THE FANTASTIC BETWEEN THE SUBLIME AND THE GROTESQUE

Cristina MIRON
University of Piteşti

Abstract**:** *The paper explores the approach to the term "fantastic" in the 18th century British culture: after analysing the meanings of the term "fantastic", special attention is paid to Joseph Addison's view on the sublime and its relation to the fantastic, as well to John Dennis's and Edmund Burke's views on the grotesque as tightly connected to the sublime.*
Key words*: fantastic, sublime, grotesque, terror, "fairy way of writing".*

Introduction

Although discussions of the fantastic go back to the antiquity, when Plato sees the "phantastic" as one of the two cognitive modalities (the other being the "eikastic") related to imagination and seen as creative imagination, the real critical debates start in the eighteenth century and most of them take place in the English space.

The first coherent discussion of the fantastic as a literary form of its own is provided by Joseph Addison. In his debates, the discourse of the fantastic coincides with the discourse of the sublime in literature. As we shall see, this vision is not far-fetched, since some traits of the fantastic are shared by the sublime. At the same time, John Dennis and Edmund Burke establish a close relation between the sublime and the grotesque, thus enabling us to find connections between the fantastic and the grotesque, too.

Meanings of the term "fantastic"

The word "fantastic" applies not only to art in general, especially to literature, but it is also part of everyday language (mostly as an adjective), meaning "extremely good, excellent; very large; strange and showing a lot of imagination; impossible to put into practice" (according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). The problem of the fantastic as a definite artistic category became a great point of interest for critics in the twentieth century, when several French critics (Pierre-Georges Castex, Louis Vax, Marcel Schneider, Roger Caillois, Marcel Brion, Tzvetan Todorov, Irene Bessière) elaborated theories of the fantastic in art or literature. For the purpose of our paper, we are interested in two important features towards which most definitions converge: the "intersection" of the real and supernatural world and the specific type of emotion induced to the characters and readers. The former appears as a "brutal intrusion" of the supernatural element (Castex) that will produce an "interruption" (Caillois) of the order inherent to the real world, whilst the emotion induced in fantastic art or literature is described as "terror" (Vax) or "anxiety and terror" (Caillois) and completed by "hesitation" in explaining the supernatural intrusion (Todorov). Another aspect of interest for the purpose of our paper regards the literary techniques which offer verisimilitude to the fantastic stories (as presented by Adrian Marino (1973:681-684): "distancing devices" (mostly by an objective narration of events), "intensifying lucidity" (by the use of precise, minute details) and the fantastic *suspense* (by always hinting at possible explanations for the events and delaying a definite answer).

BDD-A5717 © 2009 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 06:48:13 UTC)

Meanings of the term "sublime" (with special attention to the sublime in the eighteenth century)

In everyday usage, the term "sublime" means, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "of a very high quality and causing great admiration; (*of a person's behaviour or attitudes*) extreme, especially in a way that shows they are not aware of what they are doing or are not concerned about what happens because of it."

As far as the meanings of the specialized term "sublime" are concerned, Jean-Charles Seigneuret treats the term "sublimity" from a rhetorical and aesthetic perspective in his *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs*, pointing out that it refers to "a sense of grandeur, awe, or loftiness; sometimes an emotional experience combining terror and delight" (SEIGNEURET, 1988: 1243). In the ancient tradition, founded (most probably) by Cassius Longinus in his *Peri hypsous (On the Sublime)*, the sublime referred to style, being synonymous to "excellence of expression. Its stylistic emphasis is obvious in the author's outlining of five sources of the sublime: grandeur of thought, inspired passion, effective figures, noble diction, and dignified composition." (SEIGNEURET, 1988: 1243)

The influence of Longinus upon the English criticism of ideas was obvious during the eighteenth century thanks to Boileau's revival of the Latin work *On the Sublime* in his *The Art of Poetry*. The end of the seventeenth century marks a shift in the concept of the sublime, from its being associated to the infinitude of the divine towards its being connected to external nature. The theoreticians responsible for this shift are Thomas Burnet who, in his *The Sacred Theory of the Earth*, called "sublime" the "response to the vast, irregular and energetic in nature" (SEIGNEURET, 1988:1244) and John Locke, whose "epistemology […] transferred the concept of infinity from God to space" (SEIGNEURET, 1988:1244).

