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the Fantastic

A STRUCTURAL APPROACH TO A LITERARY GENRE

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Alvaro, the main character of Cazotte’s tale *Le Diable Amoureux*, lives for two months with a female being whom he believes to be an evil spirit: the devil or one of his henchmen. The way this being first appeared clearly suggests that she is a representative of the other world. But her specifically human (and, what is more, feminine) behavior, and the real wounds she receives, seem, on the contrary, to prove that she is simply a woman, and a woman in love. When Alvaro asks where she comes from, Biondetta replies: “I am a sylphide by birth, and one of the most powerful among them. . . .” But do sylphides exist? (“I could make nothing of these words,” Alvaro continues. “But what could I make of my entire adventure? It all seems a dream, I kept telling myself; but what else is human life? I am dreaming more extravagantly than other men, that is all. . . . What is possible? What is impossible?”)

Thus Alvaro hesitates, wonders (and the reader with him) whether what is happening to him is real, if what surrounds him is indeed reality (in which case sylphides exist), or whether it is no more than an illusion, which here assumes the form of a dream. Alvaro is later induced to sleep with this very woman who may be the devil; and, alarmed by this eventuality, he questions himself once more: “Have I been asleep? Is it my fortune that all this has been no more than a dream?” His mother will reflect in the same fashion: “You have dreamed this farm and all its inhabitants.” The ambiguity is sustained to the very end of the adventure: reality or dream? truth or illusion?

Which brings us to the very heart of the fantastic. In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination — and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality — but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings — with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.

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.

The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary, and the latter deserve more than a mere mention. But we shall postpone their discussion for the last chapter of our study.

Is such a definition at least an original one? We may find it, though formulated differently, in the nineteenth century. First of all, in the work of the Russian philosopher and mystic Vladimir Solovyov: “In the genuine fantastic, there
is always the external and formal possibility of a simple explanation of phenomena, but at the same time this explanation is completely stripped of internal probability." There is an uncanny phenomenon which we can explain in two fashions, by types of natural causes and supernatural causes. The possibility of a hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect.

Some years later M. R. James, a British author specializing in ghost stories, adopted virtually the same terms: "It is sometimes necessary to keep a loophole for a natural explanation, but I might add that this hole should be small enough to be unusable." Once again, then, two solutions are possible.

Here is a more recent German example: "The hero continually and distinctly feels the contradiction between two worlds, that of the real and that of the fantastic, and is himself amazed by the extraordinary phenomena which surround him" (Olga Riemann). We might extend this list indefinitely. Yet let us note a difference between the first two definitions and the third: in the former, it is the reader who hesitates between the two possibilities; in the latter, it is the character; we shall return to this difference.

It must further be noted that recent French definitions of the fantastic, if they are not identical with ours, do not on the other hand contradict it. We shall give a few examples drawn from the "canonical" texts on the subject. Castex, in Le Conte Fantastique en France, writes: "The fantastic...is characterized...by a brutal intrusion of mystery into the context of real life." Louis Vax, in l'Art et la Littérature Fantastiques: "The fantastic narrative generally describes men like ourselves, inhabiting the real world, suddenly confronted by the inexplicable." Roger Caillois, in Au Coeur du Fantastique: "The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality."

These definitions are all included within the one proposed by the first authors quoted, which already implied the existence of events of two orders, those of the natural world and those of the supernatural world. But the definitions of Solovyov, James, et al. indicated further the possibility of supplying two explanations of the supernatural event and, consequently, the fact that someone must choose between them. It was therefore more suggestive, richer; and the one we ourselves have given is derived from it. It further emphasizes the differential character of the fantastic (as a dividing line between the uncanny and the marvelous), instead of making it a substance (as Castex, Caillois, et al. do). As a rule, moreover, a genre is always defined in relation to the genres adjacent to it.

But the definition still lacks distinctness, and it is here that we must go further than our predecessors. As has already been noted, they do not specify whether it is the reader or the character who hesitates, nor do they elucidate the nuances of the hesitation. Le Diable Amoureux offers insufficient substance for a more extended analysis: here the hesitation occupies us only a moment. We shall therefore turn to another book, written some twenty years later, which permits us to raise more questions; a book which magisterially inaugurates the period of the fantastic narrative, Jan Potocki's Saragossa Manuscript.

