

# Reconsidering the Fantastic: An Anthropological Approach

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In 1764, Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique portatif*, "ce catéchisme de l'école encyclopédique," was published in Geneva. As one of the contributors to Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Voltaire had been complaining about the cumbersome in-folio size of this "bible" for all the enlightened minds of the eighteenth century. His "paperback" version of the *Encyclopédie* was supposed to remedy this problem and make the ideas of the Enlightenment accessible to more than the 4,500 subscribers of the *Encyclopédie*. Numerous editions of the *Dictionnaire* proved its success and it seemed as if nothing could stop the ideas of the Enlightenment from spreading to even the most remote corners of Europe. However, during this very same year, while Diderot and his colleagues were pursuing the illusory goal of categorizing, cataloguing and cross-referencing the entire body of human knowledge in their effort to forever ban ignorance and the superstitious beliefs of the past from their world, Horace Walpole published his novel *The Castle of Otranto* in England. This novel is anything but a tribute to the ideals of the Enlightenment. On the contrary, it marks, as José Monléon notes in his *A Specter is Haunting Europe*, the "origins of the Gothic tale, and of fantastic narrative in general" (Monléon 5). Among the gothic and fantastic tales which followed Walpole's novel is Jacques Cazotte's *Le diable amoureux*, published in 1772. As one of the earliest true fantastic stories according to Todorov, it can be considered a precursor to the large number of fantastic works in France in the nineteenth century.

What had gone wrong from the perspective of the Enlightenment? How could gothic castles and dungeons, ghosts and goblins, the supernatural, superstition, and the fantastic become popular at this particular juncture in (literary) history when such beliefs were thought to have been "repressed" forever? The danger of a blind faith in Reason, this supreme weapon against superstition, is, of course, not a discovery of fantastic or gothic narratives. Already Voltaire treated the ideals of the Enlightenment in a satirical manner in his *Candide* (1759). The work of the Marquis de Sade is an ironic monument to the power of Reason, and the Spanish painter

Francisco Goya contributed to this growing suspicion towards the Enlightenment when he published his *Los Caprichos* in 1799. One of the aquatint plates from this collection bears the title “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters.”

## 2

Even though the fantastic, “perhaps the supreme literature of difference” (9), as a widely read and practiced form of literature is a phenomenon of the nineteenth century and in particular of Romanticism, as Tobin Siebers shows convincingly in his *The Romantic Fantastic*, I would nevertheless argue that it emerged as an idea at a moment when faith in human intellectual progress, reason, and science reached a first peak during the second half of the eighteenth century. This era also marks the transition from the classical to the modern world, creating a paradigm shift of such magnitude that it affected all aspects of human existence and its repercussions could be felt throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. As an aesthetic reflection of these crucial developments, the fantastic is more than the playground for confused or escapist minds, as some critics maintain, but a hitherto little explored source of revelatory insights into the history of humanity. With the exception of Todorov, who is primarily interested in the formal aspects of a literary genre and therefore hesitates to venture into any elaborate discussion of its historicity or content, the large majority of later critics, such as Rosemary Jackson, Tobin Siebers and José Monléon, have adopted an overall historical approach to the fantastic. Monléon’s “social history of the fantastic” (4), for instance, links its development to a series of revolutionary, sociological, and economic changes from the French Revolution to the revolution of 1848 and the 1917 October Revolution in Russia.

Instead of adding another approach to the discussion of the fantastic, I propose an integrative anthropological analysis of this complex literary phenomenon which would allow us not only to account for its emergence at specific historical moments but also to raise some questions of a more general nature regarding (fantastic) art and its role in culture. The particular anthropological value of fantastic fiction is revealed in its use of figurative language. The fantastic problematizes the figural and thereby critically foregrounds what realist fiction tries to hide, as Eric Gans remarks in *Originary Thinking*: “The conflictual nature of mimesis is ironically and/or violently revealed when an apparently innocent linguistic figure of desire appears in a real incarnation” (Gans 1993 179). To this end, I will focus mainly on how the concept of mimesis, in its double meaning of representation (aesthetics) and imitation (ethics) is approached by writers of both realist novels and fantastic narratives.[\(1\)](#)

If we follow its literary history throughout the nineteenth and into the early

twentieth century, we find that the fantastic appears strongly during precisely those eras when both art and science claimed to have comprehended, in the senses of “to seize” and “to understand,” the real, as was most notably the case for the literary schools of Realism and Naturalism. But the question of realism was already of major concern to the Encyclopédistes who tried to overcome the epistemological doubts of their time by simply exhausting them through the sheer volume of knowledge presented to their readers. To this end, they complemented the seventeen volumes of articles with some 2,885 illustrations in another eleven in-folio volumes. That the Rationalists created their own form of epistemological tyranny that could not tolerate any dissent became most obvious when the French Revolution tried to dispose of all those who by birth, faith or intellectual conviction did not adhere to the new world order. The question of representation should not be treated independently from the question of its ethical implications, as Hayden White points out in his exhaustive study *Metahistory*: “the important theoretical and ideological disputes that developed in Europe between the French Revolution and World War I were in reality disputes over which group might claim the right to determine of what a “realistic” representation of social reality might consist” (White 46).

