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Towards a Genological Taxonomy of Non-mimetic Literature

By

Grzegorz Trębicki

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION[1]

Contemporary non-mimetic or, in other words, so-called "fantastic" literature (or simply fantasy)[2] is an extremely popular phenomenon of crucial literary and extra-literary import. Long gone are the times when the literature in question was regarded as a subject at best frivolous and at worst derisory and unsuitable for serious scholarly research. On the contrary, it has become increasingly à la mode in academic circles. At the same time, however—in some respects, at least, and in some particular fields of research—the outcome is far from satisfactory. It seems that,

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[1] The main assumptions of the present study were originally presented in the article "Supragenological Types of Fiction vs. Contemporary Non-mimetic Literature", *Science Fiction Studies* 41.3 (November 2014): 481-501. The study quotes or develops large parts of argumentation included therein.

[2] I feel it absolutely necessary to emphasise at the very beginning of this study that there is a discrepancy between certain popular denominations that are traditionally used in the debate on non-mimetic literature, on the one hand (such as the extremely confusing words "fantasy" and "the fantastic"), and strictly genological terms specific for the methodology I am using, on the other hand. Although I obviously rely on the latter, occasional references to the former seem to be unavoidable, as they are deeply rooted in contemporary discourse. Thus, in order to pursue maximum clarity, I have decided to, at least in some cases, apply them in a parallel way to the terms that are specific to my approach, while at the same time trying to negotiate between both terminological sets. I have also attempted to refrain from any duplications, wherever possible, to avoid additional confusion. The main exceptions are "the fantastic" (used here as the denomination of a certain intra-textual operation described at length in Chapter Three) and "fantastic literature" (referring specifically to the supragenological type of fantastic fiction as opposed to other supragenological types, i.e. mimetic fiction, exomimetic fiction, paramimetic fiction, antimimetic fiction and metaconventional fiction, respectively). I have decided to retain them as they are inherent in Zgorzelski's methodology, from which I draw on; it must be, however, noted that these are very different understandings of the terms in question than the most widespread commonsensical as well as literary-critical ones. On the other hand, the word "fantasy" will not be applied here as a literary-theoretical term at all (as it will be replaced by more specific terms such as "secondary world fantasy" or "contemporary magical novel"), and whenever it is used it will refer to a certain cultural or popular category.

paradoxically, the great popularity of non-mimetic fiction is as much accompanied by a growing interest on the part of critics and scholars (and, consequently, a flood of various analyses and papers), as it is by rising terminological and cognitive confusion.

This confusion is especially well pronounced in the sphere of taxonomical discussion. It is perhaps surprising that although "fantastic" or "non-mimetic" fiction has received so much critical attention in the last 40 years, relatively few comprehensive taxonomical proposals have been presented. As Farah Mendlesohn observes, "while there are many single author or single text studies in genre fantasy criticism, there is little comparative criticism beyond the study of metaphorical and thematic elements" (*Rhetorics* xiii). Most of the taxonomical debate that has ensued so far either relied on strictly cultural or civilisational[3] rather than literary-theoretical notions, sometimes accepted, perhaps a bit indiscriminately, in the world of literary criticism, or critical concepts which came into being, in a way, as a by-product of the ongoing discussion on the meaning and significance of such denominations as "fantasy" or "the fantastic". Very few researchers have revealed taxonomical interest *per se*, still fewer taxonomical attempts encompass the whole body of "non-realistic"[4] literature.

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[3] Whenever I speak about the "cultural" or "civilisational" perspective within the present study I refer to the status of literary texts as certain social, cultural and civilisational documents rather than simply to their existence as works of art (literature). Since I focus almost entirely on the latter in the present study, my position might be probably described as largely "essentialist" or "substantialist" (see Gruszewska-Blaim and Blaim 7; Zgorzelski, "Literary Texts, Cultural Texts" 11-15). In other words, I emphasise the necessity of the distinction between the discussion of a literary text as a work of art (the proper subject of the study of literature in its narrower meaning as applied within this work) and the research of a literary text as a document of cultural relevance (and thus belonging, at least partly, to the sphere of more broadly defined cultural studies—a position that is much more popular in the contemporary world of interdisciplinary research and is represented, for example, by such notable academic critics as Rosemary Jackson or Marek Oziewicz, as mentioned in Chapter One).

[4] I am purposely putting the word "non-realistic" in inverted commas here and in other places (the same obviously applies to the word "realistic") to emphasise that I only refer to their popular usage in common speech, but that I do not perceive them as proper literary-theoretical terms. As Robert Scholes states: "It is because reality cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. No recording. Only constructing" ("The Fictional Criticism" 7). Also, Andrzej Zgorzelski, when giving his arguments for the renouncement of the very notion of realism, remarks that it is based on an inadequate comparison between textual and empirical realities (see Chapter Two, note 6) "and so disagrees

The existing proposals are often mutually incompatible as they represent diverse methodologies and approaches. There is, obviously, nothing wrong with this heterogeneity in itself, as it helps perceive literary phenomena from different angles. Problems arise, however, when particular approaches are not clearly defined or consistently maintained throughout the discussion, which is, unfortunately, sometimes the case. To make matters worse, the whole discourse is marked with tremendous terminological confusion as the same terms are used, one might argue, a bit carelessly when referring to different concepts or categories (*vide* the multitude of definitions of "the fantastic" or "fantasy").

The aim of this study is, however, neither to dismiss the indubitable achievements of existing criticism despite its occasional (and partly unavoidable) shortcomings or inconsistencies, nor to engage in polemics with particular holistic theories by executing an attempt to create another theory. My purpose is simply to look at contemporary non-mimetic literature in all its richness and diversity from one particular angle— focusing mainly on the precise description of diverse "fantastic" ways of creating fictional realities in relation to the "realistic" (or the mimetic) mode,[5] and, subsequently, to initiate a taxonomical discussion based on this specific perception.[6]

This whole venture is also based on my deepest conviction that there is a need for a possibly comprehensive, descriptive rather than evaluative

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with the autonomous nature of literature, the interest itself in such a comparison suggesting subversively that one of the aims of literature is to inform about the surrounding reality" ("Theoretical Preliminaries" 12).

