criticism in translation

The Fantastic in Literature

CHARLES NODIER

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY ELIZABETH BERKEBILE McMANUS AND TRANSLATION BY DANIELA GINSBURG

Introduction

CHARLES NODIER (1780–1844) HOLDS THE DISMAL DISTINCTION OF BEING THE MOST IMPORTANT FRENCH ROMANTIC YOU HAVE NEVER heard of.[1] A child prodigy, Nodier was reading Montaigne and Plutarch, and writing fluently in French and Latin, by the age of ten. By twenty-five he had vandalized a guillotine, founded the ironically Freemasonesque anti-Jacobin society called the Philadelphes, published one of the first French works of scholarship on Shakespeare, and served a month in prison for criticizing Napoleon in the poem "La Napoléone." It was only then that he got serious, and in 1806 *Les tristes* was published, a collection of short stories, poems, dialogues, and essays that marked him as a disciple of the Romanticism of Goethe and Schiller and hinted at his future affinity for the visionary, fantastic mode of E. T. A. Hoffmann.

The 1820s offer the best context in which to read Nodier's history of—and defense of—the fantastic. This decade is punctuated by canonical articulations of French Romanticism and is framed by the wild success in France of two foreign authors with divergent views of the fantastic: Walter Scott's novels were widely read at the start of the decade and Hoffmann's fantastic tales became popular at its close. In 1829 works by Scott and Hoffmann appeared several times in the same issues of the newly founded literary journal *Revue de Paris*. Scott's "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition," appearing in French, criticized Hoffmann's fantastic style, and just months later François-Adolphe Loève-Veimars's translations of Hoffmann's tales began to interest the public. In 1830 the *Revue de Paris* published Nodier's "Du fantastique en littérature" ("The Fantastic in Literature"), which developed his own earlier articulations of Romanticism and complicated Scott's theory of the fantastic by countering his Burkean aesthetic of the sublime.

In an 1821 review of a French translation of a German Gothic novel, Nodier defines Romanticism in opposition to what he considers a poorly conceived form of the fantastic, the "frénétique" school. The "frénétique" school produced a derivative form of the Gothic novel that exhumes spirits and conjures horrific scenes with no thought to the craft of writing ("*Le petit pierre*" 269). Nodier does not find issue with ghosts' haunting empty castles;

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rather, he finds it egregious that the "frénétique" writers continually depict the same ghosts and the same empty castles.[2] These writers, whom he lambasts as "false romantics," are never original (270). This slight was routinely leveled at classicist writers—for example, Nodier criticizes Racine for doing nothing more than adding a beautiful flower to the already well-known "classical Greek crown" of literature (267)—but it is here used to distinguish Romantic works from popular fiction. Two years later, in his *Racine et Shakespeare*, Stendhal revived this criticism while elevating Shakespeare as a Romantic who had no use for the literary conventions of the past, whether classical poetic meters or the three unities of drama (44–45). In 1827, Victor Hugo's *Préface de Cromwell* also claimed Shakespeare as a Romantic and argued that his drama was the apotheosis of modern poetic creation because it highlighted the play of contrasts so important to representing modernity (66). Hugo cites as an example the sublime Ariel and the grotesque Caliban, characters who disrupt the restrictions of classicism (69). To Nodier, Ariel and Caliban are characters who embody the light and dark sides of the fantastic, the fairy and the gnome, and Shakespeare is the Romantic genius who along with Spenser was a pioneer of the fantastic in England. "The Fantastic in Literature" promotes the fantastic through the language, aesthetics, and ideals of Romanticism to argue that literary culture should definitively break from classicism and Enlightenment materialism, both of which limit artistic freedom.

In the midst of these declarations in favor of originality and creative genius, the translation of Scott's "On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition," which counsels the judicious use of Burke's aesthetics of the sublime, failed to impress French readers who had been enamored with his novels just a decade earlier. Scott's view of the fantastic is restrictive and his disdain for Hoffmann is evident. Ironically, Scott's criticism of Hoffmann's vision of the fantastic, "in which the most wild and unbounded license is given to an irregular fancy, and all species of combination, however ludicrous, or however shocking, are attempted and executed without scruple" (72), is very similar to Nodier's earlier criticism of the "frénétique" school. Where Scott sees "caricatures" and "fantastic extravagances" in Hoffmann's works (74), the authors of the Jeunes-France and the Petit-Cénacle, literary circles styled after Nodier's Cénacle but composed of younger writers, argue that Hoffmann, "[p]eintre, poète et musicien, . . . saisit tout sous un triple aspect, les sons, les couleurs et les sentiments" ("painter, poet, and musician, was capable of understanding the world under three dimensions: sound, color, and sentiment"; Gautier 43). In other words, Scott does not see Hoffmann as a Romantic genius. Indeed, "Hoffmann tend à supplanter Scott au moment précis où le romantisme se définit, parmi les écrivains du Cénacle, puis parmi les Jeunes-France, comme un mouvement révolutionnaire, luttant contre les préjugés du bon goût pour assurer la liberté du génie" ("Hoffmann tends to supplant Scott at the precise moment when Romanticism is being defined among the writers of the Cénacle and then among the Jeunes-France as a revolutionary movement, struggling against the prejudice of good taste in order to assure the freedom of genius"; Castex 175). In "The Fantastic in Literature," Nodier tellingly figures Scott's legacy as a lighthouse standing between classicism and romanticism. He praises Hoffmann's work as original, and thus Romantic, because its artistic genius redeems his stylistic extravagances.

