

## The Semiosis of Literary Fantasy\*

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We can describe history as a narrative of the facts that happened to a people, usually as they organize themselves into a nation. For this to occur, the group must share customs, origins, and, more often than not, language. The building of a nationality is a semiotic event informed by an interpretant. There must be a relational content that links those facts and their cultural manifestations, a bridge between what happens and how it affects the civilization that experiences the phenomena. If this is true, then the American identity would result from a Gothic national narrative, the origin of which, according to Edmundson's *Nightmare on Main Street*, Goddu's *Gothic America*, and Martin and Savoy's *American Gothic*, would be the feeling of guilt toward Native and African Americans and the fear of the future. Far from taking the national character as a final product, however, these authors consider it to be in a continuous genesis: a semiotic process where the interpretant is a Gothic mood that has generated signs in American literature since its colonial inception and is still doing so in premillennial American media.

For their hypothesis to work a previous interpretant has to exist, an interpretant that distinguishes *Homo sapiens sapiens* from other animals as the only species able to introduce in experience objects that exist independently from the physical surroundings: emotions, illusions, and abstractions. This unique ability may be called poiesis, in contrast with mimesis; one characterizing the human use of signs as going beyond reality, the other marking the animal use of signs in its inescapable dependence on the physicality.

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\* Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Robert K. Martin & Eric Savoy (eds.), *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998.

All animals use signification – the action of signs – to interact with the environment and there build a structure of experience that comprises the aspects of the physical surroundings that it needs to survive. That structure Uexküll (1957) calls the *Umwelt*, or the species-specific objective world where the physicality ceases to be merely an *esse subjectivum* to become an *esse objectivum*. In other words, where aspects of the environment change from things “out there” (subjective) to objects of experience (subjective and objective). Object here means that which the mind produces as it interacts “with a more or less real something” and toward which cognition is directed (Peirce MS 693A: 33). Thus, objective means anything that exists in relation to a knowing subject, whether that something is mind-independent or not. Only human beings are aware of the sign relations implied in this structuring of experience and can manipulate them. We add the characteristic of “stipulability” to the sign, enabling language to exist and, consequently, a more developed objective world: the *Lebenswelt*. Within the *Lebenswelt* the objective world opens itself in various ways. An opening according to its contrast with the intentional autonomy of the *Umwelt* makes possible the human sciences and the arts. An opening according to its contrast with the physical environment makes possible the natural sciences and technology.

Contrary to the sciences, which attempt to describe an experiential world as close as possible to the physical environment, the arts can neglect this attempt at univocal correspondence. Literary manifestations with a realistic bias try to depict the subjective universe as faithfully as possible; they try to make the object conform as much as possible with the thing, so to speak. Literary manifestations that lean toward the fantastic, on the other hand, do not let themselves be bound by a supposed correlation with the world of experience. They make the creation of mind-dependent beings their distinctive trait, as opposed to the so-called realistic literature. The capacity literature has to refer to what depends totally on the mind to exist and to what can exist independent of it – the

purely objective as opposed to the objective and subjective – ensues from the relational character that language has as a sign system.

As language finds an embodiment in an oral or written code and deviates from its original purpose – to describe the environment – it becomes the basis for a new modeling system: literature. Literature works as a modeling system as it portrays possible (or impossible) worlds, abstracted from the larger physical environment in which it exists. It originates in an *Umwelt*, takes shape in the *Innenwelt*, the cognitive map a human individual uses to interact with the world of experience, finally to crystallize in an oral or written postlinguistic structure exclusive of the *Lebenswelt* (Jeha 1993).

The capacity to transform the objective world in variant models through language distinguishes the human *Umwelt* – the *Lebenswelt* – from the experiences lived only at a zoösemiotic level. By experiencing the “other” and marking that experience linguistically instead of simply extinguishing it, the human being becomes able to create, besides a reduced model of physicality, a code as a system of contrasting relations. Such potential exists because the semiotic I of the *Innenwelt* stands in a dialogic relation with the semiotic Other of the *Umwelt*, creating an interior map of the external objective world and simultaneously transforming it and being transformed by it.

