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UNDERSTANDING FANTASY

Theoretical statements on fantasy can be found in two kinds of literary criticism: either as marginal remarks appearing in studies on particular authors, works and genres connected with fantasy or in articles dealing specifically with the theory of fantasy. The first type is far more numerous¹. As most of the studies lead towards historical, philosophical and literary historical conclusions, the opinion of W. Ostrowski and R. Handke² about the meagerness of theoretical research upon fantasy seems to be well founded.

Bearing this scantiness of theory in mind the author will try to review the most recent attitude of the critics towards the problem of fantasy and will also present his own methodological propositions. Obviously, then, the present attempt should be considered as merely one of the voices in the discussion and not an authoritative declaration.

The prevailing interpretation of fantasy in recent criticism seems to be based upon the opposition of two literary conventions, the term "convention" virtually meaning "the creative method of writing". This attitude may be observed in the articles by W. Ostrowski and J. Trzynadlowski and in the introductory chapters to

¹ To mention but a few works on the subject: W. Ostrowski's studies upon utopia in *O literaturze angielskiej*, Warszawa 1958; A. Darrel's *A Key to the House of Usher*, [in:] *Interpretations of American Literature*, ed. by Ch. Feidelson, P. Brodtkerb, New York 1959, pp. 51—62; R. Caillois's *Od baśni do science fiction*, [in:] *Odpowiedzialność i styl*, Warszawa 1968; J. Trzynadlowski's *Próba poetyki science fiction*, [in:] *Z teorii i historii literatury. Prace poświęcone V Międzynarodowemu Kongresowi Słowistów w Sofii*, ed. K. Budzyk, Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków 1963, pp. 258—279; W. Ostrowski's *Imaginary History*, "Zag. Rodz. Lit.", 1960, vol. 3, fasc. 2 (5), pp. 27—42; B. Bergonzi's *The Early H. G. Wells...*, Manchester; R. Gerber's *Utopian Fantasy...*, London 1955.

² Cf. W. Ostrowski, *The Fantastic and the Realistic in Literature*, "Zag. Rodz. Lit.", 1966, vol. 9, fasc. 1 (16), p. 70, and R. Handke, *Polska proza fantastyczno-naukowa*, Wrocław, Warszawa, Kraków 1969, p. 15.

the studies by R. Handke and R. Gerber³. According to the critics' opinions this is to be considered a step forward from the theories trying to oppose "the fantastic" to objective reality. As W. Ostrowski puts it:

"The situation improves when, instead of opposing 'the fantastic' to 'the real', we balance it with 'the realistic' [...]"⁴.

The above mentioned critics assume the existence of two or three conventions (realistic versus fantastic or realistic, romantic, fantastic). Hence:

"[...] in a realistic novel the world of fiction is built up from what is everyday — typical, familiar to most men in a given setting"⁵.

Consequently, the romantic would mean the unusual, the uncommon, the individual. Realistic, as well as romantic fiction, or even caricature and farce, would produce a familiar vision of the world, though the visions in the case of a romantic work, caricature or farce would be characterized by exaggeration, strangeness, distortion.

In opposition to realistic or romantic fiction, fantasy:

"[...] is produced by a transformation of the constituents of the empirical world and their pattern, which makes them so different from common experience that we may look for them in this world in vain or that their experience is, at least, objectively unverifiable"⁶.

So, rejecting the opposition of fantastic fiction to objective reality, the critics have substituted for it the contrast of fantasy and realism, but the criterion distinguishing fantastic and realistic novels has virtually remained the same: it is still the degree of similarity between the fictional world and the empiric reality.

The consequences of such an attitude are numerous.

One of them is the far-reaching dependence of fantasy upon the meaning of the term "realism", which has been changed more than once in the course of history for both the author and the reader. The understanding of fantasy changed simultaneously with the shifts in the meaning of "realism". As W. Ostrowski suggests, writers who were believers in the occult and medieval hagiographers when telling a story about miracles thought that their fiction truly reflected the objective reality, in other words, they believed they were creating "realistic fiction"⁷. On the other hand there still exist peoples for whom an epic about men reaching the moon would seem fantastic. These examples should prompt the conclusion that the research on the attitudes of the author to his fiction, or the reader to the text he reads can result in studying subjective notions about fantasy rather than in examining the essen-

³ Cf. Ostrowski, *The Fantastic...*; Trzynadlowski, *Próba poetyki...*; Handke, *op. cit.*, pp. 20—21; Gerber, *op. cit.*

⁴ Ostrowski, *The Fantastic...*, p. 55.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 57 (underlining mine — A. Z.).

