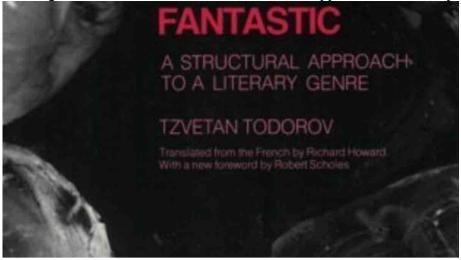Reading Todorov's The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre

Todorov's comprehensive report on the definition of fantastic literature wrapped in an exhaustive introduction to structuralist narratology is a classic example of structuralist finickiness producing interesting theory of limited practical use. The concepts he introduces are entertaining exercises in mental athletics: In order to qualify as genuine fantastic literature a text has to be right on the edge between the real and imaginary world. The hint of the supernatural and marvelous has to be believable but never realized, yet the world the reader perceives must be grounded in realism so as to make the incongruity discernible. Like Shroedinger's Cat the fantastic is alive and valid only as long as it remains unknown whether the supernatural element is present or not. Uncertainty and ambiguity are the defining elements of Todorov's concept of the fantastic.

While doing so, Todorov also draws structural parallels between fantastic and some other genres to clear cut its boundaries and founding rules. Historiographic metafiction in itself is also a human construct that obeys certain regulations like the use and abuse of concepts it features. While defining fantastic, Todorov suggests its opposition with poetry and allegorical reading. Thus, a certain type of reading is required in order to achieve the fantastic effect. Structurally, fantastic should be read in a linear way which can appeal to historiographic metafiction as well even though it does not have a linear sense of happenings.

Indeed, logic limits itself in its inherent setting of limitations, whereas literature breaks open that state of limitation through its inherent ambiguity. We need only realise that ambiguity does not always signify incongruity, nor incompatibility, but can also signify simultaneity.

Todorov takes on a double task within this text, to both explore the generic structures of the fantastic, and to challenge previous interpretations of genre, viz. Northrop Frye, in order to develop a structural interpretation of genre and literature. In doing so, he attempts to move away from a static understanding of genre built off of non-literary categories, to produce a dynamic understanding of the structures of literature that builds a vocabulary from its internal dynamics. This itself draws off of a psychoanlytical language, but in a way that differentiates itself from the practice of psychoanalysis. At the same time, he develops an understanding of the fantastic as a literature of hesitation, an intrusion of events that do not obey the natural expectations of the audience, and that are not either fully established as supernatural, which would make the text fall in the category of the marvelous, or given a naturalist explanation, which would make it an uncanny text.

Todorov contends that authors had to resort to the fantastic in order to cross boundaries and elude censors. \"for many authors, the supernatural was merely a pre-text to describe things they would never have dared mention in realistic terms. (Peter Penzoldt)\" We may doubt that supernatural events are merely pretexts; but there is certainly a degree of truth in this assertion: the fantastic permits us to cross frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it. page 158
Todorov compares a story by Gautier on necrophilia with Georges Bataille's frank account in realistic terms of a necrophiliac near-encounter in *Le Bleu du Ciel*.
\"There is a qualitative difference between the personal possibilities of a nineteenth-century author and those of a contemporary author. We may recall the devious means a Gautier had to employ in [in One of Cleopatra's Nights] order to describe his character's necrophilia, the whole ambiguous business of vampirism.\" -- page 159
That this pretext-function of the fantastic was no longer necessary, he attributes to the rise of psychoanalysis:
\"Psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby has made useless) the literature of the fantastic. There is no need today to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire, and none to resort to vampires in order to

designate the attraction exerted by corpses: psychoanalysis, and the literature which is directly or indirectly inspired by it, deal with these matters in undisguised terms.\" -- page 160,161

But in the end, he does not wish to map psychoanalysis onto the fantastic:

\"In doing so, we have not tried to establish a relation of signification between the two groups (such as: the devil means sex; the vampire means necrophilia) but rather a compatibility, a co-presence.\" -- page 143

Todorov begins with a brief discussion of the history of genre, notably examining and critiquing the work of [Northrop Frye](#) on the subject. Todorov disagrees with Frye's approach on structuralist grounds; he finds that Frye does not delve enough beyond the surface into the underlying patterns that constitute a narrative.

Beginning in the second chapter, Todorov begins to frame his definition of the Fantastic. Immediately, I must note that his definition varies strikingly with the one I have been using. I have used the term \"Fantastic\" to refer to symbolic or narrative elements that step beyond that which is known to be \"realistic\" or plausible within the laws of reality as best one can understand them from known science. For Todorov, however, has a much more narrow definition. He breaks fiction that strains the boundaries of realism into three categories, and only one is called the fantastic. To summarize, here are those distinctions:

- The *uncanny* occurs when the narrative seems to stray beyond the realm of what is possible or realistic, yet in the end the events prove to be merely unusual as opposed to \"supernatural,\" a term that Todorov applies equally to fantasy elements (such as werewolves or vampires) and science fiction elements (i.e., intelligent robots and starships).

Todorov describes the \"formula\" for the fantastic as \"I nearly reached the point of believing.\" It exists solely within the hesitation in the decision between uncanny and marvelous–and within whatever ambiguity is left for the reader at the end of a narrative. As he expands upon this definition, Todorov puts forth three essential conditions for the fantastic to exist (33).

1. \"First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of events described.\"
2. \"Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus, the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work–in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character.\"
3. \"Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations.\"

Todorov does offer a discussion of the marvelous, noting sub-genres such as the *hyperbolic marvelous*(wherein the only supernatural elements are exaggeration, such as in many tall tales), the *exotic marvelous* (wherein the supernatural is presented as merely another facet of an unknown place, such as the belief that \"monsters\" dwell beyond the edge of the map), the *instrumental marvelous* (wherein devices are referenced that are not possible at the time but might become possible with technological development), and the *scientific marvelous* (more widely known as science fiction, which is closely tied to the instrumental marvelous).

the latter portion of the book, Todorov addresses the questions of what the fantastic does and why one might utilize it–key rhetorical considerations, to be sure–though he leaves plenty of room to supplement his ideas. (Wayne C. Booth and Kenneth Burke offer up some very interesting answers to the questions of what devices fiction employs and why they work as they do–which, again, I will be reviewing in future posts. With the help of Tolkien and some others, I will relate those ideas to fiction that works within the realms of the fantastic and/or marvelous.) The functions of the fantastic, as Todorov describes them, are as follows:

First, the fantastic produces a particular effect on the reader–fear, or horror, or simply curiosity–which the other genres or literary forms cannot provoke. Second, the fantastic serves the narration, maintains suspense: the presence of fantastic elements permits a particularly dense organization of the plot. Third, the fantastic has what at first glance appears to be a tautological function: it permits the description of a fantastic universe, one that has no reality outside of language; the description and what is described are not of a different nature. (Todorov 92)

\"*I nearly reached the point of believing'*: that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic. Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life\" (Todorov 31). Fragility and specificity are the primary indicators of the fantastic.

The uncanny is a term originating from the German *das unheimlich*. In English, given that there is no clear English equivalent for the German, is instead referred to as \"the uncanny.\" The uncanny is experienced upon encountering

something that is at once both strange and familiar. The marvelous, by contrast, is the more traditional view of fantasy. Todorov argues that the uncanny is characterized by a character's response – often fear – towards something seemingly inexplicable, or impossible. He argues that the marvelous does not require a response from a character, only that the fantastic event occurs.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event\" (Todorov 25).