A series of events is initially related, none of which in isolation contradicts the laws of nature as experience has taught us to recognize them; but their accumulation raises a problem. Alfonso van Worden, the work's hero and narrator, is crossing the mountains of the Sierra Morena. Suddenly his zagal (valet) Moschite vanishes; some hours later, the other valet, Lopez, vanishes as well. The local inhabitants assert that the region is haunted by ghosts, those of two bandits who had recently been hanged. Alfonso reaches an abandoned inn and prepares to go to sleep, but at the first stroke of midnight, "a beautiful negress, half naked and bearing a torch in each hand," enters his room and invites him to follow her. She leads him to an underground chamber where he is
received by two young sisters, both lovely and very scantily clad. They offer him food and drink. Alfonso experiences strange sensations, and a doubt is born in his mind: “I no longer knew whether they were women or insidious succubae.” They then tell him their story, revealing themselves to be his own cousins. But as the first cock crows, the narrative is broken off; and Alfonso recalls that “as everyone knows, ghosts have power only from midnight till cockcrow.”

All this, of course, does not transcend the laws of nature as we know them. At most, one might say that they are strange events, unexpected coincidences. The next development is the decisive one: an event occurs which reason can no longer explain. Alfonso goes to bed, the two sisters join him (or perhaps he only dreams they do), but one thing is certain: when he awakes, he is no longer in a bed, he is no longer in an underground chamber. “I saw the sky. I saw that I was in the open air. . . . I was lying under the gallows of Los Hermanos, and beside me — the bodies of Zoto’s two brothers!” Here then is a first supernatural event: two lovely girls have turned into two rotting corpses.

Alfonso is not yet convinced of the existence of supernatural forces: a conviction which would have suppressed all hesitation (and put an end to the fantastic). He looks for a place to spend the night, and comes upon a hermit’s cottage; here he encounters a man possessed by the devil, Pascheco, who tells his story, a story which strangely resembles Alfonso’s own: Pascheco had slept in the same inn; he had entered an underground chamber and spent the night in a bed with two sisters; the next morning he had wakened under the gallows, between two corpses. This similarity puts Alfonso on his guard. Hence he later explains to the hermit that he does not believe in ghosts, and he gives a “natural” explanation of Pascheco’s misfortunes. He similarly interprets his own adventures:

> I did not doubt that my cousins were women of flesh and blood. I was convinced of this by some emotion more powerful than

all I had been told as to the power of the demons. As to the trick that had been played upon me of placing me under the gallows — I was greatly incensed by it.

So be it — until new developments rekindle Alfonso’s doubts. He again encounters his cousins in a cave, and one night, they come to his bed. They are about to remove their chastity belts, but first Alfonso himself must remove the Christian relic he wears around his neck; in place of this object, one of the sisters bestows a braid of her hair. No sooner are the first transports of love over, than the stroke of midnight is heard. . . . Someone enters the cave, drives out the sisters and threatens Alfonso with death, obliging him to drink a cup of some unknown liquid. The next morning Alfonso wakens, of course, under the gallows, beside the corpses; around his neck there is no longer the braid of hair, but in its place a noose. Returning to the inn where he had spent the first night, he suddenly discovers, between the floorboards, the relic taken from him in the cave. “I no longer knew what I was doing. . . . I began to imagine that I had never really left this wretched inn, and that the hermit, the inquisitor [see below] and Zoto’s brothers were so many phantoms produced by magic spells.” As though to weigh the scale more heavily, he soon meets Pascheco, whom he had glimpsed during his last nocturnal adventure, and who gives him an entirely different version of the incident:

> These two young persons, after bestowing certain caresses upon him, removed from around his neck a relic which had encircled it, and from that moment, they lost their beauty in my eyes, and I recognized in them the two hanged men of the valley of Los Hermanos. But the young horseman, still taking them for charming persons, lavished the tenderest endearments upon them. Then one of the hanged men removed the noose from around his neck and placed it around that of the horseman, who thanked him for it by renewed caresses. Finally they closed their curtain, and I do no know what they did then, but I believe it was some hideous sin.
What are we to believe? Alfonso knows for sure that he has spent the night with two lascivious women — but what to make of the awakening under the gallows, what of the rope around his neck, what of the relic in the inn, and what of Pascheco’s narrative? Uncertainty and hesitation are at their height, reinforced by the fact that other characters suggest to Alfonso a supernatural explanation of the events. For example, the inquisitor, who will arrest Alfonso and threaten him with torture, asks him: “Do you know two Tunisian princesses? Or, rather, two infamous witches, execrable vampires and demons incarnate?” And later on Rebecca, Alfonso’s hostess, will tell him: “We know that they are two female demons whose names are Emina and Zibedé.”