⁷ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 66.

tial nature of it. Let me be particularly precise here. Though the studies upon the literary consciousness of the writers and upon the historical poetics of a given epoch may constitute a valuable field of interest in itself, they are bound to be of little help in solving the theoretical problems of fantastic literature in general. Why so? Because they shift the focus of attention from the unchanging text to the changing convictions of the author or to the varying reaction of the audience. Misinterpreting the aim and importance of such studies seems to be one of the dangers in the present theoretical statements concerning the nature of fantasy.

One should also bear in mind, as W. Ostrowski suggests⁸, that the empiric reality and the fictional world differ much in their modes of existence⁹. As it is generally understood today, both kinds of reality constitute different worlds, though sometimes the fictional world is governed by similar laws (but not the same) to those of everyday life.

Superficial similarity of the so called "realistic" literature to the objective world often seems to blur the significant distinctions among the variety of such "realistic" works. They usually range from naturalism to subjective poetic expression, from the typical to the unique. By way of example it is enough to recall here some names from the field of the English novel, those of Defoe, Fielding, Dickens and Henry James. This variety of "realistic" literature seems to be based mainly upon different methods of selecting and ordering the literary material. Those methods vary not only according to the given poetics of the literary period but also according to the requirements of the literary genre of the work in question. In other words, the literary genetical phenomena condition the appearance of many kinds of literature more strictly than its "skin-deep" similarity to the objective world. It could be suggested that the multiformity of literature is mainly dependent on the inherent literary processes.

Thus it seems too general a statement to say that the number of literary conventions is not only limited but also easily countable, and that literature could be divided into "realistic" and "non-realistic". The statement could obliterate the differences existing between fiction and objective reality as it can be seen in the attempts at defining fantasy outlined above, where "realism" means "similar to the real world" and "fantasy" is "everything different from common experience".

These considerations suggest the conclusion that studying fantasy in relation to realism can lead to unwarranted generalizations. As each term covers half of the world's literature, both of them acquire meanings so broad that their use in literary analyses is greatly hampered¹⁰. They simply become convenient labels for assigning particular works to almost empty classes of notions.

⁸ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 55.

⁹ Cf. Ingarden's theory of the literary work of art.

¹⁰ For a refutation of the principle of endowing the term "realism" with a broad meaning cf. H. Markiewicz, *Główne problemy wiedzy o literaturze*, Kraków 1966, pp. 254—260.

To understand the essential nature of fantasy would require then the adoption of a slightly different approach to literary phenomena.

The first thing to be assumed here is the plurality of literary conventions. They are revealed in the existence of a variety of literary genres which, during their historical development, have in turn formed many variants. The existence of numerous conventions often baffles any efforts to ascribe particular works to such broad and all-embracing classes as realistic and fantastic literatures. For practical reasons it seems advantageous to observe literary processes as they are revealed in separate variants of literary genres.

Every world created in the literary work constitutes a kind of reality. The laws governing such a reality may be similar or dissimilar but they are never identical with those of empiric reality. These internal laws of the fictional world follow from the genre convention. But the development of literature depends on the process of changing conventions, on their mutual enmity and friction. And sometimes the changing of the convention may cause a break in the laws of the fictional world. Although it is true that friction between the struggling conventions does not necessarily involve the breach of the internal laws of the fictional world, yet if such a breach does occur it usually results in the appearance of fantasy.

The introduction of fantastic elements is almost always easily recognizable owing to the significant changes in the way of creation of narrators, characters or the addressee. The change lies in directing the addressee's attention to the narrator's or the characters' reaction to the new elements in the fictional world, to those which constitute a breach of the laws governing it. The reaction is usually that of surprise, disbelief, astonishment, wonder, awe, amazement, bewilderment or even terror¹¹. Those feelings arise in the protagonist, narrator or the addressee of narration owing to the unexpected appearance of such elements which do not fit the assumed order of their world, whether the order is modelled on the empiric reality or not.