Art expresses a semiosis that makes of subjective and objective life an imitation of that which started as purely objective: the *Innenwelt* (Lodge 1977; Deely 1990). Art remodels the experiential world to include something from the physicality external to it, but independently of a total coincidence with that physicality, for the frontier between what depends on cognition and what does not is very volatile. Each new cognitive achievement alters the collective interpretant of “real,” showing that it is essentially semiotic (Jeha 1994: 168).

## A labyrinth of theories

Western philosophy and critical theory have relegated imagination to an inferior position. From Plato and Aristotle until today mimesis takes pride of place in detriment of poiesis, the human ability to diverge intentionally from the physicality to create objects not prefigured in the *Umwelt*. For the present purposes, I will substitute fantasy for poiesis because of its widespread use and acceptance, mainly in its contrast with reality. Moreover, because I consider mimesis and poiesis as interpretants in a process where the sign tends toward or moves away from the object, reality and fantasy will have here the same semiotic nature. That is, signification occurs regardless whether the object a sign stands for exists independently of a mind or depends completely on it to exist.

Fantasy, it is commonly held, falsifies reality. As a possible cause for this critical deficiency, Hume (1984: 8) suggests the position taken by scholars who consider literature as emphasizing a mimetic interpretant of reality and consider the tendency toward a poietic interpretant – or an interpretant of fantasy – as a marginal, therefore isolable, literary phenomenon. This approach perniciously excludes manifestations of fantasy from the literary corpus and fails to create a genre to accommodate this phenomenon no more irregular than the texts where mimesis predominates. We find two main approaches in studies of literary manifestations of fantasy. The first ignores fantasy and distinguishes only between what we conventionally call the marvelous, the fantastic, and science fiction (Vax 1960; Todorov 1970; Bellemin-Noël 1972; Bessière 1974; Caillois 1976; Zgorželski 1979). This distinction is not always clear and precise, frequently obfuscating more than clarifying the issues.

As we could expect, the theories about the manifestations of fantasy contradict themselves and categorize texts following Procrustean definitions. According to some of those definitions, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* would be science fiction (Amis 1960: 22, 23), while to others they would be horror or gothic fiction (Rose 1976: 2; Punter 1980). The con-

fusion is such that Vax (1960: 121-122) opts for the easy way out: each critic or reader should arbitrarily establish what they understand by fantastic fiction. In much the same way, Gattégno (1971: 5) claims he knows no satisfactory definition of science fiction and leaves it to the reader to identify what that kind of literature is. Bleiler (1948: 3) and Manlove (1975: 1) complain that fantasy has different meanings to different people and confess their incapacity to define the term.

Around mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, writers E. M. Forster, Herbert Read, J. R. Tolkien, and C. S. Lewis discussed fantasy and in so doing, they distinguished between fantasy as a mind process and as a literary process. To Forster (1927) fantasy is a spiritual disposition turned toward play and the result of that state of mind, rather than a literary genre. Herbert E. Read (1984) separates fancy from fantasy, reintroducing the split between fantasy and imagination, in vogue during Romanticism. Tolkien (1984) conceives fantasy as a capacity, a rational activity, a “subcreative” art, turned toward the production of secondary worlds and beliefs that would provoke a feeling of enchantment in the reader. Fantasy would be an activity innate to human beings that joins reason in the task of telling what is real from what is not. Tolkien claims that if we were unable to separate frogs and men, we would not have fairy tales about frog-kings. Only humans can establish relations of difference and then play with them, creating new beings in possible and impossible worlds.

This psychic capacity and its literary expression occupy a great part of C. S. Lewis’s work. He separates them and warns that the first can lead to morbidity, which does not profit literature. As a literary term, Lewis explains, fantasy means any narrative dealing with impossible and preternatural objects. Such a literary speculation on the impossible or preternatural is far from leading to sensationalism or idle and morbid curiosity. To speculate on what seems to challenge the *Lebenswelt* is to free cognition from everydayness, to evade zoösemiosis and enlarge experience.

Like Tolkien and Lewis, W. R. Irwin (1976) contends that fantasy allows human beings to transcend their animal finitude and play God. He treats it as a prose subgenre and defines it as “a story

based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into 'fact' itself" (Irwin 1976: 4). Thus, an ontological inversion would characterize literary fantasy.