### 3

In the domain of literature it is the realist historical novel that claims the right to be the declared bearer of “truth” throughout the nineteenth century. A closer look at some publication dates of realist as well as fantastic works will establish their close chronological relationship. That these dates also coincide with major historical, social, and economic revolutions further supports my proposition that the fantastic must be approached from an integrative anthropological perspective.

One of the canonical works of French realism is Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot*, published in 1834-35. During these years, Auguste Comte worked on his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-42), an encyclopedic-philosophical treaty on the development of humanity which reaches, according to Comte, its highest level once it has adopted the laws of natural sciences and sociology as its foundation. Both works can be considered as quintessential expressions of a “realist” *vision du monde* of their time. Simultaneously, there is a proliferation of fantastic short stories in France under the influence of the German author E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose work was translated into French in the late 1820s. Among the authors who wrote fantastic stories were Balzac himself (*La peau de chagrin*; “Le Chef-d’oeuvre inconnu”; *La recherche de l’absolu*), Gautier (“Omphale” and “La Morte Amoureuse”), and especially Prosper Mérimée whose “La Vénus d’Ille,” published in 1837, figures among the acknowledged masterpieces of the fantastic novella.

A good forty years later, after the political disillusionment of 1848, the disaster of

the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the debunking of the realist novel by Flaubert, French art and science made their last attempt in the nineteenth century to reappropriate this privilege of representing and explaining reality. Whereas the authors of the romantic era had tried to resolve the mimetic crisis through the “hypermimeticism of the realistic detail, the *petit fait vrai*,” Zola, as the main representative of Naturalism hoped to do the same by “transforming mimesis into scientific description” (Gans *Originary Thinking* 177, 180). Similar in scope to Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*, Zola’s *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire* tries to explain the development of French (bourgeois) society by means of scientific criteria. The best-known author of fantastic short stories at this time is no doubt Guy de Maupassant. The author of “Le Horla” (1887) and many other fantastic novellas was initially associated with the experimental novel and the circle surrounding Zola but quickly distanced himself from this school. Like Zola, however, he was deeply affected by the deep social crisis that followed the war. It is no surprise therefore that one of the main themes treated in Maupassant’s fantastic and other short stories is the protagonist’s ontological fear.

Before I attempt a thematic discussion of a few selective fantastic works, a formal analysis of this genre seems appropriate. Let me begin with a quote from Richard M. Sainsbury’s book *Paradoxes*:

Paradoxes are serious. Unlike party puzzles and teasers, which are also fun, paradoxes raise serious problems. Historically, they are associated with crises in thought and with revolutionary advances. To grapple with them is not merely to engage in an intellectual game, but is to come to grips with key issues” (Sainsbury 1).

#### 4

A comparison between Sainsbury’s characterization of paradoxes and my discussion of the fantastic reveals an intimate relationship between these two forms of writing. Further analysis will show that the fantastic’s *raison d’être* lies precisely in its use of paradoxical structures and dialectical modes of thought. The key issues with which we have to come to grips in the fantastic are the concept of representation and its consequences in the realm of ethics and human interaction. Eric Gans elaborates on the importance of paradoxical thinking to intellectual activity in his *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*: “... the paradoxical is not the unthinkable; on the contrary, without paradox, thinking would be impossible. Paradox is the privileged road to understanding the human because paradox reveals the seam — the umbilical hole — in the hierarchy of sign and

referent that is the essence of human language" (Gans 1997)

The relevance of paradox for our analysis of the fantastic is clear if we consider the natural and the supernatural as two apparently acceptable narrative parameters. When used separately, they are unproblematic modes of narration. Brought together, however, in the same narrative, they necessarily challenge each other and entail a disturbance at the level of comprehension. The disturbance or hesitation on behalf of the protagonist as well as the reader caused by this procedure is, of course, one of the fundamental elements of Todorov's often quoted definition of the fantastic: "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" (Todorov 25).

In general, critics find Todorov's definition of the fantastic too restrictive because he ultimately considers only those stories as truly belonging to this genre which are able to sustain the enigma created by the fantastic phenomenon beyond the closing lines of the story. Cazotte's *Le diable amoureux*, Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille," and James's "The Turn of the Screw" fulfill this requirement for Todorov. We do not have to dismiss Todorov's definition if we choose to treat the fantastic as a paradoxical structure. Since paradoxes by definition are composed in such a way that neither of their constituents, in our case two different narrative modes, can prevail over the other, the only requirement of a fantastic story is that it develop such a paradoxical-fantastic situation at least once during the narration. Even if the enigma is artificially solved in the story itself, as is often the case, the goal of the fantastic story has been achieved; it has caused enough structural disturbance for the reader to hesitate and reinvestigate the validity of the story's content.