Hoffmann was inspired by the painter Jacques Callot, whose art transcended the rules of painting, as Hoffmann explains in his preface to *Fantasy Pieces in Callot's Manner* ("Jacques Callot"; 1814). Hoffmann finds the irony in Callot's grotesque figures—half-man, half-beast—revelatory of human nature. Hoffmann's tales adhere to the Serapiontic principle, which holds that the poet is a visionary whose works are transcribed from visions glimpsed in his inner world. The source of the genius (and madness) of the poet, according to Hoffmann's story of Serapion, a hermit who believes himself to be the eponymous dead martyr, is that the poet can escape the outer, material world by retreating into his mind (*Serapion Brethren* 51). In Nodier's view, fantastic literature strengthens the

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moral and intellectual foundations of man precisely because the poet inhabits a fantastic and ideal world that is separate from the realm of the ordinary, in which the purely rational man is constrained. Think of the proliferation of stories about zombies, vampires, and aliens set in postapocalyptic worlds, fantasy worlds, and upside-down worlds in popular culture over the past two decades: we need these fears and fantasies, Nodier would say, to liberate us from the mundane and to release us from the stranglehold of the material.

Notes

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1. Nelson's 1972 biography of Nodier is the most recent one published in English. The most recent biography of Nodier in French, by Chestier, was published in 2015.

2. Gibson notes that Nodier, in his review of *Le petit pierre*, judges the "frénétique" school harshly because of their "excesses" and "gross violations of natural laws and the macabre" (34). I argue that Nodier sees this as primarily a stylistic problem, which he attributes to untalented writers who are "les novateurs un peu sacrileges" ("sacrilegious innovators"; "*Le petit pierre*" 269). Nodier allows for the violation of rules and conventions by Goethe and Byron, because each is "l'homme de génie" ("a man of genius"; 269). All translations from the French are my own.

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The Fantastic in Literature

If we attempt to retrace how human imagination must have proceeded in choosing its first pleasures, we naturally arrive at the conviction that for a long time, the first literature—which was aesthetic by necessity rather than by choice—did no more than naively express sensation. A bit later, literature began to compare sensations with one another, to develop descriptions, to grasp the distinctive features of things, and to compensate for words with figures of speech. This was the goal of primitive poetry. When this type of poetic expression had been altered and nearly depleted by long habit, thought rose up from the known to the unknown: thinking began to go

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deeper into the occult laws of society, to study the secret workings of universal organization, and to listen in the silence of the night to the marvelous harmony of the celestial realms. Religion and the contemplative sciences were thus invented. This imposing vocation was the poet's initiation into the great work of legislation. The poet, by virtue of the power revealed in him, became magistrate and pontiff, and constructed above all human societies a sacred sanctuary from which he communicated to earth only by way of solemn instructions issued from within a burning bush or from atop Mount Sinai;[1] from the heights of Olympus and Parnassus or from the depths of the sibyl's lair; through the shadows of the prophetic oak trees of Dodona or the groves of Egeria.

Purely human literature was reduced to the description of the ordinary aspects of material life, but it did not lose the inspiration that had made it divine in its earliest days. Only, because its essential creations had already been cast and had been received by humanity in the name of truth, literature intentionally began to wander into another ideal region, one less imposing but just as rich in seductions: it invented the lie. This was a brilliant and incommensurable field in which literature—abandoning itself to all the illusions of gentle (because voluntary) credulity; to the ardent prestige of enthusiasm (so natural in young peoples); to the impassioned hallucinations of feelings that experience has not yet disabused; to vague perceptions of nocturnal terrors, fever, and dreams; to the mystical reveries of a spiritualism gentle to the point of abnegation or carried away into fanaticism—quickly expanded its domain with immense, marvelous discoveries that were far more striking and numerous than those provided by the material world. Soon, all its fantasies took shape and all these artificial shapes took on special, distinct individualities, and all these individualities came into harmony—and the in-between world was discovered. On the basis of these three successive faculties and operations—the inexplicable intelligence that founded the material world, the divinely inspired genius that perceived the spiritual world, and the imagination that created the fantastic world—the vast empire of human thought was built. Human languages have faithfully preserved the traces of this gradual creation. It soars high enough to be absorbed into God, who is sublime knowledge. We still use the word *superstitions*—that is, the science of elevated things—to talk about these secondary conquests of the mind, on which the very knowledge of God is based across all religions; as the name indicates, they are still placed beyond the reach of the ordinary. In a correct philosophical classification of humankind, purely rational man occupies the lowest region and the poet is in the middle region—that is, in the in-between world of the fantastic and the ideal.

I said that the science of God itself was based on the fantastic or supersubstantial world, and there is no need to demonstrate this. I am referring here only to what this science borrowed from the fantastic inventions of all nations, and the narrow bounds I have set myself here do not permit me to list the many examples that are readily obvious to any reader. Everyone remembers the mysterious loves of angels for the daughters of men, which are barely mentioned in the Scripture; the summoning of Samuel's ghost by the old witch of Endor; and that other vision without form or name, which, like a vague vapor, scarcely manifested itself, and whose voice sounded like a light breath of air; the gigantic and threatening hand that wrote a death prophecy on the walls of the palace of Balthazar in the midst of festivities; and, above all, the incomparable epic of the Apocalypse, a somber, terrible vision, as overwhelming for the soul as a vision of the last judgment of the human races, thrown before the eyes of early churches by a prophetic spirit that seems to have anticipated the entire future, and inspired by the experience of eternity!

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The religious fantastic, if we may call it that, was necessarily solemn and somber, because it acted on material life only through serious impressions. On the contrary, purely poetic fantasy outfitted itself with all the graces of the imagination. Its only objective was to present all the seductions of the material world in a hyperbolic light. As the mother of spirits and fairies, it was itself able to borrow the power of the fairies and the miracles of their magic wands. Seen through its magical prism, the earth appeared to open up to reveal rubies rippling with sparkles, sapphires of azure purer than the sky; the sea rolled coral, amber, and pearls onto the shores; every flower became a rose in the garden of Saadi, and every virgin a *houri* in Mohammed's paradise.[2] Thus in the countries most favored by nature the Oriental tales were born, a dazzling gallery of the rarest wonders of creation and the most delicious dreams of thought, an inexhaustible treasure trove of jewels and perfumes that fascinates the senses and divinizes life. Anyone who has still not found temporary relief from the bitter ennui of reality has probably not read *A Thousand and One Nights*.

