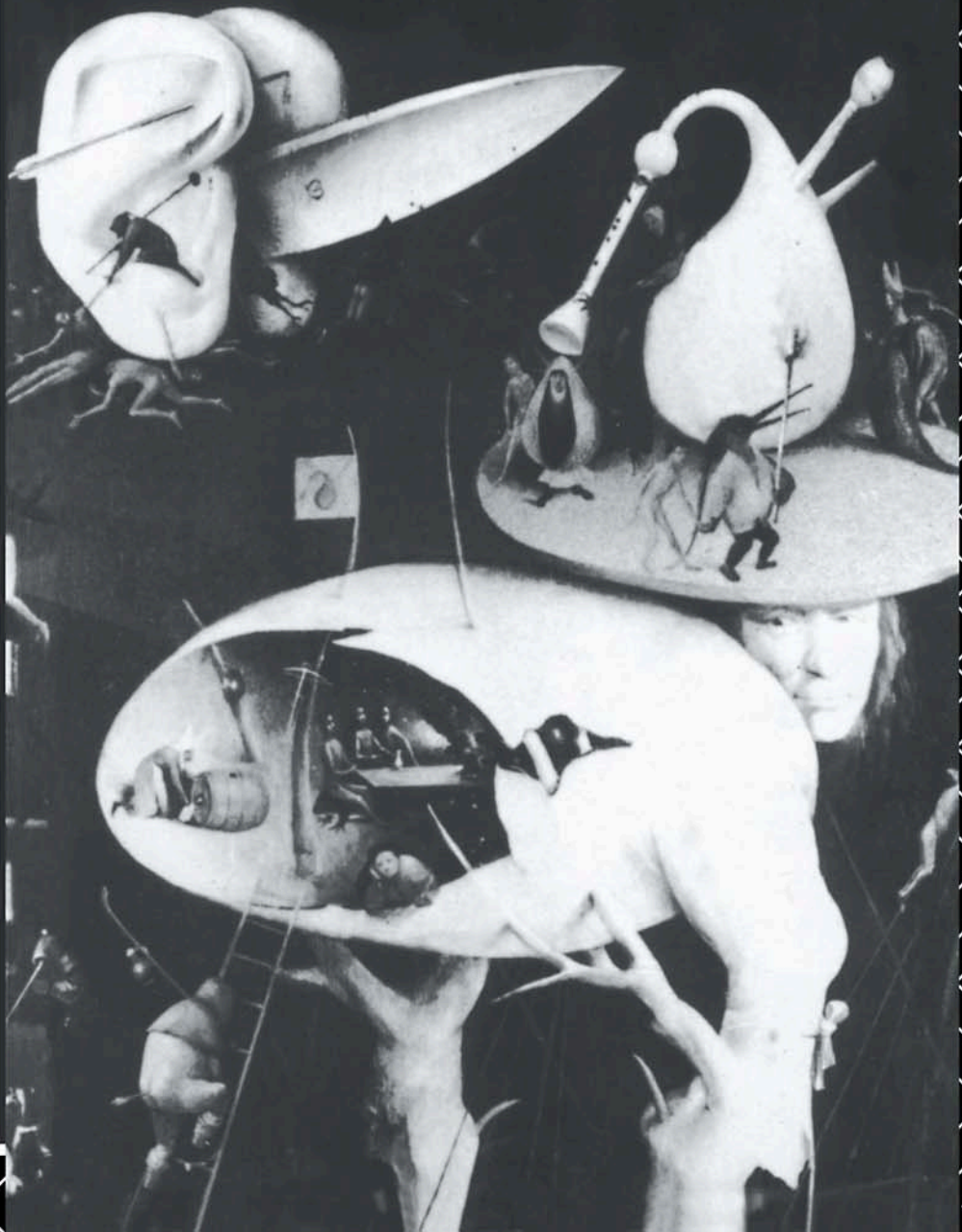
ROSEMARY JACKSON

FANTASY

THE LITERATURE OF SUBVERSION

ROUTLEDGE



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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

How can we recognise or deal with the new? Any equipment we bring to the task will have been designed to engage with the old: it will look for and identify extensions and developments of what we already know. To some degree the unprecedented will always be unthinkable.