For example, in *The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells the laws of the fictional world are modelled in accordance with those of the real world. The appearance of the invisible man not only surprises but also frightens the characters living peacefully in this world. The invisibility is the only fantastic element in the novel and it breaks the internal order of the created fiction. But in the novel by Kenneth Bulmer *Earth's Long Shadow* the fictional world is that of the far future. None of the protagonists is surprised by the shape of the world: their home is the Horakah cluster of planets "far beyond the Blight". The only fantastic element appears when five hundred thousand starships close on the Horakah cluster. It is not the strength of the armada that shocks and surprises the people of the fictional world. The aliens' claim that they are from Earth staggers the moguls of Horakah, because Earth was a forgotten legend among the peoples beyond the Blight. It is the real existence

¹¹ R. Caillois presents a similar opinion, though he speaks about the reactions of the real reader.

of the legendary Earth that does not fit into the assumed order of the universe as created in the novel.

So, it seems that the normality of the fictional world means different things for the author and the real audience and, on the other hand, for the narrator and the protagonist. The feelings of the author and the real audience do not and cannot decide the existence of the fantastic element. It is only a member of the fictional world who can discern the abnormality of the world, as only he knows in detail its presupposed natural order.

Recently it has been recognized that in the historical process of literature the new elements introduced into a literary genre convention become, after a time, stabilized. It also holds true, it seems, in case of the new laws governing the fictional world. They become the petrified part of the new genre convention and no longer stimulate the reaction of the true members of the fictional reality, who take them as natural phenomena in their world.

For example, cosmic travels used in a number of works as an exceptional and fantastic motif, stop after a time provoking astonishment among the people of the fictional world. Such an attitude of the protagonists and the narrator can be found in many contemporary science fiction novels, for example in *Starship Troopers* and *Farmer in the Sky* by R. Heinlein or *Gunner Cade* by Cyril Judd and many others. Generally speaking, this may be treated as a process of forming a new convention, often resulting in the creation of a new variant of the genre. At that time fantasy proper disappears. If a work can be said to belong to an established convention, there is no place for fantasy in it. Fantasy, in the narrow sense of the term, appears only in the intermediate stages when the old convention is still strong and the new elements are slowly and often painfully remodelling the established order of the fictional world.

In the diversity of literary genres there seem to exist some which tend to use fantasy more than others. The historical development of such genres as utopia, science fiction or some romantic genres might be a good illustration of the pulsating rhythm of fantasy which appears in these genres when they enter the stages of friction between two opposed conventions.

In the light of the above opinions it can be said that the appearance of fantasy is strictly dependent upon the given convention of a literary genre. On the one hand fantasy is connected with a reaction against the established genre convention. On the other hand it varies according to:

- a) the particular genre it appears in;
- b) the particular convention which is being changed.

Its variety is seen not only in the different characters it introduces or in the kind of motifs it uses, but mainly in the functions it has in opposing the given literary convention. Those functions are decisive when the role of fantasy in separate variants of a genre is concerned, and they would also be important if an attempt at differentiating the kinds of fantasy were made.

The conclusions seem to be following.

Fantasy appears when the internal laws of the fictional world are breached. The process is often reflected in the significant reactions of the narrator, of the protagonists or the addressee who are astonished or awed by the new shape of the fictional world. Fantasy should be discerned through the breach of internal literary laws and not the laws of objective reality which sometimes are the model for the fictional reality of literary works.

Such understanding of fantasy may make possible the practical use of the term in historical or theoretical considerations upon literature, as it is strictly connected with research upon the literary text itself and its internal relations. The proposed understanding may also open broad vistas for relating the research upon fantasy to studies upon the historical process of development in literature in general. "Fantasy" as a typological term may be used most clearly in the narrow sense of the word as suggested above. As a broad term "fantasy" will certainly exist in the domain of book reviewing, because comparing fiction to empiric reality is deeply rooted in the consciousness both of the reviewers and the reading public. But in the field of literary research the need for precise and clearly defined terms should perhaps decide in favour of accepting the narrow understanding of fantasy presented here.

The dangers in using the term "fantasy" without specifying its kind have been indicated here. The sought for precision would require adding a qualifier to the general, typological term, like: "utopian fantasy"¹², "science fiction fantasy", "fairy tale fantasy". Still greater exactness could be achieved by discovering the function of fantastic elements in particular variants of the given genre.