From India, the capricious muse, outfitted with joyful garb, fragrant veils, and magic songs and dazzling apparitions, made her way to budding Greece. The first age of poetry ended with Greece's mystical inventions. The mythological heaven was populated by Orpheus, Linus, and Hesiod. The *Iliad* completed the marvelous chain from the sublime world by attaching the final link to heroes and demigods in a story without precedent, in which Olympus communicated with the earth for the first time through sentiments, passions, alliances, and battles. The *Odyssey*, the second part of this great poetic bilogy, showed, through Odysseus's adventurous and fantastic travels, man connected to both the imaginary and the material worlds. In the *Odyssey*, everything is touched by the Oriental system of invention and everything manifests the exuberance of the creative principle that had just given birth to theogonies and that lavishly spread the overflow of its fecund polygenesis across the entire field of poetry, like the skillful sculptor who relaxes by using the clay left over from a statue of Jupiter or Apollo to shape bizarre, naive, or grotesque forms and improvises a classical caricature of Hercules out of the misshapen features of the cyclops Polyphemus. What more natural and bold prosopopoeia is there than the story of Scylla and Charybdis? Is this not how ancient navigators must have imagined these two monsters of the sea and the terrible tribute they imposed on the inexperienced ships that attempted their reefs and the howling of waves that cry out as they crash against their rocks? If you have never heard of the insidious melodies of the siren, of the seductive enchantments of an amorous sorceress who captures you with chains of flowers, of the metamorphosis of the daring, curious adventurer who finds himself suddenly trapped in the body of a wild animal with an animal's instincts, on an island unknown to travelers, ask Homer or the common people for news of them. The king of Ithaca's descent into hell—with its gigantic and admirably idealized dimensions—calls to mind the ghouls and vampires of Levantine fables for which modern critical scholars now reproach our new school; this is evidence of how far the pious partisans of Homeric antiquity, whom we foolishly entrust with guarding the so-called true doctrine, are from actually understanding Homer, and it proves how poorly they remember having read him![3]

In truth, the fantastic requires a virginity of imagination and belief that is lacking from secondary literatures and that is only recreated in them after one of those revolutions that renews everything. But when religions themselves, shaken to their foundations, no longer speak to the imagination, or do so only in confused notions that are daily made more obscure by troubling skepticism, then the capacity that nature bestowed upon the imagi-

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nation to produce the marvelous must find a more common kind of creation, one better suited to the needs of a basic intelligence. Fables begin to reappear at the moment when the influence of the real or conventional truths that lend a shred of life to the worn-out mechanism of civilization has come to an end. This is why the fantastic has become so popular in Europe over the past few years and why it is the only essential literature of the age of decadence or transition in which we have arrived. We must even see this as a spontaneous benefit of our human composition, for if our minds no longer took pleasure in vibrant and brilliant chimeras after having laid bare all the repulsive realities of the real world, this age of disillusion would fall prey to the most violent despair and society would offer up the terrifying spectacle of a unanimous need for dissolution and suicide. One must therefore not cry out so loudly against the romantic and the fantastic. They are thought to be innovations, but in fact they are the inevitable expression of extreme periods in the political life of nations, and without them I do not know what would remain today of humanity's moral and intellectual instinct.

Thus, at the fall of the first social order of which we retain a memory—the order of slavery and mythology—fantastic literature rose up, like the dream of a dying man, amid the ruins of paganism, in the writings of the last classical Greeks and Romans, Lucian and Apuleius. The fantastic had been forgotten since Homer. And even Virgil, whose tender and melancholy imagination easily transported him to the realms of the ideal, had not dared to borrow from the primitive muses the vague and terrible colors of Odysseus's underworld. Not long after Virgil, Seneca, even more of a positivist thinker, went so far as to dispossess the future of its impenetrable mystery in the choruses of the *Troades*—and thus expired the last spark of the last flame of poetry, suffocated by the hand of philosophy. From then on, the muse awoke only for a moment, capricious, disordered, frenetic, living on borrowed time, playing with enchanted amulets, poisonous clumps of grass, and the bones of the dead under the glow of Thessalian witches' torches, in *The Golden Ass*. All that remained of her after that—until the renaissance in literature—was the vague murmur of a vibration dying out in the void, waiting for a new impetus to begin again. What happened to the Greeks and Romans was bound to happen to us. The fantastic takes hold of nations in their infancy, like the Erlking so feared by children, or it comes to stand by their deathbed, like the familiar ghost of Caesar, and when its songs die out, everything ends.

Our modern literature was no less subject than Latin literature was to the spirit of imitation. But the invasion of the Moors—which was in this respect so favorable to the moral development of the Middle Ages—had already brought to our soil the hardy and productive genius of young poetries. Without this event, classical literature would have risen entirely and without mediation in the heart of the barbarity of the Middle Ages.[4] Instead, at the first call of a society hungry for the lights of the mind, when the invention of the printing press released into abundant circulation the works of antiquity, classical literature was carefully handed down to us by the admirable zeal of monks—a ready-made literary creation. The Middle Ages was a singular era, in which a generation of scholars and poets reproduced, all at once, the writings of Alexandrian sophists, late–Roman Empire grammarians, and the rhymesters of Roman decadence. These scholars and poets were like a nation of Epimenides, inspired by a dead religion, civilization, and language, and who in a sense differed from those writers only in the languor of organs and imagination that betrays the despondency of long slumber.

Upon the appearance of these texts, the fantastic disappeared, but it alone had illuminated Europe for several centuries. The fantastic is what invented or embellished the

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history of the dark ages of our young nations, populated our castles in ruin with mysterious visions, conjured the figures of protective fairies in dungeons, and opened an impenetrable refuge in the hollows of rocks or under the crenellations of abandoned walls to the formidable family of dragons and wyverns. When dragons streaked across the sky like falling stars, the fantastic lit garnet fires on their foreheads; the fantastic led voyagers astray on the shores of stagnant waters, on the capricious trail of will-o'-the-wisps; the fantastic consoled the woodcutter's rustic vigil in his cabin beside a welcoming hearth with the harmless games of imps; the fantastic maintained the credulous hopes of young girls with sweet promises and preserved the sedentary reveries of old men—alas, so quickly deceived by death—with gentle pastimes. The fantastic was everywhere then, in life's gravest beliefs as well as in its most gracious errors, in its solemn rites as well as in its festivals. It held the bench, the pulpit, and the theater. It sat with Albert the Great in church stalls, with Agrippa in the philosopher's office, with Roger Bacon and Paracelsus in the chemist's laboratory, and it brought necromancy and astrological predictions into the council of kings.