[5] Due to the reasons stated in the previous note, I prefer to speak about the diverse mimetic vs. non-mimetic ways of constructing fictional realities rather than to refer directly to the "real" or "zero world" (understood as "empirically verifiable properties around the author"; see Suvin, "On the Poetics" 372 note 2; comp. Wolfe, *Critical Terms* 143) while describing particular "fantastic" genres. See the discussion in Chapter Three.

[6] The present study is the final result of wide-ranging research on non-mimetic literature conducted over a span of several years. In the process several fragments of this research were published in the form of individual articles which, in turn, after necessary (and sometimes considerable) adaptations have been incorporated into the present work. The publications in question are: "Kulturowe taksonomie literatury niemimetycznej", "Critical-Literary Taxonomies of Non-Mimetic Literature", "The Fantastic and the Genological Research. Andrzej Zgorzelski's *Born of the Fantastic*", "Narratologiczna taksonomia fantasy: propozycje teoretyczno-literackie Farah Mendlesohn", "Contemporary Metaconventional Non-mimetic Literature: Theoretical Preliminaries" and the already mentioned "Supragenological Types of Fiction vs. Contemporary Non-mimetic Literature".

taxonomy that will indiscriminately encompass the whole body of contemporary texts which might be initially described as "non-realistic" or "fantastic" or, within the methodology and terminology I am using, as "non-mimetic". I also feel that many of the existing taxonomies, despite their cognitive merit, serve altogether slightly different purposes and, for various reasons that will be summarised in the following chapters, do not exhaustively complete the objectives I have set above.

As has already been suggested, most of the serious research in the field has focused so far on approaching, from different methodological perspectives and in various cultural contexts, the extremely confusing denominations of "the fantastic" and "fantasy", the latter being discussed, respectively, as a mode, a worldview, a cognitive strategy or a genre. What is worth noting is that many of the taxonomies that have been proposed make distinctions only within the more or less narrowly defined fantasy genre (or "super genre", as it is sometimes referred to). They generally range from relatively simple, theme-based classifications, such as by Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer or Colin Manlove (*Fantasy Literature of England*), to more sophisticated, structuralist-inspired ones such as, by way of example, a recent study by Farah Mendlesohn who researches narrative patterns behind different types of fantasy fiction. Additionally, many interesting insights into mutual relationships between fantasy and mimetic fiction or fantasy and science fiction have also been provided. What appears, however, to be missing from the whole discussion are proposals concerning a more comprehensive overall referential pattern encompassing all possible types of non-mimetic fiction while more precisely describing each of them in relation to the mimetic mode.

Another remarkable trait of the contemporary discourse on fantastic literature is that it has been considerably dominated by typically popular, cultural, social or civilisational perceptions. A good example of this phenomenon is the prevailing notion that divides all of non-mimetic or "fantastic" fiction into two principal genres of fantasy and science fiction (sometimes supplemented by the third genre—horror). This division, although obviously simplified and reflecting rather the reality of the publishing market than the genological order itself, is often taken for granted by critics and theorists of literature.

The taxonomy that I venture to preliminarily sketch out in this book, as well as my whole methodological approach, has been described as "genological" in contradistinction to other approaches that I have qualified as "popular", "cultural" or "literary-critical". The term "genological" refers to the tradition of the Polish school of genology of literature in its

structuralist variations, whose basic assumptions have been adopted for the needs of the present discussion. Thus, genology of literature is meant here as a systematic study of genres in a historical context. The vision of a literary genre applied in this work, in turn, is that of a historical-literary system, which is dynamic and evolving,[7] relating to a particular set of texts which reveal similarity regarding several structural features, such as "their subject, the shaping of the narrator(s), the structuring of spatiotemporal setting, the relationships of characters and action, their language, etc." (Zgorzelski, "Fantastic Literature" 37) as well as the literary conventions and traditions they employ and draw upon.

It is worth noting that the above understanding of literary genre differs considerably from many popular applications of this concept. The term "genre" is most frequently used in contemporary discourse as, in fact, either a typically civilisational notion (for example, as a "marketing" label) or as a critical construct based on a particular set of filters that are applied by a given researcher in order to discuss a selected collection of texts. It is, in my opinion, absolutely essential to distinguish between popular, literary-critical, theoretical and—within this last category— strictly genological (as applied in this paper) understandings of the very term of "literary genre" itself. This distinction will obviously be parallelled by the creation of popular (civilisational), literary-critical or genological taxonomies, respectively.

My principally structuralist methodology obviously has its own share of shortcomings and limitations. One might even reasonably enquire at this point whether such a strictly textual, in a manner of speaking, "technical" (and as one might suggest even "unimaginative") approach that has been adopted in this work can bring any cognitive value into the discourse on non-mimetic literature? After all, it might be argued, something as amorphous and unregulated as contemporary fiction defies all rigid (or perhaps even relatively tentative) classifications. At this point let me once again quote Farah Mendlesohn, with whose statement I completely agree:

> Taxonomy … needs to be understood as a tool, not an end in itself, and it needs to be understood in the modern context that taxonomical practices are increasingly polysemic and multiplex, generated by acknowledged questions and capable of existence alongside other configurations. … The purpose of the book is not to offer a classification per se but to consider the genre in ways that open up new questions. (*Rhetorics* xv)

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[7] See, especially, the discussion in Ostaszewska and Cudak 26-28.

Undoubtedly, new proposals for taxonomies are useful, if only to provide new ways of looking into the discussed material. Moreover, I strongly believe that the present discussion may contribute to a better understanding of this complex and multifaceted phenomenon which contemporary non-mimetic fiction is or, at least, to some extent it will summarise and systematise the current taxonomical debate.

