

LANDOLFI'S PHOBIAS: FEAR AND THE FANTASTIC IN THE STORIES OF TOMMASO LANDOLFI

Michael McLoughlin
(University of Wales)

Sommario

La paura ha sempre giocato un ruolo importante nella letteratura fantastica. Nel Gotico ottocentesco e nei film d'orrore contemporanei è un elemento necessario alla catarsi finale e alla sconfitta del Male. L'opera di Tommaso Landolfi (1908-1979) è difficile da categorizzare; raccogliendo in sé qualità sia moderniste che postmoderniste, viene ad assumere un carattere che è essenzialmente sui generis. Nei suoi racconti esplora un ulteriore aspetto della paura, come angoscia esistenziale o fobia di una realtà non più conoscibile. Questo articolo esamina i meccanismi della paura come tema fondamentale nelle opere di Landolfi, innanzitutto come parte inevitabile della tragedia della condizione umana ma anche, paradossalmente, come forza creatrice che gli permette di scrivere.

The stories and novels of Tommaso Landolfi are striking because of the singularly disturbing, perhaps even nightmare, quality with which they are imbued. Landolfi's characters are misfits and phobics, his worldview darkly comic at best, pessimistic and bitter most of the time. Although influenced early on in his career by surrealism (seen most clearly in the title story of his second collection *Il mar delle blatte e altre storie*, 1939), Landolfi's work grew away from surrealism without, arguably, ever completely divesting itself of the modernist aesthetic

expounded by Breton, his circle and its imitators. In consequence, I shall be arguing in this article that the Italian's *oeuvre* (or some of it at least) provides an interesting example of work that bridges the (admittedly generally ill-defined) gap between modernist and postmodernist writing. The nature of the relationship of his work to both modernism and postmodernism, however, is secondary, though integral, to my main purpose here: to examine the role and purpose of fear as a dominant (if not, in fact, the virtually all-pervading) theme in Landolfi's fantastic short stories in particular.

Fear, as either theme or reader reaction, has often been linked with fantastic writing — in particular with the nineteenth-century gothic genre and its twentieth century descendants "Horror" fiction and film. In his 1970 study *The Fantastic (Introduction à la littérature fantastique)* Tzvetzan Todorov names a genre "the uncanny" which he allies closely to the fantastic and which he defines (rather vaguely) thus:

In works that belong to this genre, events are related which may readily be accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which the works of the fantastic have made familiar. (1973:46)

Todorov likens the uncanny to the fantastic because they both provoke a reaction in the reader. According to his theory the fantastic only occurs when a reader "hesitates" between a natural and supernatural explanation of unexplained events in a text. However, it can be argued that Todorov is in fact confusing two different reader responses: rational (in the case of the fantastic) and emotional (in the case of the uncanny)¹. Fear/shock/aversion etc. can be elicited from texts in

1 In *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* Todorov posits the following typology of fantastic genres: uncanny/ fantastic-uncanny/ pure fantastic/ fantastic-marvellous/

many different genres. It is therefore more logical, to my mind, to consider fear as a reader reaction or as theme, as an element which can be injected into texts rather than attempting to define a "genre of fear" all by itself.

In order to examine what this element is and thereby to furnish a criterion by which to judge its use in Landolfi's stories it will prove worthwhile to look at Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*). Freud's essay is an often unsuccessful balancing act between psychoanalytic and aesthetic theory and, as he admits, his descriptions of the mechanisms of a real-life subject's reaction to real-life events do not necessarily hold true for a reader's response to a textual event. Freud attempts to explain why a strange and disquieting feeling is provoked in the subject by certain uncanny objects or situations and comes up with the theory that uncanny phenomena remind the subject (sub-consciously) of earlier "surmounted" stages of psychic development. These objects or events can remind the subject of either the Oedipal or pre-Oedipal phases of development.

At the pre-Oedipal stage there is no clear delineation between self and other in the mind of the infant; its notion of the world is, in Freud's phrase, "animistic". According to Freud's study, phenomena that may be listed among those which invoke an unconscious return to the pre-Oedipal include: coincidences (for example, thinking of someone

marvellous.