Alone for several days, Alfonso once again finds the forces of reason returning. He seeks a “realistic” explanation for these incidents.

I then recalled the words which had escaped Don Emmanuel de Sa, governor of this city, which made me think that he was not altogether alien to the mysterious existence of the Gomelez creatures. It was the governor who had given me my two valets, Lopez and Moschite. I took it into my head that it was upon his orders that they had left me at the disastrous valley of Los Hermanos. My cousins, and Rebecca herself, had often led me to believe that I was being tested. Perhaps at the inn I had been given some drug to put me to sleep, and subsequently nothing was easier than to transport me, in my unconscious state, beneath the fatal gallows. Pascheco might have lost an eye through some other accident than his amorous relations with the two hanged men, and his hideous story might well have been an invention. The hermit who had constantly sought to pluck out the heart of my mystery was doubtless an agent of the Gomelez, who wished to test my discretion. Finally Rebecca, her brother, Zoto, and the leader of the Gypsies — perhaps all these people were in league to put my courage to the test.

The uncertainty is not thereby settled: minor incidents will once again incline Alfonso toward a supernatural solution.

Outside his window, he sees two women who appear to be the famous sisters; but when he approaches them, he finds their faces utterly unknown to him. He then reads a satanic tale which so resembles his own story that he admits: “I nearly reached the point of believing that fiends, in order to deceive me, had animated the bodies of the hanged men.”

“I nearly reached the point of believing” 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.

Who hesitates in this story? As we see at once, it is Alfonso — in other words, the hero, the central character. It is Alfonso who, throughout the plot, must choose between two interpretations. But if the reader were informed of the “truth,” if he knew which solution to choose, the situation would be quite different. The fantastic therefore implies an integration of the reader into the world of the characters; that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated. It must be noted that we have in mind no actual reader, but the role of the reader implicit in the text (just as the narrator’s function is implicit in the text). The perception of this implicit reader is given in the text, with the same precision as the movements of the characters.

The reader’s hesitation is therefore the first condition of the fantastic. But is it necessary that the reader identify with a particular character, as in Le Diable Amoureux and in The Saragossa Manuscript? In other words, is it necessary that the hesitation be represented within the work? Most works which fulfill the first condition also satisfy the second. Nonetheless there exist exceptions: for example in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s “Véra.” Here the reader may question the resurrection of the count’s wife, a phenomenon which contradicts the laws of nature but seems to be confirmed by a series of secondary indications. Yet none of the characters
shares this hesitation: neither Count d’Athol, who firmly believes in Véra’s second life, nor the old servant Raymond. The reader therefore does not identify with any character, and his hesitation is not represented within the text. We may say that this rule of identification involves an optional condition of the fantastic: the fantastic may exist without satisfying this condition; but it will be found that most works of fantastic literature are subject to it.

When the reader emerges from the world of the characters and returns to his own praxis (that of a reader) a new danger threatens the fantastic: a danger located on the level of the interpretation of the text. There exist narratives which contain supernatural elements without the reader’s ever questioning their nature, for he realizes that he is not to take them literally. If animals speak in a fable, doubt does not trouble the reader’s mind: he knows that the words of the text are to be taken in another sense, which we call allegorical. The converse situation applies to poetry. The poetic text might often be judged fantastic, provided we required poetry to be representative. But the question does not come up. If it is said, for instance, that the “poetic I” soars into space, this is no more than a verbal sequence, to be taken as such, without there being any attempt to go beyond the words to images.