I plainly admit, however, that there are certain unavoidable limitations to the methodology I have adopted. This book, to quote Mendlesohn once more, is "about structure, not about meaning" (*Rhetorics* xvi). Contemporary, non-mimetic literature, be it science fiction or "fantasy", is such a fascinating phenomenon for many readers and researchers because it functions in a specific way in our culture, and it brings a special cognitive value that is perhaps unattainable in conventional mimetic literature. Some of the most impressive and interesting criticism on the subject up to date has come into being as an attempt to explore the sources of this attractiveness and cognition. This study largely ignores the issue of the messages of non-mimetic literature as well as of its social and civilisational import. It primarily deals with literary conventions and operations, not with ideas and their significance; with literary genres as such, and not with what these genres tell us about the human condition. The methodology applied here seems, at first glance at least, mostly inadequate as a basic tool for various inter-disciplinary debates, or discussions of non-mimetic literature in a larger cultural context, which are of most interest nowadays to the majority of researchers and critics, and I realise that many of them may find this study uninspiring. On the other hand, it is quite reasonable to assume that particular literary operations, narrative strategies and modes of creating fictional universes, although described here in strictly structuralist, textual (rather than contextual) terms, at the same time reflect specific cultural impulses, diverse cognitive strategies and ideologies, or simply various ways of artistic dealing with reality.[8] A deepened knowledge of the first can also

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[8] The two researchers that seem to be particularly focused on pursuing the relationship between the certain narrative structures they describe and the cultural impulses they reflect or the ideological messages they transfer are Jackson (see the discussion in Chapter Two, section 4) and Mendlesohn, who in the epilogue to her study expresses surprise about "the apparent rigidity of ideological apparatus that surround the forms [she] identify[ies]" (*Rhetorics* 273).

This relationship is sometimes, however, overemphasised, especially at a strictly generic level. Thus, to mention just one case, secondary world fantasy as a genre is often associated with ideological conservatism, i.e. unquestioning acceptance of the narrator's authoritative interpretation of the fictional reality or an

help one approach the latter more precisely. Thus I do hope that the taxonomical proposals included in my discussion may prove a useful tool of reference also for scholars who are not primarily concerned with

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unwillingness to engage in the discussion of various social or psychological issues directly related to the contemporary empirical context (see, for example, Jackson 153-156, Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics* 2-58). While these observations might be true for typical epic fantasy works in the vein of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever*, they become totally inadequate when it comes to some more recent works, such as Richard Morgan's *A Land Fit for Heroes* series.

It should be understood that literary genres (as they are described in this study) are not primarily vehicles of certain specific ideologies or messages (although they might illusorily appear as such when we compare a collection of relatively similar texts from the same period), but are generalised sets of certain literary conventions and ways of creating fictional universes. On a very basic level these sets are, in a manner of speaking, purely technical, textual and narrative, and they can be used for different ideological and cognitive purposes. In Chapter Four I argue that the core features of the secondary world fantasy genre convention (if we adopt a sufficiently broad perspective) basically merely amount to setting the plot in a secondary exomimetic quasi-medieval world of relatively closed spatial and temporal parameters at a low level of technological development but with magic openly present and functioning within the presented model of the universe. Everything else can be effectively breached without ultimately breaching the genre convention itself. Thus it was equally plausible for secondary world fantasy to produce, from the 1950s to the 1980s, texts that could be described as ideologically conservative, archetypal, mythical, and unquestioningly relying on the narrator's authoritative interpretation of the fictional reality, as it is now plausible to produce works that are in many respects exactly the opposite—subversive, anti-mythical or nihilistic.

An example that in a rather spectacular way illustrates the issue is provided by Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea series. The series, as Suvin points out ("Second Earthsea Trilogy"; no page given), falls clearly into two separate trilogies—the first one including *A Wizard of Earthsea*, 1968, *The Tombs of Atuan*, 1971, and *The Farthest Shore*, 1972; and the second one encompassing *Tehanu*, 1990, *Tales from Earthsea*, 2001, and *The Other Wind*, 2001. Both trilogies apparently draw on the same secondary world fantasy genre convention and are, technically at least, set in the same secondary world. When it comes, however, to ideological content, predominating motifs, transferred messages, narrative and cognitive strategies, shaping of the protagonists or issues, both trilogies exhibit opposite tendencies to the extent that the second one practically "deconstructs" the first one. Thus both trilogies—while being secondary world fantasies set in the same world—in fact represent mutually contradicting ideological and cognitive paradigms. See Suvin, "Second Earthsea Trilogy", comp. Trębicki, "The Second Life of Earthsea".

genological explorations for their own sake, but rather with discussing non-mimetic literature in its diverse, cultural, ideological, anthropological, philosophical, psychological or literary-critical contexts.

Obviously, even within more or less narrowly defined structural or narratologist research on non-mimetic/"fantastic" literature, my proposals are to be taken as one of the many possible ways of looking at the material in question. A taxonomical discussion on non-mimetic literature can be organised according to various principles (*vide* Mendlesohn's, Todorov's or Jackson's taxonomies). In this study my interest is rather narrowly (but, hopefully, also precisely) specified—as it has already been stated, I am primarily concerned with a possibly detailed and accurate description of the relationship between diverse non-mimetic ways of modeling fictional reality and the mimetic mode. I believe that the notion of Andrzej Zgorzelski's supragenological types of fiction, summarised in Chapter Three, most adequately approximates this relationship for my present purposes. While I regard my approach simply as one of the many possible alternatives, I also hope that it is, at the same time, internally coherent and cognitively useful.

My discussion will fall into two principal parts. In the first part an attempt to systematise contemporary discourse on the taxonomy of non-mimetic literature will be executed and theoretical foundations for a possible genological taxonomy will be laid out.

The first chapter, *The Great Taxonomical Confusion* (obviously inspired by the first chapter of Marek Oziewicz's study), will try to diagnose the main sources of bemusement shrouding the field. In its first section the distinction between three basic types of taxonomical discourses, popular (civilisational), literary-critical and genological, will be drawn out more clearly and the methodological differences and incompatibilities resulting from the adoption of particular approaches will be explained and emphasised. The second section will address specific problems resulting from the application of ambiguous denominations of "the fantastic" and "fantasy literature".