The British writers of the eighteenth century dealt with the sublime after living the experience of a journey across the Alps. It was the horror and harmony of the view that made them associate the sublime to the fearful, irregular shapes of nature. John Dennis expressed the experience of the journey in terms of pleasure combined with horror and despair, thus distinguishing the sublime from beauty of nature which only deals with delight (see DENNIS, 1939-1943). Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, referred to the sublime as an aesthetic quality more important than beauty, the infinity of space stirring the awe of the onlooker (see COOPER, 1900).

Distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime, Burke is the first philosopher to conceive the two categories as antithetical. He associated beauty to light, which accentuates it, whilst the sublime is associated to intense light or darkness, which can obliterate the sight of an object. On the other hand, whatever is dark and confused excites awe and horror to the imagination, thus the sublime is seen as deriving from whatever excites pain and terror: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." (BURKE, 1997:216) Burke saw terror as a necessary ingredient of the sublime: "Terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently the ruling principle of the sublime". (BURKE, 1997: 230-231)

Addison's view on the sublime and its connection with the fantastic

Joseph Addison places the category of the sublime within his theory of the "pleasures of the imagination" developed in some well-known essays. In the essay

BDD-A5717 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 06:48:13 UTC)

published in “The Spectator”, No. 412 he ascribes the pleasures of the imagination to sight rather than to rhetoric: “I shall first consider those pleasures of the imagination which arise from the actual view and survey of outward objects; and these, I think, all proceed from the sight of what is great, uncommon, or beautiful.” (ADDISON, 1975:141) The sublime can be identified here with greatness, by which Addison understands not only the “bulk of any single object”, but also “the largeness of a whole view” which strikes one’s imagination by its magnificence. The feelings stirred up by greatness range from “a pleasing astonishment” to “a delightful stillness and amazement in the soul” (ADDISON, 1975: 142), this representing a first point of convergence between the sublime and the fantastic. It is the same type of feelings, completed by fear and terror, as well as by the Todorovian hesitation in explaining the events realistically or supernaturally, that one character in (and implicitly the reader of) a fantastic short story share, mostly during the first instances of intrusion of the supernatural element into the real world.

In another essay, published in “The Spectator”, No 419, Addison describes Dryden’s “fairy way of writing” (this syntagm referring to modern writings which imitate the ancient supernatural ballads and fairy tales), this writing style proving to be very similar to what will later on be called “fantastic literature”. A first characteristic of this way of writing is that the poets are supposed to create “characters and actions of such persons as have many of them no existence” such as “Fairies, Witches, Magicians, Demons and departed Spirits” (SANDNER, 2004: 21). The fantastic, in its turn, involves a supernatural element which interferes in the real world, and this supernatural element can very well be represented by such imaginary characters as the ones mentioned by Addison. Moreover, Addison points out the tight connection between the sublime and the imagination, the creator of the sublime having a more difficult, non-mimetical task since he “has no pattern to follow in it and most work altogether out of his own invention” (SANDNER, 2004: 22). In the previously mentioned essay, Addison sees imagination as the main generator of the sublime discourse, too, thus establishing another close connection between the fantastic and the sublime, because imagination is central to the fantastic, too, the fantastic incarnating an entire history of human imagination. Addison himself insists on the concept of imagination as the main source for the “fairy way of writing”, characterizing it by “fruitful and superstitious, […] well versed in legends and fables, antiquated romances and the traditions of nurses and old women.” (SANDNER, 2004:22)

When Addison focuses on the text-reader relation, he reiterates the issue about the emotions stirred by the sublime, thus building another bridge between the fantastic and the sublime. Besides raising “a pleasing kind of horror” and amusing the reader’s imagination (see SANDNER, 2004: 22), these texts also bring up memories of the stories heard in childhood, favouring “those secret terrors and apprehensions to which the mind of man is naturally subject”. (SANDNER, 2004: 22) In other words, besides a feeling of terror, these texts also stir feelings of delight and surprise. Similarly enough, the modern theories of the fantastic set up a tight connection with fear, most fantastic stories developing this feeling into the reader because of the ambiguity related to the supernatural event, which can have both a realistic, logical explanation and a non-realistic one, no explanation being yet definitive. It is the unexplainable, the incredible, the strange in the fantastic stories that may raise feelings of fear, terror or just surprise and delight. As Lovecraft, in his theory of the “weird tales”, puts it at the beginning of the twentieth century, “The one test of the really weird is simply this – whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown

BDD-A5717 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 06:48:13 UTC)

spheres and powers." (SANDNER, 2004: 105) Thus, he considers terror (not physical, but cosmic terror) as the very source of the fantastic.

Yet, Addison identifies one objection that could be made to this kind of poetry: it possesses a small degree of probability, although one must be sure that in the world there are beings and spirits "who are subject to different laws and economies from those of mankind" (SANDNER, 2004: 22) and their representations cannot be considered as impossible. The prose of the fantastic has a better way to answer this objection: all the construction of the text is realistic, many details play the role of making the description true to life, and when the supernatural element is introduced, it appears to belong so deeply to this world that the question of probability can hardly be raised. The degree of probability is increased by employing distancing devices such as: third person narrative or first person narrative with non-implied narrator, placing the story in a remote time or space or by employing literary techniques which supply the stories with verisimilitude, mostly the realistic description of characters, events or backgrounds, rich in details, full of colour and true to life. More than that, the supernatural element can always be explained in two ways, one of which is realistic, thus assuring it a certain degree of probability, even if usually no definite explanation is given in the end, since fantastic literature favours ambiguity.

Meanings of the term "grotesque"

The adjective "grotesque" is defined in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as "strange in a way that is unpleasant or offensive; extremely ugly in a strange way that is often frightening or amusing". From an artistic perspective, Jean-Charles Seigneuret defines by "grotesque" "fabulous or imaginary creatures of pagan origin […] regarded as both threatening and benign, such as primitive deities or fantastic beasts." With reference to literature "the grotesque is a disjunctive image, scene, or larger structure, composed of comic-horrific elements or otherwise irreconcilable parts. It is also a fictional world that appears to be absurd. Bestial types or stock characters of farce are called grotesque, as are fictional portrayals of harsh and deformed reality and the sordid characters of such worlds." (SEIGNEURET, 1988: 560) So, the term denotes both a larger literary structure and a specific type of character.

The grotesque and the sublime

In his theory of the sublime, John Dennis subordinates all the traits of the sublime to emotion, terror being the dominant type of emotion (in his own terms, "Enthusiastick Terror"), this conclusion resulting from the following logic: the necessary condition for the sublime is "Enthusiastick Passion", because "the Sublime is nothing else but a great Thought, or great Thoughts moving the Soul from its ordinary Situation by the Enthusiasm which naturally attends them" (DENNIS, 1939: 359; then, terror is the enthusiastic passion that "contribute(s) extremely to the Sublime" being "the violentest of all Passions" and making "an Impression which we cannot resist and which is hardly to be defaced"; finally, "no Passion is attended with greater Joy than Enthusiastick Terror, which proceeds from our reflecting that we are out of danger at the very time that we see it before us" (DENNIS, 1939: 361) The generators of enthusiastic terror are, according to Dennis, gods, demons, hell, monsters, lions, earthquakes, torrents (see DENNIS, 1939: 361) Thus, without using the term in itself, Dennis describes the mechanism of the grotesque using an oxymoronic notion, namely "joyful terror": "we are terrified by grotesque deformed monsters and yet infinitely pleased" to be out of danger when seeing them before us (see CHAO, page 5). The

BDD-A5717 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 06:48:13 UTC)

same idea of safety in contact with a grotesque character is developed by Joseph Addison: "When we look on such hideous Objects, we are not a little pleased to think we are in no Danger of them. We consider them at the same time, as Dreadful and Harmless; so that the more frightful Appearance they make, the greater is the Pleasure we receive from the Sense of our own Safety." (ADDISON, 1975: 98)

So, according to the aesthetics of John Dennis and Joseph Addison, the tight connection between the sublime and the grotesque can be translated as such: 1. the sublime is generated by enthusiastic, or joyful terror, this emotion, or passion, being, in turn, generated by grotesque characters; or 2. both the sublime and the grotesque, as literary structures, spring from enthusiastic terror as the most powerful of all literary emotions. This second interpretation suggests a potential identification between the sublime and the grotesque.