A great part of literary criticism, Irwin denounces, mistakes fantasy and fantastic. The fantastic, he says, "the factitious existence of the antireal, is actually material. It is not of itself a literary form, and its presence, even preponderance, in a narrative does not necessarily make a fantasy" (Irwin 1976: 8). Its elements can show up in any literary form from any period, even in those with a realistic bend. Thus, a genre cannot be defined by its content: fantasy is an arbitrary mental construct, controlled by logic and rhetoric. To Irwin (1976: 59) what characterize fantasy are the persuasion methods that an author uses; more specifically, "fantasies are controlled by a proposition or an understanding usually not stated but easily formulated, which counters and temporarily displaces the norm." Rhetoric in fantasy purports "to persuade the reader through narrative that an invention contrary to known or presumed fact is existentially valid" (Irwin 1976: 60). As Irwin defines a genre according to the way it is narrated, he produces a formalist definition, at best, or reduces it to formulaic literature. Yet, to characterize fantasy mainly according to the effect that it produces on the reader, as Todorov had already proposed, transfers to the reader a responsibility that belongs mostly to its author: the efficacy of the text.

Some authors recognize fantasy as a human characteristic that exists behind all literature, if not behind every achievement distinctive of *Homo sapiens sapiens*. These authors suggest the existence of fantasy and its literary manifestations, but in their works, fantasy appears as a super-genre or as indistinguishable from its manifestations.

Poul Anderson (1982: 9-10) considers the capacity to fantasize "as basic to being human as are tool-making and year-round sexuality." With semiotic perspicacity he notes that the young of higher mammals play to learn how to cope with the world; the young of humans distinguish themselves

by playing also with their imagination. Human adults, at least some of them, keep this capacity and use it in intellectual games that range from a plan to dine out to the highly abstract visions of scientists. Anderson's semiotic insight goes farther and he wonders "whether human language, the very capability of language as we know it, originated in fantasy." He could be echoing Cassirer's "linguistic imagination" (*Sprachfantasie*) and Humboldt's mention of *Phantasie* or *Eibildungskraft* to propose imagination as a discourse catalyst (Gumpel 1984: 34). He goes to the core of the question when he says, "All fantasy is fiction, in that it deals with events that never happened, people and places that never happened. All fantasy is realistic, in that it tells us something about the real world" (Anderson 1982: 11). Every literary manifestation, not only fantasy, is simultaneously mimesis and poiesis (Jeha 1993: 356).

Equally perceptive Searles, Meacham, and Franklin (1982: 208) point out that "all fiction is fantasy, no matter how realistic. Madame Bovary is as much a creature of the imagination as any witch or elf . . . ." They recognize that several allegories and satires are fantasies, but they focus on "a kind of fantasy which is told for its own sake and which attempts to convince the reader that the unlikely or improbable or impossible matters being narrated are true B at least for the duration of the reading of the story." The problem here is a categorical error: they jump from one plane to another without distinguishing between fantasy as impulse, as super-genre, as narrative element or as literary form. This error reappears in the subgenres they propose: according to how elements of fantasy are treated, we have science fiction, ghost story or supernatural tale, and pure fantasy.

Hume (1984), like Searles, Meacham, and Franklin, commits a categorical mistake. She correctly proposes to study fantasy in contrast with mimesis as two impulses in literature. However, she analyzes several theories of the fantastic (genre) as theories of fantasy (impulse). By doing so, she takes the cause (the impulse) for the effect (its manifestations), which invalidates her purpose. Similarly, David Pringle (1989: 14) considers fantasy the source and origin of other literary forms: "a primal genre,

essentially formless, a swamp which has served as the breeding ground for all other popular fictional genres.” He defines fantasy as “a body of stories that deals with the marvellous, the magical and the otherworldly,” whose essential formlessness would make it a bag big enough to contain “the supernatural and the uncanny, the visionary and the repellent” (Pringle 1989: 13, 14). Thus, he differentiates between fantasy and science fiction, which turns itself toward modern science, but he places them in the same category, that of literary genres.