The genre central to Todorov's theory is the pure fantastic wherein the reader is unable to decide between a natural and a supernatural explanation of unexplained textual events. In the fantastic-uncanny the hesitation is resolved via a natural explanation, in the fantastic-marvellous by a supernatural one. The marvellous is a separate genre in which the strange events of the texts are explained in advance because the action is set in pre-history, the future, a parallel universe, etc., and tend to evoke reactions of wonder as opposed to fear (this genre includes many other different genres, e.g. science fiction, fairytale, fable, fantasy, etc.). The uncanny genre defined in the main text is, in my opinion, non-existent. The type of reactions Todorov enumerates can be found in many different types of text. Fear can be a component of the marvellous (the science-fiction film *Alien* springs most readily to mind as an example of a marvellous narrative which fulfils all of Todorov's criteria for the uncanny) which is diametrically opposed to the uncanny in his typology.

and they appear, wishing something and it happens); the “doubles” that are often found in fantastic literature (and which Freud also points out may have an Oedipal significance), which also function as a reminder of a world where self/other distinctions are not so clear as they are for the adult; lifelike toys, automata, mannequins etc., which, according to Freud, remind the subject of the life they once imbued them with in early childhood. All those events or objects which return the subject to the pre-Oedipal can certainly be considered to evoke a feeling of “puzzlement” but I would disagree that they invariably, if at all, produce negative reactions, i.e. feelings of fear or horror. Those phenomena which evoke reactions of dread and/or horror (and therefore of most interest to us here) are those associated in the mind of the subject with the Oedipal phase; with fears of castration and death.

According to Freud, it is at the Oedipal stage of development that the father steps in to break up the symbiotic infant/mother relationship, forbidding the infant's desire for the mother and effecting the self/other division. The infant is isolated, his desire thwarted and he is (metaphorically) threatened with castration by the father. In opposition to the phenomena which provoke a 'memory' of the pre-Oedipal (a non-dualistic mode of being), the phenomena connected with Oedipal recollection are reminders of severance and differentiation. Principal among the latter are severed limbs, corpses and anything to do with death — all of which, in Freud's opinion, elicit the uncanny reaction in the subject.

The preceding two paragraphs constitute a summary of Freud's clinical theory of the uncanny but not of an aesthetic one. In his essay Freud uses E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* as a kind of case study that forms the basis of his clinical theory, but has less success when he comes to view it aesthetically. *Der Sandmann*, very briefly, is the story of a young boy, Nathaniel, who is told by a family servant that he must always go directly to sleep or the Sandman will come to throw sand in his eyes and pluck them out. Nathaniel believes the Sandman to be a

real person, a friend of his father's called Coppelius. The boy is morbidly eager to see the dreaded Sandman and so hides in his father's study, where he is discovered by Coppelius. Nathaniel is so frightened that he faints and dreams that Coppelius is trying to gouge his eyes out. Years later, he meets a man, Coppola, whom he uncannily connects with the Sandman/Coppelius, and their meeting leads to a series of events which eventually drive the protagonist to madness and suicide.

Freud's analysis of Hoffmann's story deals only with character reactions. Nathaniel's dream is an Oedipal scene, the foundation of his castration complex — the eye, according to Freud, being a phallic symbol. Coppola, a wandering eye-glass seller, becomes uncanny for Nathaniel because he reminds him of the repressed fear of castration which stems from his encounter with Coppelius. The interesting point, for an aesthetic theory of the uncanny, is that although Coppola provokes a feeling of fear/horror in the protagonist he does not do so in the reader (at least, not in this reader). The point in the story where the reader experiences fear/horror is much earlier — with the description of the events of Nathaniel's dream. The dream plays on the reader's own castration fears, because of its evocation of the scene, in a way in which the description of Coppola cannot.

Toward the end of "The Uncanny" Freud makes the following observation:

[...] in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place [...] there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life. (1953-73:XVII, 243)

As an example to illustrate the first of these observations he cites Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*. In theory, being associated with death, the ghost should evoke a return to the Oedipal phase and a feeling of fear; Wilde's ludicrous and endearing protagonist does not. This

would seem to suggest, in my opinion, that, in literature at least, the particular emotional response evoked (in this case, fear) depends on how the object is presented — in other words, on the textual image and not on the basic concept.

