CHAPTER 1

TODOROV, BAKHTIN, AND OTHER THEORISTS

Todorov’s theory of the fantastic and its critics

Tzvetan Todorov’s *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* is the indisputable precursor text, when we approach one of the two main topics taken up in the present study, viz. the fantastic – insofar as Todorov’s book presents us with what can be termed the classic discussion of fantastic literature, as far as Anglo-American and French approaches to the genre/mode are concerned (in Germany we are confronted with a slightly different tradition).

Todorov’s *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* was written under the auspices of structuralism and in many ways reflects the methodological debates of the 1960s. In the first chapter Todorov thus carries out a polemical raid against another precursor, Northrop Frye, whose concept of genre is criticized by Todorov (see Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, 1957): what Todorov objects to in this connection is precisely the way in which Frye, according to Todorov, does not pay sufficient attention to the discursive levels on which he operates, when he discusses literary genres, modes, *mythoi*, etc.; sometimes thematic and formal elements tend to converge in Frye’s exposition of theoretical and critical issues.

In his *Phantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning* (1999) Peter Schwenger draws attention to Todorov’s theory of the “fantastic”:

… a theory that can further this book’s aims [that is Schwenger’s *Phantasm and Fiction*]: the genre’s name is derived from Greek *phantastikos*, whose verb form, *phantasein*, in late Greek comes to mean “to imagine, to have visions”. Todorov does not pursue the implications of this. For him “the fantastic is that hesitation
experienced by a person knowing only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event”.

Whereas the imagination tended to be regarded as mainly a source of error in Antiquity, the intellectual élite of the European Renaissance to a certain extent rehabilitated the notion; we can read about this in Robert Burton’s monumental epitome of Renaissance learning *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621 ff.):

[The powers of imagination] can cause and cure not only diseases, maladies, and several infirmities by this means ... in parties remote, but move bodies from their places, cause thunder, lightning, tempests [see Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*] .... So that I may certainly conclude this strong conceit or imagination is *astrum hominis* [a man’s guiding star], and the rudder of this our ship, which reason should steer, but, overborne by phantasy, cannot manage, and so suffers itself and this whole vessel of ours to be overruled, and often overturned.

Whereas the idea of the imagination was once more downgraded during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (during the “Age of Reason”, exemplified by Hobbes), its position was redefined in a significant way at the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, during the Preromantic and Romantic era (exemplified by Coleridge and Novalis), which is interesting inasmuch as the rise of fantastic literature, represented by writers like

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3 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. with an introduction by C.B. Macpherson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, 88: “IMAGINATION ... is nothing but decaying sense; and is found in men, and many other living Creatures, as well sleeping, as waking” (Hobbes’ emphasis).