In a previous work, Pringle (1985: 9) had defined science fiction as “a form of fantastic fiction.” Other forms would be “the Supernatural Horror Story and the Heroic Fantasy.” Thence science fiction and fantasy, and the horror tale, are divisions of a literary super-genre, fantastic fiction. Two problems arise: if fantasy is a “primal genre” that has bred every other popular fictional genre, then it cannot be in the same category of other genres (here, science fiction). Following the same rationale, it cannot be subsumed under fantastic fiction.

Although Pringle, Hume, Searles, Meacham, and Franklin, and Anderson focus on fantasy as a primary human impulse, they do not always keep clear the distinction between fantasy as an extra- and intraliterary phenomenon. This confusion contaminates their theories, making them only partially useful for the study of the literary manifestations of fantasy.

### **Knowledge of the world or possible worlds?**

The literary manifestations of fantasy are generally considered ways of knowing the world, but maybe speaking of them as representations of worlds that seem possible to their authors would be more correct. The scholars mentioned above define the fantastic, the marvelous tale, and science fiction in epistemological terms. For them, the tendency toward fantasy would be characterized as an

attempt to present readers with a world different from the one that they are used to experiencing every day. Though created with natural elements, this other world also contains supernatural or unreal elements, strange to the readers' interpretation of the real. Such a mixture would provoke a feeling of estrangement that, in turn, would wake the readers to the possibility that individuals may experience the world in different ways.

To every individual corresponds a different "map" of the *Umwelt*. This notion presupposes that every organism experiences the world as made up in the same way; what changes is the manner of perceiving it. We have no guarantee that this is so, for, as perception changes, so does the object experienced. As "reality" is a model we cut in the space-time continuum to help us to survive and prosper, we can suppose that other models engender various interpretations of a same universe. Commenting on a Chinese encyclopedia and the cataloguing system of the Brussels Bibliographic Institute, Borges (1988: 103) said we should doubt the existence of a universe "in the organic, unifying meaning that this word has." Foucault (1970) expanded this by saying that every taxonomy implies a sign system and a certain continuum (a non-discontinuity, a plenitude of being) and a certain power of imagination that makes appear what is not, but makes it possible, because of that, to bring the continuum to light. We can suppose that the experience of a time-space continuum may be different for different organisms. The *Umwelt* would cease to be a difference of perception between species to become, in effect, another world obeying its own rules of organization.

Fantasy in literature works in this ontological sphere; it reveals that it is possible to perceive the world in a singular manner and that each act of perception determines a possible world. Its manifestations show us how, by establishing a world model, we determine that world's existence according to that model. Nonetheless, it could be different if it were cut out in another manner.

This implies that mimesis and fantasy are inseparable and equipotent. Mimesis intends to be an imitation or a representation of the world, but every imitation or representation only occurs through

preestablished models. There will be always and necessarily at least a partial divergence between the object of experience and the thing “out there.” On the other hand, fantasy imitates (or represents) the process of world modeling, making explicit the conventionality of the relation between object and thing, as the linguistic world absorbs the object. Making mine the words Weiss (1978: 15) used in another context, I would say that the division between mimesis and fantasy is merely the expression of the human monomania of endowing antithetical personal points of view with universally pertinent validity.

Let us now return to the initial question: does fantasy deal with ways of knowing the world or with the creation of possible worlds? Fantasy is more than a mere representation of a product, that is, of the world as we know it or of a theory of world knowledge. We can approach fantasy as a special kind of mimesis: a *representation* of the ontological creation process, by means of which possible and impossible worlds come into existence. This makes evident the advantage a semiotic analysis of fantasy and its manifestations has when compared with psychoanalytical, structural, or heuristic approaches. While these only perceive its cognitive aspects, semiotics allows for a study of fantasy from an epistemological and ontological point of view, as an experiential reality created in the play of relations.

### **The play of fantasy**

We can define “play” as a possibility of disconnecting relations from their termini and fundamentals and reconnecting them to other termini and fundamentals. As such, play lies in the origin of fantasy and language and makes possible the subsequent creation of purely objective worlds, like art and fiction, and of objective worlds that will later become also physical: culture. Play first appears as an

idea in an individual's *Innenwelt* and becomes public in the *Lebenswelt* through a common code. That individual creation that started as a daydream, a firstness, eventually becomes a world, however purely objective it may be. Caillois (1961: 19) claims that any play requires that we accept at least a closed, conventional, and, in certain regards, "imaginary universe." This universe (or field of reference) has its own ontology, determined by the rules of the game.