The second chapter, *Taxonomies of Non-mimetic Literature,* will be devoted to a short survey of existing proposals in the field. Its second section, *Popular Notions and Cultural Taxonomies*, will summarise popular, civilisational perceptions of non-mimetic literature, as expressed by the publishing market, writers, fans and the reading public in general, as they, apparently, affect even more serious criticism of non-mimetic fiction. It will also be suggested that the whole current discourse on "fantastic literature" has been largely dominated by its typically cultural notions—probably more than in the case of any other category of

contemporary literature.

The next two sections, *Thematic Classifications* and *Literary-Critical and Theoretical Taxonomies*, will describe a variety of taxonomical approaches, ranging from simple classifications found in various compendiums, guidebooks and popular studies, through the complex theories of the fantastic as presented by researchers such as Tzvetan Todorov or Rosemary Jackson, to the recent narratologist distinction of Farah Mendlesohn. It must be noted that all of these proposals will not be analysed here for their own cognitive merit, but only in the context of their potential usefulness for the creation of an overall comprehensive taxonomy as described above.

Finally, the third chapter, *Towards a Genological Taxonomy of Non-mimetic Literature: Supragenological Types of Fiction,* will present theoretical concepts introduced by Andrzej Zgorzelski. His six supragenological types of fiction will be discussed at some length and will be suggested as a skeleton for a possible genological taxonomy of all of non-mimetic literature.

The second part will constitute a preliminary attempt at the creation of a possibly wide and comprehensive referential pattern for contemporary non-mimetic literature based on the particular supragenological types of fiction. Individual chapters will be devoted to exomimetic literature, antimimetic literature, fantastic literature, paramimetic literature and, finally, non-mimetic meta-conventional literature, respectively. Each of the types will be discussed at length against a possibly representative range of texts and the discussion will, hopefully, also descend to the strictly generic level, thus enabling an approximation of particular genres within each of the supragenological categories.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

THE GREAT TAXONOMICAL CONFUSION

1. Popular, Literary-Critical and Genological Discourses

It is fairly obvious that texts of non-mimetic literature—much as texts of any other type of fiction—function in several distinct ways. They simultaneously belong to the spheres of literature (understood primarily as a branch of art), culture and, even more widely, civilisation. As works of art they can be subjected to specific scholarly or interpretative scrutiny, which is aimed, basically, at interpretation of their meanings and explaining the artistic mechanisms behind their creation. As works of culture they can be analysed in wider, anthropological, social, psychological, and other, contexts. They constitute, in short, a valuable document for research and reflection on the widely understood human condition in the contemporary world. Apart from that, they are also influenced by certain mechanisms which are, actually, neither artistic nor even cultural[1] but, in fact, purely civilisational in nature. They can be

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[1] The issue of the exact relationship between artistic and cultural mechanisms is, obviously, an extremely complex one. As Zgorzelski observes: "We know, of course, that processes and mechanisms of culture and of art condition each other and their effects are intertwined. A literary genre, for instance, is born as a consequence of the conventionalising of artistic devices and artistic construction, and we are aware that automatisation and petrification are really of cultural nature. Art, while employing systems and making use of tradition, constantly strives to breach the systemic rules and frustrate reader's expectations. In contradistinction, culture imitates what has already been proposed, repeats what in art has acquired fame, simplifies what in art and science is complex and difficult, popularises what has been accepted, confirms values recognised by the majority: the literary canon, as well as the hierarchy of genres in a particular period, are products of cultural mechanisms. Since texts can begin to function only when read by a culturally determined recipient, whatever is conventional, petrified, simplified in them is more readily understood and remembered by the reader than what is new, complex and what frustrates expectations. In this and many other ways texts are always involved with cultural mechanisms" ("Literary Texts, Cultural Texts" 12-13).

viewed, for example, as certain products whose functioning can be discussed in terms of marketing and economy.[2]

Similarly, any discussion on non-mimetic literature—academic or non-academic—can be conducted from a multitude of distinct positions, sometimes converging or overlapping, sometimes diverging, conflicting or even mutually exclusive ones. This also pertains to discussions related to, to a larger or smaller degree, taxonomical issues. Not all taxonomical debates have the same (or even similar or analogous) objectives and not all of them treat their subject matter in ways that are at least comparable. This is only natural and understandable as it results from various literary (artistic), cultural and civilisational functions of non-mimetic literature and the numerous contexts in which it can be analysed.

Problems arise, however, when particular approaches are confused or not delimited in a sufficiently clear manner. It appears that a large proportion of taxonomical bemusement obscuring the field of non-mimetic/"fantasy" literature research results from this initial misunderstanding. Therefore, in the present section I will try to look more closely into the most essential types of taxonomical discourses trying, at the same time, to clearly distinguish between their respective objectives and methods—their possible strengths as well as unavoidable deficiencies.

The next part of my discussion touches upon the complex issue of the notion of "genre", which is, probably, the most fundamental one for any taxonomical debate. Over the centuries, i.e. in the history of literary criticism and theory, this term has come to denote many diverse concepts and has become a point of much controversy. I will, obviously, not attempt to discuss all the implications related to the problem, as this would immensely exceed the scope of my present discussion; instead, I will focus on certain proprietary understandings of the term in question which are connected with particular approaches that seem to be most relevant in the context of research on non-mimetic literature. Generalising, I argue that there are three main types of discourses here which reveal their respective and distinct approaches towards the concept of literary genre.