Paradoxes as well as fantastic literature invite us to engage in a dialectical process whose beginning and end remain open because they refuse to provide their reader with easily acceptable scientific or logical explanations. Our interest in fantastic narratives consequently shifts from reaching closure to an endless process of reconsidering the same central problematic of mimesis from different perspectives, be they historical, economic or social. Because of its dialectical structure, it is appropriate to compare this cognitive effect provoked by the fantastic to a Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Each new reading reconfirms the double meaning of this paradoxical term: it transcends the previous reading while at the same time preserving it for further use.

5

The anthropological value of the fantastic's problematization of mimesis through a paradoxical structure is best exemplified if we link it to what Gans calls the

hypothesis of the “originary event.” This event, we recall, is itself based on a paradox created by the simultaneously attractive and repellent force of a central object of desire. In order to temporarily defer the outbreak of violence among the members participating in this event because of their common (imitated) desire for this object, the latter use “a sign [as] an economical substitute for its inaccessible referent” (Gans 1993 9). The human thus emerges through the experience of a mimetic crisis that forces the participating members to contemplate the potentially violent consequences of their action. Because this hypothetical “originary event” creates an *Ur-model*, or Heideggerian *Ursprung*, of all subsequent cultural development, its basic mechanism must be detectable in all manifestations of culture. Gans shows that the subsequent artistic approaches to the concept of mimesis, whether they are classical, romantic or modern, are based on this originary event: “The historical succession of esthetics through romanticism reflects a progressive refinement in the reproduction of the originary event” (Gans 1993 170).

Since our approach to the fantastic coincides with the emergence of the philosophical as well as aesthetic concept of realism, our analysis cannot be complete without a comparison between the fantastic novella and its “enemy brother” the realist novel. At the aesthetic level, realist art tries to cope with the mimetic crisis in a way that is quantitatively as well as qualitatively similar to the vast project of the *Encyclopédie*. While the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century used a combination of word and image to master reality, Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine* was viewed by the author as an encyclopedic undertaking in the sense that its 91 novels and short stories were supposed to provide an “étude sociale” of French society from the Empire to the July Monarchy. The effective use of recurrent characters in the *Comédie* is analogous to the systematic cross-referencing in the *Encyclopédie*.

The fantastic, on the other hand, critically plays on the realist’s assertion that reality can be captured through truthful representation. By deliberately creating a paradoxical situation at the vertical (aesthetic) level of representation, the fantastic draws the reader’s attention to the potentially conflictual horizontal (ethical, social, economic) relationships inherent in the concept of imitation. The formal requirements of a fantastic story are consequently different from those of a realist novel. In order to show the illusive quest of the realist novel, what the fantastic has to accomplish is to develop a natural (realist) frame similar to those in Balzac’s novels which it then puts into question by introducing one or several supernatural (fantastic) events. The quality of such fantastic novellas as Mérimée’s “La Vénus d’Ille” and “Lokis” stems from their gradual development of the paradoxical situation which makes it difficult to detect at what point the supernatural enters the natural realm.

Let me return once more to Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, where we find one of the best illustrations of how the illusion of an approximation, and ultimate merging, between the sign and the referent is created in a realist novel. Considering realism's quest for a truthful representation of reality, we understand why it usually claims to avoid highly figurative language. Metaphors are particularly suspect figures of speech since it lies in their nature to leave gaps in the process of transferring one image to another. Metonymy and synecdoche, on the other hand, appear less dangerous because they operate through contiguity; the gap between one image and the other is hidden by a necessary relationship between them.<sup>(2)</sup> The description of the Pension Vauquer at the beginning of *Le Père Goriot* is a model for the attempt to fuse reality with fiction, since streets and buildings in his work can frequently be traced to real locations. Even though no scholar has yet found, to my knowledge, a precise address for this famous pension, its description nevertheless makes us treat it as one of the typical Parisian pensions of its time. Its fictitious owner, Madame Vauquer, becomes real by sheer proximity to the house she has been living in for so many years. The link between the house and its owner is achieved by contiguity and a gradual movement from the inanimate to the animate; no particular rhetorical figure links Madame Vauquer to her house yet we all know, since Balzac authoritatively says so, that she "is" like her house: "enfin toute sa personne explique la pension, comme la pension implique sa personne" (Balzac 30 ["her entire person explains the pension, just as the pension implies her person"]). That realist fiction cannot avoid figurative and, in particular, metaphoric language is evident; the point is rather that it treats these figures as essentially unproblematic tools of representation.

