A MYTH RETOLD
Towards a Rhetoric of Fantasy[*]

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In their study *Science Fiction: History – Science – Vision*, Robert Scholes and E. S. Rabkin view the history of literature as "a steady movement from myth towards realism" (1977:5). This movement implies a shift from a mythical or supraempirical world view to one in which the natural and the supernatural are clearly distinguished. The authors continue: "Curiously, as realism developed, so did its opposite – fiction which is aware of the difference between natural and supernatural but deliberately presents supernatural events. We call this kind of fiction "fantasy", and we distinguish it from myth and legend precisely because of its deliberate inclusion of supernatural elements in its fictional world" (1977:5).

The key word here is presumably 'deliberate'. There have been a number of attempts at demonstrating the close affinity between certain types of contemporary fantasy fiction and myth. These particularly involve those works which make use of traditional folk motives rather than cognitive innovations for the purpose of invoking our 'sense of wonder', that is to say, to 'fantasy' in the common sense of the term as opposed to science fiction. Boyer and Zahorski (1979:12, 14) include categories like 'myth fantasy' and 'fairy-tale fantasy' in their classificatory scheme, reflecting not only Tolkien's distinction (1947:51ff), in "On Fairy-Stories", between 'high' and 'low' myth but presumably also Northrop Frye's (1957:37f) influential typology of literary modes ranging from 'myth', through 'romance' and 'realism', to 'irony'. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in particular has invited various kinds of myth criticism, among them an interpretation by Anne C. Petty (1979)[1] which is based both on the structural analysis of folk tales inaugurated by Vladimir Propp and on the ethno-mythological writings of Joseph Campbell, in the tradition of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and eventually concludes that Tolkien's work itself partakes of that elusive quality of myth.

Studies like these, however, often fail to take into account that our appreciation of myth – in whatever sense of the term – is fundamentally different from the mythical experience of our remote ancestors, and that this fact, again, is reflected in the structure of a literary work. This is what Scholes and Rabkin mean by "deliberate inclusion". In a more general, but possibly more precise way, it is put by the Russian critic Julius Kargalitski. Kargalitski distinguishes between fantasy and myth by the criterion of syncretism: in myth, unity and contrast coincide, fantasy, they are dissociated. While myth is "more than reality", fantasy is an interpretation of reality (Kargalizki 1977:47f). "From myth", he writes, "fantasy arises only when, at least in the bud, the mythical, the improbability of what is being described, is exposed" (Kargalizki 1977:51; cf. also Kargalitski 1971:29).

Fantasy and Realism

The shift from a syncretic to a more differentiated way of thinking has been aligned with rather different historical epochs: with the discovery of writing (as suggested by Scholes and Rabkin); with the destruction of the geocentric world view and the associated hierarchical order of the universe; with the rise of rationalism, when philosophers like Descartes first formulated the basic distinction between an outer reality of nature and an inner reality of the human mind; or with the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century as a reflection of our everyday social reality(2). Definitions like these seem to be determined by the interest of the observer rather than by any intrinsic qualities of the subject matter at hand, and it is interesting to note that they tend to become narrower in scope the closer they come to our immediate historical and social experience. We are, therefore, probably well advised in defining 'reality' not as an absolute term, but, as the German critic Herbert Grabes (1977:71) puts it, as "a mode of being which is attributed to certain facts according to an intersubjectively accepted norm reinforced by conventions and sanctions".

According to this definition, a text – or indeed any aesthetic object – is understood as realistic if it assigns facts to that existential domain, viz. the real or the unreal, to which they belong according the acknowledged norm. The principle of the fantastic, then, implies that our conventional notion of reality is contrasted with an order of a different kind. A very abstract, genre-transcending, structural-mimetic definition of this kind is found as a lowest common denominator in virtually all theories of fantasy; this is what Fredericks (1978:37) calls the "counter-reality principle". How this aesthetic principle is actually realized, depends on the kinds of norms contradicted and on the possible alternatives available in a given historical situation.