All that has been already said points to the necessity of conducting studies capable of correlating the research upon fantasy, upon its kinds and its functions with the problem of the development of literary genres, with the historical formation of genre variants in different literary epochs. This seems to be one of the most urgent needs both for the theory of fantasy and the history of literature in general.

„FANTASTYKA”. PRÓBA REINTERPRETACJI TERMINU

STRESZCZENIE

Szkic niniejszy jest zarówno próbą omówienia współczesnych badań teoretycznych nad zagadnieniem fantastyki, jak i prezentacją własnych założeń autora w rozumieniu tego terminu.

Stwierdzono, iż ostatnie prace teoretyczne przeciwstawiają fantastykę dość szeroko pojętemu realizmowi. Kryterium takiego rozróżnienia jest, jak się wydaje, dość zawodne, gdyż sprowadza się ono do poszukiwania podobieństw i różnic fikcji fantastycznej z rzeczywistością realną. Konsekwencją takiego stanowiska teoretycznego jest zwykle zainteresowanie historyka literatury intencjami autora lub reakcją czytelnika, a nie samym tekstem literackim. Fantastyka i realizm uzyskują wówczas zbyt szerokie znaczenie, aby stanowić mogły wartościowe terminy analityczne.

¹² The term used by R. Gerber in his book *Utopian Fantasy...*

Autor zwraca uwagę na istnienie dużej liczby konwencji literackich, które są tak zróżnicowane, iż mało mówiący staje się ich podział na dwa tylko rodzaje. Stąd wypływa propozycja, by rozważać zjawiska literackie przede wszystkim na terenie poszczególnych odmian gatunkowych. Według autora fantastyka jest ściśle związana z historycznymi odmianami gatunków literackich, w których się pojawia.

W przedstawionej propozycji metodologicznej założono, iż powszechny proces literacki ścierania się elementów różnych konwencji gatunkowych w trakcie historycznego ich rozwoju prowadzi czasem do przełamania praw świata fikcyjnego dotychczas w danym gatunku obowiązujących. Przełamanie to jednak jest rozpoznawane przede wszystkim przez postaci, narratora lub adresata narracji, którzy należąc do świata fikcji, świadomi są w pełni zasad jego założonego porządku. Autor osobowy natomiast lub realny czytelnik pozostają poza granicami danego świata fikcji i ich reakcje na jakiegokolwiek jego zmiany są często albo trudne do zbadania z powodu braku wiarogodnych stwierdzeń, albo w wypadku czytelnika różnią się nieraz od siebie zbyt diametralnie, aby stanowić mogły podstawę badań innych niż statystyczne. Wspomniany proces obalania dotychczasowego porządku świata fikcyjnego, ustalonego przez konwencje gatunkowe, budzi w większości wypadków znamienne reakcje bezpośrednich jego świadków (postaci, narrator), reakcje przejawiające się w zdumieniu, zdziwieniu, strachu, niewierze czy obawie. Zjawisko owo nie wiąże się bezpośrednio z podobieństwem zmienianej rzeczywistości fikcyjnej do empirii. „Normalność” świata fikcji jest, jak się zdaje, wartością względną. Decyduje o niej nie odczucie autora lub czytelnika, lecz wyrażnie sygnalizowany stosunek narratora, postaci lub adresata. Stąd stosunek ów mógłby być uznany za jeden z wyznaczników pojawienia się fantastyki w utworze.

Zgodnie z powyższymi rozważaniami fantastykę (w wąskim rozumieniu terminu) można by określić jako przełamanie wewnętrznych praw literackich i ustalonego gatunkowo porządku świata fikcyjnego. Jest ona zwykle sygnalizowana zdziwieniem lub przerażeniem postaci tegoż świata. Wydaje się, że ustabilizowana konwencja gatunkowa rzadko idzie w parze z fantastyką. Zjawia się ona raczej w tych etapach rozwoju odmian gatunkowych, w których ustalona i tradycyjna konwencja ściera się ze zmieniającymi ją nowymi elementami.

Choć dotychczasowe rozumienie fantastyki przyjęło się już szeroko, wydaje się, iż zastosowanie jej węższego znaczenia w badaniach analitycznych zgodne byłoby z potrzebą ścisłych i precyzyjnych określeń w studiach literaturoznawczych, zwłaszcza iż wiązałoby się to także z odkrywaniem funkcji fantastyki w kształtowaniu odmian niektórych gatunków, a więc jej funkcji w procesie rozwojowym literatury.

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