The *New Accents* series has made its own wary negotiation around that paradox, turning it, over the years, into the central concern of a continuing project. We are obliged, of course, to be bold. Change is our proclaimed business, innovation our announced quarry, the accents of the future the language in which we deal. So we have sought, and still seek, to confront and respond to those developments in literary studies that seem crucial aspects of the tidal waves of transformation that continue to sweep across our culture. Areas such as structuralism, post-structuralism, feminism, marxism, semiotics, subculture, deconstruction, dialogism, post-modernism, and the new attention to the nature and modes of language, politics and way of life that these bring, have already been the primary concern of a large number of our volumes. Their 'nuts and bolts' exposition of the issues at stake in new ways of writing texts and new ways of reading them has proved an effective stratagem against perplexity.

But the question of what 'texts' are or may be has also become more and more complex. It is not just the impact of electronic modes of communication, such as computer networks and data banks, that has forced us to revise our sense of the sort of material to which the process called 'reading' may apply. Satellite television and supersonic travel have eroded the traditional capacities of time and space to confirm prejudice, reinforce ignorance, and conceal significant difference. Ways of life and cultural practices of which we had barely heard can now be set compellingly beside—can even confront—our own. The effect is to make us ponder the culture we have inherited; to see it, perhaps for the first time, as an intricate, continuing construction. And that means that we can also begin to see, and to question, those arrangements of foregrounding and backgrounding, of stressing and repressing, of placing at the centre and of restricting to the periphery, that give our own way of life its distinctive character.

Small wonder if, nowadays, we frequently find ourselves at the boundaries of the precedented and at the limit of the thinkable: peering into an abyss out of which there begin to lurch awkwardly-formed monsters with unaccountable—yet unavoidable—demands on our attention. These may involve unnerving styles of narrative, unsettling notions of 'history', unphilosophical ideas about 'philosophy', even un-childish views of 'comics', to say nothing of a host of barely respectable activities for which we have no reassuring names.

In this situation, straightforward elucidation, careful unpicking, informative bibliographies, can offer positive help, and each *New Accents* volume will continue to include these. But if the project of closely scrutinising the new remains nonetheless a disconcerting one, there are still overwhelming reasons for giving it all the consideration we can muster. The unthinkable, after all, is that which covertly shapes our thoughts.

TERENCE HAWKES

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ROSEMARY JACKSON
UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA, 1980

Note

Editions of primary literary texts are identified in the notes which are printed, by chapter, before the bibliography. All secondary works (including those mentioned in the notes) are listed in the bibliography, in alphabetical order under the name of the author.

> Only the perverse fantasy can still save us.
>
> Goethe

> Literature of the fantastic is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as in its various transformations or perversions.
>
> Todorov

> When our eye sees a monstrous deed, our soul stands still.
>
> Fassbinder

> The only thing you can do if you are trapped in a reflection is to invert the image.
>
> Juliet Mitchell

1
INTRODUCTION

> Human nature, essentially changeable, unstable as the dust, can endure no restraint; if it binds itself it soon begins to tear madly at its bonds, until it rends everything asunder, the wall, the bonds and its very self… My inquiry is purely historical; no lightning flashes any longer from the long since vanished thunder-clouds…. The limits which my capacity for thought imposes upon me are narrow enough, but the province to be traversed here is infinite.
>
> Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China*[1]

FANTASY, both in literature and out of it, is an enormous and seductive subject. Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define, and indeed the 'value' of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its 'free-floating' and escapist qualities. Literary fantasies have appeared to be 'free' from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death. Given this resistance of fantasy to narrow categorization and definition, it might seem self-defeating to attempt to produce a critical study which proposes to 'schematize' or 'theorize' about fantasy in literature and thereby to militate against escapism or a simple pleasure principle. Since this book does attempt such a study, it is best, perhaps, to try to clarify at the outset some of the theoretical and critical assumptions upon which it is based.