Growing out of the above analysis I would like to offer an adaptation of Freud's notion. As suggested earlier, there is a difference in reaction to events/objects which return the subject to the pre-Oedipal phase as compared to those which return him to the Oedipal phase. The basic feeling of puzzlement evoked by coincidences, doubles, etc., in a return to the pre-Oedipal is exactly the same as that evoked by fantastic concepts. I use the term "fantastic concept" here to designate the basic element necessary to the fantastic text. In Todorov's theory mentioned above, the fantastic is determined by a "hesitation" on the part of the reader between a natural and a supernatural explanation of unusual textual events. However, it is my contention that for this hesitation to take place (and it can do so only in relation to traditional mimetic texts) there must be an element in the text capable of being considered supernatural, impossible etc and which is logically prior to any reader hesitation to which it may give rise. This is the "fantastic concept". It is an everyday concept that has been redefined so that it paradoxically includes a quality which is contradictory to its everyday definition. A classic example of a fantastic concept is the ghost which is based on the familiar concept of the corpse but a corpse which is fantastically redefined as animate. The ghost is a paradox: it is neither truly dead nor truly alive. Faced with such a paradox the reader of the fantastic is nonplussed or puzzled since the normal, empirical categories of phenomena (as defined by knowledge and experience) do not apply. What is real and what unreal (initially at least) in the fantastic is not clear-cut and so the boundaries between self and other (between subjective and objective realities) imposed at the Oedipal stage of development no longer seem as concrete — hence the similarity the fantastic concept and those

phenomena which Freud cites as reminding the subject of the pre-Oedipal stage².

Coincidences and doubles are instances of non-duality: in the former, subjective reality and objective reality appear as one; in the latter disparate entities become identical — in both cases the strict difference between signs which gives conventional meaning is undermined. This exactly mirrors what occurs in the fantastic concept which, because it is formed via the fusion of normally exclusive qualities and is therefore beyond comparison with knowledge and experience, cannot be wholly objectivized — it has no stable objectifiable referent. The reader is unable to fit it into accepted semantic categories; it floats somewhere between the subjective and the objective, reminding the reader of the fluid subject/object relations of the pre-Oedipal phase.

Events/objects or literary images which cause a return to the Oedipal phase evoke a fear/aversion response as the subject is reminded of the precarious nature of his own identity which is never complete (since it is separated from the mother) and always under threat (of castration by the father). As suggested above, the strength of the effect produced by this type of literary image will be determined by how detailed and gory the description is, how well developed the association with death/castration/ severance, etc.: whether or not the basic concept involved is associated with death/castration/severance is largely unimportant. For example, Wilde's ghostly protagonist Simon de Canterville evokes no fearful reaction because Wilde chooses not to cloak this particular fantastic concept in "Oedipal" imagery.

In practice, it must be admitted, the division between the puzzlement characteristic of a return to the "pre-Oedipal" and fear characteristic of a return to the "Oedipal" is rarely clear-cut. At one point in "The Uncanny", Freud, basing himself largely on the work of

² For a more in-depth discussion of the fantastic concept see: Michael McLoughlin, *Il Paese delle Meraviglie: The Fantastic Short Story in Italy in the 20th Century*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, forthcoming.

Otto Rank, deals with the common fantastic figure of the double and remarks on its varying Oedipal and pre-Oedipal interpretations. The double as a pre-Oedipal figure springs, in Freud's opinion, from the "unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man" — it is clearly a reminder of a time when the self was everything (1953-73: XVII, 257). In the Oedipal phase, with the creation of the ego and the super-ego, the double assumes a threatening aspect — the self is the ego, the double the super-ego. The latter, in Freudian parlance, is the critical voice of paternal authority which holds the individuals more selfish and anti-social desires in check. In effect, the pre-Oedipal double (originally the symbol of unbounded desire) has become a censuring presence — the Oedipal double is both the expression of desire and its negation. Whether one interprets it in the classical Freudian manner (as above) or not, the "Oedipal" phase, it should be remembered, is in many ways a reaction to the "pre-Oedipal". The "Oedipal" phase which we have all passed through is characterized by a nostalgia for the lost union with the mother and the bitter awareness of present alienation. The return to the "pre-Oedipal" precipitated by the fantastic concept often incorporates elements of this "Oedipal" reaction via a description of the concept using overtly disquieting imagery.