The fantastic's influence on literature will never be forgotten; there it produced the naive tales of legends; imbued the chronicles of tournaments, battles, and crusades with imposing ceremony; and filled the fanciful tales of old storytellers and the fabliaux of minstrels to the brim. It is to the fantastic that we owe the chivalric romances, a type of anonymous epic, in which all the scenes of love and heroism from the Middle Ages come together with inexpressible harmony: love without precedent, where one does not know which to admire more, the modest tenderness of the beloved or the passionate enthusiasm of the lover; ideal heroism, which had to overcome everything and which triumphed over all; the bravery of warriors; the rage of knight-kings; the pitfalls of betrayal; the upheavals of a nature mastered by magic; the intervention of a thousand unexpected powers, modified at the will of the author's inventive imagination with ever-new aspects and with all the possible accidents of destiny. It was no longer, as in pagan theogony, Juno, Neptune, or Venus who were roused by the loss of a man: it was the entire universe personified as a multitude of different individualities struggling against a warrior whose only defense was his courage, his love, and his righteousness. It was no longer the shameful, bloody quarrel between two peoples determined to destroy each other in the cause of or in retribution for abduction or adultery; it was the moral trial of the just and the unjust, waged in the general interest of men between heaven and hell, under the gaze of a Helen who was the prize and not the cause of strife and who, happier than the other Helen, could reveal herself to both sides without blushing.[5] This, it must be agreed, was marvelous poetry, an order of invention such that if the ancients had had the tale of Amadis, perhaps we would not talk of Achilles; an imagination both grandiose and charming, that will never be replicated and will always be missed—like the mare in Roland's tale, who was so beautiful, so strong, so agile, who so powerfully imprinted the arena and battlefield with her hooves, whose harness and covering were embroidered by the hand of a princess, and who died.

If I were able to feel any hatred toward Cervantes, I would perhaps reproach him for having contributed more than anyone else to stealing away from us these delicious fantasies of the spirit from intermediary centuries, for he shattered them as easily as Don Quixote broke Ginés's puppets. But I am obliged to agree that this work of destruction, which is also one of the most beautiful books produced by the modern imagination, was the necessary condition of Cervantes's literary destiny. When the people's fables have grown old, the merciless instinct for change that

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lives in the people becomes manifest at its day and hour, and with clear signs it shows that social life must be begun anew, without regard for the traditions or sympathies of the past. This instinct releases spirits of derision, compelled by reckless hatred, who spit upon all that previous centuries have venerated and who play with the ruins of a dying civilization by offering up words of irony and disdain, like Hamlet at Yorick's grave, weighing the ashes of the dead and analyzing the workings of the intelligence by looking inside the skull of a madman. Thus, Lucian arrived at the end of paganism, Cervantes after chivalry, Erasmus and Rabelais with reform, and Voltaire ahead of the political revolutions that accompanied the great conflagration of Christianity. When one order of things dies, there is always some ingenious demon standing at its deathbed laughing, waiting to finish it off with a jester's *marotte*.[6]

The first fantastic genius of the Renaissance—first in date and in rank, for in the masterpieces that reveal the fantastic, genius is not progressive—is Dante. He arrived alone at the final sunset of a finished society and at the first dawn of a new one, and though he dug the quarry, he also filled it entirely. It is true that he placed the theater of his terrible phantasmagoria under the protection of the beliefs of his time, but he made it his own through passions, actors, and details that are neither Homeric nor Virgilian but rather uniquely Dantesque. Today, we hear some critics lament the errors of this magnificent imagination and the apparent confusion contained in his poetic fable, in which the Virgil of the Middle Ages is led into the Christian hell by the Virgil of paganism. But this is the key to Dante's composition and what makes it sublime. The hell specific to any one particular theogony would have been too narrow for such a wide-ranging inventiveness. Dante had to hurl himself into the torrent of centuries, without consideration for the circumscribed forms of a mere epic, and what universally received ideas he did preserve in his work were actually a concession—ingenious and legitimate—to the mythologies of his own era, which was in its own right one of the essential components of the *Divine Comedy*, but which could not be the only spirit driving the literary creation of this giant, Dante.

Thus, Dante's hell does not resemble any of the countless hells invented by the somber melancholy of other poets, which more or less recall the *vade in pace*[7] of monarchism and the torture chambers of the Inquisition. The colossal architecture of the *Inferno* contains all hells, and it is fit to receive generations of sinners for all eternity. Dante's harsh creation must not be measured using the artist's compass or the rhetorician's units. Its greatness lies in its unimpeded freedom, in the hard-won right to constantly play with all aspects of life in the thousand-faceted mirror of the imagination, all the reflections of thought, all the rays of the soul. Only in the Apocalypse of Saint John can a comparison—though not a model—be found, and we must not look for successful imitators in the centuries that followed Dante, for his was the special work of an era, and the man of genius who created it was himself the expression of a time from which his individuality cannot be separated without mutilating it. What has been passed down to modern writing from him—such as the dream of patricide in *Les voleurs*[8] or the desperate prosopopoeia of Jean Paul,[9] in which Jesus Christ reveals eternal nothingness to the innocent souls waiting in limbo, or the incomparable vision of the condemned in Victor Hugo's psychological novels—are only local, partial, restricted products that cannot be communicated today, and which act with all the force of the principle that engendered them but only within a specific range, in rare circumstances, and across an imperceptible milieu, like the heat of the eclipsed sun, which can still set powder aflame through a glass lens. The world that civilization has created for us does not allow for more.