English literary criticism has been notoriously untheoretical in its approach to works of fantasy, as to other texts. Despite the growth of interdisciplinary studies in British institutions during the last decade, the impact of Marxist, linguistic and psychoanalytic theory upon readings of literature has been safely buffered by a solid tradition of liberal humanism, nowhere more so than in readings of fantasy, where a transcendentalist criticism has seemed to be justified. Literature of the fantastic has been claimed as 'transcending' reality, 'escaping' the human condition and constructing superior alternate, 'secondary' worlds. From W.H. Auden, C.S.Lewis and J.R.R.Tolkien, this notion of fantasy literature as fulfilling a desire for a 'better', more complete, unified reality has come to dominate readings of the fantastic, defining it as an art form providing vicarious gratification. This book aims to locate such a transcendentalist approach as part of a nostalgic, humanistic vision, of the same kind as those romance fictions produced by Lewis, Tolkien, T.H.White and other modern fabulists, all of whom look back to a lost moral and social hierarchy, which their fantasies attempt to recapture and revivify.

Particularly pertinent to an argument against transcendentalist fiction and criticism is a famous passage from *The German Ideology,* in which Marx and Engels urge the importance of situating art within the historical and cultural framework from which it is produced. They write:

> In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven…. The phantoms formed in the human brain are

> also, necessarily, sublimates of their [men's] material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. (p. 47)

Like any other text, a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it. The forms taken by any particular fantastic text are determined by a number of forces which intersect and interact in different ways in each individual work. Recognition of these forces involves placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants, as well as to a literary tradition of fantasy, and makes it impossible to accept a reading of this kind of literature which places it somehow mysteriously 'outside' time altogether. In a book of this length, it is impossible to consider all, or many, of these determinants in connection with every text, but my approach throughout is founded on the assumption that the literary fantastic is never 'free'. Although surviving as a perennial mode and present in works by authors as different as Petronius, Poe and Pynchon, the fantastic is transformed according to these authors' diverse historical positions. A more extensive treatment would relate texts more specifically to the conditions of their production, to the particular constraints against which the fantasy protests and from which it is generated, for fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.

In expressing desire, fantasy can operate in two ways (according to the different meanings of 'express'): it can *tell of,* manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can *expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force). In many cases fantastic literature fulfils both functions at once, for desire can be 'expelled' through having been 'told of and thus vicariously experienced by author and reader. In this way fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which lies outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'. The movement from the first to the second of these functions, from expression as manifestation to expression as expulsion, is one of the recurrent features of fantastic narrative, as it tells of the impossible attempt to realize desire, to make visible the invisible and to discover absence. Telling implies using the language of the dominant order and so accepting its norms, recovering its dark areas. Since this excursion into disorder can only begin from a base within the dominant cultural order, literary fantasy is a telling index of the limits of that order. Its introduction of the 'unreal' is set against the category of the 'real'—a category which the fantastic interrogates by its difference.

As a literature of 'unreality', fantasy has altered in character over the years in accordance with changing notions of what exactly constitutes 'reality'. Modern fantasy is rooted in ancient myth, mysticism, folklore, fairy tale and romance. The most obvious starting point for this study was the late eighteenth century—the point at which industrialization transformed western society. From about 1800 onwards, those fantasies produced within a capitalist economy express some of the debilitating psychological effects of inhabiting a materialistic culture. They are peculiarly violent and horrific.

This book concentrates upon literary fantasies of the last two centuries, fantasies produced within a post-Romantic, secularized culture. One purpose of drawing together a number of different texts of this period was to see what features, if any, they had in common, and what conclusions might be drawn from their possible identification. It was in the course of reading and comparing a wide variety of fiction, from Gothic novels, through Dickens and Victorian fantasists, to Dostoevsky, Kafka, Peake and Pynchon, that a pattern began to emerge for me, a pattern which suggested that similarities on levels of theme and structure were more than coincidental.

The most important and influential critical study of fantasy of this post-Romantic period is Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). The value of Todorov's work in encouraging serious critical engagement with a form of literature which had been dismissed as being rather frivolous or foolish cannot be overestimated, and anyone working in this area has to acknowledge a large debt to his study.