Fear is a very common character reaction in traditional fantastic narratives because the fantastic is perceived by the characters as not belonging to consensus reality: it is perceived as other (except, of course, in the Todorov's marvellous genre, which detached itself from the real from the start). The character's sense of the familiar is shattered as he encounters something that lies outside his knowledge and experience of the possible, and this may or may not be shared by the reader, depending on how much identification there is between reader and character. The fear evoked by the horrific fantastic image in twentieth-century forms (such as Landolfi's) however is not the physical fear produced by the Gothic "spine-chiller" but more a cerebral,

existential unease experienced (usually) by reader and character alike. This form of fear will be the central preoccupation of the following analysis of some of Landolfi's tales.

Fear or horror as a theme or a reaction in character and/or reader is not, as argued above, dependent on the intrinsically horrific concepts but on images that are associated with death/castration/severance. The first story I have chosen to examine, "La morte del re di Francia" in Landolfi's first collection, *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi* (1937), belongs more firmly in the simply horrifying than in the fantastic but provides a fund of recurrent motifs and images found throughout Landolfi's writing as well as an opportunity to analyse how these images are constructed and how exactly the author achieves particular horrifying/fearful effects.

"La morte del re di Francia" is the story of Tale³, a widower and retired clerk who pretends to himself, and anyone else who will listen, that he has lived a long and adventurous life as a heroic sea captain. Despite Tale's incredible fantasies of derring-do and almost superhuman exploits, he has one major weakness — a paralysing fear of spiders. Tale has a sickly son and an adopted twelve-year-old daughter for whom he clearly has "incestuous" desires. He watches the girl, Rosalba, bathe every day. Rosalba is totally innocent until one evening, at a gathering in Tale's home, a young guest makes romantic overtures towards her and Tale realizes that her innocence must soon come to an end. In the central, almost surrealistic, section of the story Rosalba, who is troubled by certain unanswered questions (why had the young man looked at her so earnestly? why had her father behaved so strangely of late at bath time?), has a dream in which she is attacked by a large worm-like beast which ravishes her and by doing so liberates

3 In a footnote the story's apparently irrelevant title is explained thus: "Veramente, il titolo originale della composizione è *OO* (prefatto). Ma una rivista come *Caratteri* ha bisogno di titoli tondi e distesi: e quest'unico motivo ci ha indotti alla sostituzione che s'è vista (si usa dire delle musiche lunghe e noiose)." (N. d. E. di *Caratteri*). "La morte del re di Francia", *Opere*, vol. I: 16.

her from the weight of doubts clouding her mind. In the dream she feels blood running down her legs and with it go all her doubts. She wakes up to find that the blood is real — menstrual blood. Tale, on the same night, is also troubled but cannot sleep. He goes into the kitchen (the same kitchen, incidentally, in which Rosalba is raped in her dream) for a drink of water. He comes across a spider. Frozen with terror he watches it, and a realization dawns on him that the spider's brown/black body is the same colour as his son's eyes. Tale dresses quickly and leaves the house, walking through forests and mountains until he collapses and dies.

There is no need in the present context for this story to be subjected to a particularly rigorous analysis; but it will be useful to identify the important themes running through it and to examine how particular images are constructed. “La morte del re di Francia” brims with Freudian allusions and imagery, principal among these are the phallic symbols of the spiders and the worm-like monster in Rosalba’s dream. Landolfi’s work is populated with all manner of repulsive small creatures: insects, snakes, lizards, mice, toads, etc., which in all probability point to a particular phobia of the author himself. The phallic symbol is, of course, associated with the power of the father and takes on an even more terrifying aspect when it is translated into the form of small animals — particularly rats, spiders, snakes, etc., all of which bite and are thus clearly linked with the castration complex. Freud, in his case history of the Wolfman, explores the relationship between fear/dislike of small animals and repressed castration complexes⁴.