The fantastic implies, then, not only the existence of an uncanny event, which provokes a hesitation in the reader and the hero; but also a kind of reading, which we may for the moment define negatively: it must be neither “poetic” nor “allegorical.” If we return now to The Saragossa Manuscript, we see that this requirement is fulfilled in both respects. On the one hand, nothing permits us to give, immediately, an allegorical interpretation to the supernatural events described; on the other hand, these events are actually given as such, we are to represent them to ourselves, and not to consider the words which designate them as merely a combination of linguistic units. A remark by Roger Caillois gives us a clue as to this property of the fantastic text:

This kind of image is located at the very heart of the fantastic, halfway between what I have chosen to call infinite images and limited images.... The former seek incoherence as a principle and reject any signification; the latter translate specific texts into symbols for which an appropriate lexicon permits a term-by-term reconversion into corresponding utterances.

We are now in a position to focus and complete our definition of the fantastic. The fantastic requires the fulfillment of three conditions. 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 a supernatural explanation of the events described. 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. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as “poetic” interpretations. These three requirements do not have an equal value. The first and the third actually constitute the genre; the second may not be fulfilled. Nonetheless, most examples satisfy all three conditions.

How are these three characteristics to take their place within the model of the work as we have articulated it in the preceding chapter? The first condition refers us to the verbal aspect of the text, more precisely, to what are called “visions”: the fantastic is a particular case of the more general category of the “ambiguous vision.” The second condition is more complex: it is linked on the one hand to the syntactical aspect, insofar as it implies the existence of formal units which correspond to the characters’ estimation of events in the narrative; we might call these units “reactions,” as opposed to the “actions” which habitually constitute the argument of the narrative; on the other hand, this second condition refers to the semantic aspect, since we are concerned with a rep-
resented theme, that of perception and of its notation. Lastly, the third condition has a more general nature and transcends the division into aspects: here we are concerned with a choice between several modes (and levels) of reading.

We may now regard our definition as sufficiently explicit. In order to justify it fully, let us compare it once again to several other definitions, this time definitions which will permit us to see not how ours resembles them but how it is distinguished from them. From a systematic point of view, we may start in several directions from the word “fantastic.”

First of all let us take the meaning which, though rarely articulated, comes to mind straight off (that of the dictionary): in the fantastic texts, the author describes events which are not likely to occur in everyday life. We might indeed characterize such events as supernatural, but the supernatural, though a literary category, of course, is not relevant here. We cannot conceive a genre which would regroup all works in which the supernatural intervenes and which would thereby have to accommodate Homer as well as Shakespeare, Cervantes as well as Goethe. The supernatural does not characterize works closely enough, its extension is much too great.

Another endeavor to situate the fantastic, one much more widespread among theoreticians, consists in identifying it with certain reactions of the reader: not the reader implicit in the text, but the actual person holding the book in his hand. Representative of this tendency is H.P. Lovecraft, himself the author of fantastic tales as well as of a theoretical work devoted to the supernatural in literature. For Lovecraft, the criterion of the fantastic is not situated within the work but in the reader’s individual experience — and this experience must be fear.

Strange as it seems, efforts have also been made to locate the essence of the fantastic in the author. An example of this is to be found in Caillois who, in any case, has no fear of contradictions. Here is how Caillois revives the romantic image of the inspired poet: “The fantastic must have something of the involuntary about it, something submitted to — an interrogation as troubled as it is troublesome, rising suddenly from a darkness which its author was obliged to take just as it came. . . .” Or further: “Once again, the fantastic which does not proceed from a deliberate intention to disconcert but which seems to develop despite the work’s author, if not

This sentiment of fear or perplexity is often invoked by theoreticians of the fantastic, even if they continue to regard a possible double explanation as the necessary condition of the genre. Thus Peter Penzoldt writes: “With the exception of the fairy tale, all supernatural stories are stories of fear which make us wonder if what is supposed to be mere imagination is not reality after all.” Caillois, too, proposes as a “touchstone of the fantastic . . . the impression of irreducible strangeness.”

It is surprising to find such judgments offered by serious critics. If we take their declarations literally — that the sentiment of fear must occur in the reader — we should have to conclude that a work’s genre depends on the sang-froid of its reader. Nor does the determination of the sentiment of fear in the characters offer a better opportunity to delimit the genre. In the first place, fairy tales can be stories of fear, as in the case of Perrault (contrary to Penzoldt’s assertion). Moreover, there are certain fantastic narratives from which all terror is absent: texts as diverse as Hoffmann’s “Princess Brambilla” and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s “Véra.” Fear is often linked to the fantastic, but it is not a necessary condition of the genre.

