The *Künstlerroman*, through the artist's quest for self is therefore highly metafictional. According to Maurice Beebe, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is particularly important for the genre inasmuch as he develops in his works one of the main

themes related to the quest for self, that is, the conflict between life and art that every artist has to face: "Quest for self is the dominant theme of the artist-novel, and because the self is almost always in conflict with society, a closely related theme is the opposition of art to life" (Beebe 6).

This opposition expresses itself through two artistic traditions which Beebe calls the "Sacred Fount," on the one hand, and the "Ivory Tower," on the other. The Sacred Fount tradition is related to the social Romanticism from the beginning of the 19th century. It assimilates art to experiment, that is, the artist has to live more intensely than any other person in order to be an artist:

> The Romantic artist is typically both an outcast from society and a teacher of his fellowmen, but in either case he is considered a superior kind of person. We may distinguish two main ideal types of romantic artist-heroes: one is the Chatterton image, the sensitive plant too delicate to feel at ease in a material world; the other is Byronic, the guilt-cursed rebel whose intensity of purpose and appetite for passionate experience alienate him from a society that prefers mildness to intensity and the usual to the unique. (Beebe 66)

The Ivory Tower tradition, on the contrary, is related to the spiritual Romanticism of the second half of the 19th century and places art above life. It assimilates art to religion, which means that the artist has to stay aside from life to be an artist:

> The artist of the Ivory Tower tradition […] cares little for humanity or nature. Far from wanting to live more fully, he resents his carnal appetites and natural instincts, and yearns for release from human bondage. […] Dissatisfied with the way in which he was made, [the artist] tries to create himself anew, thus becoming a dandy or an esthete. Life is replaced by art, and art becomes a sacred ritual. (Beebe 114)

Being both man *and* artist, the creative man is torn between these two artistic traditions and becomes a divided being. The theme of the "Divided Self" (Beebe 7) of the artist, the promethean *alter ego* then becomes central in supernatural *Künstlerromans*, as shown in Robert Louis Stevenson's "Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" (1885) or Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The literary doppelgänger truly reflects human duality, this "second self" (Beebe 310–311) that is inside

each of us and which we want to keep hidden. A fictitious writer's *alter ego* will then reflect the identity crisis of the artist in writing.

However, the doppelgänger is not only a central metafictional figure in the *Künstlerroman*; like the fictitious writer, it also haunts supernatural fiction from its origins. The contemporary fantastic doppelgänger comes from the development of the mythological doubling's motif (Bessière 151), such as Narcissus or twin-rivalry myths, into a psychoanalysis' one, and Jorge Luis Borges "numbers the double [...] as one of the four fundamental devices of fantastic literature" (in Rogers 161). According to Otto Rank, the doppelgänger motif is linked to the Eros and Thanatos, which is why there is conflict: the first-self feels persecuted by his *alter ego* who announces his death (85). For his own sake, the first-self then seeks to destroy his doppelgänger. Drawing upon classics in fantastic fiction— Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1839), Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Dvojnik* (1846), and E.T.A. Hoffmann's tales—, Rank lists the following recurrent motives:

> We always find a likeness which resembles the main character down to the smallest particulars, such as a name, voice, and clothing—a likeness which, as though "stolen from the mirror" (Hoffmann), primarily appears to the main character as a reflection. Always, too, this double works at cross-purposes with its prototype; and, as a rule, the catastrophe occurs in the relationship with a woman, predominantly ending in suicide by way of the death intended for the irksome persecutor. In a number of instances this situation is combined with a thoroughgoing persecutory delusion or is even replaced by it, thus assuming the picture of a total paranoiac system of delusions. (33)

Doppelgängers in fantastic fiction belong to what Robert Rogers calls "the manifest doubles" which he classifies in eight categories, confirming some of Rank's motives: the Mirror Image, when "the projected self [is] not merely a similar self but a duplicate" (19), as in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* or Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson;" the Secret Sharer from Conrad's story (1910), that is doppelgängers who "have a more or less autonomous existence on the narrative level [...] and yet are patently fragments of one mind at the psychological level of meaning" (41); the Opposing Self (60); the Fragmentation of the Mind which consists in "the appearance of an alternating personality" (91–92); the Paths of

Ambivalence, that is the division of an object doubling instead of a subject (109); Fair Maid and Femme Fatale (126–127); Psychomania (138); and Baroque Doubles, which refer to self-parody strategies as used by Jorge Luis Borges (161–162). These eight categories of manifest doppelgängers are grouped together in two subgroups by the French scholars Jacques Goimard and Roland Stragliati: the doubling by division, defined as: I am double, and my other self gives me the slip—which explains the moral difference between the first-self and the doppelgänger, according to Jean Fabre (236); and the doubling by multiplication, defined as: I am unique, and I meet a character strictly identical to myself (25). According to Carl F. Keppler, the doppelgänger can be defined under two conditions: in his relationship with the first-self, "each of them lacks [...] exactly what the other possesses" (9) and the doppelgänger is "a paradox of simultaneous outwardness and inwardness, of difference from and identity with the first-self" (10). As such, the doppelgänger seems to incarnate Freud's Unheimliche par excellence: familiar as he is part of the Self and foreign as he is repressed. Moreover, Keppler's perspective ties up with Maurice Beebe's as he considers that "[e]very second self story, so far as the first self is concerned, is to one degree or another a story of shaping, a *Bildungsroman*" (195). In 19th-century fantastic fiction, following the *Künstlerroman* tradition and in the wake of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "inner weird fiction," authors explain their metadiscourse on art and creative schizophrenia through the literary representation of different artists (writers, painters, composers) and their psychological (that is, a product of a character's hallucination) or supernaturally embodied doppelgänger.