The main thematic preoccupation of “La morte del re di Francia” is manifested in Tale’s growing awareness of the ageing process; his physical decay and fear of death are embodied in the image of the

4 For an analysis of the relationship between the Wolfman case and the uncanny see E. Wright, “The Uncanny and Surrealism” in *Modernism and the European Unconscious*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990: 265-82.

spider. Tale, like many of Landolfi's characters, is a phobic, and the power of this story lies in Landolfi's ability to portray the objectively innocuous spiders in disquieting terms, letting the reader see them through Tale's eyes. The abstract and emotionally neutral concept of the spider, as becomes a textual image, is imbued with values which relate it to death, division and injury. For a further heightening of the effect these horrifying images are described in minute detail or, via a kind of cinematic 'zoom' technique, brought into threatening close-up. Both the type and method of description employed in the story are best demonstrated by examples from the text:

[...] all'improvviso sotto il gradino di una scala di legno che menava al solaio, eccoti un ragno enorme e gelatinoso, di color gialletto incarnatino. Dapprima sbigottito, poi forse rincuorato dalla coscienza della sua passeggiata notturna, Tale pensò bene di accostargli la fiamma della candela per bruciarlo: il ragno spiccò un salto mirabolante e dileguò per le arie. [...] Un'altra volta a Tale che dormiva un ragno passò sul collo, egli lo vide poi sul suo letto, onde, prese su baracca e burattini, se ne andò a dormire, o a vegliare fra incubi innominabili, altrove. (21)

Come sopportare infatti lo spettacolo di un ragno innocente, che, schiacciato a mezzo da una malaccorta scopa, cerca ancora di fuggire, seminando il pavimento delle sue proprie zampe e bagnandolo di un liquido gialliccio (il suo sangue!) arrancando disordinatamente sulle poche zampe che gli son rimaste, per poi giacere infine colle zampe in croce, morto? (21)

Viste colla coda dell'occhio, le forbici aperte sul canterano avevano l'aspetto di un grosso ragno che avesse dovuto abbandonare in una lotta quattro delle sue zampe. (34)

Era un ragno della specie più comune, di una famiglia senza nome, quelli colle lunghissime zampe sottili come capelli e col corpo a grandipepe. Camminava spedito, secondo il loro costume, ma senza fretta: senza uno scricchiolio arrancava sulle impossibili zampe, che parevano aderire muscosamente

al pavimento, tirandole a sé con piccoli strappi che avrebbero seriamente compromesso il suo equilibrio se molte altre zampe delle stessa specie non lo avessero subito ristabilito dall'altra parte; il minuto grano del suo corpo, come in preda di una procella astrale, ballonzolava disordinatamente sulla trama aerea dei suoi sostegni, e volta a volta, quando l'ombra trascolorava e mangiava quella trama, pareva librarsi in una ridda dal ritmo mostruoso sulla mera aria. (36)

In all of the above quotations the concept of the spider is defamiliarized, but in a different manner from the form of defamiliarization found in the fantastic. The fantastic would defamiliarize such a concept by formally redefining it, perhaps creating a spider of enormous size. In an essentially realistic horror story such as "La morte del re di Francia" Landolfi achieves a similar effect by bringing the reader in closer. In several places in the story Tale comes across spiders when he is crouching on the ground or only notices them (as in the first of the above series of quotations) when they are in close proximity. The protagonist's bodily space (the limits of the self) is invaded by insects — an action which becomes ultimately a metaphor for the encroachment of death.

