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ONTOLOGICAL STRUCTURE IN GENRE ANALYSIS

In the present essay I attempt to provide the analysis of, and the means for a structural distinction between the genres of science-fiction on the one hand, and utopia and dystopia on the other. That the need for such a generic touchstone exists is evident in the light of a regular practice (at least by science-fiction scholars) of lumping these genres together under a common heading¹. I hope to provide persuasive reasons for regarding the genres of utopia and dystopia as discrete from science-fiction by virtue of the ontological shift inherent in their generic identity.

The most fundamental interpretive strategy employed during an act of reading is an effort to understand the text as a unified whole. No matter how disjointed or fragmentary the narrative might be the reader will, for the most part automatically, strive to impose semantic coherence upon it. The creation of a cogent interpretive framework (Gestalt) is the inevitable result of the reader's integration of the text during the act of reading. This principle holds equally true even for the most experimental of postmodern prose (probably best epitomized by the *Nouveau Roman*) which, as a matter of principle, does not facilitate the establishment of a textual Gestalt.

Although the problems of fictional coherence and autonomy have been around in one way or another from the inception of literature, the function, generative principles, or even the ontological status of fictional worlds have surged to the forefront of critical debates particularly since the advent of postmodernism. Contemporary texts delight in foregrounding their self-awareness as generators of fictional worlds through a vast array of devices (textual fragmentation, generic hybridization, rhetorical narrativity, direct reader engagement, dissolution of plot, erasure of distinction between fiction and non-fiction, etc.).

It is a truism that every work of literature must be at the same time familiar and unfamiliar (estranged) in order to be comprehensible without being trivial and cognitively meaningful without being inaccessible. It is thus not difficult to

¹ One of its most vocal proponents is Darko Suvin; cf. "Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genology, a Proposal, and a Plea" in *Metamorphoses*.

see that the principal distinction between realistic and fantastic literatures consists in the degree of estrangement-syntagmatic in realistic fiction, paradigmatic² in fantastic fiction. This difference in degree constitutes, at the same time, the difference in kind and thus sets fantastic fiction apart from realistic fiction where all narrative constructs *must* be continuous with our empirical reality (otherwise they would no longer classify as realistic fiction). Fantastic genres can be understood, then, as devoid of a direct (non-symbolical) global correspondence to any world extraneous to them implicit in their shift on the spatio-temporal axis (the worlds they conjure up have, by definition, never existed).

In light of the above remarks it transpires that fantastic genres could be eminently suited to analysis in terms of the type of estrangement sought and achieved in them. It seems further that particular types of estrangement should originate in the ontological qualities of the generic "universes" within which the estranged parameters are developed. The universe of a particular genre should be understood here as a narrative space circumscribed by the ontology of the "world" or "paradigm" (or "world presented" in the more traditional nomenclature). The potential infinity of new worlds as developed in different works of literature is thus created using the generative rules of specific types of literary genres³. These rules demarcate the confines of fictional universes--universes whose properties set them categorically apart from one another, as well as, in the case of fantastic genres, from the world of our empirical experience. Such distinction can, therefore, become a base for a comparative generic study of the ontologies⁴ created by different types of fantastic literature.

During an act of reading every reader participates in a conventionalized communication process which involves the (for the most part unconscious) identification of the literary game enacted during his contact with the text. The reader maps out the character of the work for himself quite pragmatically by generating a consistent set of rules that characterize the behaviour of the

² Although the term is highly unsatisfactory in view of its manifold connotations, its persistence in critical jargon warrants its inclusion at this point. Throughout the essay I employed strictly in the sense delineated by Marc Angenot in "The Absent Paradigm".

³ The tacit understanding at this point is that this approach is--as, indeed, any other approach based on a similar principle--synchronic, approaching any generic space as a time-slice phenomenon.