Mérimée's short story "La Vénus d'Ille" is, on the other hand, a perfect example of the fantastic's particular way of problematizing figurative language. A short summary of the main events will help the reader to appreciate Mérimée's mastery in developing the fantastic phenomenon. The narrator, a well-educated Parisian traveler interested in archeological discoveries, visits the small town of Ille in Southern France where he is invited to participate in the marriage of Alphonse de Peyrehorade, his host's son.<sup>(3)</sup> The visit is overshadowed by the discovery of a bronze statue of a Venus which, as the narrator tries to convince his reader, takes on human features over the course of the story. This process begins when one of the workers, who helped to unearth the statue, describes her look as "malevolent." His aversion to the statue can easily be explained by an accident in which the statue fell on and broke a friend's leg. The next day, the "idol," as it is called by now, is charged with "throwing back" a stone which a young man had thrown at it. One plausible explanation is that the stone simply ricochets from the statue, sending the stone back to where it came from. Yet even the erudite Parisian

narrator cannot refrain from attributing human qualities to the statue when he sees it for the first time: “Ces yeux brillants produisaient une certaine illusion qui rappelait la réalité, la vie” (Mérimée 739) [“Those brilliant eyes produced a certain illusion that recalled reality, life itself”]. As the day goes on, M. Alphonse takes off his diamond ring and places it on the statue’s finger to play a “jeu de paume.” When he afterwards tries to take back his ring from the statue, he is unable to do so because it seems that the statue had purposely bent its finger to keep the ring. The final “turn of the screw” occurs when the young husband is found dead in his bed the morning after the wedding, his chest seemingly crushed by a ring of iron.

## 7

The increasing anthropomorphization of the statue throughout the story, combined with the final “evidence” of M. Alphonse’s ring next to his dead body and the noise of a heavy body moving through the house during the night of the murder, suggest that M. Alphonse’s joking remark about the statue being his wife after he had given her his ring has become reality. We are led to believe that the statue has finally become alive and killed her “husband” M. Alphonse in a violent embrace during their wedding night.[\(4\)](#)

Fewer incidents would have sufficed to characterize “La Vénus d’Ille” as a fantastic story according to our definition. What makes it so powerful, however, is the way in which the supposedly innocent and explicable metaphors describing the statue as “breaking” legs, “throwing” stones, and “bending” fingers gradually turn into the real yet inexplicable “killing” of M. Alphonse. This fantastic development is artfully paralleled by a heated yet collegial discussion between the Parisian visitor and M. de Peyrehorade concerning two inscriptions on the statue. The conflicting interpretations by the two “archeologists” refer to the ambiguous nature of the statue. Whereas the narrator interprets the Latin inscription *Veneri turbul...* as “Vénus qui trouble”[“Venus who troubles”], M. de Peyrehorade adopts a more benevolent interpretation, claiming that the cut-off word refers to the local origin of the statue and is nothing but a simple linguistic reversal leading to Boulternère, the name of a nearby village. The same is true for the inscription *Cave amantem*, which the narrator translates/interprets as “Prends garde si elle t’aime” (739) [“Beware if she loves you” ]. M. de Peyrehorade remains at a more general level with his interpretation “Prends garde à celui qui t’aime, défie-toi des amants” (739) [Beware of the one who loves you, distrust lovers”].

In his analysis of “La Vénus d’Ille” in *The Romantic Fantastic*, Tobin Siebers makes several important points in regard to my proposition of considering the fantastic as a romantic manifestation of the “originary event.” In both “La Vénus d’Ille” and “Lokis,” the creation of the fantastic is not only implicitly a crisis of representation



and imitation, but it is also explicitly problematized in the content of the story: “It is striking that Mérimée generated the fantastic from linguistic interpretations, for the fantastic itself springs from the most radical manipulations of language ...” (Siebers 70).[\(5\)](#)

The crisis at the level of representation created by the fantastic has inevitable consequences for the ethical relationship among the users of language. Mérimée presents us in fact with two different possibilities for such consequences. One of these possibilities is foregrounded in the archeological-linguistic discussion between the Parisian visitor-narrator and his host M. de Peyrehorade. Their mimetic rivalry is caused by their common object of desire, the statue of Venus, for which both display a passionate admiration. A second example of such a rivalry exists between M. Alphonse and the narrator. Once again, their rivalry is generated by a common object of desire; this time it is M. Alphonse’s fiancée, Mlle de Puygarrig.

8

Whereas the two protagonists in the first triangle seem to have, at first sight, the same linguistic power, conflict between them, over the possible appropriation of the statue, is constantly deferred through a non-violent battle of representations. Each interpretation of the statue given by the visitor-narrator appears as valid as the interpretations presented by M. de Peyrehorade. However, as the story unfolds towards its tragic end, the series of fantastic and increasingly violent events involving the statue suggest that the narrator was indeed right in insinuating the statue’s malevolent nature. In the battle of representations, it seems as if reality proves the narrator right. When the visitor from Paris leaves his host after M. Alphonse’s funeral, he makes an attempt to profit from his intellectual victory over M. de Peyrehorade when he momentarily contemplates the idea of asking his host to donate the statue to a museum. As a known lover and connoisseur of art whose domain is the museum, the narrator would thus have “possessed” the statue. That he does not dare to make this request and instead leaves without saying a word will be significant for my later discussion of the narrator’s status in the fantastic story.

The second mimetic triangle reveals not the narrator’s linguistic but ethical superiority over M. Alphonse. Because the battle over the common object of desire, Mlle de Puygarrig, is more personalized and concrete in this triangle, it is also more dangerous as the end of the story shows.[\(6\)](#) Here, the narrator does not waste a minute to present M. Alphonse from the beginning as naive, simple-minded, and physically repulsive and himself as courteous and well-educated. The problematic double status of the Parisian visitor as a character in the story as well as its narrator reveals itself in these two mimetic triangles. As the Parisian amateur archeologist and language specialist, he develops the “myth” of the fantastic nature of the

statue through his linguistic battle with M. de Peyrehorade. On the other hand, he portrays M. Alphonse as a monster, a "Minotaur," through a series of soliloquies which can only be known to the reader.