"SPECIAL CASE - CHARACTERIZATION APPARATUS"
unknown to him, turns out to be the most persuasive of all."

Arguments against this "intentional fallacy" are today too familiar to be reformulated here.

Other attempts at definition deserve still less attention since they could as well be applied to texts which are not fantastic at all. Thus it is not possible to define the fantastic in terms of opposition to the faithful reproduction of reality, or in terms of opposition to naturalism. Nor in the terms used by Marcel Schneider in La Littérature Fantastique en France: "The fantastic explores inner space; it sides with the imagination, the anxiety of existence, and the hope of salvation."

The Saragossa Manuscript has furnished us an example of hesitation between the real and (let us say) the illusory. we wondered if what we saw was not a trick, or an error of perception. In other words, we did not know what interpretation to give to certain perceptible events. There exists another variety of the fantastic in which the hesitation occurs between the real and the imaginary. In the first case, we were uncertain not that the events occurred, but that our understanding of them was correct. In the second case, we wonder if what we believe we perceive is not in fact a product of the imagination: "I have difficulty differentiating what I see with the eyes of reality from what my imagination sees," says one of Achim von Arnim's characters. This "error" may occur for several reasons which we shall examine below; here is a characteristic example of it, in which the confused perception is imputed to madness: E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Princess Brambilla."

Strange and incomprehensible events occur in the life of the poor actor Giglio Fava during the Carnival in Rome. He believes that he has become a prince, has fallen in love with a princess, and has had incredible adventures. Now, most of those around him assure him that nothing of the kind has taken place but that he, Giglio, has gone mad. This is the claim of Signor Pasquale: "Signor Giglio, I know what has happened to you. All Rome knows as well, you have been forced to leave the theatre because your mind is deranged. . . ." Sometimes Giglio himself doubts his own reason: "He was even ready to think that Signor Pasquale and Maestro Bescapi had been right to believe him a little cracked." Thus Giglio (and the implicit reader) is kept in doubt, uncertain if what surrounds him is or is not the product of his imagination.

This simple and very common procedure may be contrasted with another which appears to be much rarer, and in which madness is utilized once again, but differently, in order to create the necessary ambiguity. Consider Nerval's Aurélia: this book, as we know, is the account of certain visions seen by a man during a period of madness. Although the narrative is given in the first person, the I apparently comprehends two distinct persons: a character who perceives unknown worlds (and lives in the past), and the narrator who transcribes the former's impressions (he lives in the present). At first glance, the fantastic does not exist here: neither for the former, who regards his visions not as due to madness but as a more lucid image of the world (he is thus in the realm of the marvelous); nor for the latter, who knows that the visions are the product of either madness or dreams, not of reality (from his viewpoint, the narrative is merely uncanny). But the text does not function in just this way, for Nerval recreates the ambiguity at another level, where we did not expect it; and Aurélia thus remains within the bounds of the true fantastic after all.

In the first place, the character has not entirely decided what interpretation to give to events. Sometimes he too believes in his own madness, but never to the point of certainty. "I understood, seeing myself among madmen, that hitherto everything had been only illusions. Yet the promises I once attributed to the goddess Isis seemed to turn into a series of ordeals I was destined to undergo." At the same time, the narrator is not sure that everything the character has
experienced results from illusion. He even insists on the truth of certain of the phenomena described: "I inquired in other quarters, no one had heard anything. And yet I am still certain that the cry was real, and the earthly air had echoed to it...."

Ambiguity also results from the use of two stylistic devices which suffuse the entire text: imperfect tense and modalization. Nerval habitually employs them together. The latter consists, let us note, in using certain introductory locutions which, without changing the meaning of the sentence, modify the relation between the speaker and his utterance. For example, the two sentences "It is raining outside" and "Perhaps it is raining outside" refer to the same fact; but the second also indicates the speaker's uncertainty as to the truth of the sentence he utters. The imperfect has a similar effect. If I say "I used to love Aurélia [J'aimais Aurélia]," I do not specify whether or not I still love her now; the continuity is possible, but as a general rule unlikely.