When used in reference to "fantastic literature", this term exhibits a type of ambiguity that is quite symptomatic of the whole debate. For better or worse, it is used continuously by all of its participants, i.e. readers, publishers, fans, editors, critics and researchers alike and, as noted, it appears to function in three basic ways:

I. "Literary genre" as a typically civilisational notion or even a "market category". The notable American critic Gary K. Wolfe suggests that,

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[2] See, especially, Zgorzelski, "From the Short Story to the Novel Cycle" 81.

although it can be argued, on the one hand, that science fiction, fantasy and horror are not real literary genres in the typical taxonomical meaning, on the other hand,

> the ways in which literature is written, published, distributed, read—or even reviewed—do not always or easily yield to the pure perspectives of literary theory. Clearly there are writers who identify themselves with science fiction, fantasy, and horror, just as there are authors who flee from the mere suggestion of such labels. Clearly there are publishers who find benefits in such labels, and bookstores that shelve books according to such labels, and readers who seek their reading of choice on such shelves, and who sometimes attend fan conventions clearly labeled "science fiction", "fantasy," and "horror". Each field has its own canons, its own awards, its own fan organizations, its own zines and websites and podcasts and even to some degree its own artists. (*Evaporating Genres1*-2)

Wolfe's remarks are quite adequate, as we cannot dismiss the obvious fact that non-mimetic literature exists not only as a literary phenomenon, but as a social and cultural one as well. Thus in the "popular" discourse, terms such as "fantasy" or "science fiction" act primarily as certain convenient labels enabling effective social communication between readers, fans, writers, publishers and reviewers. The exact criteria on the basis of which borderlines between particular "genres" are being drawn are, naturally, not stated anywhere or clearly defined, as it is common consciousness that creates and accepts them. They are, simply, certain social conventions that are consensually accepted by a sufficient number of participants of a given discourse. As the most notable Polish fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski states in his popular compendium, elaborating on Damon Knight's ironic SF definition: "Fantasy literature is what is labeled as 'fantasy'. If the book's spine, at the very top, just beneath the publisher's logo, features the caption 'fantasy' inscribed with small letters, then this book clearly belongs to fantasy genre" (10). Obviously, we may try to approximate, deduce, or simply guess the sets of criteria that determine notions of reading, writing and the reviewing public, but they are bound to be too vague and superficial to be applied directly to scholarly research. They will also probably tell us more about the social perceptions of non-mimetic texts than about the texts themselves.

At the same time it must be remarked that those perceptions have exerted a profound influence on more serious criticism, as various theorists and researchers often seem to rely (one might argue a bit unquestioningly) on this typically cultural or "pop-cultural" set of notions. As I have already suggested in the introduction, the whole current discourse on "fantastic literature" has been largely dominated by them. As

the whole issue will be analysed at greater length in Chapter Two, at this point let me only observe, further commenting on Wolfe's reflections, that while the literary theoretical perspective does not suffice in itself in describing non-mimetic literature in its whole cultural context then, in turn, social, marketing, commercial or editorial perspectives do not constitute proper tools for formulating statements that are supposed to be genological in nature. These are, in my opinion, two distinct paradigms—each in its own right. They are constantly interacting and, therefore, probably cannot be totally separated in the discussion but, nevertheless, they should not be simply confused.

II. "Literary genre" as a literary-critical notion. Further elaborating on my previous remarks, I feel it necessary to distinguish between approaches that will be denominated here as "literary-critical" and "genological", respectively.

Although literary critics seem to apply the term "literary genre" in a similar way as more theoretically inclined scholars or literary genologists do, they in fact pursue slightly different objectives and use different sets of criteria when it comes to taxonomical debates.

Literary criticism frequently evaluates works of literature and analyses their cognitive potential and social usefulness against a set of criteria adopted by a given critic. In many cases the cultural relevance of texts is emphasised and they are studied in broader anthropological, psychological, philosophical or social contexts. Consequently, a "literary genre" appears here as a certain convenient construct whose main purpose is to facilitate a discussion on a particular collection of texts which has been pre-selected by a given critic. The applied criteria are, naturally (as they are bound to be in order to pursue their aims efficiently), subjective, selective and occasionally evaluative. As Colin Manlove honestly admits in his introduction to *Modern Fantasy. Five Studies*, "all that matters ultimately is the isolation of a particular kind of literature" (1).

The taxonomies based on such an approach out of necessity reflect the critic's attitude, thus enabling him/her to take part in a discussion on a particular collection of texts from a particular angle. They are also bound to be influenced by the author's current agenda and his/her ideological or aesthetic preferences. This is, obviously, fully understandable and, moreover, desirable from the point of view of particular discussions. I feel it necessary to emphasise once more that I am not, in the least, questioning here the usefulness of such critical approaches—I am simply pointing to the fact that they serve different purposes than the ones I have specified in the present study.

Two of the most impressive examples of such an "interdisciplinary" or

"cultural" literary-critical approach are provided by the studies of Rosemary Jackson and Marek Oziewicz. Jackson elaborates on Tzvetan Todorov's theories by developing a taxonomy which enables her to delimitate the mode of "fantastic"—texts which perform a social/cultural function of subverting dominating ideologies. Oziewicz, in turn, goes through a comprehensive discussion of fantasy criticism in order to focus on the category (which he frequently denominates as "genre") of mythopoeic fantasy, which is perceived as central and especially significant. In both cases, delimitated texts or genres are discussed in a larger, extra-literary context, and they are viewed as literary embodiments of certain ways of artistic commenting upon reality. Jackson emphasises the necessity of focusing on the "ideological implications of fantastic literature" (and criticises Todorov for his reluctance to engage in such a discussion; 61), whereas Oziewicz clearly speaks about "a battle of worldviews" (*passim*). Jackson's and Oziewicz's approaches are, obviously, marked ideologically, and, from the ideological point of view, in many respects antagonistic. Both studies, nevertheless, deal with vital issues in a coherent and persuasive way and add undeniable value to the whole discourse on non-mimetic literature.

On the other hand, although both Jackson and Oziewicz become involved in the taxonomical discussion, their objectives are definitely different from those I have stated in the introduction, and the solutions provided are not fully compatible with what could be described as a strictly genological approach. In short, despite their otherwise immense cognitive merit, the proposals presented there are not completely sufficient as a suitable starting point for a more comprehensive taxonomy.