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Thus, the hallowed tradition of the *Divine Comedy* has not produced a noteworthy work of the same kind in the one nation on earth best able to appreciate it: Italy. It has remained an inviolable and inaccessible monument of distant times, at the far frontier of Italian literature, and the respect that clings to sacred objects seems to protect it forever from the inexhaustible temerity of copyists. The new mine of invention—exploited in that country by the mind, the imagination, genius, and then the imitative industry that never fails to follow behind the creative muses, wherever they pass and that, in what we call classical times, ended up bedecking itself with their crowns—was shared by all Europe, but only Italy still had the privilege of stamping its discoveries with an immortal seal, because its language was complete. The role of the Italian language was to enrich our chronicles and novels with the easy beauty of free and graceful verse, and by subjecting them to the harmonious meter of its octaves, it liberated them from the gravest reproach of ill-tempered critics, who, in deference to antiquity, tolerated rhythmic lies until they were replaced by the new order. To use the familiar language of this poetry, it would be easier to count the stars in the sky and the sands of the seas than the many knights' tales that emerged from the most ingenious of all literary ages. Aficionados count more than a hundred chivalric epics before Ariosto—which Ariosto caused to be forgotten, just as Homer caused the rhapsodies of his unknown predecessors to be forgotten. Indeed, what mind would not have faltered before this prodigious imagination that with grace, freshness, and originality played at mastering the traditions of an obscure history and the delicious reveries of a new and unjustly neglected mythology? It is said that Hesiod was fed honey by the daughters of Pindus, but it was the fairies who nourished Ariosto with a more intoxicating ambrosia and gave his divine writings their overwhelming seductiveness and enchantment! How could we doubt the involvement of magic when the poet, himself a magician, leads us at will into spaces less familiar than the hippogriff's lair; how could we doubt when his songs ring with supernatural inspiration and seem to have come from another world? Marked by his study of the ancients, Ariosto is not averse to taking a few scraps from their pile, but never without matching them to the air and physiognomy of his characters and to the free flow of his compositions. He is still independent when he obeys, still new when he imitates, and he never bows to the inventions of others except when he has been sated by his own inventions, whose sheer number wearies and discourages him. This is because he stole from the ancients the setting of Alcina's magical island and the secret treasures of the caves of Cathay, and the modesty of opulence taught him to mix in, from time to time, riches more vulgar than what was all too easily available to him. After Ariosto and his feeble copycats, the fantastic was almost never seen again in Italian literature, and nothing is easier to explain: Ariosto exhausted it.

Who would have believed that the fantastic, the muse of the ideal, the elegant and sumptuous daughter of Asia, would take such long refuge in the fogs of Great Britain? Perhaps horrified by the melancholic ceremonies of the North, which had carried her to the throne of Odin, and by the vaporous fictions of Scotland, where the bard's harp was accompanied only by the clash of claymores and the roaring of storms, the muse of the ideal soon sought repose in one of the lively, laughing imaginations whose voluptuous songs had cheered her earliest festivities. This was Shakespeare, who, trapped on his island *orbe toto divisa* ["separated from the rest of the world"], to borrow Virgil's expression, scarcely knew of the marvels of the physical world but in some sublime vision had perceived them and understood the miracles of the kingdom of the sun, as if he had strolled there on the arm of some fairy—

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for Shakespeare and poetry are one and the same thing. Spenser merely cleared the path; Shakespeare widened and lengthened it. He bedecked it with new spectacles, filled it, inundated it with new figures, fresher, airier, and more transparent than the fleeting apparitions of morning dreams; there he brought the romantic dances of Oberon, of Titania, and of spirits who, with a lighter foot than Camille, grazed the grass without bending it; he planted flowers scented with heavenly perfumes, which opened in the warm air of dawn to receive the nocturnal nation of spirits, and, like enchanted pavilions, sheltered them until nightfall; he spread unknown lights through the air, tuned heavenly lyres that had never yet vibrated in human ears, suspended Ariel's melodious orchestra from the tremulous branches of shrubs, hid Puck's invisible nest in a rosebud, and from all the pores of the earth, all the atoms of the air, and all the reaches of heaven, he drew forth a concert of magical voices. In terms of the innumerable colors of the palate and the multitude of moving sympathies that words cause to resound in the depths of the soul, everything belongs to Shakespeare. When his brush has finished caressing the seductive forms of a sylph, to him alone is given the right to trace the gigantic, crude proportions of a gnome in the form of Caliban, to disguise an ancient satyr in the burlesque cloak of Falstaff, and to hang Michelangelo's sketch over a delectable Correggio painting. If Dante and Ariosto have not yet shown you all the essential characteristics of a demigod, stop here: *incessu patuit* ["it is revealed by his step"].

As for our own national literature, everyone already knows all too well how fantastic poetry has fared. There was no way that the fantastic, which lives on imagination and freedom alone, could acclimate with any hope of success to the academic, classical France of Louis XIII and Richelieu. There, the brilliant lies of genius would have been as poorly received as the truth. There, through the influence of the Sorbonne and the philosophy of Aristotle, thought was ruled by the servants of a straitlaced muse, who, with royal privilege, dragged the scraps of a travestied antiquity across the court theater and into the salons of the Hotel de Rambouillet.[10] Racine, inspired in his old age by the genius of holy texts, once, as an exception, dared to throw into an audacious story the grand figure of the ghost of Jezebel, and Voltaire, a social opposition leader looking for the new in all things, thought he had taken daring to the limit when he wrote a few alexandrines to be shouted through a megaphone by the tragic ghost of Ninus.[11] Yes, we have had our chronicles and knights' tales, but these respectable stalwarts of the Middle Ages spoke an outdated language that could no longer be understood. Moreover, the Knights of the Round Table waited a long time—until a coquettish innovator replaced the knights' heavy armor with French garb and their clanging spurs with red heels—before they received anything like the welcome they were accustomed to under Charlemagne. The characters dressed up like this by M. de Tressan[12] more or less resemble their heroic, naive types—to the same extent that the clown's lantern in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* resembles moonlight.