Previous French critics, such as P.-G. Castex, Marcel Schneider, Louis Vax and Roger Caillois, had tried to define literary fantasy by cataloguing its recurrent themes and motifs, taken rather randomly from various works. Schneider had claimed the fantastic as dramatizing 'the anxiety of existence', whilst Caillois described it as a form which was stranded between a serene mysticism and a purely humanistic psychology. Todorov has little time for metaphysics and he opposes impressionistic attempts to define fantasy. He is not interested in the semantic approach of many other critics (looking for clusters of subjects and for the meaning of the fantastic in these subjects), and he turns instead to a structural analysis of fantastic literature, seeking structural features which different texts have in common and which might provide a more concrete definition of the fantastic,

Nevertheless, there are some important omissions in Todorov's book, and it was in an attempt to go some way towards filling these that the present work was begun. For, in common with much structuralist criticism, Todorov's *The Fantastic* fails to consider the social and political implications of literary forms. **Its** attention is confined to the effects of the text and the means of its operation. It does not move outwards again to relate the forms of literary texts to their cultural formation. It is in an attempt to suggest ways of remedying this that my study tries to extend Todorov's investigation from being one limited to the *poetics* of the fantastic into one aware of the *politics* of its forms.

Fantasy in literature deals so blatantly and repeatedly with unconscious material that it seems rather absurd to try to understand its significance without some reference to psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic readings of texts. Yet Todorov repudiates Freudian theory as inadequate or irrelevant when approaching the fantastic. I take this to be the major blind-spot of his book and one which is bound up with his neglect of political or ideological issues. For it is in the unconscious that social structures and 'norms' are reproduced and sustained within us, and only by redirecting attention to this area can we begin to perceive the ways in which the relations between society and the individual are fixed. As Juliet Mitchell writes,

> The way we live as 'ideas' the necessary laws of human society is not so much conscious as *unconscious*—the particular task of psychoanalysis is to decipher how we acquire our heritage of the ideas and laws of human society within the unconscious mind, or, to put it another way, the unconscious mind *is* the way in which we acquire these laws.[2]

Psychoanalysis directs itself towards an unravelling of these laws, trying to comprehend how social structures are represented and sustained within and through us in our unconscious. Literary fantasies, expressing unconscious drives, are particularly open to psychoanalytic readings, and frequently show in graphic forms a tension between the 'laws of human society' and the resistance of the unconscious mind to those laws. I shall discuss some of these features in the chapter on fantasy and psychoanalysis, returning to the work of Freud and referring to the writings of Jacques Lacan as providing a theoretical base in approaching the relation between ideology and unconscious life. In many ways this chapter provides the centre of my arguments and is the most crucial in trying to stretch Todorov's ideas into a more widely based cultural study of the fantastic.

This study is divided into two sections. The first section is theoretical, examining the conditions and the possibilities of fantasy as a literary mode in terms of its forms, features, basic elements and structures. The term 'mode' is being employed here to identify structural features underlying various works in different periods of time.

> For when we speak of a mode, what can we mean but that this particular type of literary discourse is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed.[3]

It could be suggested that fantasy is a literary mode from which a number of related genres emerge. Fantasy provides a range of possibilities out of which various combinations produce different kinds of fiction in different historical situations. Borrowing linguistic terms, the basic model of fantasy could be seen as a language, or *langue,* from which its various forms, or *paroles,* derive. Out of this mode develops romance literature or 'the marvellous' (including fairy tales and science fiction), 'fantastic' literature (including stories by Poe, Isak Dinesen, Maupassant, Gautier, Kafka, H.P. Lovecraft) and related tales of abnormal psychic states, delusion, hallucination, etc.

This is not to imply that an ideal theoretical model exists to which all fantasies should conform. There is no abstract entity called 'fantasy'; there is only a range of different works which have similar structural characteristics and which seem to be generated by similar unconscious desires. Through their particular manifestations of desire, they can be associated together. The possibilities available to each particular text are determined, in many ways, by the texts which have preceded it and whose characteristic features it repeats or repudiates. Like dreams, with which they have many similarities, literary fantasies are made up of many elements re-combined, and are inevitably determined by the range of those constitutive elements available to the author/dreamer. Freud writes, 'The "creative" imagination, indeed, is quite incapable of *inventing* anything; it can only combine components that are strange to one another.'[4] Again, 'In the psychic life, there is nothing arbitrary, nothing undetermined.'[5] Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different.

