

Levchenko on Whitehead (2006)

Whitehead, Claire. *The Fantastic in France and Russia in the Nineteenth Century: In Pursuit of Hesitation*. London: Legenda, 2006. Pp. 170. ISBN 978-1-904350-56-9

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Claire Whitehead's *The Fantastic in France and Russia in the Nineteenth Century: In Pursuit of Hesitation*, is a study of the fantastic following the critical tradition introduced by Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov's groundbreaking *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, published in 1970, contains a definition of the fantastic which Whitehead makes the basis of her study: "The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a being who knows only natural laws when confronted by an event which is seemingly supernatural" (3). Whitehead highlights the structuralist approaches to the genre of the fantastic employed by Todorov, among which is treatment of a text as a self-sufficient aesthetic entity. She argues, however, that the issue of the provocation of hesitation was largely overlooked by Todorov and his successors. The central thesis of Whitehead's book is that the hesitation experienced by the reader of the fantastic is not the result of the fictional events *per se* but rather the depiction of these events – the stylistic, narrative, and syntactic devices employed by the author. In her approach to the pursuit of hesitation Whitehead reinserts the figures of the addresser and the reader which were left out of Todorov's study.

The book provides a rich comparative analysis of eight prose works written in France and Russia from 1833 to 1887. The development of the genre of the fantastic in these two countries depended not only on close literary contacts between them but also on the commonality of the root to which the fantastic can be traced – the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann, who was often translated into Russian via the French. The choice of only eight primary texts is explained by Whitehead's aim to focus on works, "in which hesitation is sustained for an extended period in the narrative" (9).

The book has four chapters. Chapters one and two explore the mechanics of hesitation in two types of narrative – heterodiegetic (where the narrator is absent from the story he tells) and homodiegetic (where the narrator is present in the story he recounts). In the first chapter Whitehead analyzes specific techniques, such as geographical and temporal references, which are used by Alexander Pushkin in *The Queen of Spades* and by Théophile Gautier in *Spirite* for establishing the verisimilitude of the fictional world – one of the two essential components of the fantastic. The author then assesses how these writers create interpretative ambiguity by means of certain syntactic devices (such as the use of modalizing syntax) and by changing in the narrative point of view. In the second chapter Whitehead reveals the commonality of syntactic devices in heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narratives, and discusses the role played by the narrator's personality in the fantastic, specifically examining Prosper Mérimée's *La Vénus d'Ille* and Vladimir Odoevskii's *The Sylph*. The author specifically focuses on manipulation of multiple voices in the homodiegetic context as a device which mirrors switches in point of view in heterodiegetic narrative. Whitehead also examines how the reader assigns authority to different voices in the situation with heteroglossia, and how the difficulties of handling multiple voices increase a narrative's ambiguity.

Chapters three and four provide a typology of hesitation in texts where this element is more profound and disruptive, such as where narrative voices show a tendency toward mental instability or self-conscious playfulness. The third chapter centers around Todorov's postulate that insanity has the potential of reducing the supernatural and thus resolving the hesitation. Here Whitehead provides examples of two primary texts with different diegetic modes: *The Double* by Fedor Dostoevskii and *Le Horla* by Guy de Maupassant. She demonstrates that there exists a group of texts in which madness does not serve the purpose of disambiguation. She brings to light the techniques of creating sustained ambiguity in these texts, and claims that these techniques are used in order to make sure that "the disintegration of the fictional self is reflected in the disintegration of rational discourse" (117).

The central focus of the fourth chapter is the figure of the "initiated reader," which most closely correspond to Stanley Fish's "informed reader." Whitehead analyzes effects produced by syntactic and narrative devices upon this reader and questions the extent to which the experience of hesitation, essential to the fantastic, can be problematized in works with irony as its main mode. Whitehead demonstrates her powers of reading here, making a very strong argument that both Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* and Théophile Gautier's *Onuphrius* challenge the generic model of the fantastic with their inclusion of self-reflected and playful performances. She argues that these works thus extend the Todorovian notion of the fantastic by shifting "the hesitation away from fictional events and towards the status of the discourse" (151).

In short, Claire Whitehead's skillful close reading of eight prose works by French and Russian nineteenth-century writers result in a persuasively and carefully structured argument, which complements and extends Todorov's work on the genre of

the fantastic. Whitehead's study is an invaluable resource for scholars of French and Russian literature, and those interested in a comparative approach to literary works.

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