The rules, besides determining the manner of existence of a game, enable it to be shared. They guarantee the players that they are playing that game, not another. From hopscotch to language, every game follows a syntax, a rationale. Or, according to Huizinga (1967: 10), a game "creates order, it is order." It transforms life's chaos, at least while it lasts, into a limited cosmos ruled by "absolute and supreme order." Thus, players find legitimacy for their participation.

In language games, the rules guarantee the message's communicability and comprehension. Furthermore, they enable the existence of the *Lebenswelt*. Within this specifically human objective world, play makes it possible to propose options, other possible experiential worlds. Thence changes, revolutions, and creations arise. Far from abolishing order, however, any change, revolution, or creation implies new rules to replace the former ones. This dialectic between following the rules and changing them forms the matrix of creative "logic" (Innis 1985: 131).

Ultimately, fantasy is another name for play. This dialectic of order, subversion of the order, and instauration of a new order is fundamental to its nature. Fantasy in literature tends to be represented or interpreted as a reactionary attempt to restore the original order, thus preventing any changes. Such nonsense issues from either a misapprehension of its true nature or a misinterpretation of its play. Fantasy introduces a new ontology not to jettison ours, but to show us that ontologies are built – if only to a certain extent – and, thus, there may be other possibilities.

By means of the intellectual play that characterizes fantasy, what was a firstness ontologically becomes a thirdness (and may become a secondness as happens with viable plans and projects). From

such an imaginative speculation arises all artistic and scientific creation. To propose new phenomena, however, fantasy depends on the existence of established relations that can be disconnected and reconnected to other termini and fundamentals, deconstructed and reconstructed in unexpected ways. This capacity to disconnecting and reconnecting relations enable the human being, via fantasy, to transcend the limits of zoösemiosis and reach anthroposemiosis, where the liberating flights of imagination made possible culture in its difference from an animal society.

### **Fantasy: cosmogenesis and ontology**

Tolkien (1984) considers the author of fantasies (as genre) the creator of a secondary world, an “other” world in contrast with a primary one. In the secondary or “faerie” world, the author projects a “reality” that must inspire a secondary belief in the reader. For this to happen, this world must be internally coherent, that is, its ontology must be consistent. As for the requisites of wonders produced by magic and the existence of fairies, Little (1984: 3) remarks that wondrous events may happen in secondary worlds without any magical intervention and, as Tolkien himself (1984: 16) claimed, fairy tales can exist without fairies.

Unwittingly, Tolkien defined literature in general and not only fantasy. All literature creates secondary worlds the coherence of which ought to lead the reader into a suspension of disbelief. Material from the primary world has to suffer transformations before it can be used in the creation of a secondary world. As such, the secondary world is always under suspicion, for, no matter how realistic it may be, every representation always occurs from an observer’s perspective.

Like Tolkien, C. S. Manlove defines fantasy according to the creation of impossible or supernatural worlds. For Manlove (1975: 10) fantasy is “a fiction that evokes a feeling of prodigy and contains

a substantial and irreducible supernatural element or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the reader or the characters in the story become at least partially familiar.” Authors ought to recognize their texts as fictional and not as reports of wondrous events that they claim to be true. When explaining the supernatural is possible, says Manlove, we leave fantasy for science fiction. Still, whether a narrated event is conceivable is not enough to distinguish between fantasy and science fiction. Manlove defines the world of fantasy by the absence of connections “with our sphere of possibility: the author does not suggest any way through which it could be reached from our world, nor does he give it any location in time or space.” While the world of fantasy “is impossible or totally ‘other’ in relation to ours (. . .) [i]n science fiction we discover that such ‘alterity’ is never present, however remote the location” (Manlove 1975: 3).