The technique of defamiliarization in this story is used as a means of permitting the reader to see certain objects through the eyes of the phobic. The phobic is obsessed with the object of his fear and it assumes for him an importance that is out of proportion with its actual potential to harm him. The detailed descriptions of the spiders reflect Tale's obsessive preoccupation with them and (particularly graphically in the third example) the fear of castration that the spiders provoke in him. Through the technique of extreme close-up the reader too is brought, metaphorically of course, into virtual bodily contact with the horrifying image, and in this manner the text is able to elicit from him the same physical reactions of fear/horror/revulsion. In Freudian terms, this "physical" proximity engenders the very physical fear of castration. On the more general level of subject/object relations, death-as-other

attempts to overpower and destroy the self. This is what happens to Tale in the story. Unsettled by physical evidence of inevitable mortality (as he views himself in the mirror just before he goes down to the kitchen) and the imminent dissolution of his intimacy with Rosalba, Tale has the mysterious realization that the spider he meets in the kitchen (the objective correlative of his fear of death) is the same colour as the eyes of his sickly son. Death surrounds Tale, physically, emotionally and in his relationships with his children: Rosalba's youth and beauty are now no longer accessible; his son will soon die; even his desperate attempts to find refuge in his self-aggrandizing (and completely fictional) fantasies of a glorious maritime career no longer work. At the end of the story all Tale can do is embrace death through suicide.

In those of Landolfi's stories which interweave the horrific and the fantastic all that has been said up to now about the horrifying still applies but with a subtle change of emphasis: pre-Oedipal desire, which in the horrifying lies immanent or exists purely on the thematic level (as is the case with Tale's incestuous desire for Rosalba), manifests itself in symbolic form in the shape of the fantastic concept. With the horrific fantastic image pre-Oedipal desire is viewed through Oedipal eyes, desire and fear are no longer separable and Landolfi's horrific fantastic tales become a lament for an impossible transcendence of Oedipal "exile".

"La morte del re di Francia" was examined for the richness of its imagery and the particular textual strategies it employed in relation to the horrifying; as a bridging text between Landolfi's horror stories and his horrific fantastic tales I have chosen "Voltaluna" in his third collection, *La spada* (1942). This story is not fantastic, nor particularly horrifying for that matter, but it does constitute an interesting paradigm, both thematically and symbolically, of the major features of Landolfi's horrific fantastic works. In "Voltaluna" the narrator takes as his topic the kind of phenomenon which "sembra applicarsi a renderci vivo e

presente il senso della morte" (346)⁵; phenomena which suddenly reveal the dark side of existence. As an example, he cites the story of how, after a long and frustrating day he had managed to rip his overcoat. He went to a seamstress, an invisible mend was put in the coat and all was well. But, at the very end of the story he adds:

Ecco però che cosa voglio soggiungere: in tutta questa faccenda c'è un inganno. Per un paio di stagioni ancora non ci fu nulla a ridire, ma in seguito, invecchiando il soprabito, la traccia del rammendo affiorò dal tessuto, e più questo si consumava, più quella diventava visibile; finché apparve da ultimo come un'orribile cicatrice. Di più, i fili che univano le labbra dello strappo parevano a ogni istante dover cedere e la ferita della stoffa doversi riaprire in tutta la sua spaventosa oscenità. (348)

"Volataluna" is a kind of existentialist parable with the moral that the "strappi nel tessuto approssimativo e plausibile della nostra esistenza" (346), the division and alienation inherent in the human condition, can only be hidden (repressed) but never totally done away with. In other words, Landolfi is referring to the uncanny reappearance of Oedipal fear as an indicator of the basic predicament of existence.

What is of particular interest in "Volataluna", for the purposes of this analysis, is its imagery, or rather, the manner in which that imagery is presented. The most central image in the story is that of the tear in the overcoat, variously described as "un'orribile cicatrice" or "la ferita della stoffa" which would reopen "in tutta la sua spaventosa oscenità". The tear's description in terms of scars and wounds certainly makes the image horrifying — referring to the castration complex — but what is most notable is the reference to frightening obscenity and the juxtaposition of fear and (sexual) desire. This reference goes to the

5 All quotations are from the 1991 edition of the *Opere*, voll. I-II.

heart of the horrific fantastic and provides (to put it in psychoanalytic terms) an archetype for the horrific fantastic image — the castrated mother.

