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## **The Future of a Fantasy**

What is fantasy? Is this any kind of fiction, any kind of a fabricated image of which we know that it has no place in the real world? Such definition would make fantasy a concept far too broad, and as such rather uninteresting. In order to make it fruitful, we should try to contrast it with another, closely related category whose function will reveal itself as, in fact, completely different: namely, illusion. When Sigmund Freud wrote his famous critique of religious phenomena and called it *Future of an Illusion*, he made his intentions very clear from the onset: religious belief is nothing but an illusion, an illusion of being parented by an omnipotent being, fabricated by mankind in order to survive in the hostile and unyielding universe. But what the father of psychoanalysis could say about the future of a fantasy? Would he be equally dismissive? Probably not, he would have to admit that fantasies are more vital and significant to human beings than sheer illusions. But why, really? This is precisely what I will try to explain to you.

So, what is the difference between fantasy and illusion, and what is their respective relation to reality? In psychoanalysis, as well as in the general usage of the word, „illusion“ has a definitely negative connotation. It describes a state of deception of senses and understanding as to the real nature of the world: to be deluded - the word „delusion“ is closely related to it - means not to be able to see the reality. Worse, it may also conceal - as it is revealed by Freud's demystifying efforts - an unconscious, or, perhaps, only superficially suppressed, wish not to see reality as it is, that is, to engage into delusion which takes the form of a self-deception, or, as Sartre called it a *mauvaise foi*. This Sartrian term, „bad faith“ is especially useful here for it shows that illusions rarely involve deep psychological defences, like repression, but remain on the level of shallow suppressions operating within the subconscious domain of a rather superficial self-deception.

The definition of „fantasy“ is precisely the opposite: its relationship with reality is far more complex than in the case of illusion, and its status within the psychological apparatus is based on the strongest repressions possible, leading to the very depths of the unconscious. It is true that fantasy does not refer to the reality as we know it; that it is wholly in the service of the Pleasure Principle. On the other hand, however, it doesn't merely hide some unpleasant aspects of the world, as it is in the case of illusion. Its function is more specific. It consists in *denying* the conditions which had thwarted realisation of some important desire, and thus it allows its satisfaction *in effigie*, i.e., in the sphere of the imaginary. We could resort here to the famous distinction coined by William Blake, between *negation* and *contrariness*; while illusion merely negates, and as such posits itself within the logical sphere of stiff oppositions, fantasy's power consists in its provocative, adversary attitude towards the rigidity of the former. Illusion's weakness lies in its attempt to compete with the principle of reality; it tries to make a cognitive claim about the world and while it wants to satisfy some of our frustrated wishes (like, e.g. a wish to be parented by an omnipotent being, which, according to Freud, leads to coining of the religious illusion), it always has to do it *in compromise* with the Reality Principle. This is because illusion and truth compete within the same domain, the domain of the one and only reality. Whereas fantasy, using the strategy of contrariness, wants, in fact, much more. It attempts to trick the real - not to negate but to deceive it - and thus avoid any compromise with the constraints of *Realitätsprinzip*. By refusing to comply with its imposition of the one and only real world, it sets an opposite realm which becomes a crux of a quite new, adversary kind of subjective reality. So, while illusions usually require no more than just a superficial self-deception, some measure of a „bad faith“, in order to reach their compromise within the conflicting principles of pleasure and reality, fantasies have to be

repressed far deeper and, in consequence, use a different, more autonomous and more vivid means of expression. Thus, illusions usually occur in the sphere of perception and conceptualisation, whereas fantasies operate in the domain of an alternative reality: reveries, day-dreaming, sudden tides of vivid imaginations.

According to Freud, fantasies are incomparably more significant to the working of human psyche than illusions: they constitute the hardest core of what he calls a „psychical reality“. This paradox - „psychical reality“ being made of fantasies which openly defy reality - is one of his greatest discoveries. It reveals antithetical nature of the human self which is based - to paraphrase Max Stirner - on even less than nothing. The images it uses to set itself *against* the world and thus establish itself in its existence are not just unreal: they defy reality, thus making place for something which Emerson, a great figure of American romanticism, called a „golden impossibility“, a subject whose existence not only wasn't prepared by the world as it is but seems completely improbable. In Freud's implicit formulation - and I take him here to be also one of the latest descendants of the romantic lineage - the existence of the subject is something that defies laws of the Principle of Reality: it should not have taken place, it has no natural right to emerge. In order to set itself through all the obstacles sent by the world to annihilate a rising new psyche, man has to recourse to fantasies: to build the core of its antithetical „psychical reality“ on the denial of the real. Strong „narcissistic fantasies“, in which the psyche denies its condition of dependence and sports a self-image of magical autonomy and omnipotence, are, in fact, her first defence against the world, her first „protective shield“, and, simultaneously, her act of origin. At the same time, they are the very source of the fantastical world of the romantic literature which protects primary, magical *fantasmata* against the intrusion of the real, disenchanted world.

The very term *psychische Realität* appears already in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* where it indicates all those factors within human psyche which *resist* an easy access of self-conscious introspection. In opposition to the Cartesian line which traditionally associates subjectivity with transparent self-knowledge and internal plasticity, Freud defines “psychical reality” in analogy with physical reality whose most distinctive feature is its opaqueness and resistance. Thus, the term “psychical reality” – say Laplanche and Pontalis – “is often used by Freud to designate whatever in the subject's psyche presents a consistency and resistance comparable to those displayed by material reality; fundamentally, what is involved here is unconscious desire and its associated fantasies”. The psychical reality, therefore, is a set of those psychic elements which “take on the force of reality”. And the elements which take on this force of reality are nothing else but the primordial fantasies: the inner imaginarium which pictures the fulfilment of first and strongest desires. It is those fantasms which set the most thorough resistance to conscious reflection; as such, they fill the deepest core of psychic being.

“If we look at unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape - writes Freud in reference to primal fantasies - we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that psychical reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with material reality.”<sup>1</sup>

Fantasy is thus not *just* a fantasy; not just a feeble phantom which dissolves in confrontation with harsh reality, but a formula of an alternative being which arises in adversary attitude towards the principle of reality. If it weren't for this original conflict with the reality principle, the „psychical reality“ could not constitute itself in its autonomy. Thus, what *prima facie* may seem a weak and purely defensive fantasm, standing no chance towards the overwhelming power of the real world, becomes, in fact, a paradoxical source of creation. For if it weren't for the adversary boldness of fantasies against the real, the psychic being could never achieve

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, in: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. V, London 1953-1973, p. 620.

even the lowest degree of autonomy, and thus could never constitute itself as a separate subject.

Romanticism was the first movement in the history of Western thought which spotted the vital importance of fantasy, creating a world boldly and defiantly opposed to what Blake used to call “a universe of death”, the disenchanting, modern reality of Newtonian physics. Romantics did not want to contend themselves with mere illusions: they consciously chose a more provoking trope of the fantastical. Long before Freud, who merely codified this romantic knowledge, they discovered that fantasies, fulfilling desires which are overtly impossible, do not compete with reality, they challenge reality as such, thus refusing to comply with the principle other than pure pleasure of instantaneous gratification. The romantics, living in the age of progressing disenchantment, reclaimed the use of fantasies as a primordial means of psychical defence against the offences of external reality: witnessing shattering of many illusions under the influence of modern science, they invested in the fantastical. So, it is thanks to fantasies - and not just simply illusions - that they have managed, in Novalis' words, „to romanticise the world“. They fought for the right to fantasize (not to be mistaken with the right to be deluded) not only for the sake of whim, but with an intense sense of necessity: they filled their rhetoric with fantasies, convinced that human subject would not be able to survive without their beneficial influence in the world increasingly more deprived of magic and warmth.

Let me repeat again: illusion is a weak, defensive compromise, yet fantasy manages to challenge reality in its most threatening aspect. Thus, the fantasy of science-fiction, the most popular contemporary genre using the rhetoric of the fantastical, challenges the most threatening aspect of the modern reality which is its scientifically mortified view of nature as, to use Blake's words again, the fallen domain of Satanic Mills. Transforming science by fantasy was already a favourite romantic trope: the prose of Novalis, Kleist and E.T.A. Hoffman visibly anticipates the High S-F style of such writers as H.P. Lovecraft or, nowadays, the French admirer of Lovecraft, Michel Houellebecq. The romanticisation of the world is therefore the process which is still going on, and, unlike Freudian illusions, seems to have a secure future.