However, it would be unjust to refuse the Grande Siècle the only accolade missing from its shelf of vaunted triumphs, and even though it was outrageously rejected in its time, a more just future will perhaps recognize it, in compensation for the aborted glory of Chapelain[13] and the somewhat diminished admiration that crowned Voiture's sonnets, Ranchin's triolets, and Saint-Aulaire's madrigals. This work, which would have been epoch-defining in any of the most beautiful literary ages, this imaginative, natural, ingenious masterpiece that will long continue to charm our descendants and that, along with Molière, La Fontaine, and some beautiful scenes from Corneille, will undoubtedly outlast all the monuments of the reign of

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Louis XIV. This book without model, which the best imitations will never be able to touch, is Perrault's *Fairy Tales*. Its composition does not exactly obey Aristotle's rules, and, to my knowledge, its unadorned style has not given our rhetoricians many rich examples of description, amplification, metaphor, or prosopopoeia; and I must say, to the shame of our dictionaries, that it would be difficult to find in those ample archives of our language any definitive information regarding certain of Perrault's unusual locutions, which, at least for foreigners, require the attention of an etymologist and commentator, and I will not disagree that there are some among these, such as "tirez la cordelette et la bobinette cherra,"[14] that might cause serious trouble for some future Saumaise. But what is certain is that the countless readers of these tales understand them marvelously, and it is clear that the author had the modest good-heartedness not to write for posterity. What lively attraction lies in the smallest details of these charming trifles of stories; what veracity in Perrault's characters; what ingenious and unexpected originality in the twists and turns of the adventures he recounts! What frank and striking verve in the dialogues! I can therefore say with confidence that as long as there remains in our hemisphere one people, one tribe, one village, or one tent where civilization can take refuge against the gradual invasions of barbarism, there will be talk of the adventures of Little Thumbling,[15] the conjugal vengeance of Bluebeard, and the wily maneuvers of Puss in Boots; the children's versions of Odysseus, Othello, the Figaro will live as long as their grown-up counterparts. If there is anything that can be compared to the flawless perfection of these miniature epics, if there are any idealities fresher than the innocent charm of Red Riding Hood, the impish grace of Cinderella, or the touching resignation of Griselda,[16] it must be sought among the people themselves, in their hidden poems, the traditional delights of village nights, from whom Perrault judiciously drew his stories. I am not denying that nowadays the *Fairy Tales* are the subject of learned discussion, that their origin is claimed to have been far-off, that we are asked to believe the erudite scholars who teach us that Donkeyskin[17] is an Arabian import, that Ricky with the Tuft[18] would not have had feudal rights over his ancestral domain without a title stamped by the Orient, and that, in spite of their false appearance of being local, the *galette* and the *pot à beurre*[19] were brought to us one fine day by some other Sinbad on the shoulders of some genie born in the land of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

We have become so accustomed to imitation ever since the establishment of the Aristotelian dynasty that still rules us from the lofty heights of the Institute that it is basically literary dogma that we here in France do not invent anything—and the Institute probably has no shortage of good reasons for leading us to believe this.[20] But my submission to its decrees cannot go that far. Our kindly fairies with their wands of iron or hazel, our hostile and ill-tempered fairies with their chariots drawn by bats, our entirely adorable, graceful princesses, our likeable, impish princes, our stupid and ferocious ogres, the charming metamorphoses of Blue Bird, and the miracles of the Golden Bough are all part of our dear old Gaul,[21] just like its sky, its customs, and its monuments, too long ignored. It shows true contempt for France, an intellectual nation that has leapt so far ahead of its own movement on all the roads of civilization, to deny that it has the inventiveness necessary to paint the heroes of its own *bibliothèque bleue* ["popular literature"]. If the fantastic had never existed among us, with its own, inventive nature, independent of any other ancient or exotic literature, we would not have society, for there has never been a society that has not had its own fantastic literature.

All the explorers' excursions have not revealed a single savage family that does not recount strange stories and that does not locate,

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in the clouds of its atmosphere or the smoke that curls up from its huts, every kind of mystery discovered in the in-between world by the intelligence of the old, the sensitivity of women, and the credulity of children. If only the impassioned orientalists who steal away from us the fables told to us by our nannies in order to pay homage to Egyptian and Hindu belly dancers had sat just once under the peasant's thatched roof or near the woodcutter's nomadic hut, or attended the talkative vigils of seamstresses or spent time in the joyful huts of grape harvesters! Far from accusing Perrault of plagiarism, they would decry the stingy parsimony with which he distributed to our ancestors these surprising chronicles of times that did not exist and never will and that are still so fresh and so alive in the memories of our village troubadours! What beautiful narrations they would have heard, so vividly imprinted with the customs, ways, and names of our country, that even the most intrepid etymologist, upon hearing them, would be forced to stop for the first time at the incontestable source of these inventions and things, and it would never occur to him to seek their source in another nature or another society! Ever since the first old woman, sentimental, dreamy, and perhaps a bit of a witch, who improvised these poetic fabliaux to soothe the impatience and pain of a poor sick child, these stories have been faithfully repeated from generation to generation, during spinners' long nights, the monotonous sound of spinning wheels occasionally interrupted by the ringing of an iron poker stirring the embers, and they will be repeated forever, without some new nation deciding to challenge us for them—for each people has its own stories, and in every country the storyteller's creative faculties are rich enough that, like griots and dervishes, they do not need to go searching afar for the talent they already possess. The penchant for the marvelous, and the ability to modify it in accordance with natural or fortuitous circumstances, is innate to humanity. It is the essential instrument of human imaginative life, and perhaps even the only truly providential compensation for the miseries of social life.

