The Modern High Fantasy Novel was Born in France: An Essay on Reverse Literary History

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BIBLIOGRAPHIES, encyclopaedias and literary research by both fans and scholars are increasingly revealing the international wealth of science fiction's past and present. In contrast, the other great branch of speculative fiction, fantasy, has still a long way to go in this respect. Andrzej Sapkowski's "Witcher" series is virtually, and exceptionally, the only international fantasy works well known in English. This contention could seem far-fetched if we consider that Gabriel García Márquez's magical realist works, as well Italo Calvino's post-modern fancies are widely read and praised world-wide, and that Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* (*Die unendliche Geschichte*, 1983) has previously taken the world by storm. The European "fantastique," from E. T. A. Hoffmann to the French "Décadents," not to mention Franz Kafka's symbolic parables, enjoys high critical consideration. My contention stands, however, if we consider how fantasy, and high fantasy in particular, can be defined. This task of defining is not an idle one even from the historical perspective here adopted. Without exactly knowing what we are talking about, namely the high fantasy novel and its origin in French literature, any contention about this matter would probably lack a solid scientific foundation. A prior specific theoretical description of high fantasy seems, therefore, necessary to escape the vagueness that affects all too often academic approaches to this kind of fiction.

Whereas science fiction is, despite its range of definitions, a clear literary entity, the English word 'fantasy' is so all-encompassing that it has virtually lost any taxonomic value. Putting Edgar Allan Poe and J.R.R. Tolkien under the same heading because both use the supernatural amounts to a complete disregard of the specific nature of fantasy, and namely of high fantasy. Faster than light travel is as supernatural as ghosts appearing to the living. Narrative omniscience in the realistic novel looks like a godlike, supernatural power as well. On the other hand, fantasy, especially high fantasy, is a literary species with distinctive fictional features that can be inferred from even a superficial reading of its classics. High fantasy is about

the realistically consistent building of a fictional secondary world fully independent from the mundane one (past, present, or rationally anticipated). Whether it is specifically named or not, high fantasy hardly stands intrusions from our world without losing its ontologically autonomous status, if we are to follow the definition of 'secondary world,' as it appears in this genre, proposed by Waggoner: "A fantasy world is a secondary reality whose metaphysical premises are different from those of the real world" (4). Using a more precise narratological language, Trębicki contends that fantasy follows:

> a strategy aimed at the creation of a secondary world model with its own precisely described spatial and temporal parameters, its own social and ontological order, and its own causality, unusual from the point of view of mimetic reality but perfectly coherent and logical within the fictional universe (2014: 488).

Therefore, I would exclude from high fantasy those works in which modern characters intervene in the secondary world, thus depriving it of the illusion of completeness in its own legendary, far-away setting in place and time, as well as distracting readers from a fully immersive experience. C. S. Lewis' Narnia is a wide and sophisticated secondary world but the children's access through a cupboard during World War II implies that it coexists with modernity, instead of remaining impervious to it as it would be the case in the true exercises of sub-creation in the Tolkienian sense. Portal fantasies (Conkan, 2017) such as Lewis' (and Ende's), to which one could add the weird awakening of alien gods in modernity in H. P. Lovecraft's horror stories, are enjoyable in their own right but they cannot be considered genuine high fantasy.

High fantasy eschews implausible contacts between ontologically different kinds of fictional worlds (the mundane and the fantastic) in order to offer the complete result of a speculative process of world building akin to that of science fiction (since it is rationally created on the basis of a particular set of premises). These appear to be scientific in science fiction, as its name implies. They are rather mythical in high fantasy, thus warranting the presence of supernatural beings, magical powers and extraordinary occurrences in the framework of a plausible pagan and pre-technological society.[1] In this kind of imaginary society godlike forces intervene, or are believed to intervene, in human affairs in the same way as they do in the true mythological lore that modern archaeological, philological, and ethnological research have revealed to us using rational methods from the Enlightenment Age