The theoretical section, then, introduces critical material on literary fantasy, both from a structuralist position, looking at the *narrative qualities* of the mode, and from a psychoanalytical perspective, considering these features as the *narrative effects* of basic psychic impulses.

The second section of the book looks at a number of texts in a little more detail. It does not attempt a comprehensive 'survey' of post-Romantic fantasy, but it does include a wide variety of diverse works to give a sense of the striking recurrence and similarity of several thematic and formal clusters. It thus reinforces the argument against any particular fantasy's 'difference' or 'peculiarity'. Detailed exposition has, unfortunately, had to be sacrificed. As to the selection of texts, there is reference to French, German, Russian and American literature, but the bias is quantitatively towards English works, for reasons of familiarity and convenience.

Texts which receive most attention are those which reveal most clearly some of the points raised in the theoretical section—not in order to prove a hypothetical argument, but because it is in these works that the subversive function of the fantastic is most apparent. Although nearly all literary fantasies eventually recover desire, neutralizing their own impulses towards transgression, some move towards the extreme position which will be found in Sade's writings, and attempt to remain 'open', dissatisfied, endlessly desiring. Those texts which attempt that movement and that transgressive function have been given most space in this book, for in them the fantastic is at its most uncompromising in its interrogation of the 'nature' of the 'real'.

One consequence of this focus is that some of the better known authors of fantasy works (in the popular sense) are given less space than might be expected. For example, the best-selling fantasies by Kingsley, Lewis, Tolkien, Le Guin or Richard Adams are not discussed at great length. This is not simply through prejudice against their particular ideals, nor through an attempt to recommend other texts as more 'progressive' in any easy way, but because they belong to that realm of fantasy which is more properly defined as faery, or romance literature. The moral and religious allegories, parables and fables informing the stories of Kingsley and Tolkien move away from the unsettling implications which are found at the centre of the purely 'fantastic'. Their original impulse may be similar, but they move from it, expelling their desire and frequently displacing it into religious longing and nostalgia. Thus they defuse potentially disturbing, anti-social drives and retreat from any profound confrontation with existential disease. Writers whose discontent is less easily repressed are given correspondingly more attention, not least because of the relative critical neglect they have suffered to date—hardly surprising in terms of the close relation that has existed between literary criticism and a body of literature which supports orthodox behaviour and conservative institutions. By the same criterion, some novelists who are not normally thought of as working within a fantastic mode are included because of the way in which elements of fantasy enter into, disrupt and disturb the body of their texts. So alongside Mary Shelley, James Hogg, Edgar Allan Poe, R.L.Stevenson and Kafka lie George Eliot, Joseph Conrad and Henry James, as well as 'fantastic realists' such as Dickens and Dostoevsky.

All of this leaves aside the pleasures (of various kinds) of reading literary fantasy. This is really another area for psychoanalysis. I can only say that I have no desire to deprive the reader of the pleasure of the text. The reluctance to let works rest as closed or 'innocent' or pleasure-giving objects derives from a need to understand what might be going on under the cover of this pleasure. De-mystifying the process of reading fantasies will, hopefully, point to the possibility of undoing many texts which work, unconsciously, upon us. In the end this may lead to real social transformation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This lists all secondary sources mentioned in the book, as well as indicating some other background reading. Works of literary fantasy are not included here: editions of texts are to be found in the notes.

The bibliography is split into three sections. The first (a) provides a fairly comprehensive catalogue of general works available on literary fantasy: readers wanting introductory criticism on the subject should refer to items marked *, whilst more incisive and theoretical studies are marked **. Remaining unmarked items are either general background, or in a foreign language. Psychoanalytic theory and criticism are listed separately in the second section (b), for the sake of easy reference, whilst the third section (c) deals with some critical works on individual authors. This last section does not aim to be exhaustive, but has selected works which are of especial interest in relation to some of the ideas introduced here. Although many of the items are, unfortunately, available only in French, they have been listed here, rather than excluded altogether, for English material is still very limited in its scope and method.

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