In light of Siebers's discussion of the unreliability of the narrator and his possible implication in the death of M. Alphonse, the specificities of the story's end become more significant. If the narrator has indeed reason to cover up his traces, he knows that he has achieved his goal as far as the protagonists in the story are concerned. With the exception of M. de Peyrehorade who, as I argue, does not believe in the statue's fantastic nature, all other characters fall prey to the narrator's clever scheme, because they are already prone to superstitious beliefs and unable to challenge his linguistic superiority. Once he realizes that even the state prosecutor cannot make sense of the events, the narrator does not insist to push the investigation any further. As to his silence towards M. de Peyrehorade, it can be viewed as an act of politeness but also as a sign of guilt.

9

That the narrator's task of convincing his reader is, however, not complete yet as the conclusion of the story itself and a postscript show. When the narrator receives the manuscripts of the events after the death of M. de Peyrehorade, he expresses his desire to publish them. In what can be regarded as his final bluff, he tells us that the two pieces of evidence that could still cause him trouble retrospectively, the parts of the manuscript dealing with the inscription as well as the statue itself, do not exist any more. The manuscripts are lost and the bronze statue has been melted and turned into a bell. Since the narrator has nothing more to fear, he does not have to be silent, as was the case with M. de Peyrehorade. On the contrary, counting on a benevolent audience that has followed him this far, he tries to finalize his victory by subtly creating yet another "lie" about the statue, this time presented as a letter from his friend in Ille, in which the latter informs his Parisian friend that the vines have frozen twice since the statue's transformation into a bell. The establishment of a causal link between the freezing of the vines and the bell is not insinuated by the friend, rather it is the trap into which the reader is supposed to fall himself.

Mérimée's problematization of representation through a clever juxtaposition of the two mimetic triangles is, I believe, a historical and cultural commentary. If we compare the two contrasting translations/interpretations of the inscriptions, we note that M. de Peyrehorade always remains at a general or non-individualized level. Especially his interpretation "Beware of the one who loves you, distrust lovers" strikes me as classical in that the style of a maxim of La Rochefoucauld. In fact, everything about M. de Peyrehorade leads us to see in him a well-educated man of

classical taste and manners: he likes to speak Latin and, at one point, quotes Racine's famous line from *Phèdre*: *C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée!* (739)[It's Venus wholly attached to her prey]. As a man whose aesthetic and ethical values originate in the classical world, M. de Peyrehorade looks at the statue as belonging to the realm of the *merveilleux*. As such it is a transcendental signifier, as Siebers remarks (71). Because of this, however, it is impossible for him to understand the danger of violence the statue incarnates. Rather than looking at the incident of the broken leg as a concrete event, M. de Peyrehorade interprets it as another instance in which human nature reveals itself when brought in contact with Venus: "Qui n'a pas été blessé par Vénus?" (735) ["Who has not been wounded by Venus?"]. The configuration of this mimetic triangle maintains a classical, that is ritualistic, structure. The two protagonists, even though they have contrasting interpretations of the statue, keep their place at the periphery of the scene and respect the centrality of the object of desire. M. de Peyrehorade is a classical protagonist unable to adapt to the changing world around him; he dies in resignation only a few months after his son.

10

We discover a completely different attitude if we look at the interpretations of the two inscriptions given by the narrator. In both instances, he chooses a romantic interpretation which anthropomorphizes the statue. Through his linguistic interpretations and treatment of the statue throughout the novella, he wants to make his reader believe the statue actually becomes alive. The Parisian's double status as a protagonist in and narrator of the story reveals the latter's romantic desire for the center, on the one hand, and his awareness of the dangers inherent in this move, on the other. Thus the hitherto classical and relatively stable configuration of the mimetic triangle breaks down and develops a more fluid and therefore highly volatile structure. The central object of desire is not considered sacred any more by the protagonists who consequently attempt to appropriate it. This leads to the violent mimetic conflict between the narrator and M. Alphonse that can only be "resolved" by the paradoxical insertion of the transcendental narrator into the world of the novella as the cause of M. Alphonse's death.

Merimée's use of two aesthetic experiences with different ethical consequences in "La Vénus d'Ille" shows his anthropological insight into the problematic inherent in the concept of mimesis. As an author writing during the era of Romanticism, he is conscious of the artistic development of his own time period and uses the revelatory qualities of the fantastic to reflect critically upon it.<sup>(7)</sup> By virtue of these qualities, that the value of the fantastic goes beyond the aesthetic and ethical specificities of a certain era and reveals about the human what otherwise would remain hidden. As man's struggle with his own violence constitutes the core of

many a fantastic story, it is not surprising that mainstream criticism tends to dismiss this kind of literature exactly because it reveals “les choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde,” that is things about the human condition that we are not at all eager to hear. In an essay entitled “Aminadab or the Fantastic as a Language,” Sartre develops this function of the fantastic as follows:

We recognize the footprint on the shore as our own. There are no phantoms, no succubi, no weeping fountains. There are only men, and the creator of the fantastic announces that he identifies himself with the fantastic object. For contemporary man, the fantastic is only one of a hundred ways of mirroring his own image (Sartre 64).