onwards. However, unlike mythological and legendary fiction based on existing matter (Greek mythology, Arthurian legends, *Arabian Nights*, etc.), as well as fairy tales, where narratives follow traditional and stereotyped settings and motives usually borrowed from folklore, high fantasy is 'created.' Its worlds are essentially personal artistic inventions by a particular author, although fantasy writers often find inspiration in existing mythologies as well as in ancient history for their creations. As Braga notes, "la littérature *fantasy* actuelle … est une pseudo-morphose, modelée par l'esprit positiviste et réaliste, par la sensibilité et le goût contemporain, de la littérature magique et féerique traditionnelle" [current fantasy literature ... is a pseudo-morphosis, shaped by the positivist and realist spirit, by contemporary sensibility and taste, of the traditional magical and fairy-tale literature (my translation)] (2018: 44).

High fantasy writers, however, treat features borrowed from the ancient lore yet revealed by the modern human sciences as mere elements in their free world building, the consistency of which is internal, and which need not to be externally consistent with previous mythological, ethnographical or historical knowledge. For example, while Robert H. Howard uses names and peoples from the true ancient history of our planet, his work does not constitute archaeological fiction, because his history is invented, as his fictional historiographical account of the Hyborian age shows. Lord Dunsany was probably inspired by Japanese mythology but his mythology of Pegāna was his own.

These features are common to all high fantasy worlds now considered canonical in the Anglosphere, such as Lord Dunsany's Pegāna, Robert H. Howard's Hyboria, Clark Ashton Smith's Zothique, Tolkien's Middle-earth, Fritz Leiber's Nehwon, Fletcher Pratt's Dalarna, L. Sprague de Camp's Novaria, Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea, Samuel Delany's Nevèrÿon, Terry Pratchett's Discworld and George R. R. Martin's Westeros. A similar mythopoetic imagination already appears active in William Blake's narrative poems where his personal mythology is, rather confusedly, presented to the world as an alternative to Christianity. Regarding prose narratives, John Sterling's short story "The Sons of Iron" (included as an independent narrative in the novel *Arthur Coningsby*, 1833) explores the customs and history of an ancient race of men made of iron with a sober speculative tone similar to that adopted by later fantasists such as Giovanni Papini and Jorge Luis Borges in their imaginary ethnographies.

Actually, the first high fantasy novels are believed to have appeared relatively late in the 19th century. If we do not consider the portal fantasies and fairy tale novels by Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald, as we should not do if the above descriptive definition of high fantasy stands, the high fantasy novel is to be found fully in Laurence Housman's "Gods and Their Makers," published in a collection of the same title in 1897. This appears as the first significant landmark[2] in a long tradition of high fantasy novel that blossomed in Britain in the interwar period alongside with works such as Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), Margaret Irwin's *These Mortals* (1925), Norman Douglas' *In the Beginning* (1927) and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937). Together with the high fantasy stories written by Clark Ashton Smith and Robert H. Howard, and published during the same period in the US pulps, these narratives helped to elevate high fantasy to an inescapable feature of the contemporary literary landscape. It is easy to see that high fantasy novels not written in English are conspicuously absent from this list of early acknowledged classics, in the same way as they are hardly to be found in most surveys of fantasy, either in English (for example, Barron, 1990; Mendlesohn and James, 2009; Wolfe, 2011; Moran, 2019) or in other languages (Pech, 1990; Pato, 2019). Why is this so? Do other literatures lack writers who have created their proper speculative fantasy worlds long before Tolkien's success and his countless global imitators? How is it possible that French, Italian, Spanish, German and Russian scientific romances have already been translated into English and taken into account in histories of world science fiction at this time, but no early continental high fantasy novels seem to exist according to present knowledge on the matter?