At the Oedipal stage of development the subject, under the father's threat of castration, rejects the mother, seeing (in classical Freudian terms) in her genitals the effects of castration and thus evoking the subject's own fear. The mother, with whom the subject had had a symbiotic relationship at the pre-Oedipal stage — when (m)other and self were indistinguishable, is now, under the Oedipal injunction, associated with castration and death. In other words, the desire for union with the mother, for a return to the non-dualistic pre-Oedipal existence, is tainted with the fear of further severance. The subject lives in a world of conflicting emotions of fear and desire, inextricably intertwined.

Landolfi's horrific fantastic stories are thematically preoccupied by the tension between fear and desire and his images, via the rhetoric of their composition, embody this tension. Such an image gives "Voltaluna" its title. In C.G. Jung's *Symbols of Transformation* the moon as symbol is described as one of the transformations of the female archetype and therefore, it could be argued, associated with the mother and the pre-Oedipal phase⁶. It is a symbol of wholeness and unity and any fantastic concept may well be considered, because of its anti-logical and non-dualistic nature, a representation of this archetype. In "Voltaluna" the narrator observes those phenomena which destroy the veneer of unity and balance in everyday life, revealing a dark side. He says:

È, in una parola, come v'avessero costretto a buttare un'occhiata sull'oscuro rovescio delle cose, là dove tutto è gelo e orrore. Ossia come se aveste dato di volta alla luna. [...]

⁶ C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, in *Collected Works* (1956), 20 vols., London, Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1967, vol. V.

Immaginate dunque se giraste la faccia piena e splendente della luna, paragonabile agli avvenimenti e alle azioni della nostra vita giornaliera, e vi ritrovaste sull'orlo del baratro buio e freddo! (346)

The images that occur in Landolfi's stories are like that of the dark side of the moon. The fantastic concept, like the transformations of the female archetype, reminds the reader of the pre-Oedipal phase, but when this is viewed from a different angle, that of Oedipal separation, a dark side is perceived which obscures transcendent desire.

The image of the moon receives full horrific fantastic treatment in "Il racconto del lupomannaro" published in Landolfi's second collection, *Il mar delle blatte e altre storie*. The narrator and his friend cannot abide the moon. The sight of it forces them to roll "mugolando e latrando nei posti umidi, nei braggi dietro ai pagliai". One evening the narrator's friend catches the moon and brings it to him. The moon, a soft gelatinous globe about the size of a football, cannot be destroyed, so they place it in the fireplace, whence it rises through the chimney, getting covered in soot in the process, and out into the sky. The werewolves rejoice. Their joy, however, is short-lived. Gradually, on successive nights, the moon begins to reappear and soon they are back where they started. They give up resigned to their failure.

The dark side of the moon, as presented in this story is not the soot-covered globe which ascends into the night sky but the horrific fantastic reinvention of the moon captured by the narrator's accomplice in all its disgusting glory:

"La luna!" esclamai allora. L'amico annuì tacendo. Lo schifo ci soverchiava: la luna fra l'altro sudava un liquido ialino che gocciolava di tra le dita dell'amico. (l:247)

"Oh" disse l'amico "che sollevo! quanto faticoso a tenerla giù, così viscida e grassa com'è! E ora speriamo bene"; e si guardava con disgusto le mani impiastriate. (l:248)

The purpose of such descriptions in this text is the same as in Landolfi's non-fantastic tales (such as "La morte del re di Francia") — to let the reader perceive the horrifying object through the eyes of the phobic protagonist. There is an important difference, however. In the realistic forms of the horrifying, everyday concepts have their normal *value* redefined (i.e. they assume a negative value as images through association with death, castration, etc.), whereas in the horrific fantastic stories they are initially *formally* redefined before, as images, they acquire negative value through Oedipal association. This is what gives the horrific fantastic its particular "flavour" — it describes a reality in which repressed complexes can be formally represented as material rather than merely psychological⁷.