To take this relative notion of reality as a basis of discussion is awkward on one respect, since it is psychologically difficult for us to accept different conventional systems on the same terms as the one we have been taught to acknowledge. From our limited historical point of view it would be difficult to argue whether a fiction such as Homer's *Iliad* or Dante's *Divina Commedia* should be accepted as realistic within its own cultural framework. On the other hand, this conception is most helpful in some ways. It prevents us, for instance, from viewing the problem in just intraliterary terms, as has been proposed by critics such as Zgorzelski (1972) and Rabkin (1976). It is, of course, true that every work of art creates its own reality. By definition, a fiction is not veryfiable. Grabes, again, is helpful in pointing out that the distinction between realism and fantasy involves a judgment of epistemological validity, while the distinction between referentiality and fictionality is a problem of ontological validity (cf. Grabes 1977:64, 70). If a reader is incapable of relating a nonfictional text to what it claims to refer to, it is no longer meaningful in referential terms (although it may still be viewed as an aesthetic object). These two parameters may be superimposed on each other in the form of a matrix:

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ontological / epistemological	referential	fictional
realistic	realistic nonfiction	realistic fiction
fantastic	fantastic nonfiction	fantastic fiction

What is called ‘fantastic nonfiction’ seems to denote a residual category, and a paradoxical one at that, since such a text would contradict the very reality that is supposed to serve as a frame of reference. Still, it is a most useful classification, appropriate to ‘occult’ writings such as the quasi-archaeological studies by Erich von Däniken and others, which are, presumably, read less for their truth value as because they are found to be intellectually stimulating, conveying a similar ‘sense of wonder’ as literary fantasies. Indeed, it could be argued that all texts which challenge or actually alter an accepted view of reality, either in personal experience or in the historical perspective, are in some way or other ‘fantastic’. The reality norm, as defined above, is not an entirely fixed value but rather a Probabilistic one, and only the epochal changes we are aware of remind us that our whole life is a constant process of learning and adjustment.

The identification of what is real with what may be empirically verified is a phenomenon of the nineteenth century, and if we take it as a basis for our discussion here, it is not because this definition is supposed to be intrinsic-ally superior to others – an assumption which any religious person would be ready to dispute – but because it used to be the prevalent paradigm during the time when the historical genres dealt with here were established. In fact, they may still be adequately explained in terms of this paradigm, even if it is assumed that a literary genre, once established, is to some extent legitimated by its own tradition.

Viewed in historical terms, science fiction, then, may be seen as a type of fiction which adheres to the epistemological premises of empirical realism – the chain of cause and effect – but employs them in a way they were not originally designed for. This dichotomy of realist model and non-realist application is basic to most definitions of science fiction, from Heinlein’s “imaginary-but-possible” in his seminal article (Heinlein 1959:23), through Suvin’s combination of “cognition” and “estrangement” (Suvin 1979a:3-15, 20). The “novum”, as Suvin puts it, the new element introduced by a process of analogy, cannot be validated by historical experience, but it is nevertheless acceptable as long as it is accordance with what he calls “the post-Cartesian or post-Baconian scientific method” (Suvin 1979b:36).

As strange as the world of science fiction may seem, it is still ‘our’ world,

while the world of fantasy may resemble our present world ever so closely, but is still fundamentally different. For it contains elements which not only contradict historical experience but which are at the same time incompatible with the empirical definition of causality. Instead, they answer to a kind of "nonrational causality" (Boyer and Zahorski 1979:5ff) which is not subject to time. In fantasy, the a-temporal system appears either as superimposed on our present model, resulting in that deep epistemological uncertainty which psychologically most often results in fear, sometimes in laughter, or it is [20]taken at face value, as a literary convention. Viewed in the historical perspective, it may be best interpreted as a recourse to an earlier paradigm, in which the order of the universe was still governed by absolute, time-defying laws, which were ultimately ethical by nature.

Fantasy and Myth

Is fantasy, then, still a return to myth, after all? Or is it at least similar to myth, as argued by Jane Mobley (1974), in that it shares the latter's ability to combine religion and literature and thus "preserves and gives significance in the present reality to the sensation of *mana* or magic" (Mobley 1974:126)?

The problem with a definition like that is that it assigns myth to the domain of feeling, translating an ontological concept – the idea of a numinous power permeating all existence – into a subjective experience. This may be intuitively valid, but it is not accessible to verification, and it is impossible to tell in which way narrative elements of a given story are derived from this subjective feeling. At most, it could be argued that such a feeling is common to all human beings, reflecting an innate mental predisposition, a way of organizing experience, and if this is the case, all fantasy stories could be expected to be basically alike, in some way or other, in terms of their underlying narrative structure.