Naturally, not all of the attempts which are described here as "literary-critical" have such strongly accentuated interdisciplinary or ideological agendas; some of them are definitely more theoretical and textual in nature. They are, however, often limited in either scope or approach, as a critic may focus on particular classes of texts and totally ignore others. Such is, for example, the case of the seminal work by Tzvetan Todorov on the fantastic which excludes from the discussion the whole sphere of popular literature—in other words, the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, Neil Gaiman and other writers whose works are identified as contemporary "fantasy" by most readers. Alternatively, a critic may also employ a certain set of filters (or a single filter) to help him/her emphasise particular phenomena that lie in the range of his/her immediate interests but, on the other hand, unavoidably reduce the possible comprehensiveness and universality of the proposed taxonomy (the case of, for example, Darko Suvin and William L. Godshalk).

In fact, many of the discussions summarised in the last section of Chapter Two balance on the verge between the literary-critical and genological approach as described above (especially that of Farah Mendlesohn). They undoubtedly provide a coherent and structural analysis of the texts involved and offer many valuable insights into taxonomical issues. At the same time, however, they exhibit certain deficiencies which prevent them from fulfilling all of the postulates I have set before in a comprehensive taxonomy in my introduction.

III. Finally, we may deal with a taxonomical discourse that is at the same time theoretical and based on the historical-literary material. Its purpose is simply to establish genological relationships within a possibly vast and unlimited number of non-mimetic texts. The literary genre is used here as a strictly genological term. Within the methodology applied in this paper it is specifically understood as a historical-literary system which is dynamic and evolving,

> dependent not on teleological presuppositions, but rather on definite traits of a given set of texts […] which display their similarity as regards their subject, the shaping of the narrator(s), the structuring of spatiotemporal setting, the relationships of characters and action, their language, etc. (Zgorzelski, "Fantastic Literature" 37).

The birth of a new genre has to be marked by the emergence of a substantial set of structural features that clearly distinguish it in the whole genological order. It should also be characterised by a breach or significant alteration of the existing conventions. Thus "the introduction of a new thematic variant, or of a few unconventional motifs does not yet correspond to the birth of a genre" (Zgorzelski, "Fantastic Literature").[3]

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[3] Zgorzelski also argues that the appearance of a new genre must be parallelled by "the awareness of contemporary readers, critics, and writers who recognise this genre variant as different from all other genres of the times. Such an intersubjective recognition is often most arbitrary, dependent on a multitude of cultural factors, on the general state of education, on the mutual relations between tradition and contemporary literature, on literary institutions (magazines, promotion mechanisms, sponsorship), on the advancement of criticism and academic studies, etc. Although chancy, unpredictable and often not reliable, such a recognition is nevertheless necessary to make a new genre function in literary consciousness, to make it enter the traditional genre hierarchy" ("Fantastic Literature" 36). In this sense many of the possible genres whose status is discussed in this study (for example the "contemporary magical novel" in Chapter Five) appear as purely theoretical constructs rather than historical-literary systems as described by Zgorzelski, since they have not been acknowledged by the

It must be stressed that a genre understood thus amounts to, basically, a certain generalised set of features, which are both diachronically evolving and synchronically variable, and which are realised differently in particular texts. In other words, it is largely "a construct of the observer" (Zgorzelski, "Fantastic Literature"). The aim of the discussion at a generic level, as I have noted in the introduction, is not to label texts but to describe tendencies that influence their narrative structures.

The distinction between strictly genological discourse on the one hand and popular and literary-critical discourses on the other hand could probably best be summarised in the following way:

1. In contradistinction to popular (civilisational) taxonomies, a genological taxonomy is not aimed at describing a certain in nature extra-textual state of affairs (such as, for example, the commercial labelling of non-mimetic literature) nor is it to rely on its typically popular perceptions (as expressed by various publishers, editors, writers, readers and fans). Thus it is bound to be basically textual in character, i.e. based on thorough analyses of the texts themselves, the similarities and differences they reveal under closer scrutiny, the conventions they apply and the literary traditions they draw upon.
2. It should also be acknowledged that many of the critical explorations of the subject, no matter how scholarly, sincere and sophisticated they are, often serve, by definition, a different agenda. A genological taxonomy is bound to be descriptive rather than normative, non-evaluative rather than axiological, and textual rather than contextual. Instead of engaging in a contemporary ideological dispute, it will preoccupy itself with studying the evolution of literary genres in a historical context.
3. In contradistinction to many of the literary-critical "single-factor" approaches, a genological taxonomy should rely on a possibly vast range of diverse factors pertaining to all crucial elements of the texts' structures. It is also aimed at creating a comprehensive and non-exclusive description of all of non-mimetic literature, and not merely of some of its parts.

Obviously, I am not arguing here that the taxonomy I venture to preliminarily approximate in this study is bound to be in any way more "objective" than any of the more ideological treatments. Every description is, by definition, to some extent normative as it is always filtered through the researcher's cognitive framework. I am simply emphasising at this point that it is the potential comprehensiveness that lies at the core of my interests.

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contemporary literary audience.

Although I am asserting here the disparity between the genological perspective on the one hand and the "popular" or the literary-critical perspective on the other hand, assuming that the first does not mean ignoring, at the same time, the whole cultural-civilisational context in which the particular genres of non-mimetic literature have been evolving, especially since on numerous occasions this context exerted a profound influence on the shape of the genres themselves. This context will be, however, discussed from more textual positions.

In the present study a strictly genological understanding of the literary genre will be applied, but I do not, in the least, disown other usages of this term in its various literary-critical and cultural applications (however, in order to avoid confusion, I will refer to them as "labels", "classes" or "categories" within this work, thus reserving the term "genre" for genres in a genological sense), nor do I question the usefulness of taxonomies based on such understandings. All three discourses as described in this section, i.e. popular, literary-critical and strictly genological, are well grounded in their respective contexts. They are also complementary rather than exclusive. Nevertheless, awareness of the existence of the distinction as described above is, in my opinion, essential for every researcher of the subject, and highly desirable for all participants of the discourse. It will definitely help reduce the confusion that is pestering the debate.

