

---

# Bridge Essay: Fables and the Fantastic

*Riccardo Capoferro*

Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

Both the ancient genre of the fable and the modern genres we associate with the fantastic are highly relevant in a world perspective. The former appears in a great variety of cultures, and the latter have played a key part in the global literary system. The fable can be found in classical antiquity, in traditional African culture, in ancient India, China, Japan, and the Americas. A longevous genre, the fable in most world cultures has survived in spite of historical transformations, finding its way into the second millennium BCE, and into the modern period. In post-Enlightenment Europe, fables are still relatively common: translations and adaptations – for example from Aesop – can be found alongside new fables, such as Lafontaine’s, written specifically for a modern audience.

In light of the similarities between fables and the fantastic, and of the fact that the former predate the latter, it would be tempting to regard them as part of the same family. However, a crucial distinction can be made, one that can also help us clarify how to approach them from a comparative viewpoint. On the surface, both fables and the fantastic present a deviation from the reality experienced daily by readers, their fictional worlds accommodating both natural and preternatural beings. In fables, however, the coexistence of natural and non-natural events is usually unproblematic, although it can occasion fleeting moments of wonder. This applies to fables that belong to radically different periods and cultures, ranging from Lafontaine’s fables (see Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables*) and Pu Songling’s *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (2006) (see Pu Songling and the Chinese Ghost Tale) to the Br’er Rabbit stories. In these works, the transition between the natural and the preternatural is seamless. Characters live and act in a world that has much in common with the reality of readers, but in the blink of an eye they are confronted with incredible beings and phe-

nomena. Pu Songling's fables, for example, are rich in prosaic details from everyday life, its protagonists being common people such as farmers or merchants. However, they are also full of marvelous occurrences: men and women turn out to be foxes, characters are suddenly transported to heavenly regions, spirits inhabit the natural world.

Fables such as Pu Songling's are not so much meant to destabilize shared perceptions of the real world, but rather, paradoxically, to make comments on it or exemplify moral and philosophical principles. This is common to many cultures (consider, for instance, Aesop's fables and their reception in later periods). Fables have often been a tool for satire, instruction, social commentary, and moral or philosophical reflection. They invite, therefore, an allegorical and/or metaphorical interpretation, one that makes the non-natural constitution of their world irrelevant to their overall meaning. Very often, the beings that appear in fables, such as the ant and the cicada in Aesop's famous story, represent moral attitudes and convey meanings that cannot be expressed as easily or explicitly. At times, they are useful to elude censorship: Pu Songling's direct experience of the Manchu conquest and dominion, for example, made him painfully aware of how risky it could be to complain of bad administration, and this nourished his interest in folk tales of the supernatural as the safest medium to voice his feelings, principles, and comments (Li 2010, 231–333). The moral and/or philosophical scope of fables has never been lost, and has often been extended to include broader social meanings. In pre-World War II Japan, for example, Aesopean fables were used for moral instruction in the elementary grade, and the novelist Natsume Sōseki turned the fable of the frog and the bull into an allegory of Japan's effort to embrace modernization (Aldridge 1986, 134).

In the family of genres that we now associate with the fantastic, metaphorical or allegorical meanings can still be produced, but they are far from taking center stage. In other words, in the fantastic the world represented and, inseparably, the way in which it is perceived powerfully demand our attention. A full understanding of this phenomenon requires a focus that combines theoretical and historical awareness.

It is useful, in this respect, to interrogate the category of the fantastic. While in the critical idiom the idea of the fantastic has for the most part been shaped by Tzvetan Todorov's influential work (1975), devoted to late Gothic fiction and nineteenth-century fiction of the supernatural, the current usage of the term implies a much broader meaning. The notion of the fantastic has been used to define genres as diverse as supernatural fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and their subgenres (such as heroic fantasy) and hybridizations (such as China Miéville's "new weird"). Some of these genres have been regarded as radically different: a key theorist such as Darko Suvin (1979), for example, has remarked that the defamiliarized representation of social reality that is typical of science fiction marks a radical difference from fantasy, which is not meant to encourage social criticism and historical change. Nevertheless, the labels commonly used by readers often provide important theoretical insights: the idea of the fantastic is a far-reaching one, because it implies a distinction between modes of literary representation that present themselves as a faithful, though fictional, portrait of the empirical world, and modes that self-consciously depart from it. It implies, in other words, the existence of the narrative mode we call realism, fully realized in the novel. And this opposition presupposes a common ground, a shared narrative language, which can be used unproblematically or subverted radically.