The type of narrative organization which has been most often associated with fantasy fiction and with Tolkien's works in particular, is known by the name of *quest.* Originally a designation for a common type of medieval romance, the *aventure* or adventurous journey of the hero-knight, the quest of the hero has been claimed to be one of the basic thematic units of literature, from myth to contemporary fiction (cf. Pütz 1979:32).

What exactly is a quest? In his essay "The Quest Hero", the second half of which deals with Tolkien, W. H. Auden emphasizes its teleological aspect. Among the elements he extracts from a typical quest story, the tale of *The Waters of Life* as retold by the Brothers Grimm, there is first of all the *object* or person to be found and possessed. Furthermore, he lists the *hero,* the *journey,* the *test* or series of tests, the *guardians* of the object and the *helpers* who assist the hero in his task (Auden 1961:83). Among these various functions, there is no mention of what will happen once the hero has achieved his object, although Auden points out afterwards that the goal of the quest has not only a personal significance but is often important for the common good of society as well. Among the six phases of romance as defined by Frye (1957:186-203),

beginning with the birth of the hero and ending with his later contemplative life, the quest or adventurous journey is but one, followed by the confrontation and the restitution of the natural order. A quest thus does not only imply a movement towards a destination, reflecting, as Auden (1961:84) puts it, “time as a continuous irreversible process of change"; it is at the same time a cyclic pattern, as formulated by Campbell (1968:30) in his well-known tri-partite scheme of “departure – initiation – return”.

In fantasy fiction we often find the same linear succession of adventures leading to a climax, but in the final aspect, the resolution, there are a number of significant departures from the traditional model. These deviations are interesting enough to bear some closer investigation.

The closest equivalent to the quest pattern is probably found in the work of William Morris, who explicitly attempted a revival of medieval literary forms. His *The Well at the World’s End* is named after the goal of the journey, [21] which is, incidentally, also a water of life, just as in the tale from the Grimm collection. The hero, Ralph, is the youngest son of a king of a small kingdom. Destined by fate to stay at home, he runs away and then takes up the search for the well, by which his quest gains its purpose. His journey leads him through the typical landscape of medieval romance, which he suddenly encounters cities and castles, often with allegorical names, and adventures with knights and brigands and beautiful women. He eventually finds his heart’s desire as well – not a princess, though, but a girl from the common folk. They drink from the well of life, and by the enlightenment he has achieved, Ralph is able to return home as a liberator; for he has realized that he desires nothing more but “to hold war aloof and walk in free fields, and see my children growing up about me, and lie at last beside my fathers in the choir of St. Laurence” (Morris 1913:37).

While in this story the well, the object of the quest, occupies a central position – the journey home takes up almost a third of the narrative – the well in Fletcher Pratt’s *The Well of the Unicorn* is only a peripheral element. Here the actual achievement of the hero consists in his realization that the absolute peace granted to those who drink from the well does not hold any promise for him and the political world he lives in. But in other cases, too, the quest does not result in the expected confirmation. In the work of H. Rider Haggard, for instance, the goal always turns out to be eventually unattainable, as in *She,* in which Ayesha, the object of the quest, wants to impart eternal life to her hero-lover and is destroyed by the same fire that made her immortal, or in the subsequent novels, which the hero follows his beloved through count-less incarnations, only to lose her again and again. With James Branch Cabell, the attained turns out not to be desirable after all; in *Jurgen,* the protagonist returns to his unloved wife because he knows that she is better for him than all those perfect women he has met on his journey. The adventure is here more important than the end, just as in E. R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros,* the heroes at the end wish to bring back the times that are gone, when their great adversaries were still unvanquished. Even at the lowest level, in the sword-and-sorcery stories

by Robert E. Howard and his successors, the material gain often proves illusory in the end.

Tolkien, in *The Lord of the Rings,* does not only deviate from the quest pattern as far as the outcome is concerned. Even the essential concern of the quest is virtually reversed. “What is to be my quest?”, says Frodo, recalling Bilbo’s earlier adventures in *The Hobbit.* “Bilbo went to find a treasure, there and back again, but I go to lose one, and not return, as far as I can see” (Tolkien 1966:75). He is not to win a precious object, but to destroy it. For the price is too high: Frodo is not given an elevated social standing after his return. On the contrary, he has been hurt so deeply that he can no longer live a normal life but departs with the Elves from Middle-earth. For the Elves themselves, the fight against Sauron is but part of a “long defeat” (Tolkien 1966:372), during which their influence in Middle-earth has gradually been waning, and the ultimate victory is beyond their power.