Another English essayist, Edmund Burke, elaborates on a possible opposition between the sublime and the grotesque. Yet, it should be noted that he does not propose a total opposition between the two terms, this mainly because he distinguishes between two types of grotesque, only one of them being the subject of opposition: visual grotesques (represented in painting) and verbal grotesques (represented in poetry). The opposition between the two types of grotesques derives from the opposition between painting and poetry developed by Burke in his *Enquiry*: poetry is the art which can create images of the obscure, whilst painting presents clear, visible images. Actually, these two arts embody Burke's opposition between the beautiful and the sublime: painting, representing clearness, incarnates the beautiful, while poetry, connected to obscurity, and subsequently to infinity, is the incarnation of the sublime.

Coming back to the grotesques, they can be represented both visually and verbally, but the visual grotesques are only images of ugliness, whilst verbal grotesques are sublime: "When painters have attempted to give us clear representations of these very fanciful and terrible ideas, they have I think almost always failed; insomuch that I have been at a loss, in all the pictures I have seen of hell, whether the painter did not intend something ludicrous. Several painters have handled a subject of this kind, with a view of assembling as many horrid phantoms as their imagination could suggest; but all the designs I have chanced to meet of the temptations of St. Anthony, were rather a sort of odd wild grotesques, than anything capable of producing a serious passion. In all these subjects poetry is very happy. Its apparitions, its chimeras, its harpies, its allegorical figures, are grand and affecting" (BURKE, 1997: 70). Thus, the sublime opposed only to visual grotesques, but identifies with verbal grotesques.

So, according to Burke, the sublime is one and the same with verbal grotesques (the grotesque represented in poetry – the only art which can represent obscurity, being thus related to infinity), but it opposes to visual grotesques (the grotesque represented in painting which embodies the aesthetic of ugliness).

Conclusions

1. Eighteenth century England offers the cultural space favourable for the first theoretical discussions of the fantastic. Known as "the fairy way of writing", the fantastic tale described by Joseph Addison is based on the invention of imaginary characters, produces strong emotions to the readers (surprise, astonishment or fear) but seems to be deficient in point of probability.

2. Addison's discussion of the fantastic in the eighteenth century is subordinated to the aesthetic of the sublime, both belonging to the "pleasures of the imagination". The fantastic embodies a discourse of the sublime in literature, since its

BDD-A5717 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 06:48:13 UTC)

aesthetic affect on the reader is exactly the same: emotions of astonishment, surprise and terror.

3. In the same period, John Dennis and Edmund Burke identify the grotesque with the sublime, mostly on account of the specific affect they have on the reader, therefore terror proves to be the key notion that unifies the fantastic with the sublime and the grotesque.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

*** *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1999

Addison, Joseph, *Essays in Criticism and Literary Theory*, ed. by John Loftis, AHM Pub. Corp, Northbrook, 1975

Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997

Chao, Shun-liang, *The Grotesque Sublime: Play with Terror* available on the Internet http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/issue2/chao.pdf

Cooper, Anthony Ashley, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody* in *Characteristics*, vol. II, Ed. John M. Robertson, London, 1900

Dennis, John, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* in *Critical Works*, vol. I, Ed. Edward Niles Hooker, Baltimore, 1939

Dennis, John, *Miscellanies in Verse and Prose* in *Critical Works*, vol. II, Ed. Edward Niles Hooker, Baltimore, 1939-1943

Marino, Adrian, *Dicţionar de idei literare, vol. I (A-G)*, Editura Eminescu, Bucureşti, 1973

Sandner, David, *Fantastic Literature. A Critical Reader*, Praeger, Westport Connecticut, London, 2004

Seigneuret, Jean-Charles, *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs: L-Z Vol. 2*, Greenwood Press, 1988

BDD-A5717 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-25 06:48:13 UTC)