In literary history, as in archaeology, one can hardly find anything without looking for it where others have not, for instance in French Literature. Since high fantasy scholars are rarer than science fiction ones even in the Anglosphere, let alone in other cultural areas of the world, it is a small wonder that some of the few hints of the existence of early, pre-Tolkienian high fantasy novel in French has been revealed at all by Brian Stableford, a writer, researcher and translator whose main field of work is science fiction. However, he has also translated other kinds of speculative works. For instance, two novels translated by him, André Lichtenberger's *The Centaurs* (*Les Centaures*, 1904) and Han Ryner's *The Superhumans* (*Les Surhommes*, 1929), are perhaps better understood as high fantasies. The latter is a rhetorically sophisticated work[3] of its prospective brand, consisting of fantasies set in a future

that looks like a mythic past, including the presence of supernatural entities and the absence of modern technology and science. Following its rediscovery in France thanks to Stableford's English translation, the former has tentatively been considered there as the first French high fantasy novel.[4]

Stableford has also translated shorter narratives by Remy de Gourmont, Gabriel de Lautrec, Bernard Lazare, Camille Mauclair, Victor-Émile Michelet, Éphraïm Mikhaël and other French *Belle Époque* authors. Most of these authors wrote in the so-called purple prose typical of Symbolism. French purple prose was widely imitated by British and American high fantasists from the Aesthetic Movement such as Lord Dunsany, Kenneth Morris and Clark Ashton Smith, and its influence can still be seen in Tolkien's style. Rhetorically at least, modern(ist) high fantasy owes much to French *Décadence*. This style encompasses the high fantasy tales by those writers, as well as by Marcel Schwob and Remy de Gourmont, just to mention the ones whose work has acquired some canonical status in French literature. Now their contribution to the high fantasy short story should certainly be re-appraised, but it is also to be acknowledged that no high fantasy French novels written in this period or earlier other than Lichtenberger's *The Centaurs* seemed to exist, except maybe for a short one by Mauclair entitled *Le Poison des pierreries* (1903), later collected in his collection *L'Amour tragique* (*Tragic Love*, 1908). This is indeed a beautifully decadent and weird high fantasy that was translated by Stableford in 2016 as *The Poison of Precious Stones*.

French high fantasy novel would seem then to have appeared later than, for example, Housman's "Gods and Their Makers" (1897) if it were not for a famous mother and her less renowned son. They were Aurore Dupin (1804-1876) and Jean-François Maurice Arnauld (1823-1899), better known as George Sand and Maurice Sand, respectively. The latter inaugurated modern fantasy novels about Atlantis with *Le Coq aux cheveux d'or* (*The Golden-Haired Rooster*, 1867 in book form). Although it is set in the mythical ancient city-empire described by Plato, complete with its end by the gods' wrath, Maurice Sand's novel reads as a Howardian sword and sorcery story, with its barbarian protagonist, the blond 'rooster,' endowed with virtually supernatural strength and panache negotiating his way among the intrigues and decadence of ancient sedentary kingdoms. This hero rescues his romantic interest from her scheming father the king, as well as from her religious and marital duties as high priestess and wife of the volcano god worshipped in Atlantis. He even saves

her from the eruption and the deluge that destroy the mythical world of Atlanteans, Scythians and other ancient peoples. These coexist in that legendary place and time without regard for archaeological findings, but according to the artistically controlled freedom of high fantasy. Maurice Sand's style, with his short sentences and narrative conciseness and dynamism combined with colourful descriptions capable of generating the desired atmosphere of decadence, looks exactly like that of Howard's Hyborian stories. Having arrived a century too early, Maurice Sand's novel unfortunately went virtually unnoticed.[5] Its existence is thus rather an anecdote in the history of (high) fantasy.