In a historical perspective, the fantastic and novelistic realism look, in fact, closely interconnected. In the early modern period, the fantastic emerged, like the novel, as a response to the rise of empiricism (Capoferro 2010). The empiricist worldview implied a more restrictive ontology, and valued new ways of representing and explaining reality. As it spread and became prominent, new aesthetic theories and practices came into being: in the course of the eighteenth century, novelistic realism became the touchstone of literary representation in all European cultures. In response to, and under the pressure of, empiricism, however, other genres coalesced. In early eighteenth-century England, for instance, apparition narratives like Defoe's *The Apparition of Mr. Veal* (1704), and imaginary voyages like *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) enjoyed wide popular success. Like the emergent novel, these genres used an empirically oriented mode of representation. In spite of presenting extraordinary events, they contained claims of historicity and deployed a descriptive language that drew from empirical discourses.

This process culminated in the emergence of the Gothic (see Gothic Ghosts and Gothic Mirrors). In his preface to the 1764 edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (2003), Horace Walpole highlights that his work has resulted from the conflation of the ancient and the modern romance. In Walpole's view, the psychological verisimilitude of the novel can lend the supernatural credibility and psychological depth. Walpole's way of rationalizing his approach to the supernatural is instructive in that it highlights a key feature that distinguishes not only the Gothic, but most of the works that have been associated with the fantastic. These genres deploy a system of verisimilitude that is recognizably novelistic: they include long descriptions of environments and psychologies, as well as chronological and topographical data. This holds true for a broad range of narratives which belong to different times and genres, such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Stephen King's *It*, and Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. Thus, we may say that the worlds of the fantastic are built by using a realistic mode of presentation, which fleshes out preternatural beings and events.

However, there is one more key feature to highlight, one that emerged, as well, as a response to the pressure of the new epistemology and its outlook. The fictional worlds of the fantastic result from the juxtaposition of different sets of ontological properties – embedded in different genres and different worldviews – and thematize the tension between them. For example, the worlds of fantasy literature are often built by blending different myths (Attebery 2014). More often than not, this tension is mediated by the viewpoint of characters who are unable to reconcile the objects or phenomena they experience with their established assumptions about reality, and feel threatened by forces they cannot control: consider, for example, the ontological hesitation between the natural and the supernatural that Todorov regards as a distinctive feature of the fantastic, typical of nineteenth-century ghost stories. A state of disorientation also informs character response in more recent genres, such as science fiction and fantasy. In the former, characters often confront beings or phenomena that challenge their views of the world, which need to be revised and expanded (for example, in Stanislaw Lem's masterpiece, the sentient ocean of *Solaris* becomes the object of a new scientific discipline). In the latter, the exploration of the fictional world discloses previously unknown beings and phenomena, whose existence – as in *The Lord of the Rings* or in *A Song of Ice and Fire* – contributes to expand the character's narrow world-picture, invites speculations, and

entails explanatory histories that go back to an ancient past, both mythical and historical. These ontological tensions have far-reaching meanings, both social and psychological. The destabilization of reality and of the subject that experiences it, who finds himself confused and vulnerable, conveys anxieties and drives of many kinds, depending on each social context. For example, in early Gothic novels, the manifestation of the preternatural expresses fears over a residual aristocratic ideology (Clery 1995). In nineteenth-century American culture, as well as in later horror fiction – see “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the novels by Stephen King – preternatural beings symbolize a repressed corporality or a wilderness that remains radically other.

From the comparative viewpoint of World Literature, the study of the fantastic can be particularly fruitful. The birth of the fantastic is hard to pin down to one single context. However, it can certainly be traced back to three European cultures: after Walpole in England, Cazotte in France, and Hoffman in Germany, distinctive ways of using the natural/preternatural opposition coalesced, and a game of influences, rewritings, and counter-influences began. For example, between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, English Gothic fiction was influenced by German versions of the genre. The center–periphery approach adopted by Franco Moretti ([2000] 2004) in his study on the spread of the novel in the modern world seems also suitable to the study of the fantastic, whose adaptation has entailed formal and ideological compromises between Western influences and local concerns. At the same time, the history of the fantastic can be extremely productive in an intercultural perspective, with a specific focus on anxieties and projects sparked by social and cultural transformations in a global context. The ontological tension that is distinctive of the fantastic has been used to stage disruptive changes, or has been deliberately overcome to forge new narrative forms.

The period that goes from decolonization to the present day is, in this respect, crucial. With the rise of a world system, the fantastic has played a part as relevant as that played by the novel. Significant works of postcolonial literature have collapsed the opposition between realism and the fantastic, overcoming their epistemological underpinnings and forging a different kind of narrative style. This is apparent in the works that have fallen within the category of the *real maravilloso*, theorized by Alejo Carpentier in his prologue to *The Kingdom of This World* (2006), which itself constitutes an example of this kind of aesthetic, epitomized by *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez (2000) (see Gabriel García Márquez and the Worlding of Latin American Literature), whose impact has been enormous. Writers like Carpentier and Márquez blur the boundaries between realism and the fantastic and draw from local traditions to renew both narrative modes. In doing so, they appropriate, polemically and creatively, the conventions of European literature. The works of *real maravilloso* – often translated as “magical realism” – have paved the way for a range of postcolonial works that presuppose, and at the same time undermine, the differential between realism and the fantastic. One notable example is *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie (2006), which accommodates both myth and history to narrate a postcolonial (and postmodern) version of the history of India (see Salman Rushdie and the World Picture of Islam).