Based on my analysis of the paradoxical structure of the fantastic, its emergence during epistemological as well as ontological crises from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, I propose a new historical typology of the fantastic. As I have mentioned earlier, it is possible to recuperate Todorov’s definition of the fantastic by structurally linking it to paradox. This allows us to include in our textual analysis all those stories which, according to Todorov, fall either in the realm of the marvelous or the uncanny and therefore cease to be fantastic. A true paradox, we said, cannot be solved by definition. How can a typology of the fantastic reconcile the stories where the enigma continues beyond the closing lines of the narration and those where it is solved in one way or another? To answer this question I will analyze the endings from three fantastic stories which also represent three different time periods: Cazotte’s *Le diable amoureux* (1772), Hoffmann’s “The Sandman” (1815), and Mérimée’s “Lokis” (1869).

11

In *Le diable amoureux*, which can be considered as a sort of fantastic *Bildungsroman*, the mother of the main character, Alvare, and a doctor from Salamanca tell him at the end of his numerous fantastic adventures that he has been tempted by the Devil.[\(8\)](#) Although this explanation may settle the affair for young Alvare, it certainly does not solve the problem for the reader, who may not necessarily accept the mother’s or doctor’s explanation of the fantastic events.

Because the protagonist himself is unable to reach a decision on his own based on the events he has experienced, other authorities, such as parents, relatives, friends or the narrator, are permitted to step in and attempt to impose their explanation on him and us. This means that if our analogy between paradoxes and the fantastic is correct, any such final explanation does not emerge logically or scientifically from the content of the narrative itself but is forced upon it from the outside, since it lies

in the nature of any paradoxical structure, and consequently also of the fantastic, that it cannot be resolved from within. Alvare's situation is that of a young man in limbo between adolescence and maturity. As a young Spanish nobleman, he lives according to an old-fashioned moral code which conflicts several times with the fast-living, money-oriented life style of the Republic of Venice where most of his adventures take place. Alvare's doubts and uncertainty, albeit of a fictitious nature, mirror the very real doubts and fears that swept through Europe at the end of the eighteenth century when the relatively stable social order of the Ancien Régime was slowly being replaced by a more open and seemingly unstable bourgeois market-oriented society. The solution to his problems provided by the authoritative figure of the doctor from Salamanca, who "imposait, même avant de parler, par la gravité de son maintien" (Cazotte 124) [who "imposed, even before he talked, by the gravity of his bearing"] is appropriate for a young aristocratic man:

Votre vocation n'est point assez décidée; les gens instruits par leur expérience sont nécessaires dans le monde. Croyez-moi, formez des liens légitimes avec une personne du sexe; que votre respectable mère préside à votre choix, et, dût celle que vous tiendrez de sa main avoir des grâces et des talents célestes, vous ne serez jamais tenté de la prendre pour le Diable (Cazotte 126). [Your calling has hardly been decided yet; this world needs people educated by their experiences. Follow my advice, seek a legitimate relationship with a woman and let your mother preside over your choice. And if the woman whom you will receive from your mother's hand has grace and faith, you will never be tempted to mistake her for the Devil.]

The *Aufhebung* of the fantastic events by the doctor and the mother can be considered a progress insofar as their immediate personal situation is concerned: for Alvare, because he now appears to be able to continue with his life; for the mother and the doctor, because they have imposed their traditional set of values on him. Considered from a historical perspective, the *Aufhebung* of the fantastic events is, however, not a step forward but an attempt to consolidate the values of Enlightenment Europe that still provide some kind of guidance for young Alvare throughout his adventures. Alvare descends from a long line of Spanish noblemen who do not work for a living. He is educated and wealthy and follows the lifestyle of his contemporaries. Confronted with a relatively strange modern world in Italy where all his values are turned upside down, Alvare expresses the uncertainty of a man who finds himself in the middle of a historical change which, in this case, centers around sociological and economical issues. The explanation at the end of the story thus reflects a conscious choice by the author Cazotte, who has his hero,

instead of making the leap into the new world order, return to the protection of the old social hierarchy.