Little (1984: 3) argues that a world of difficult location in space and time is not necessarily an “other” world. Usually, he says, the worlds of fantasy are less strange than those of science fiction. If it is enough that authors proclaim their fictional worlds to be other planets, then all fantasy could be science fiction if only authors did that. The difference between fantasy and science fiction reduces itself to the perspectives adopted by their authors. All is equally impossible in their *Lebenswelt*, although it can be conceivable. If there is any difference, it is that the events in literary fantasy can hardly become reality, whereas science fiction works with scientific possibilities.

Writers create secondary worlds from the primary world, whether they write realistic or fantastic literature. Realistic texts will tend toward mimesis: the fictional world (sign) will get closer to the *Lebenswelt* (object) according to its creator’s intentions and capabilities. On the other hand, authors of fantasies will push the fictional world away from the experiential world to create an ontology incommensurate with that they experience. In both cases, the primary (extratextual) world will always serve as a basic reference for the secondary (textual) world. Realistic authors use poetic licenses to work primary world material and form secondary worlds. This license has limits that they cannot

cross if they want to maintain verisimilitude and make readers believe the narrated events. Such limits mark the starting point for authors who work with fantasy: they must transgress them in the creation of the “other” world. Although these authors must strive for textual coherence, they must diverge from interontological verisimilitude.

I will use Tolkien’s terminology, adapting it to my purposes. To avoid ontological confusion, I will call the primary world that where we live, which is the secondary’s source and origin, its representation in realistic and fantastic literature. That world characteristic of fantastic literature, which cannot exist in our *Lebenswelt*, I call tertiary. Authors create a tertiary world whose effect of estrangement is realized through the unreal and fantasy. Thus, we have the primary (extratextual) world represented as a secondary (textual) world, to which a possible or impossible tertiary (textual) world opposes itself. The tertiary worlds of fantasy necessarily exist in spatiotemporal coordinates different from those of the primary world as represented in the secondary. Tertiary worlds may be found in a remote past, a distant future, or an alternative present, represented by unknown regions, magic or mythological kingdoms, other planets and dimensions. The tertiary world can also be represented from the point of view of life forms different from *Homo sapiens sapiens*. For readers to gain access to a purely semiotic ontology, authors ought to supply it with the distinctive mark of anthroposemiosis: language.

Authors play with these various manners of world building to produce textual fantasies where the represented ontologies contrast with that of authors and readers. From this contrast rises the awareness that reality as we experience it is not the only one and a given, but formed by means of a modeling system. This being established, authors have in hands enough material to make a critique of the *Lebenswelt* (their or anybody else’s), propose improvements, modify relations for the sake of playing with them, or create a purely experiential world that, however, can also become physical.

We can now define fantasy as the creation of purely objective beings, in an intentional divergence between thing and object, according to a given *Lebenswelt*. This divergence makes it possible to transcend a state that presents itself as preexisting our experience of it. In literature, fantasy manifests itself both in texts that tend explicitly toward fantasy and in texts that bear realistic presumptions. Every fiction is born from fantasy, and fantasy depends on the real to exist.

Fictional texts with a realistic bias bring a disclaimer about the coincidence between characters and narrated facts and real people and facts, which may give the impression that they, too, intentionally try to avoid a coincidence between thing and object. This is not so, though. The tendency toward mimesis implies the search for a correlation between the narrated world and the physical world as it appears in the *Lebenswelt*. On the contrary, the tendency toward fantasy demands that the narration diverge intentionally from that same physical world, its point of departure, to create another possible world.

The other world is possible according to its own physical and social laws, which enable authors to project a fiction in some point in space and time. These laws allow for the existence of aliens and replicants, utopias and dystopias, parallel universes and interstellar journeys, miracles and monsters, animated objects and human body parts with a life of their own, invisible cities, metamorphoses, etc., etc., which could not exist in the present *Lebenswelt*.

### **The Gothicizing of America**

Edmundson, Goddu, and the authors in Martin and Savoy's anthology take the opposite direction: to them, the Gothic, a purely objective creation, informs the American *Lebenswelt*, which is both objective and subjective. That literary phenomenon extrapolates its ontological field to influence the

media and politics, according to Edmundson, who goes as far as to claim that the whole American outlook derives from it. Just as social and political forces generated the Gothic, now it interacts with them, in a cybernetic, dialogical movement. Martin and Savoy collected essays by authors who focus on the Gothic as “the story generated by the national ego” (p. viii). Goddu makes her point explicit already in the title of her work – *Gothic America*. Their books share a preoccupation with the Gothicizing of the United States and the consequences this may have to literature in particular and culture in general as already expressed by Fiedler (1960). In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler demonstrates that the American dream has become a Faustian nightmare, producing an essentially Gothic culture, an insight to which the three books under review are greatly indebted.