Contemporary fantastic fiction authors still represent fictitious writers and their doppelgänger in order to reflect upon literature and artistic identity. Stephen King in particular is known to be the author of three essays on supernatural fiction. The foreword of *Night Shift*'s collection of short stories (1978) is dedicated to the feeling of fear, central to the definition of supernatural fiction. *Stephen King's Danse Macabre* (1981) analyzes the branch of the genre that is called "horror fiction." *On Writing* (2000), his last essay to date, is a toolbox for aspiring writers. Haunted by the art of writing, Stephen King also often sets a fictitious writer in his

stories, sometimes as the main character of the narrative, such as in *The Shining* (1977), in which a writer takes his family to an isolated hotel in order to fight his writer's block. After *The Shining*, Stephen King composes a trilogy on writing: *Misery* (1987) first, which examines the relationship between an author and his readers. Then comes *The Dark Half* (1989), where King develops a reflection on the literary pseudonym and the hold of fiction over a writer. Finally, King writes the novella "Secret Window, Secret Garden" (1990), which questions the identity of a writer through plagiarism. Although Stephen King claims in the preliminary note on the novella that "Secret Window, Secret Garden" is "the last story about writers and writing and the strange no man's land which exists between what's real and what's make-believe" (237–238), *Bag of Bones* (1998) and *Lisey's Story* (2006) develop these topics once more. Would it then be possible to say that these fictitious writers serve a *mise en abyme* in literature and artistic identity, as Hoffmann's do? Or would horrific components in King's fictions prevent such a metadiscourse? Let's investigate from the study of Stephen King's fictitious writers and their doppelgänger in *The Dark Half* and "Secret Window, Secret Garden" what the answer could be.

Chapter 2. The Fictitious Writer and His Doppelgänger: A Relationship Shaped by Creative Schizophrenia

King's Fictitious Writers and Their Doppelgänger

The main character of *The Dark Half* is called Thaddeus Beaumont. He is identified as a fictitious writer from the prologue of the novel, in which the omniscient narrator presents an 11-year-old Beaumont as a winner of a writing contest that "shaped his life" (*TDH* 3). The first chapter quickly confirms Beaumont's textual identity as a writer through the presentation of his "Bio" in *People* magazine: "[Thad] tapped a picture on the second page of the article which showed [him] sitting at his typewriter with a sheet rolled under the platen" (*TDH* 16). This article on Beaumont in an existing national magazine hints that the fictitious writer is famous and probably publishes best-sellers. A few pages later, the heterodiegetic narrator indicates that Beaumont had been nominated for the National Book Award (*TDH* 20). As the National Book Award is an existing literary award usually received by critically-acclaimed authors, Beaumont is then identified as a mainstream fiction author, which is rather surprising regarding *People*'s readers. This gap, however, is immediately clarified:

> Thad Beaumont was a well-regarded writer whose first novel, *The Sudden Dancers*, had been nominated for the National Book Award in 1972. This sort of thing swung some weight with literary critics, but the breathless celebrity-watchers of America didn't care a dime about Thad Beaumont, who had only published one other novel under his own name since. The man many of them *did* care about wasn't a real man at all. Thad had written one huge best-seller and three extremely successful follow-up novels under another name. The name, of course, was George Stark. (*TDH* 20)

So Beaumont is in fact two different writers: a mainstream fiction author who also publishes thrillers under a pseudonym. However, Stark is not only a pen-name for Beaumont. He sees him as a separate person: "'I don't have the slightest idea when he became a... a separate person. He

seemed real to me when I was writing as him, but only in the way all the stories I write seem real to me when I'm writing them'" (*TDH* 206). Unlike the traditional literary doppelgänger, the pseudonym thus has a proper physical appearance and voice inflection (*TDH* 217):

> Looking into the dark, [Thad Beaumont] summoned up his private image of George Stark—the *real* George Stark [...].
>
> 'He's fairly tall,' he began. 'Taller than me, anyway. Six-three, maybe six-four in a pair of boots. He's got blonde hair, cut short and neat. Blue eyes. His long vision is excellent. About five years ago he took to wearing glasses for close work. Reading and writing, mostly.
>
> The reason he gets noticed isn't his height but his *breadth*. He's not fat, but he's extremely *wide*. Neck size maybe eighteen-and-a-half, maybe nineteen. He's my age, Alan, but he's not fading the way I'm starting to or running to fat. He's *strong*.' (*TDH* 171)

The more clumsy and shy Beaumont is, the more agile and dangerous is Stark. This reveals part of Carl F. Keppler's first condition to establish the relation between a first-self and his doppelgänger: one lacks what the other possesses (9). Beaumont also imagined Stark with a biography:

> [George Stark] is thirty-nine and has done time in three different prisons on charges of arson, assault with a deadly weapon, and assault with intent to kill. The jacket bio is only part of the story, however; Beaumont also produces an author-sheet from Darwin Press, which details his alter-ego's history in the painstaking detail which only a good novelist could create out of whole cloth. From his birth in Manchester, New Hampshire, to his final residence in Oxford, Mississippi, everything is there except for George Stark's interment six weeks ago at Homeland Cemetery in Castle Rock, Maine. (*TDH* 27)

Finally, the fictitious writer created his pseudonym with different writing habits in order to overcome his writer's block: "Writing had always been hard work for [Thad]. It had come a lot easier for George [...]" (*TDH* 16). For instance, the pseudonym does not type his novels as Beaumont does, but writes them with Berol Black Beauty pencils (*TDH* 23): "I've typed all my books, but George Stark apparently didn't hold with typewriters. [...] Maybe because they didn't have typing classes in any of the stone hotels where he did time" (*TDH* 27).