12

In 1815, approximately 40 years after the publication of *Le Diable Amoureux*, E.T.A. Hoffmann published probably his best known fantastic story "The Sandman." This story is situated in a completely different socio-economic context: the young protagonist Nathanaël comes from a bourgeois family. The lawyer Coppelius, a former friend of his father, is, in the eyes of the boy, responsible for the father's death during a chemical experiment. Even as a young man, he is still haunted by this event, especially since Coppelius will reappear out of nowhere each time Nathanaël seems to have overcome his doubts and fears of being haunted by the "Sandman," a figure Nathanaël remembers from a gruesome fairy tale told to him by an old servant at his father's house. The fantastic element is introduced in the story by the appearance of a man who has a striking resemblance with Coppelius. The man's name, Coppola, adds to the confusion. This Piedmontese barometer-seller sells a pair of binoculars to Nathanaël. Ordinarily considered to be a beneficial instrument, the binoculars have the opposite effect on Nathanaël's life because he can now observe Olimpia, the daughter of his neighbor the famous professor Spalanzani. Whereas everybody in town "sees" through the cold, unnatural beauty of Olimpia who, as we will find out later, is nothing but an automaton created by the combined efforts of Spalanzani and Coppola, Nathanaël is completely infatuated with this robot. In his blindness, he jeopardizes his relationship to his fiancée Clara and almost provokes her brother to a duel with him.

On several occasions, his mother, his fiancée and her brother step in to rescue Nathanaël. As far as the father's death is concerned, Clara finds a rational and very bourgeois explanation:

As for his [Coppelius] uncanny nocturnal goings-on with your father, I expect the two of them were simply conducting secret alchemical experiments, which could hardly please your mother, since a lot of money must have been squandered and moreover, as they say always happens to such inquirers, your father became obsessed with the delusive longing for higher wisdom and was estranged from his family (Hoffmann 94).

They also discard the probability that Coppelius haunts Nathanaël in the guise of the Piedmontese glass-seller Coppola. Instead, they urge the young man to settle down, take up a business and marry Clara (the name indicates that she sees clearly and would thus be perfect to counter Nathanaël's supposedly blurred vision of

reality). The explanation of the fantastic events is, once more, typical for its time period. A bourgeois family and its young son face the challenges of a new economic and social era which is represented by the automaton Olimpia. The father's search for knowledge and wisdom through alchemist experiments, which is also the obsession and undoing of Balthazar Claës in Balzac's *La recherche de l'absolu*, has a negative influence on the well-being of the family. In order to rescue the only heir of the family, everybody (including the narrator) step in to comment and explain at length Nathanaël's fantastic adventures which to them are in fact only uncanny (Olimpia can be explained in scientific terms). Nevertheless, the mystery surrounding the double character Copelius/Coppola survives the end of the story and ultimately causes Nathanaël to commit suicide.

13

For our third example, we make another leap of 40 years to 1869 when Mérimée published "Lokis." This fantastic short story centers around a murder which was committed, the narrator Professor Wittembach wants us to believe, by a young count who supposedly suffers from a kind of werewolf syndrome with a bear in place of the wolf. The murder of the count's bride serves as the culminating point of a mimetic rivalry between the count and the professor. In what can be considered a more extreme version of "La Vénus d'Ille," Mérimée once again links an aesthetic experience to an ethical problematic, this time in a single mimetic triangle. The professor and the count are not only competing for the lovely Mlle Ioulka, they are also involved in a constant discussion of art and language. Professor Wittembach is, as was the case in "La Vénus," a protagonist and the narrator of the story. In "Fantastic Lies: *Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence," Tobin Siebers reveals the narrator's unreliability and shows that he has reason enough to kill the woman. Since not even the doctor in the story can determine exactly the cause of her death and only suggests that it was caused by a "morsure," the professor seems to have the last word as he directs our suspicion towards the count by linking him to the word "Lokis" which means *bear*.

The question of who is right and wrong in "La Vénus d'Ille" and "Lokis" leads us back to our question of who has the ultimate authority in the fantastic story to "resolve" the fantastic paradox. In Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux*, we found that a solution is imposed by the doctor from Salamanca. The narrator hides behind Alvare who tells his story in the first person. The former's status as a reliable and trustworthy narrator is never challenged, since he supposedly leaves the last word to the authoritative figure of the doctor who would therefore be the first target of a critical inquiry on behalf of the reader. This changes when we move to Hoffmann's "The Sandman." Here the narrator relates the story to his reader from different perspectives. He presents letters written by the protagonists themselves and only

appears as the third-person narrator once he has established the authenticity of the events through the letters. Even though Hoffmann's narrator never participates directly in the development, we find out through his comments that he is a close friend of the family. In contrast to the good-natured Clara, however, the narrator reveals himself as a harsh and ironic critic of his good friend Nathanaël and the latter's blind love for the automaton Olimpia. That the narrator is involved in a mimetic rivalry with his hero Nathanaël in the same way the narrator is implicated in Mérimée's two stories is revealed by the following admission:

I might now go on cheerfully with my story; but at this instant the image of Clara is so vividly present to me that I cannot look away, as always happened when she used to look at me with her lovely eyes (Hoffmann 99).(9)