However, in the system of World Literature, as in all literary cultures and historical arcs, there are no clear-cut transitions from one period to the next. The recurrent features of the fantastic, in particular its characteristic tension between ontological regimes, enjoys wide

circulation across a variety of genres and media (it can still be found in *Scooby-Doo*, a cartoon series, in *Interstellar*, a science fiction movie, and in *What Lies Beneath*, a thriller-horror movie). In the course of the twentieth century, the popularity and durability of the fantastic has made it possible for a wide range of writers and cultures to react against it, reuse it, and refashion it. Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (2009) (see Franz Kafka), for example, stages and explores the absurd by subtly departing from the opposition between the natural and the supernatural. What is striking in Kafka's novella is precisely the fact that Gregor Samsa does not question his sudden transformation into a man-sized bug. Kafka achieves this effect by implying, and undermining, a well-established model that, as I have highlighted, was closely related to empirical rationalism. In some of Borges's short stories (see Borges in the World, the World in Borges), to give another relevant example, the ontological hesitation that is characteristic of the fantastic becomes an unsettling question over the philosophical/categorical construction of reality: in "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" (1998) Borges deftly refigures the natural/preternatural opposition by presenting the world of Tlön as an intellectual construction which is so elaborate, extensive, and appealing as to infiltrate reality and raise fundamental doubts about its nature.

A case of intercultural appropriation which proves particularly interesting is that of Japan. Twentieth-century Japanese culture has made ample use of the fantastic as a tool to express the effects, both social and psychological, of modernization (Napier 1996). By staging the tension between an established perception of reality and preternatural events, the works of writers such as Tanizaki, Sōseki, and Kawabata have expressed a feeling of nostalgia and bewilderment. The Japanese fantastic, therefore, is not so much a reaction to Western ideologies and epistemologies as an aesthetic response to the conflicted relation between modernization and local traditions. Having originally emerged to represent the ruptures caused by modernization in its native context, the fantastic was particularly suited to the task. However, the appropriation was also a transformation. In many of the works of the Japanese fantastic, especially in its early stages, the preternatural does not necessarily pose an epistemological challenge (unlike, to give significant examples, in *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*). Instead, it manifests itself in surreal touches that recall the atmosphere of local myths, with the significant addition of the uncanny. By using the fantastic, moreover, Japanese writers widened their readership: much like the novel, the fantastic has in fact become, in spite of its diversification, a shared narrative mode in the global literary system.

**SEE ALSO:** Pu Songling and the Chinese Ghost Tale; Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables*; Gothic Ghosts and Gothic Mirrors; Salman Rushdie and the World Picture of Islam; Franz Kafka; Borges in the World, the World in Borges; Gabriel García Márquez and the Worlding of Latin American Literature

#### REFERENCES

- Aldridge, Alfred Owen. 1986. *The Reemergence of World Literature: A Study of Asia and the West*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses.
- Attebery, Brian. 2014. *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. 1998. "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In *Collected Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, 68–81. London: Penguin.
- Capoferro, Riccardo. 2010. *Empirical Wonder: Historicizing the Fantastic, 1660–1760*. Bern: Peter Lang.

- Carpentier, Alejo. 2006. *The Kingdom of This World: A Novel*, translated by Harriet de Honis. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Clery, E.J. 1995. *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kafka, Franz. 2009. *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, translated by Joyce Crick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Li Way-Yee. 2010. "Early Qing to 1723." In *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, vol. 2: *From 1375*, edited by Kang-I Sun Chang and Stephen Owen, 152–244. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Márquez, Gabriel García. 2000. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, translated by Gregory Rabassa. London: Penguin.
- Moretti, Franco. (2000) 2004. "Conjectures on World Literature." In *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast, 148–162. London: Verso.
- Napier, Susan J. 1996. *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*. London: Routledge.
- Pu Songling. 2006. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, translated by John Minford. London: Penguin.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1980. *Midnight's Children*. London: Penguin.
- Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1975. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Walpole, Horace. 2003. *The Castle of Otranto*, edited by Frederick S. Frank. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press.

#### FURTHER READING

- Brooke-Rose, Christine. 1981. *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, Especially of the Fantastic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cornwell, Neil. 1990. *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Doležel, Lubomír. 2000. *Heterocosmics: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jackson, Rosemary. 1991. *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen.
- Patterson, Annabel. 1991. *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1991. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Van Dijk, G.J. 1997. *Ainoi, Logoi, Mythoi: Fables in Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Greek Literature: With a Study of the Theory and Terminology of the Genre*. Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill.