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978-0-521-27656-6 - A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure,  
Especially of the Fantastic

Christine Brooke-Rose

Excerpt

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PART I

The real, the unreal and the rhetoric

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## 1

## The real and the unreal

That this century is undergoing a reality crisis has become a banality, easily and pragmatically shrugged off. Perhaps it is in fact undergoing a crisis of the imagination; a fatigue, a decadence. And rhetoricians usually appear in times of decadence, that is, when stable values disappear, when forms break down and new ones appear, co-existing with all the old ones. Their task is then to try to make sense of what is happening by working out reasoned typologies of structures and trying to account for 'deviations from the norm' (the norm being what they, and people generally, have been used to). But since they have to start, humbly, with simple structures, their attempts never wholly account for the explosions of forms taking place around them, they become more and more complex, more cumbersome, themselves more 'deviating' from their own original principles, more and more self-questioning. Today the rhetoricians, of innumerable kinds, are more voluble than they have been for centuries, and since the literary work of art is itself a rhetorical system, superimposing, on the first arbitrary system of natural languages, yet another system of representation, the complications of modern rhetoric have become both fascinating and discouraging. Fascinating for itself, in a self-reflexing way that itself reflects what is happening in the work of art, but discouraging and confusing for others. The defence of the reader, the journalist and the teacher is usually to reject all this as nonsense and, in effect, to stay with or propagate whatever notions they were brought up on.

There is a similar split in attitudes to 'reality'. For professional philosophers, the commonsense division that defines the real as the physical and empirical, and the unreal as the metaphysical has ever been contested, from Plato who regarded our familiar reality as mere shadows of perfect ideas (truer, so more 'real'), to modern

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post-Hegelians such as Derrida, for whom 'truth' is for ever postponed (see p. 46), and modern philosophy generally, which has long come to recognise that the brute ontological fact is inaccessible to us, since man can only re-present it through his many arbitrary systems, including language and the languages of science.

The difference here is that, whereas the various rhetorics are simply dismissed or ignored by the average reader, the sense that empirical reality is not as secure as it used to be is now pervasive at all levels of society. Certainly what used to be called empirical reality, or the world, seems to have become more and more unreal, and what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to or studied as the only 'true' or 'another and equally valid' reality. Witness, for example, Foucault on madness (1961), Laing on schizophrenia as a breakthrough (1967), and since then what Shoshanna Felman (1978) calls 'cette inflation discursive *pour la folie*' as well as psychic research on paranormal phenomena or, on a more general level, the return of religious belief, the vast rise of occultism, mystical sects, drugs, and the renewed waves of ideological and religious fanaticisms.

This apparent and for the moment still partial (and perhaps transient) inversion of real/unreal is perfectly logical: if the 'real' has come to seem unreal, it is natural to turn to the 'unreal' as real: the two propositions are interrelated. This 'naturalness' however is due to man's need to impose significance on the empirical reality around him, which in itself is without significance. But of course, the very statement that the ontological fact is itself without significance is a signifying statement, imposing a view of reality as non-significant, imposing, that is, the significance of non-significance; a contradiction which seems to escape Clément Rosset who, in a brief but remarkable book (*Le réel – traité de l'idiotie*, 1977), first demonstrates that all reality is both necessarily determined (in virtue of the identity principle that  $A = A$ ) and necessarily fortuitous in the sense that it is not necessarily this or that, but cannot escape the necessity of being something (i.e. anything). This property inherent to all reality of being both fortuitous and determined he calls 'the insignificance of the real', and what makes reality tip over into nonsense is precisely the necessity we impose on it of always being significant (pp. 13–14).

The only enigma then, for Rosset, is the ontological fact, that is, the necessity of being something (anything) is valid for all reality excepting only the fact of its existence. Similarly, all significance

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given to the real is illusory, excepting only the fact that it is (p. 40).

But, he says, we perceive reality as either necessary or fortuitous. When an occurrence or object seems to us *both necessary and non-necessary*, this is an isolated perception, at once sanctioned by laughter (as in certain types of humour) or by irritation (as when losing a game of chess, the moves of which are both necessary and fortuitous, pp. 29–30). Or again, there are four main means of access to the real in its necessary/fortuitous non-significance, its mere being itself (its ‘idiocy’ in the original sense of singular, unique): that of the drunk, whose seeing double is a superficial optical phenomenon (it is we who see double), and who in fact sees things in their prodigious ontological singularity; that of a person suddenly bereft of love, who sees things divested of all emotional investment (wash-basins exist, coffee exists); that of the work of art; and that of philosophy, which sums up the other three in the sense that the philosophical state, in Plato’s words, is a state of being perpetually drunk, in love, and an artist.

All other perceptions of the real pass through the double, the mirror-image, the ‘value added’ of significance (pp. 34–5, 41–6). And the double has three main functions: (1) practical – to displace somehow a reality that must at all cost be evacuated (A is A, but also equal to all its doubles); (2) metaphysical – to make reality less ‘idiotic’ by endowing it with another meaning; (3) fantasmatic – to produce an object lacking in an incomplete world and thus account for desire. All these betray a refusal to apprehend the real in its singularity (pp. 46–51).

However, the direct access to the real which Rosset generously attributes to art and philosophy is surely highly ambiguous, for on his own showing (he deals with many literary texts, as well as with what he calls the philosophies of (a) the ‘illusionist’, which stems from Hegel, and (b) the ‘incurable’, which stems from Kant), both are largely and deeply involved in this doubled vision, and philosophy not the least, since the notion of the incomplete world and indeed all idealism goes back to Plato (see also Rosset 1979).

This question of responsibility apart, there may seem to be an apparent contradiction in the very fact that Rosset is constantly ‘interpreting’ or giving significance to the many literary works he mentions (from Sophocles to a comic strip by Hergé), and to the philosophies he discusses, even if it is only *his* significance that reality has no significance. The contradiction is only apparent, at least as far as the works are concerned, for it is at two removes from the

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contradiction I mentioned above when I said that his view of *reality* as non-significant is itself a signifying *statement*. Any statement in language must signify, but literary works form yet another signifying system. The *texts* he is looking at and interpreting are not 'reality' but man-made 'artefacts' (Frye 1957), 'secondary modelling systems' (Lotman 1970), or meaning-making machines, just like philosophies, ideologies or any other meaning-making machines, which he interprets as such, and quite legitimately within his postulates. The difference between philosophical systems and art-systems is that philosophical systems are wholly and avowed meaning-making machines, while the art-systems display a graduating scale from works that are avowed meaning-making machines or claim to be, and works that come as close as communication systems can to mere ontological existence ('pure' poetry, 'concrete' poetry, abstract art, music); but of course even these have at least the structural significance of similarity and difference, on which all communication systems (and ultimately all criticism) are based.

If significance is necessity, as opposed to fortuitousness which seems to us meaningless, it is certainly true that, on a much more popular level than that of philosophers, this century seems to us more and more fortuitous despite all our attempts at rational planning, scientific analysis and system-building (including rhetoric). Never before have the meaning-making means at our disposal (linguistic, economic, political, scientific) appeared so inadequate, not only to cope with the enormity of the problems we continue to create (since every apparent solution creates new problems), but simply to explain the world. This seems to be the century which, despite or because of the pace of technological advance, has taken the longest, relative to that pace, to emerge from the mental habits of the previous century. We know that all the old secure values have gone, that a radical change is occurring which man must undergo or perish, yet we somehow go on *as if*, ensconced still in relics of nineteenth-century ideologies, in a way which other times in parallel situations apparently did not. Apparently, because it seems so in the midst of it and retrospectively. But this too is probably an illusion of culture, of history books which impose their neatly significant patterns of periods calmly succeeding each other as we turn to the next chapter, whatever the anguish and turmoil we have just read about.

In one of his most important books (1966, esp. p. 95), Frank Kermode argues persuasively against this illusion of culture, and

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shows that although 'there is a powerful eschatological element in modern thought' (the modern apocalypse), it is commonplace but wrong 'to talk about our historical situation as uniquely terrible and in a way privileged, a cardinal point of time'. Eschatological anxiety has always existed, it was even a feature of Mesopotamian culture, he tells us, but since 'it attaches itself to the eschatological means available, it is associated with changing images'. The book is important for the links it establishes with philosophical and art systems, and, more particularly, with narrative literature, which most clearly fulfils our need for 'a beginning, a middle and an end'. On that high level, I agree with Kermode, but since I am here trying to account for the return of the fantastic in all its forms, some of which were until not so long ago ignored or despised by intellectuals as crude, I shall stay with this pervasive 'sense of an ending' as it is understood (in my view) more popularly.

There are, we feel, some essential differences between this century's crisis and those undergone by others. One, obvious even to the layman, is that the very notion of progress is now untenable in its secure nineteenth-century sense of man's perfectibility – indeed in the moral sphere we seem on the contrary to be capable of regressing several centuries, or rather, of making 'progresses' in iniquity unimaginable before.

Another is that man is now wholly decentralised, having been partially so by the Copernican revolution, after which man placed his centre in human consciousness. But now this too has been dethroned, after, on the one hand, Freud's 'Copernican revolution' and its sequels and, on the other, the advances in modern physics, which questioned the very possibility of totalisation, of postulating an ordered, systemisable universe. After Einstein's equivalence of matter and energy, after de Broglie's dual nature of particle and light wave, after Planck's demonstration that energy is emitted in discontinuous quanta, and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle which replaced the determinism of classical physics with a state of probability and randomness, and showed that observable phenomena are affected by the instrument observing them, a certain tolerance of ambiguity was introduced into science, and man is now faced with a philosophy of indeterminacy and a multivalent logic. As Zavarzadeh (1976:16) points out, the prevalent cultural metaphor, now more or less banalised, is no longer that of order, or 'organic unity', but that of entropy.

Thirdly, and equally banalised, man has learnt that he is mortal;

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not of course in the sense that he as an individual must die, for he has always known that, and has coped with it in various signifying ways. Even within that knowledge of individual death, there is a vast difference between knowing that I (or X, whom I love) must die, and being aware that when I die my whole world of cognition and all that I have loved and invested with significance must also disappear with my cognition of it. This too, however, man has coped with by simply denying it, through various fictions which in some way enable this very love, in some purified form or other, to conquer death. These fictions are the fruit of desire, and are 'true' in re-presenting the undeniable fact that desire, though by definition of an absent object, is channelled towards specific and present objects and thereby appears to conquer individual death – in works of man that remain after him, and more usually in progeny, not just as repetition of self but as creation of another signifying complex.

Never before, it is felt, has man been so squarely faced with the possible annihilation of mankind and all his works, his planet and perhaps more. Certainly the end of the world has always been present in his fictions, and surges especially at a millenium, but this notion was itself part of his survival fictions: he as individual could be saved. We have no such generally accepted fictions today, unless of course we wish individually to retain one of those.

These essential differences, and no doubt others, are deeply linked to the sense we have that the real has become unreal. If significance is necessity and fortuitousness meaningless, how has the situation become necessary? In the popular view, it is the result of rational science, based on necessary connections, science on which we had based all our hopes, and which has 'let us down', with what seems to the layman wholly fortuitous discoveries. In his mania for significance, man looks for moral meanings; his own guilt, or, displaced, the myth of the mad scientist. Or he looks for mystical meanings: man, not content with the created light, has discovered the un-created light, the secret of the universe (in some versions, long known but undivulged by the wise men of ancient occult traditions); man-Prometheus, or man-Lucifer. These can take optimistic forms: man will be wise, will control this force, and merely manipulate its existence to prevent its use; or this force will be the solution to the death of the planet by other means – these means however being also the result of unwisdom – greed, sloth, power-games, so that the force will enable us to go on being greedy, polluting, powerful.

Such myths have always existed, but never before have they been

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so dangerously, yet so obviously (for any man to see) ambiguous, self-cancelling, 'meaningless', perched so visibly, at one and the same time, on the necessary and the fortuitous – popularly exemplified, on the one hand, in the vast and rational scientific apparatus, even with built-in failsafe, and, on the other, in the famous pressing of the button.

The burden of this meaningless situation being unbearable, we naturally escape, and easily, into our more familiar reality, endowed with significance by our desire, whatever it might be, and displace the meaningless situation into a mere backdrop, apocalyptic no doubt, but a backdrop we cease to see. This displacement also partly explains the banalisation of the scientific 'marvellous': since the excitement of the moon landing, nobody cares much about Russians circling the earth for six months or a Pioneer photographing Saturn. It is 'meaningless'. Inversely, nature films have rendered 'marvellous' what is perfectly natural and happening all the time, everywhere around us, unperceived by us before the telescopic lens and accelerated filming. Then this too becomes banalised, from repetition. But the meaningless pursues us daily even in that more familiar reality, in the all too visible contradictions of our discourse; for example in the way in which all discourse manipulates us and doesn't even bother to hide the fact; in the purposeful inflation of an item by the media, followed by down-toning or inexplicable silence; in daily catastrophes that we cease to react to, guiltily of course, so that we do react, and hysterically, as soon as we are in some way involved, personally, or by proxy of friends or fortuitous presence, or nationally, by proxy of close geographical or political connection, that is, through vested interests, through investment of significance. And this significance, if not itself obvious at once, is given to us by the media who can whip up or tone down or obliterate at will; just as a bestseller can be created wholesale, or the death of a film star become a world event juxtaposed with a local genocide, or an alliance with a dictator presented as necessary, and quietly dropped when inconvenient.

I say 'all discourse' because it is fashionable to pick on the obvious ones, like the media above, or publicity, but no discourse is innocent, from the supposedly neutral administrative discourse to the pseudo-scientific occult, from the authoritarian dogmatic discourse of theology or political ideology to the personally neurotic discourse of desire, from the elitist jargon of supposedly revolutionary groups to that of supposedly pedagogic ones, or even in the obvious con-



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traditions of our educational systems. It is perhaps one of the saddest aspects of all the verbiage that the very intellectuals who show most relish in analysing such manipulative discourse themselves fall easy victims to at least one type.

Fudge: this is the term for a 'rule' invented by a group of linguists who analysed the way certain rules of transformational grammar were somehow not as logical or explicit as they seemed (*Where the rules fail: a student's guide*, edited by Ann Borkin 1972). Somewhere the fudge-rule occurs. As in all system-building. However, all human discourse is fudged, not only, as is natural, in personal and spontaneous situations, not only, as is right and proper, in poetry, with its black holes of density, its great gaps of non-significance through the veil of significance (for poetry is very close to the real), gaps which we can fill in with all and any significance; but also and more dangerously in carefully planned ideological discourse. Dogma by definition must fudge. And insofar as a basic premiss is at any time shown or declared to be untrue, or only partly true, or not true in the sense earlier accepted, a whole edifice collapses, an abyss remains: the real, which must quickly be filled with new idols, readjusted significance. The differences between the collapse of earlier systems and today would seem to lie in the pace, and hence in our increased and inescapable awareness of successive changes.

Our very capacity for being thus manipulated, either into ignorance or into sincere convictions and (equally sincere) indifference – each producing the other in turn – also helps to create, in the long run, this new consciousness we have of the real having become unreal, because brutally endowed with significance and then as brutally deprived of it. With the death of the planet in the conveniently displaced background, the feeling that not only can no one be trusted but that we ourselves cannot, and contribute constantly, makes us unavoidably aware of the real's meaninglessness. Not its absurdity, which is itself a significance, through which we saw reality earlier in the century, but its non-significance. As Robbe-Grillet put it (1962; 1965, p. 53), 'the world is neither meaningful nor absurd. It quite simply *is*.'

This awareness, as a generalised phenomenon, seems new. Until now, only a few philosophers, madmen or cranks would maintain the thesis of the non-signifying real. And if, as Rosset maintains, we do have access to the 'idiocy' of the real, half consciously, in sudden moments – a certain type of humour, irritation in certain specific situations, drunkenness, loss of love, or through (some) art and

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(some) philosophy, then it could be argued that the present time has peculiarly increased those moments, with its apocalyptic backdrop, its freedom of mores, its visibly nonsensical discourse, forever increasing in volume as a kind of ghastly western parallel to the birth-rate on the rest of the planet, and its inheritance of two main philosophical currents (Hegel/Kant) which both manage in different ways to duplicate the ontological fact with a significance somehow absent. We are peculiarly privileged in our access to that meaningless ontological fact: we have become irritated clowns, drunk or drugged, perpetually bereft of love, artists and philosophers of the meaningless. Hence our voluble and frenzied attempts to find meaning, to build new systems. Hence the emergence of semantics, semiology, and later semiotics, which study meaning and how it functions; and psychoanalysis, sociology, the philosophy of history, linguistic philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, modern rhetoric, generative grammar, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, etc., all of which accept as given the arbitrariness of language systems, all of which try desperately to establish the mental structures underlying human discourse, rather than merely to note and expound upon the discourse. But either way the discourse upon discourse that man has always needed since writing began has now expanded to a vast industry of unprecedented proportions.