The status of the narrator in Mérimée's two short stories is, as we have seen, the most elaborate and paradoxical one. His masterful ability to use figurative language to his advantage is explicitly and implicitly developed in the story, since the fantastic appears first through the guise of a discussion of representation, which is not the case in *Le Diable Amoureux* and "The Sandman." Whereas the narrators in these two stories "resolve" part or all of the mystery, the narrator in Mérimée consciously creates the fantastic through his use of language. In fact, his survival as both a protagonist and a narrator depends on this ability. But his (dangerous) use of language to create the fantastic is also his undoing. He cannot fool the reader forever since his scheme can be revealed through thorough analysis. Mérimée's narrator wants to be like the narrator in one of Balzac's realist novels whom we follow blindly and whose reliability is initially not questioned. He jeopardizes his desire to be the transcendental narrator by his desire to be a part of the story. This and the creation of the fantastic through the juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural lead, as the century advances, to an ever growing suspicion in regard to the narrator's reliability that reaches a peak in Maupassant's "Le Horla."[\(10\)](#)

14

Based on our discussion of the fantastic's revelatory anthropological quality in regard to the potentially violent nature of mimesis in general combined with its specific historical manifestations in art from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, we can create a historical typology of the fantastic. The solutions openly imposed or cleverly suggested by the narrator who, over the course of the nineteenth century loses his authoritative status, will allow us to account for the specific development of French bourgeois society, from the hopes created by the Enlightenment to the disillusion of the revolution of 1848 and the war of 1870/71.



Despite its different appearances, the fantastic remains a powerful aesthetic manifestation of the “originary event.” In contrast to the *Encyclopédie*, the realist or experimental novel, the fantastic has no claim to solving the problem of how reality can be represented in fiction. What it can do, however, is to remind us of ourselves and humanity’s birth in a potentially conflictual crisis which we constantly have to reinvent in order to avoid the violence that “Lokis” represents as *homo homini ursus*.

15

## Notes

1. This article summarizes my basic ideas and critical approach to the fantastic which I am currently developing in my dissertation with the provisional title: “Paradoxes, Paradigms and the Fantastic.” ([back](#))
2. The system of cataloguing and cross-referencing used by the Encyclopedists is similar in nature to the figures of metonymy and synecdoche. Although its intended purpose was to circumvent the constant censorship by the government, the cross-referencing of articles enhances the notion of realism since one article explains and also authorizes the other. No a priori authoritative model or transcendental signifier is necessary to validate this system. ([back](#))
3. Let us not forget that Mérimée himself was interested in archeology and the conservation of antique art work in his function as “Inspector of Historic Monuments.” ([back](#))
4. That an unproblematic aesthetic experience can suddenly turn into a nightmarish reality is equally well expressed by the adventures of a character in Gautier’s “Le Club des Hachichins,” first published in 1846. In this fantastic story, the narrator experiences the effects of opium for the first time in his life. For a few moments, the results are quite pleasant and promising: “La réalité ne servait que de point de départ aux magnificences de l’hallucination” (219) [“Reality only serves as a point of departure towards the splendors of hallucination”]. But the pleasure lasts only for a few moments as Daucus-Carotus, a character out of Hoffmann’s fantastic tales, suddenly starts tormenting the narrator by constantly uttering the following sentence: “C’est aujourd’hui qu’il faut mourir de rire” [“Today you must die of laughter”]. From this moment on, countless fantastic figures, who are none else than the other opium smokers in the room, join Daucus-Carotus. When the orgy reaches its aesthetic and mimetic peak the “rire avait perdu son timbre et tournait au grognement, le spasme succédait au plaisir; le refrain de Daucus-Carotus *allait devenir vrai*” (224; my emphasis [“was going to become *real*”]). Only the intervention by one member of the group who did not participate in the orgy

prevents them from committing a collective suicide by jumping out of the window.[\(back\)](#)

5. For further reading on “Lokis,” I refer the reader to Tobin Siebers’s article “Fantastic *Lies*: *Lokis* and the Victim of Coincidence,” *Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 28 (1981): 87-93.[\(back\)](#)

6. Siebers shows that Mérimée actually changed his initial portrayal of Mlle de Puygarrig as beautiful yet uninteresting to a seductive woman because he “recognized ... that there had to be an object of contention between the two men if the eruption of the fantastic was to be motivated” (Siebers 66).[\(back\)](#)

7. For further reading in regard to Mérimée’s ambiguous attitude towards Romanticism, I refer the reader to Eric Gans’s *Un pari contre l’Histoire. Les premières nouvelles de Mérimée (Mosaïque)*, Paris: Archives des Lettres Modernes, 1972.[\(back\)](#)

8. That the doctor is from Salamanca is of importance since the city was considered a center of intellectual and spiritual life in Spain because of its famous university and cathedrals. The city was at the height of its fame during the Renaissance, the classic and baroque era. Thus it is symbolic of the Ancien Régime.[\(back\)](#)

9. It would be interesting to discover whether or to what degree Mérimée, as a reader of Hoffmann, has made use of this admission by the narrator in “The Sandman,” especially since the long passage following this passage bears a striking resemblance to the description of Mlle de Puygarrig’s physical beauty in “La Vénus d’Ille” discussed by Siebers.[\(back\)](#)

10. See also Siebers’s chapter “Narrative Unreliability and the Fantastic” in *The Romantic Fantastic*.[\(back\)](#)

16

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