The Fantastic Mode: A Quick Introduction

The fantastic operates in tension with and in contrast with mimetic writing (the dominant mode, which privileges verisimilitude, since the eighteenth century). The fantastic must, of necessity, include the mimetic or the "real"/"normal" but it subverts these, calling into question "things as they are."

Kathryn Hume: "a deliberate departure from consensus reality."

Brian Attebery: The "fantastic" refers to the literary mode; "fantasy" to the genre (more about mode below).

Attebery, Irène Bessière, and Rosemary Jackson: fantastic texts assert what both the implied author and the implied audience know to be false. Jackson: opposed views are held antinomially (mutually exclusive yet simultaneously).

Bessière: the fantastic asserts what cannot be but is.

Narrative expectations (Brooks Landon, Science Fiction After 1900, 8):

Reportage: assumes that words refer to what has happened.

Naturalistic ("realistic" or mimetic) fiction: assumes that words refer to what might happen.

Fantasy: assumes that words refer to what could not have happened.

Science Fiction (SF): assumes that words refer to what has not happened (either it might happen or it will not happen).

Miriam A. deFord: SF=improbable possibilities; fantasy=plausible impossibilities.

Genre vs. Mode

Mode is broader and subsumes genre (literary works grouped acc. to common defining characteristics and concomitant expectations).

Contra-factual tales:

myths: stories that cultures write about themselves (aetiology, charters, customs, a "dream time" or a time when deities and humans interacted); they are "true" if expressive of a viable body of beliefs held in common. Myths are not "owned" by individuals; they do not vanish, but they are appropriated as patterns or "frozen" in narratives, e.g., tales by Ovid.

religious: grounded in formal belief systems (either Christian as in the works of Charles Williams, or not, such as stories grounded in Rosicrucianism).
romance: the mode of wish-fulfillment (Northrop Frye). Can be "rationalizing" (Sir Walter Scott, Henry James, Ann Radcliffe) or "fantastic" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Matthew (Monk) Lewis, or J. R. R. Tolkien).

gothic: the literature of sensibility and sensation, and of "family anxiety"; of the fragmented self, the ineffectual protagonist. Early associated with the Sublime; later with Freud's "Uncanny." This subgenre need not function within the fantastic mode, but may, in early works, be used dismissively under the designation of "superstition" as a way of elevating "Protestant rationality."

Gothic in Romanticism forces a (mostly temporary) reconsideration superstition and calls scepticism into question.

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