⁴ The comparative ontology of fantastic literature was originally developed by Stanislaw Lem in *Fantastyka i Futurologia* where Lem discussed five sub-types of the literature of the fantastic: fairy tale (Lem ill-matches *bajka ludowa* [lit. folk tale] with weird tale), fantasy, horror story, myth and science-fiction. Since the properties of fantasy and horror story are not only tangential to my paper but also secondary to the other genres (they can be derived from them by a few transformations), I confine my analysis only to the three *extrema*: fairy tale, myth and science-fiction (precisely Lem's own strategy in "On the Structural Analysis of Science Fiction"). In an approach based on Lem's, Darko Suvin distinguishes between folktale (fairy tale), myth and fantasy, and science-fiction and pastoral (*Metamorphoses* [orig. essay 1973]).

fictional world. His normative efforts result, in fact, in a stabilization of a certain ontological perspective behind the world of a given work.

If, at the beginning of the narrative, the protagonist affects his escape by means of a ring which, rubbed vigorously, teleports him instantaneously to far-off locations, the local fantasticism of the semantic element (instantaneous transportation) will have already delimited the realm of the narrative as para-empirical, i.e. fantastic⁵. Such local parameters do not suffice, however, to determine the global character of the world in question and, consequently, the genre to which the work belongs. After all, the world in which the ring and the protagonist find themselves could ultimately have different ontologies: it could be either neutral, or intentionally (positively or negatively) biased towards its inhabitants. In order to properly judge its global character it is necessary to consider the text on its entirety.

Any world of realistic fiction enjoys an ontologically direct relationship with the "zero world" of our empirical reality. Both manifest the same properties familiar to the reader from his everyday experience. After all, we do not perceive objects around us as intentionally inclined (either positively or negatively), and we fully admit of the world's indeterministically neutral character. In other words, in the empirical world, as well as the realistic fiction modeled upon it, "physics stands in no significant relation to ethics" (Suvin 18).

In the literature of the fantastic the coincidence between the empirical and fictional worlds loses its imperative character. The generic rules governing fantastic fiction no longer oblige it to coincide with the axis of verisimilar ontology (however, they do not preclude it either: hence the presence of science-fiction). In fact the fantastic genres diverge from it on both sides of neutrality, creating for their fictional purposes para-empirical ontologies. In the literature thus created, events are subservient to the fate decreed by the particular (positive or negative) bias of the world towards its inhabitants.

The positively oriented world is, of course, the domain of the fairy tale. As a fictional construct, the world of the fairy tale "has such secret regulators built into it that it [becomes] an ideal homeostat which aspires to the best of all possible equilibriums" (Lem, *Fantastyka* 66). Since fairy tale usurps the autonomy of physics, we might be justified in describing it as a meta-physical genre. Despite built-in retardative devices (conventionalized as dragons, witches, human and superhuman contenders, etc.), the immanent partiality of the ontology which fairy tale adopts for its generic universe never allows any sustained doubt as to the auspicious result of the protagonist's temporary misfortunes.

The opposite side of the generic spectrum is occupied by the world of myth with its tragically deterministic character. The mythical universe, a homeostat "determined like of the fairy tale, but pursuing unknown, trans- or anti-human

⁵ Such elements need not be merely, or purely semantic; linguistic or syntactic signification of fantasticism can be as effective.

goals" (Lem, *Fantastyka* 70), is no less meta-physical than that of the fairy tale. Even though the pre-ordained fate might seem avoidable--after all Oedipus' struggle to elude the impending doom is inspired by his knowledge of the oracle--such mythic homologues of the fairy tale's retardation serve only to underscore the inevitability of the deterministic decree.

The ontologies generated by both types of fiction are thus equally meta-physical, distributed on either side of the neutral, i.e. realistic ontology. After all, the ontologically neutral world, governed by physical rather than ethical laws, is not in any significant relation towards its inhabitants. This impartial "zero" ontology is, as has already been suggested, the basis of science-fiction. Despite the generic prerequisite of paradigmatic estrangement which differentiates it from realistic fiction, science-fiction shares with it a common ontology. In this sense, science-fiction can be described as realistic literature shifted outside the sociohistorical known values of the continuum.