By contrast, George Sand's *Évenor et Leucippe* (*Évenor and Leucippe*, 1856), afterwards re-titled *Les amours de l'âge d'or: Évenor et Leucippe* (*Loves of the Golden Age: Évenor and Leucippe*, 1861), is arguably the first high fantasy novel, at least the first subject to some academic attention[6] and re-issued. Its author achieved fame as a writer throughout the Western world. Although this particular work did not enjoy the popularity of her novels of manners, and it was not translated into English, it was known in Anglophone intellectual circles, where French was widely read. This "Légende antédiluvienne" ('antediluvian legend') was anonymously commented upon, for example, in April 1862 in *The North American Review*. The unknown reviewer mentions its models, namely the Biblical account of the fall and the Platonic Atlantis myth, but only as the basis for a fully new mythology created by Sand about the origins of humanity, love and civilization. Both the Hebrew single god and the panoply of Greek deities are absent from the narrative, which tells the life as well as the emotional and philosophical growth of Évenor, a human child living in a balanced primitive society. The seeds of selfishness and evil already exist among humans, however, and the little protagonist is happy to find, after getting lost in the forest, a secluded, paradisiacal valley where he decides to stay. He meets there another child, Leucippe, who is being raised by Téleïa, the last of the 'dives,' a species of beings "half humane, half divine, – rather at once divine and human, having the heavenly soul and knowledge, with an earthly body and needs," according to the American reviewer of the novel (558). The 'dive' (name adapted from 'diva,' the Latin and Italian word for 'goddess') teaches them morality and true love as the main inheritance from her race to this couple of children, then teenagers and married couple, so that they can deliver it to the successor sentient race, the humans. They fail, however, in their mission. Evil has already grown deep roots in human society.

Évenor, Leucippe and their followers are forced to escape from their tribe. Only the dive's supernatural intervention finally saves them from their pursuers, allowing them to return to their paradise in the valley, called Éden. This parts them from their fellow humans and therefore from the course of human history. Their fate is lost in the mist of myth and legend. Despite the echoes of their names and place in later traditions, namely the aforementioned Biblical and Platonic ones, their internally consistent world is a closed one, having nothing to do either with sacred or secular history.

Évenor et Leucippe is not a fictional reconstruction of prehistory as it could have been but rather a symbolic narrative intended to convey, for a grown-up readership, an ethical and philosophical meaning through mythopoesis. The fictional world created there by George Sand fulfils all the requirements of high fantasy. It has "its own precisely described spatial and temporal parameters, its own social and ontological order" (Trębicki, 2014: 488) with its own beliefs and customs, which are all realistically shown. Its characters are individualised, and are radically different from those typified in fairy tales,[7] as it is its plot, where the folktale motifs inherited by the literary fairy tale are also absent or, at least, they do not define the structure of the novel. Moreover, it has further features usual in later high fantasy literature, such as the presence, as well as the agency, of a supernatural category of beings independent from any previous lore and mythology, the 'dives.' Even Sand's use of expressive invented anthroponyms (Le Guillou, 2013), similar to the ones typical of high fantasy is witness to her pioneering high fantastical approach. Nothing of this sort existed in the European and American novel at that time, at least as far as we know given the current state of research and translations, and there would be virtually nothing similar until the Symbolist/Decadent experiments in creative mythography and ethnography a few decades later. Therefore, unless further comparative research proves it wrong, there are solid grounds to maintain that the modern high fantasy novel to have been born, indeed, in France. It would can be claimed that two women, Mary Shelley and George Sand, invented in the Romantic age, most likely without knowing it, the science fiction and the high fantasy novel, respectively. Shelley has been given her due credit for it. Sand awaits hers.

Notes

1. Trębicki has proposed a further definition of high fantasy that takes into account the pre-modern technological level of its secondary worlds. Actual supernatural agency is taken for granted in them following a posited pre-modern and pre-scientific world-view: "The basic structure of SWF [secondary world fantasy] is … placing the plot in a world whose technological level is rather low and spatial parameters closed, and which is presented as a reality not connected with the mimetic universe either spatially of temporally" (2011: 45).