Now the entire text of Aurélia is impregnated by these two devices. Whole pages might be quoted from it in support of this assertion. Here are several examples taken at random:

*It seemed to me that I was returning to a familiar house... An old servant whom I called Marguerite and whom I seemed to have known since childhood told me... L-believed I was falling into an abyss which split the globe. I felt painlessly swept away by a flood of molten metal... I had the sense that these currents were constituted of living souls, in a molecular state... It became clear to me that the ancestors were taking the form of certain animals in order to visit us on earth... [my italics]*

Without these locutions, we should be plunged into the world of the marvelous, with no reference to everyday reality. By means of them, we are kept in both worlds at once. The imperfect tense (less apparent in the English translation) introduces a further distance between the character and the narrator, so that we are kept from knowing the latter's position.

By a series of interpolated clauses, the narrator keeps his distance from others — from the "normal man," or, more exactly, from the normal use of certain words (for in a sense, language is the main theme of Aurélia). "Recovering what men call reason," he writes somewhere. And again: "But it appears that this was an illusion of sight." Or once more: "My apparently meaningless actions were subject to what is called illusion, according to human reason." An admirable sentence: the actions are "meaningless" (reference to the natural) but only "apparently" so (reference to the supernatural); they are subject to illusion (reference to the natural), or rather not to "what is called illusion" (reference to the supernatural). The imperfect tense, moreover, signifies that it is not the present narrator who thinks this way, but the character at that particular time. And again this phrase, which epitomizes the pervasive ambiguity of Aurélia: "A series of mad visions perhaps." The narrator here keeps his distance from the "normal man" and draws closer to the character; and the certainty that he is dealing with madness thus gives way to doubt.

Indeed, the narrator will go further: he will openly adopt the character's view that madness and dreaming are only a higher form of reason. Here is what the character had said: "The testimony of those who had seen me thus caused me a kind of irritation when I realized that they attributed to mental aberration the movements or words coinciding with the various phases of what for me constituted a series of logical events" (this corresponds to Poe's remark: "Science has not yet told us whether madness may not be the sublime form of intelligence"). And again: "Having come to this notion of dreams affording man a communication with the world of spirits, I hoped..." But here is how the narrator speaks:

I shall try... to transcribe the impressions of a long disease which has occurred entirely within the mysteries of my own mind...
— and I don’t know why I use this word disease, for I myself have never felt in better health. Sometimes I believed my strength and activity to have doubled; imagination afforded me infinite delights.

Or again: "Whatever the case, I believe that the human imagination has invented nothing which is not true, in this world or in others, and I could not doubt what I had seen so distinctly." (Again perhaps an echo of Poe's "The mind of man can imagine nothing which has not really existed.")

In these two passages, Nerval’s narrator seems to declare that what he has seen during his so-called madness is only a part of reality — that he has therefore never been ill. But if each of the passages begins in the present, the final proposition once again occurs in the imperfect tense and it thus reintroduces ambiguity into the reader’s perception. The converse occurs in the last sentences of Aurélia: "I was able to judge more soundly the world of illusions in which I had lived for a time. Still, I feel happy in the convictions I have acquired. . . ." The first proposition seems to refer whatever precedes it to the world of madness; but then, why this happiness in the convictions acquired?

Aurélia constitutes, then, an original — and perfect — example of the ambiguity of the fantastic. This ambiguity turns on madness, certainly; but whereas in Hoffmann’s "Princess Brambilla" we questioned whether or not the character was mad, in Aurélia we know in advance that the behavior of Nerval’s protagonist is considered madness. What we are concerned to know (and it is on this point that the hesitation turns) is whether or not madness is actually a higher reason. The hesitation previously concerned perception; now it concerns language. With Hoffmann, we hesitate as to the name for certain events; with Nerval, the hesitation shifts inside the name: to its meaning.

The fantastic, we have seen, lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story’s end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic. If he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described, we say that the work belongs to another genre: the uncanny. If, on the contrary, he decides that new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena, we enter the genre of the marvelous.

The fantastic therefore leads a life full of dangers, and may evaporate at any moment. It seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre. One of the great periods of supernatural literature, that of the Gothic novel, seems to confirm this observation. Indeed, we generally distinguish, within the literary Gothic, two tendencies: that of the supernatural explained (the "uncanny"), as it appears in the novels of Clara Reeves and Ann Radcliffe; and that