2. The Fantastic and Fantasy Literature

Already in 1979 S. C. Fredericks reasonably remarked that "words like 'fantasy' and 'fantastic' derive from common parlance and popular culture, and because their semantic fields are at once broad and vague they are unlikely to be appropriate for the refined analytical techniques typical of contemporary literary scholarship" (33). To illustrate the confusion caused by these terms, Fredericks compares various incompatible definitions of the fantastic as introduced by influential scholars such as Tzvetan Todorov, Eric Rabkin, W. R. Irwin or C. N. Manlove. He also demonstrates that the term "fantasy" is used by different researchers to denote rather different (and sometimes not even partially overlapping) classes of texts.

Nearly thirty years later the issue was raised again by Marek Oziewicz, who tried to diagnose "the confusion over fantasy" in the first chapter of his seminal book on mythopoeic fantasy. Apparently, not much has changed. "The tip of the iceberg of confusion shrouding fantasy", Oziewicz writes, "is the number of often conflicting definitions of fantasy. None of the definitions proposed so far is viable. This is frustrating to the

point that some recent books skip the definition step altogether" (15).[4]
Then he quotes several other more recent critical opinions by such
researchers as Diana Tixier Herald, Cathi Dunn MacRae or Martha
Sammons, all of whom also testify to this terminological helplessness. "In
this light it is not an exaggeration", he summarises, "to say that after over
a century of classification attempts … we are nowhere near the successful
completion of the taxonomy of fantasy, let alone its definition" (15).

   Things are further complicated due to the ambiguous relationship
between both terms in question—sometimes "the fantastic" simply
functions as the adjective from "fantasy" or, conversely, fantasy denotes
the class of texts in which the fantastic operates and, thus, the two words
are used more or less interchangeably (in this way it is used, for example,
by Jackson or Manlove). Sometimes the fantastic and fantasy are applied
as denominations of different classes of texts, or they even constitute
different types of categories. In numerous other cases the distinction
between both seems to be unclear.[5]

   My objective here is not to discuss all the definitions of the fantastic or
fantasy that have surfaced so far in the debate, especially given that they
have already been efficiently summarised elsewhere.[6] Neither is it my
intent to supply my own definitions and thus to contribute to the overall
confusion, especially that I utterly share S. C. Fredericks's reservations as
quoted at the beginning of this section. I feel it is, nevertheless,
unavoidable to relate to those ambiguous terms before I start my own
taxonomical discussion.

   It seems that the term "fantastic", when it is not simply used as an
adjective of fantasy, surfaces most frequently in three contexts:

1. It covers "all forms of expression that are not 'realistic', including
fantasy and SF, magic realism, fabulation, surrealism, etc." (*The*

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[4] This is, for example, the case of an otherwise eminent study by Farah
Mendlesohn.
[5] Several examples of such terminological inconsistencies are given by Horstkotte
(34-36).
[6] Three of the most comprehensive surveys of various critical approaches towards
"the fantastic" and "fantasy" as well as convenient summaries of the most
significant theoretical and terminological proposals in the field are offered by
Hume (3-28), Horstkotte (14-42) and, especially, Oziewicz (15-28). A useful
source of reference for science fiction and fantasy criticism is provided by Wolfe
in his *Critical Terms*. See also Attebery's discussion of fantasy as a mode, formula
and genre (*Strategies* 1-17) and Lichański's discussion in "Problemy genologiczne
literatury fantasy".

Encyclopedia of Fantasy 335) or, in a more restrictive way, contemporary fantasy (here, in turn, in its narrowest respective meaning) and science fiction. [7]

2. It denotes a certain specific more or less narrowly defined class of texts that is distinct from fantasy or even opposed to it. A good example is provided by Tzvetan Todorov's seminal study where "the fantastic" denotes a very restricted and rather peculiar group of texts. The distinction between fantasy literature and fantastic literature is, in turn, emphasised by Martin Horstkotte or Theodor Ziolkowski (see the discussion in Chapter Two).

3. It refers to a certain mode, literary operation or a contextually (that is, described in relation to cultural and civilisational phenomena and not only to purely textual ones) defined motif rather than simply a class of texts or a genre. In this way it is used, for example, by such researchers as Rabkin or Jackson.

In this particular study, however, the term "fantastic" will be used only either to denote a certain specific intra-textual operation as defined by Zgorzelski (which will be described in greater detail in Chapter Three), or in relation to the specific "fantastic supragenological type of fiction" as further proposed by the researcher. It is important to emphasise the "technical" (in a manner of speaking) and "non-holistic" application of this term here—it is meant only to refer to certain specific strictly genological and purely textual as well as structurally describable phenomena that will be positioned precisely within Zgorzelski's methodological and terminological apparatus.

The situation with "fantasy literature" is, arguably, even more complex. As has already been noted, this term is used to delimitate very different classes of texts. Several of the particular discussions which involve at least rudimentary classifications will be discussed at some length in Chapter Two. At this point I will only try to approximate certain general tendencies and account for the reasons of possible misunderstandings and fallacies.

In the broadest possible meaning the category of fantasy literature seems to encompass all works of fiction, both historical (sometimes even ancient collections of myths or epics such as *Gilgamesh* or *Odyssey* are evoked) and contemporary, that might be roughly (and usually in rather vague terms) qualified as "non-realistic".

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[7] See, for example, Wolfe, *Critical Terms* vii, xi, *passim*.