In light of the above remarks it is not difficult to notice a symmetry between the ontological properties of the fairy tale and myth on the one hand, and utopia and dystopia on the other. Just like science-fiction, the genres of utopia and dystopia depict socio-political worlds which must be paradigmatically estranged. Unlike science-fiction, however, the ontologies of their generic universes do not follow the dictates of physical laws. Instead, utopia and dystopia deviate in the direction of the meta-physical ontologies of fairy tale and myth, with their respectively quaranteed "positive" and "negative" amplitude. The metaphysical slant of either genre is firmly encoded into its etymology. The taxonomical label of *eu-topia* denotes a location which *must* be essentially superior to what in the contemporary social consciousness passes for the empirical norm. Under a symmetrical negative transformation, dystopia must always describe a place at all times inferior (*dys-topian*)⁶. Whether classically defined as "good" or "bad", or seen in a more modern fashion as simply "better" and "worse", utopia and dystopia distinguish themselves from science-fiction by virtue of their prerogative of creating worlds which carry with themselves the assurance of ontological bias.

One of the most economic metaphors describing this state of affairs is Yevgeny Zamyatin's description of the "generic and invariable features that characterize utopia" (286). The Russian writer observed that "we might say that utopias bear a + sign" (286) in contrast to science-fiction's "zero state" ontology. A sudden nullification of this ontological plus (or minus, in the case of dystopia) would thus be tantamount to stepping outside the boundaries of the genre in question. After all, a last minute prole revolution which, besides abolishing the party tyranny, liberated Winston Smith from O'Brien's sadistic

⁶ All examples of dystopian taxonomy listed by Arthur Lewis: reverse utopia, negative utopia, inverted utopia, regressive utopia, cactopia, dystopia, non-utopia, antiutopia, satiric utopia, nasty utopia--define dystopia's inherent "badness" through an inversion (negation) of the utopian ontology.

clutches, would be cognitively and aesthetically incompatible with 1984's generic contract. Analogously, it would be equally incongruous if an outbreak of a super-virulent epidemic (with William the Gues as an unwitting carrier) shattered the utopian idyl of Morris' *Nowhere* by wiping out its pseudo-medieval population.

That works transcending utopia and dystopia's generic boundaries have been and continue to be written, is undeniable--*Fahrenheit 451* is only one of the better known examples. The question remains, however, how to distinguish generic hybrids from straightforward genres which they can resemble. To put it in brutally pragmatic terms: how can we tell a dystopia with a happy end tacked onto it (or its utopian reverse) from a work of science-fiction?

A commonsensical impression could intimate that, since utopian and dystopian narratives appear to be superficially (syntagmatically) realistic, the worlds they create should be no less realistic--i.e., comparable to those of science-fiction--in their character. In fact, the situation is less straightforward due to the biased, i.e. para-empirical, nature of utopian and dystopian ontologies. Although the syntagmatic verisimilitude of narrative events may seem to warrant their analysis as signifiers "in themselves", the overall character of either genre must, nonetheless, remain symbolical in view of the meta-physical bias of its ontology. After all, if interpreted literally, the only generic import of the utopian Scylla is that a transition into a better, *eutopian* state can never be accomplished in the course of social evolution--a logical conclusion which follows from the discontinuity between the fictional and empirical ontologies. In a similarly literal reading, the dystopian Charybdis is equally incapable of spelling out a less monochromatic future for the human society, generically constrained to painting pictures of inevitable degeneration and decline. The global import of both genres *must* remain exclusively symbolical as long as their respective ontologies' depart from the "zero-state" of empirical neutrality.