Germany has been rich in this genre of creation, richer than any other country in the world, including the fortunate Levantines, eternal overlords of our treasures in the opinion of our antique dealers. This is because Germany, blessed with a particular system of moral organization, carries in its beliefs a fervor of imagination, a vivacity of sentiment, a mysticism of doctrine, and a universal penchant for idealism that are fundamental to fantastic poetry. It is also because Germany is freer from the predictable conventions and stiff despotism of an oligarchy of so-called scholars and thus is fortunate enough to be able to abandon itself to natural feelings without fear of being controlled by that imperious guardian of human thought that only admits ideas bearing the weight and trappings of pedantry. The meditative, impressionable, original individuality that characterizes its inhabitants has been displayed since time immemorial in the countless monuments of its fantastic literature, and there, in contrast to our own literary customs where everything is ruled by the aristocracy of the mind, it is popularity that crowns success. In this respect, Germany still enjoys the same plainspokenness it had at the time of Götz von Berlichingen. It owes a great deal to its many local districts and particular usages, which have kept the precious ingenuity of primitive peoples alive and have saved Germany from the devouring greed of that monstrous Medusa, centralization, whose arms reach out only to take, in a futile attempt to satiate the Gorgon's insatiable hunger—and, no matter what our coffee shop and clubhouse theoreticians say, these particularities will keep Germany first among nations until our current civilization comes to an end.

To this day, Germany is the chosen land of the fantastic, and it has been so ever since

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the beautiful story of Faust, admirably poetized by Goethe, who added nothing to the philosophical ideality of the original invention, the profound allegory of an adventurer who sold his soul to the devil. This country has completed the psychic history of humanity, which was so magnificently begun in Genesis with the truly divine emblem of the tree of knowledge and the serpent's seductions. Faust is the Adam of an earthly paradise, who has come to believe himself equal to God. Jean Paul's *Un songe* is the solemn dénouement of this sad drama, that other apocalypse, and the terrible answer to the riddle of our material life. Apart from these three fables, there is no absolute truth on earth.

The ever-increasing misfortunes of that new society so visibly heralded its imminent ruin that even the angel's trumpet sounding the end of days will not be a clearer announcement to the condemned generation.[22] From this moment, the fantastic erupted onto all the paths that lead from sensation to thought—and this is how, in spite of Aristotle, Quintilian, Boileau, La Harpe, and all the rest of them, the fantastic burst into the theater, elegies, novels, and painting, filling all the mind's pleasures and all the passions of the soul. And a great cry of bitter and ignorant anger rose up against the unexpected invasion that was threatening the beautiful forms of classicism. It was not understood that an irreparable, larger, more universal form was coming to an end: the form of a worn-out civilization, of which the classical is but a partial, momentary, indifferent expression. Nor was it understood that there was nothing surprising about the dissolution of the puerile connection holding together foolish rhetorical unities as the entire social world was collapsing all around.

Among the chosen men whom a deep instinct for genius has recently thrown to the head of literature, there is not one who has not heeded the warning from this muse of a dying society and who has not obeyed her inspirations, like one might obey the imposing voice of a dying man whose grave is already open. The Romanesque school of Lewis, the Romantic school of the lackists,[23] and, above all, those masters of words, Byron, Walter Scott, Lamartine, and Hugo, threw themselves into the quest for the ideal life, as if the special organ of divination that nature has bestowed upon poets had warned them that the breath of positivist society was about to go out in this obsolete organization of peoples. I have not named in this list Chateaubriand, who by conscience and by choice remained at the end of the old world, like a pyramid in the sands of Egypt, like Noah's ark on the summit of Mount Ararat, like the columns of Hercules on the shores of unknown seas. Walter Scott, also chained by his memories, studies, and affections, built the foundations of his future renown in the space between the two societies. He stands as a lighthouse casting a few indistinct glimmers across the port, a few glimmers into the abyss. The abyss! Byron got lost there and no man's gaze has ever been able to follow him.

The fantastic in Germany is more popular, and this, I repeat, is due to its long faithfulness to traditional ways, to the institutions that have emerged from the country, which are often defended and preserved at the cost of citizens' lives, and to a more general system of education, one better understood and better suited to the needs of the time. Above all, the popularity of German literature is explained by that country's repugnance for purely material innovations, from which the intelligent and moral principle of nations has nothing to gain. This people, which has reached the limits of all the sciences, which has produced almost all the essential inventions that have made European civilization complete, and which, in sweet possession of unending freedom, deliciously spends its time in sedentary contemplation of astronomy and in the enrichment of natural nomenclatures, deserved to keep for a long time its innocent

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and sensible taste for children's stories. Let us thank Musäus, Tieck, and Hoffmann, whose happy caprices, by turn mystical and familiar, poignant or farcical, simple to the point of triviality, exalted to the point of extravagance, but filled with originality, sensitivity, and grace, renew the fresh and brilliant illusions of our cradles for our last days of decrepitude. Reading them, for a soul exhausted by the death convulsions of nations fighting an inevitable crisis, has the effect of serene sleep filled with attractive dreams that cradle and relax the mind. It is the fountain of youth of the imagination.

In France, where the fantastic is today so decried by the supreme arbiters of literary taste, it would perhaps be useful to look for its origin, to mark its main periods in passing, and to attach the highest titles of its genealogy to gloriously consecrated names—but I have done no more than trace the outlines of its history, and I will not undertake to defend it here against erudite minds who have abdicated the first impressions of their childhood in order to retreat to an exclusionary set of ideas. Questions about the fantastic belong to the realm of fantasy, and may God save me from stirring up the miserable arguments of academics that have filled these past centuries and may God save me from transporting a theological quarrel into the terrain of literature in the interest of the grace of fairies and the free will of the mind![24] I dare to believe that if the freedom we are told about is not, as I have sometimes feared, a juggler's sleight of hand, its two main sanctuaries must lie in the religious person's belief and the poet's imagination.