It is a legitimate question whether these deviating patterns can be regarded as quest structures at all. If the presence of certain elements is taken as constitutive, then these stories are defective and do no longer correspond to the quest paradigm. Such an interpretation would seem conclusive if quest is taken as a mythical structure, for as such it is defined by the interrelationships between elements, according to the structural definition of myth given by the French anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955). At most, quest in this sense could be regarded as part of the reader’s *latent* repertoire, a kind of implicit background against which deviations achieve their significance.

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Towards a Rhetoric of Fantasy

Fantasy could thus be said to pursue a double strategy: on the one hand, it deviates from the realist fiction pattern by taking recourse to what might be called a fairy-tale epistemology, on the other hand, the fairy-tale patterns are themselves contradicted by a corresponding movement towards a more complex and, in a sense, more realistic view of reality.

Deviations from a norm may themselves be classified, and this is done by the science of rhetoric. It was Irwin (1976) who first suggested that fantasy might be viewed in rhetorical terms. While grammar is concerned with what is right or wrong *(recte),* rhetoric is concerned with what is adequate or not *(apte)* (cf. Ostheeren 1981). Rather than on rules, it is based on conventions, and since we are dealing with conventional systems here, rhetoric could be expected to provide an adequate framework for interpretation.

The rhetorical operations which have been isolated by Quintillian in his *Institutio Oratoria* (1, 5, 38-41) are those of addition *(adiectio),* deletion *(detractio),* substitution *(immutatio),* and permutation *(transmutatio).* The application of these operations results in various figures of divergence or ‘metabolies’, as they were termed by Dubois (1980) and his group at Liege. While contemporary approaches to rhetoric have been mainly concerned with deviation phe-

nomena at various linguistic levels, i.e. with the domain of formulation, the classical *elocutio,* these operations may equally well be applied within the domains of textual organization *(dispositio)* or thematic choice *(inventio).* Thus it could be argued that, e.g., 'fantastic' beings or objects are derived by application of one or more of these operations at the thematic level.

To supplement this 'rhetoric of divergence', a 'rhetoric of equivalence' has been suggested, which is to deal with figures of repetition or reinforcement, also known as 'isotopies' (cf. Dubois et al. 1980:37f; Plett 1975:147ff). Those two categories of isotopy and metaboly have been argued to correspond to two types of aesthetic appreciation, which the American critic J. Livingston Lowes (1930:62), who had become interested in rhetorical effects in literary texts early this century, named "the pleasure of recognition" and "the pleasure of surprise", and they probably reflect a basic dichotomy of human experience, which has been known in genre criticism, under different theoretical aspects, as the distinction between 'cognition' and 'estrangement', 'the expected' and 'the unexpected', or 'the known' and 'the unknown' (cf. Suvin 1979a; Rabkin 10-6:8.; Wolfe 1979:13-16).

In the double rhetoric of fantasy, both principles coincide. From the viewpoint of empirical realism, the supernatural elements encountered are perceived as deviations, while they are recognized as familiar the closer they come to our preconceived notions myth and fairy-tale. On the other hand, the contemporary reader, who has been exposed to realistic fiction and historical research, is no longer capable of accepting the familiar fairy-tale patterns at face value, and again greets their modification towards a more realistic conception with a corresponding pleasure of recognition. This tension, never fully resolved, and the admixture of doubt and gratification it provides, is most probably the basis of much of the appeal of contemporary fantasy fiction.

Because in myth ontology and epistemology are still united, myths are implicitly accepted as true. This rare quality has been lost in the retelling; the literature of fantasy, just as any other kind of fiction, cannot tell us how the world really is. It can only convey beliefs, or at most, in Coleridge's famous phrase, a "willing suspension of disbelief", in. which our present scepticism gives way to a certain poetic faith.

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Notes

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(1) The original dissertation, "The Creative Mythology of J. R. R. Tolkien: A Study of the Mythic Impulse" (Florida, State Univ.; cf. *DAI* 33, 1972,

2390A), dates from 1972.
(2) For a controversial statement on the problem of epochal divisions see C. S. Lewis (1969).

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