This approach is, for example, confirmed by several popular or even more scholarly studies which include a historical background. Thus, Richard Matthews's *Fantasy. The Liberation of Imagination* searches for the roots of modern fantasy in antiquity. The chronology provided therein dates back to the year ca. 2000 BCE and starts with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, then it goes through, to mention only a few titles, *Mahabharata*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf*, Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* or James Barrie's *Peter Pan,* and finally it arrives in contemporary times with the works of such writers as J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin, Stephen Donaldson and Piers Anthony, as also Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Salman Rushdie or John Barth. A very similar approach has been adopted by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James in their *Short History of Fantasy*. Lin Carter, the author of probably the first popular history of fantasy, *Imaginary Worlds*, is slightly more selective. He also starts his book by mentioning *Gilgamesh* which, he insists, can be described as "an heroic fantasy laid in an imaginary world" and "as much an heroic fantasy as any of Robert Howard's yarns of Conan of Cimmeria" (13-14). However, when it comes to contemporary works, Carter focuses primarily on contemporary "imaginary world fantasy" for adults, excluding, for example, works such as *Peter Pan* or *A Wizard of Oz*.

Interestingly, in both of the works mentioned above, as well as in many other similar studies, science fiction is excluded from this broadly understood category of fantasy; although in several other cases (see my discussion in Chapter Three) it is, perhaps more logically, included.

In the narrowest possible meaning, in turn, the term "fantasy" refers to a particular contemporary genre that is usually identified with works of such authors as J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin or Stephen Donaldson, whose plots are usually set in a secondary world.[8]

Obviously, apart from these two "extremes", there exists a series of possible "intermediate" states. Thus, by way of example, the term "fantasy" may denote all of twentieth-century or twentieth- and nineteenth-century non-mimetic fiction (in this case excluding from the widest set the more historical works) or all of contemporary fiction (but sometimes also historical works) in which (variously described) magic constitutes an essential motif.

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[8] In the second part of my study I argue that "secondary world fantasy" actually *is* a genre in a strictly genological meaning of the term.

This latter case is so popular in contemporary criticism that it is perhaps worth brief consideration here. It seems that a single thematic criterion, i.e. emphasis put on the presence of magic in a text, lies at the core of many perceptions of fantasy, both popular and critical. It is, for example, strongly emphasised by Lin Carter: "The essence of this sort of story can be summed up in one word: *magic*. A fantasy is a book or story … in which magic really works" (6). Also, Jane Mobley argues that the "world [of fantasy] is informed by Magic, and the reader must be willing to accept magic as the central force without demanding or expecting mundane explanations" (117). Patrick Merla, in turn, states that "the essential element of any true work of fantasy is magic—a force that affects the lives and actions of all creatures that inhabit the fantastic world … Real magic cannot be explained in material terms, nor manufactured with mechanical devices, nor achieved through ingested substances" (348; quoted after Lynn xliv). Similarly, Ruth Nadelman Lynn states that "'Fantasy Literature' is a broad term used to describe books in which magic causes impossible, and often wondrous, events to occur … The existence of the magic cannot be explained" (xvi).

It appears that the application of the above criterion, in a way, enables one to place in the same category such diverse and distant (both structurally and historically) texts as, for example, *Gilgamesh*, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Peter Pan, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* or *The Lord of the Rings* while, at the same time, excluding science fiction. Obviously, relying on a single thematic motif is a rather controversial taxonomical strategy. Additionally, this supposedly common factor of magic proves rather illusory at closer scrutiny. In fact, "magic" functions in many distinct ways in particular non-mimetic texts and by no means can it be regarded as a homogeneous motif. Also, contrarily to what some of the authors quoted above suggest, magic *is* often rationalised or explained in logical terms and, in fact, in many cases it can be, in a way, "manufactured", thus resembling the modern technology of science fiction novels.[9]

To deepen the confusion, apart from those relatively widespread and "consensual" understandings of the term "fantasy literature" as discussed above, there exist also more specific, untypical treatments of the issue. Several researchers (for example, Rosemary Jackson) use the term "fantasy" in their own proprietary and "non-consensual" way by assigning it to a very specifically defined and relatively narrow class of works (in Jackson's case these are the "subversive" texts).

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[9] See my discussion of SWF vs. SF in Chapter Four.

  As a result, particular participants of the discourse on "fantasy literature" often debate about totally different sets of texts, however, these sets are usually much wider than any actual literary genre could possibly be. What is remarkable is that in the very centre of all those sets we will nearly always find the works of Tolkien, Le Guin, Donaldson, Eddings or other authors who clearly represent the specific genre of secondary world fantasy.[10] This centre is surrounded by consecutive, vaster and vaster sets of texts, as if by concentric circles. The central position of particular works seems to be determined again not by their genological prominence, but rather by their cultural (civilisational, marketing, commercial, social) popularity.

  It is, again, by no means my intent to supply yet another definition of what fantasy literature is or is not (and even less what it should be or should not be, for that matter)—as it has already been proved that it can quite simply be anything depending on the methodology that is applied or on the researcher's ideological filter. Instead, I will consider the possible uses of the term "fantasy" (with qualifiers or substitutes supplied when necessary or desirable) that I find most logical in the context of a more theoretical debate on literary genres.

  As Oziewicz states, fantasy is "at the same time a cognitive strategy and a worldview—what Brian Attebery calls 'a mode' and Kathryn Hume 'a response to reality'—and involves a cluster of genres, both historic and contemporary" (13). Oziewicz also distinguishes between a "quest for a general definition of fantasy" (in which for the last 40 years most notable critics were involved and which, in my opinion, seems plausible only when applied to the study of fantasy as a cognitive strategy or mode) and "a search for definitions of specific genres which are textual expressions of certain assumptions inherent in fantasy as a worldview" (19). Further on, he also observes, commenting on Hume's proposals, that

> If works as diverse as The Epic of Gilgamesh, Beowulf, Piers Plowman, Queste de Saint Graal, The Nun's Priest's Tale, The Faerie Queene, Dr Faustus, The Rape of the Lock, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Wuthering Heights, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and a number of modern ones such as those by Tolkien, Pratchett, Fowles, Carter, Winterson,

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[10] An interesting experiment described by the eminent American critic Brian Attebery might be quoted here. Attebery conducted a quiz among several researchers and critics of fantasy and asked them to select works that are most archetypal and characteristic of the whole genre of fantasy. What is hardly surprising is that *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin received the highest scores. See *Strategies* 13-14.