2. Histories dealing with high fantasy usually mention the late romances by William Morris published in the 1890s as pioneering works. Christian institutions and real place names (for example, Rome) appear in these romances, which have a quest structures borrowed from medieval chivalric narratives. These features trouble their high fantasy status, since Morris' fictional worlds would not be then full-fledged secondary subcreations in the Tolkienian sense here adopted (Tolkien, 2001). Moreover, they often lack an easily recognizable usual landmark of high fantasy, namely what Lin Carter called 'neocognomica:' "In creating an imaginary world with words, the author is thrust into the role of Adam. Everything must be named" (1973: 192-193). What kind of secondary worlds can be the ones in Morris' chivalric romances when their characters are named Ralph or Arthur?

3. In my essay on this work which accompanies its contemporary edition, I describe it as follows: "Les Surhommes semble être un « monstre narratif », où le roman doit cohabiter avec d'autres genres, comme la poésie (en prose) dans ses manifestations tant sapientielles qu'épiques, ou l'historiographie, faisant fi de l'illusoire psychologie des personnages, collectifs par ailleurs, et des exigences d'une action conventionnelle" (2016: 125). My translation: "The Superhumans appears to be a 'narrative monster,' where the novel must cohabit with other genres, such as (prose) poetry in its sapiential as well as epic variants, or historiography, ignoring the illusory psychology of the characters, which are collective for that matter, as well as the demands of conventional action."

4. In the preface to its contemporary edition, Fraysse contends that it could be considered to be the "« premier roman de fantasy français »" ('first French high fantasy novel') but with a possible caveat: "mais rêvons plutôt qu'il existe de nombreux textes antérieurs dignes d'endosser ce rôle" (2017: xiii). My translation: "but let us rather

dream that there are many earlier texts deserving this consideration." These earlier French high fantasy novels are precisely the matter of the present essay.

5. The most detailed review of this novel was written by his mother (Sand, 1867). In contemporary times, only a book devoted to Maurice Sand briefly comments on it (Bissonnette, 2017: 228-235, 331, 380-381). There is no contemporary edition of this significant work.

6. It is to be noted that none of the recent academic studies on this novel that I have been able to read (Gillet, 1977; Le Guillou, 2012, 2013, 2016; Mathias, 2018) clearly mentions its high fantasy features. French academic study of this kind fiction is still in its early infancy, though (Bougon, 2019).

7. Matthew David Surridge argued in a blog entry from 2010 (https://www.blackgate.com/2010/09/19/worlds-within-worlds-the-first-heroic-fantasy-part-iv/) that Sara Coleridge created in her novel Phantasmion (1837) the first fantasy secondary world. However, this novel's subtitle, "A Fairy Tale," is very clear regarding the particular kind of fiction it belongs to. Although the fairy tale is an important predecessor of high fantasy, their secondary worlds are different, even in the many instances, before and after Coleridge, where fairy tale worlds are fully independent from our mundane one. In high fantasy characters are individuals whereas those of the fairy tale are "occupational labels" (Waggoner, 23). Moreover, in the fairy tale magic and supernatural occurrences are taken for granted; in high fantasy they "must be realistically established" (22) following the posited rules of the (sub)created world. Following Tolkien, Nikolaya states that "genuine and skilful fantasy creates Secondary Belief (unlike the Primary Belief of myth or religion), putting the reader in a temporary state of enchantment. As soon as suspension of disbelief is disturbed, the spell is broken" (153) whereas "the addressee of a fairy tale knows that the story is not true" (153). Furthermore, the intrusion in fairy tales of elements from the phenomenological world also disturbs the suspension of disbelief or secondary belief. On the other hand, high fantasy stories "take place in a closed, self-contained Secondary World without any connection with reality. However, unlike fairy tales, they are definitely based on Secondary Belief" (154). Last but not least, 'fairy-land' "is a space where things happen, not a place of itself" (Hunt, 12) as Sand's Éden is.

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