What other compensation can you, free men who sell the monk's cloister out from under him, who undermine the hermit's retreat, the refuge he built alongside the eagle's nest, promise to a soul profoundly sorrowed by the experience of life?[25] What other future could such a soul hope for now in the anguish of so many dashed hopes, which revolutions sweep up with them, I ask you? Do you have any joy to give to the brothers whom you push away that can compensate them for the loss of a single, consoling error? And are you so sure of the truths for which you make nations pay so dearly that you judge their sterile bitterness to be worth as much as the sweet, inoffensive reverie of an unfortunate soul falling asleep to a happy dream? Everything in you, it has to be said, enjoys unlimited freedom—except for conscience and genius. And you do not realize that your triumphant march across the ideas of a defeated generation has not entirely engulfed the human race, for there remain around you men who need to occupy themselves with something other than your theories, who need to exercise their thought along a progression that is imaginary, to be sure, but is perhaps no less imaginary than your material progression, and its predictions are no less important than your attempts at social perfection under the protection of the freedoms you invoke! You forget that, like you, everyone in living Europe has received the education of Achilles, and that you are not the only ones to have broken the bones and veins of the lion to suck the marrow and drink the blood! It is a fact, and also no doubt a good thing, that the positivist world belongs irrevocably to you; but break, break this shameful chain of the intellectual world with which you obstinately persist in imprisoning the poet's thought. We have each had, in our turn, our own Battle of Philippi, and there are some, I swear, who did not wait for that event to become convinced that the truth is only a sophism and that virtue is only a name. For such people, there must be a region inaccessible to the tumultuous movements of the crowd, where their future can be placed. This is the region of faith for those who believe and the region of the ideal for those who dream, all those who prefer, in compensation for everything, illusion over doubt. And after all, no matter what, the fantastic returns to us again and again, regardless of what is done to proscribe it. What are most difficult

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to uproot from a people are not the fictions that preserve it but the lies that amuse it.

Notes

This translation is based on Charles Nodier's "Du fantastique en littérature," *Œuvres complètes de Charles Nodier*, vol. 5, Hauman et Cie, 1844, which is a reprint of the article originally published in *Revue de Paris* in 1830.

1. For additional information about the authors and works Nodier cites, please see "A Literary Tour of Charles Nodier's 'Du fantastique en littérature,'" a StoryMapJS available at wp.geneseo.edu/lizmcmanus/du-fantastique-en-litterature-a-literary-tour/.

2. The *Gulistan* (*Rose Garden*; 1258), by the Persian poet Saadi of Shiraz, is a collection of poems and stories that is meant to be a literary rose garden, where the reader can read a poem or story at will, the way that one might randomly pick a rose from a garden.

3. Here Nodier criticizes the members of the Académie française, who came out against the *romantique* school—which was, for Nodier, often indistinguishable from the fantastic—in 1824 with the *Discours sur le romantisme*, a speech given by Louis-Simon Auger on 24 April 1824.

4. Nodier attributes the survival of classical literature in the Middle Ages to the Umayyad Caliphate's expansion into modern-day Spain in the eighth century CE.

5. This medieval Helen, "happier than the other Helen" of ancient mythology, likely refers to the Helen of *Historia destructionis Troiae* ("The History of the Destruction of Troy") from 1287, written by the Italian author Guido delle Colonne.

6. A *marotte* is a carved scepter used as a prop by a jester or harlequin.

7. *Vade in pace*, or immurement, is a form of execution in which a person is walled into a small space and eventually starves to death.

8. *Les voleurs*, or *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*; 1781), was written by Friedrich Schiller.

9. Nodier refers to an extract of the novel *Siebenkäs* (1796), by Johann Paul Friedrich Richter. Mme de Staël translated this extract, titling it *Le songe* (*The Dream*), and included it in *De l'Allemagne* ("Of Germany"; 1813), an extremely influential work that offered an early and often-cited definition of the term *romantique*.

10. The Hotel de Rambouillet was the location of a literary salon led by Madame de Rambouillet from 1618 to 1650.

11. Nodier refers to *Athalie* (1691), a tragedy by Jean Racine, and *Semiramis* (1748), a tragedy by Voltaire.

12. Louis-Élisabeth de la Vergne, Comte de Tressan, translated and adapted chivalric romances from Old French in 1782.

13. Jean Chapelain's epic poem about Joan of Arc, *La Pucelle* ("The Maid"; 1656), was never published in its entirety and never lived up to the expectations of readers and critics.

14. Nodier misquotes Perrault. "Tire la chevillette, la bobinette cherra" ("turn the knob and the door will open") is what the Big Bad Wolf says to Red Riding Hood in Perrault's tale.

15. Little Thumbling is known in France as Petit Poucet and in the United States as Tom Thumb.

16. "Patient Griselda" tells the tale of a young peasant woman who marries a prince. He tests her loyalty to him by telling her he must kill their children and, later, divorce her. She obediently submits to all his tests. Her reward comes many years later when she is reunited with her children and reinstated as princess.

17. "Donkeyskin" tells the story of a beautiful princess whose father is determined to marry her, the most beautiful woman in the land. She succeeds in escaping his advances by wearing a donkey skin to appear hideous, and she eventually finds work as a cook in another kingdom. There a prince catches a glimpse of her when she is not wearing the skin and immediately falls in love.

18. "Ricky with the Tuft" tells the tale of an ugly prince, born with a funny tuft of hair on his head, who is granted the power to give intelligence and wisdom to his true love. He falls in love with a beautiful but stupid princess, on whom he bestows intelligence, but not before he convinces her to promise to marry him in a year. But in a year's time the beautiful and, now, intelligent princess refuses the ugly yet kind and witty Ricky. However, he convinces her that she has the power to transform him into a handsome and noble prince. And her love does just that.

19. The *galette* ("cake") and the *pot à beurre* ("jar of butter") are two treats that Red Riding Hood brings to her grandmother.

20. The Institut de France refers to a learned society that included the Académie française, which was openly hostile to the Romantic movement in the mid-1820s.

21. *The Blue Bird* and *The Golden Bough* (1698) are fairy tales written by Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barneville, Baronness d'Aulnoy, better known as Madame d'Aulnoy.

22. Nodier refers here to the final years of the ancien régime.

23. Nodier's "lackistes" is a misspelling of "lakistes," which refers to early-nineteenth-century English poets, including Coleridge and Wordsworth, who lived along the shores of lakes in Cumberland and Westmoreland.

24. Nodier is likely referring to medieval angelology, which attempted to blend faith and rational thinking.

25. Here Nodier uses the term "free men" ironically to refer to the revolutionaries and their nineteenth-century inheritors, the liberals. Nodier, despite his revolutionary upbringing, became a royalist (conservative) and a Catholic, and thus he disagreed with the revolutionary practice of seizing property from the Catholic Church.

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