That is not to say, however, that utopia and dystopia are otherwise comparable to their ontological analogues of myth and fairy tale. The list of differentiating features between them opens with the predominantly realistic (verisimilar) narrative mode common to utopia and dystopia which, unlike in myth and fairy tale, is largely devoid of local fantasticities⁷. Likewise, utopia and dystopia are written from a rational and cognitive, rather than the ludic or transcendental perspective dominant in the fairy tale and myth. Unlike their counterparts, utopia and dystopia entail an implicit or explicit reference to the empirical world of the reader which presupposes the physical (spatial, temporal or both) separation of their worlds from it. The implied presence of the empirical world to which the deep narrative structures of utopia and dystopia allude is markedly absent from myth and fairy tale, inasmuch as both create fictionally non-referential, i.e. semantically and interpretively autonomous, worlds. Lastly, in the view of at least one critic, the panoramic depiction of a utopian or dystopian sociopolitical world presupposes an outline of

a "formal hierarchic system" (Suvin 50), a condition which does not extend to the generic configuration of either fairy tale or myth.

All the same, out of surface elements of verisimilar modality, utopia and dystopia construct meta-physical worlds characterized by ontological partiality. Keeping this in mind, some of the most common narrative elements written into the structure of these genres can be re-interpreted in light of their global ontological character. If at the basis of the utopian paradigm lies a new socio-political contrast, the depiction of the struggle for, or merely transition into, this desired state parallels the role of a retardative device in fairy tale which postpones the achievement of the optimal homeostasis. In a dystopia, the marginal presence of a heterodox community--usually on the fringes of the dominant socio-political system (although sometimes presented in the form of a pre-dystopian retrospect)--resembles the mythical oracle in its function of amplifying and magnifying the deterministic order.

Quite pragmatically then, the distinction between the utopian or dystopian and science-fiction genres as embodied in any work of fiction can be drawn on the basis of their ontological characteristics. If the fictional world is "personifiable", i.e., acts in the capacity of an opponent who stands to gain or lose from the protagonist's fate, it is obviously the meta-physical world of utopia or dystopia. In a number of works, especially of dystopian nature, the world is actually and conveniently personified (although not necessarily personalized) in the image of the ruling establishment (party, government, Big Brother, etc.). The contrast between the opposing sides--protagonist versus system/world--resembles thus a zero-sum conflict, where the gain of one side is tantamount to the loss experienced by the other. No such zero-sum symmetry can be observed in the ontologically empirical world of science-fiction, where the protagonist's eventual success or failure fails to affect the system/world in any way. It is precisely the sustained "no gain" relationship between the world and its inhabitants which differentiates science-fiction from the genres of utopia and dystopia.

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⁷This rule applies to the narrative proper or to the fictional framework, but not to the transition between them which, often enough, is accomplished through non-verisimilar means (e.g. dream vision, time-travel). Some works, e.g. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*, employ fantastic elements even within the narrative itself (the physicomagico-occultist force called 'Vril'); these non-empirical parameters are, nevertheless, subsequently developed with a rational logic and verisimilitude which differentiates it from *ad hoc* supernaturalities of myth and fairy tale.

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STRUKTURA ONTOLOGICZNA W ANALIZIE GATUNKÓW LITERACKICH

STRESZCZENIE

W tym studium dokonałem próby wzbogacenia analizy właściwości strukturalnych dotyczących różnic między odmianami gatunkowymi fantastyki naukowej z jednej a utopią i dystopią z drugiej strony. (W polskim nazewnictwie genologicznym określenie „dystopia” jako „miejsce dowolne” zdarzeń świata przedstawionego jest raczej mało używane). Potrzeba tego rodzaju rozróżnień jest oczywista również w sferze badań, gdy chodzi o gatunki mieszczące się przecież w jakiejś wspólnej grupie genologicznej. Jestem przekonany, że zdołałem wykazać, iż utopia i dystopia są formami dyskretnymi w stosunku do fantastyki naukowej, w swej substancji gatunkowej mieszczącymi się w jej strukturze ontologicznej.