Martin and Savoy concentrate on the gothic as “national, or part of a collective self” (p. ix) to put together an anthology of “new interventions” in the American narrative. Their book purports to be committed to a pluralistic orientation provided by “a variety of poststructuralist theories.” The compilation opens with the customary essay defining the subject under scrutiny, which is followed by sections on psychoanalysis, racial politics, and women’s writing, and closes with an analysis of the postmodern gothic.

Readers looking for a definition of terms will go to Savoy’s opening essay but will have a hard time trying to figure out what he means by explaining the American Gothic tradition as “the attempt to invoke ‘the face of the tenant’ – the specter of Otherness that haunts the house of national narrative – in a tropics [sic] that locates the traumatic return of the historical preterite in an allegorically preterited [sic] mode, a double talk that gazes in terror at what it is compelled to bring forward but cannot explain, that writes what it cannot read” (p. 14). Indeed. I wonder if Savoy is inventing words or just misusing them when he writes “tropics” (p. 3, 14) and “tropic” (p. 5) where one would expect “trope” or “topos” and “tropical” or “topical.” He undoubtedly mistakes “scarifying” for “scary” or “horrifying” or “terrifying” (p. 6). To make the matter muddier, he likens the Gothic to allegory

without bothering to explain what he means by that. He speaks of “allegorical translucency” in direct disregard for Coleridge’s distinction between allegory and symbol, which he claims “is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual . . . ; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal” (1992), which probably is where the noun comes from. Moreover, as in the quote above, Savoy’s excessive use of prosopopoeia – “the master trope of gothic’s allegorical turn” (p. 10) – and an illogical play with words – “If allegory is the strangest house of fiction, . . . then it is not surprising that the house is the most persistent site, object, structural analogue, and trope of American gothic’s allegorical turn” (p. 9) – fail to introduce a collection of academic essays that may interest not only those who delight in poststructuralist lingo.

Most of the other essays in *American Gothic* resort to poststructuralist theories to make “interventions” in that literary manifestation, but the writers focused on are still Poe and Faulkner, with the predictable Stephen King representing the postmodern era. One look at Joyce Carol Oates’s *American Gothic Tales* (1996), for example, will explain the déjà vu feeling caused by Martin and Savoy’s anthology: there are no mentions of modern and postmodern authors like Don DeLillo and Robert Coover, Raymond Carver and E. L. Doctorow, Paul Bowles and Isaac Bashevis Singer, to name a few. Also, where are those whom Punter (1980: 404) called writers of “paranoiac fiction”: Oates, Burroughs, Pynchon, and Ballard; Poe and Hawthorne being obvious choices?

Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America* concentrates on literature, in spite the broader scope its title suggests, and does a fine work of tracing the development of the genre from Crèvecoeur to Harriet Jacobs, in a new-historicist perspective. She contends that the Gothic discourse articulates the horrors of American history, impelled mainly by racial guilt. Her strategy lets her get away without defining her object of analysis. Instead, she wonders (p. 8): “Whose interests and what readings are served by particular definitions of the American gothic? How are traditional readings of American literary unsettled by allowing the gothic to reappear as a viable, if not easily definable, literary category?” Like

Savoy, Goddu lets the object of her analysis contaminate it; like his abuse of allegory, her text betrays paranoia, one of the elements Punter looks for when identifying the Gothic.

Punter proposed barbarism, paranoia, and taboo as essential to the Gothic, a criterion that Goddu accepts without acknowledging. To replace the notion of taboo that he borrowed from Freud, Goddu adopts Kristeva's concept of abject with a twist: while it originally deals with the psychosymbiotic economy, here it is used "to signify . . . historical horrors" (p. 10). Paranoia she sees as an American style, consisting of "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (p. 24). The fear of the past, a form of barbarism that Punter indicates as "the motivating source of the 'historical Gothic'" (1980: 405), is translated into racial guilt, or the fear that the sin of slavery may be revisited upon later generations. With this theoretical framework, Goddu rereads American literature often with sagacity and concludes that, because the Gothic challenges the critical narratives of American literary history, it destroys the myth of new-world innocence. Thus, it unsettles the nation's cultural identity, founded on fictions and self-mythologization, and replaces it with the horrors of history.

More than Goddu or the authors anthologized by Martin and Savoy, Edmundson claims for the Gothic the role of interpretant in premillennial America: "we now find ourselves in a culture where the Gothic idiom has slipped over from fiction and begun to shape and regulate our perception of reality" (p. 62). Its modeling effects can be detected "in media renderings of the O. J. Simpson case, in our political discourse, in our modes of therapy, on TV news, on talk shows like *Oprah*, in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment" (p. xii), where the plot is usually that of a victimizer tormenting a victim in a terrible place. To oppose "an impression of sickening descent into disintegration," there arises 'facile transcendence', Edmundson's phrase to describe "an anti-Gothic world inspired by the belief that self-transformation is as simple as a fairy tale wish" (p. xv). These two forces shape the 90s America into a dialectical pattern that gives it significance, the study of which,

Edmundson proposes, will help Americans make sense of their current circumstances and will let them see how they might better them.

Edmundson's translucent prose makes reading his book as enjoyable as going through any summer bestseller, with the advantage that readers will get more from his insights into American culture than a fashionable tan. The three sections – “American Gothic,” “The World According to Forrest Gump,” and “S & M Culture” – flow one into the other, always directing readers to intra- and extratextual references that contextualize his logically-built arguments, which fulfill his declared intention of writing a book directed not to academia but to the general public interested in cultural criticism. And he succeeds admirably. He brings O. J. Simpson to illustrate the concept of the double, the serial killer to explain that of the avenging angel that scourges the brutal society that invented it, and Bush, Nixon, and Clinton to exemplify the “deep ambivalence toward authority [that] lies near the heart of our culture of Gothic” (p. 21). We only have to think of the Starr Report on Clinton's foibles to see that interpretant in action. What the whole world thought was irrelevant became a Gothicizing scheme to transform the President into “a cruel hero-villain,” the targets of his sexual appetite into “cringing victims,” and the White House into “a terrible place” where “the drama unfold[ed]” (p. 130).

Inimical to the Gothic drive stands the facile transcendence movement, which finds its personification in Forrest Gump, who led a life without trauma and who looks as if he is enjoying a permanent mental vacation. Around him gyrate the elements that make such a figure possible: “the self-help programs, the spiritual journeys, the New Age philosophy” (p. 83), Oprah Winfrey (“Freud's substitute”), David Letterman (the TV Zen master), and angel books. But these cannot stop the Gothic from dominating American culture, which, Edmundson fears, will then give itself over to sadomasochism. Although Freud had already demonstrated in *Culture and Its Discontent* that “to be sadomasochist is to be normal; we're all sadomasochists” (p. 129), this would be an unhealthy turn

of affairs. Because “at the core of every Gothic plot is the S & M scenario: victim, victimizer, terrible place, torment” (p. 133), Edmundson warns, “then the social and political situation in which Gothic reigns triumphant is characterized by the pervasiveness of rancor and revenge” (p. 139). This could imprison American culture in a paralyzing repetition compulsion that would eventually kill it as past traumas win over future possibility.

Gothic authors, as Edmundson sees it, have a role in a culture as fundamental as the visionary writers, who offer a solution to life’s darker moments. The problem arises when one group or one drive predominates and breaks the dialectical struggle that pits one against the other and ignites a creation in culture. Maybe there will come along creators, he hopes, who “will take Gothic pessimism as a starting point and come up with visions that, while affirmative, never forget the authentic darkness that Gothic art discloses” (p. 179). Those creators will be able to make interventions in the national narrative through the modification of the Gothic interpretant, which will then generate a new sign B a more developed American culture that will subsume those two warring forces, which will in turn cause another interpretant to arise, and the semiotic play will continue.

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