From the point of view of literary history, the most interesting aspect of "Il racconto del lupomannaro" is Landolfi's treatment of the figure of the werewolf. The first point to note is that Landolfi focuses on such a traditional fantastic figure in the first place. Landolfi's roots, as some of the stories I shall be examining further on clearly demonstrate, are in surrealism, but the greater part of his output, although it contains a great deal of the psychoanalytic imagery and *humour noir* beloved of the French school, is less concerned with radical formal experimentation and 'automatic' writing. The basic surrealist device of incongruous juxtaposition (which is essentially that of the fantastic concept) provided an endless stream of fantastic concepts and helped

7 The particular Oedipal associations that the imagery of this story give rise to are explained by the following statement by Freud, which also throws some light on the Austrian psychoanalyst's views on the relationship between the fear of death and the fear of castration, which differ from those expressed in "The Uncanny": "[...] castration can be pictured on the basis of the daily experience of the faeces being separated from the body or on the basis of losing the mother's breast at weaning. But nothing resembling death can ever have been experienced [...] I am therefore inclined to adhere to the view that the fear of death should be regarded as analogous to the fear of castration." S. Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, S.E., vol. XX: 129-30.

redefine accepted notions of the text and literature in general, but soon lost its novelty as one surrealist text began to look pretty much like another. Landolfi's move away from the radical experimentation of the surrealists took the form of a re-examination, indeed a rewriting and rehabilitation, of earlier, more traditional forms of the fantastic. Landolfi's work acts in many ways as a bridge between surrealism and the works of post-surrealist (post-modernist?) writers such as Buzzati.

The traditional figure of the werewolf belongs to the European oral folk tradition and has been generally interpreted as an allegory of the latent animal nature of man beneath the civilized veneer of human culture (this is the main thrust also of Stevenson's reworking of the werewolf myth in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*); and certainly much is made of the physical man/wolf transformation in its nineteenth-century literary and twentieth-century cinematic reincarnations. In these cases the werewolf myth becomes an allegory of the savage retribution of the father/superego if we return to our baser natures. Landolfi's werewolf does not resemble any of its oral, literary or cinematic predecessors. For Landolfi, the werewolf is not a monster from the id but a kind of Everyman; and lycanthropy becomes a metaphor for the phobia at the heart of existence.

The protagonists of "Il racconto del lupomannaro" undergo no physical transformation at the full moon (in fact, they are never physically described at all); their "transformation" is purely emotional. The moon as symbol of the transcendent drives them mad and yet, when captured, it becomes an object of disgust and derision. What affects the werewolves is beyond the material and the symbolic. As the narrator's friend says of the moon:

E non cercherà davvero le uscite più facili, no, su sempre dritta, ciecamente e stupidamente: essa, la maligna che ci governa, c'è una forza irresistibile che regge anche lei. (248)

Attracted by something they cannot attain, the werewolves live in "un

incubo infamante". Even when they temporarily manage to blot out the moon they continue "innocentemente e quasi per sfregio" to roll howling in the mud. In the end their attempts to remove the symbol of the force which drives them mad are fruitless, and what is essentially a stylistically colloquial and mildly ironic tale ends on a dark note: "Ecco ad ogni perché io vi dico: contro la luna non c'è niente da fare".

In "Il bacio" a story in the 1968 collection, *Un paniere di chiocciole*, he reinvents another traditional fantastic figure, the *succubus* — a she-devil that would seduce saintly celibates in their sleep, robbing them of their vitality. The protagonist of this tale, il notaio D. — "scapolo e non ancor vecchio ma maledettamente timido colle donne" (II:890), as he settles down to sleep one evening feels a kiss on his lips. This happens on successive nights and he reasons that "si trattava d'una proiezione dei suoi desideri, di un'allucinazione insomma" (II:890). He enjoys the sensation and welcomes it. He tries to evoke the (albeit totally imaginary) creature who kisses him. He starts seeing strange shadows, auras, hearing ghostly laughter. Frightened, he discontinues the attempts, but the manifestations persist. He tries sleeping with the light on but the kisses, by now voracious and exhausting, continue. Il notaio D. is becoming ill through loss of sleep and appetite. He realizes the absurdity of his situation; he is dying but cannot escape from a creature of his own invention. Eventually, on his last night, he is pulled into a huge vortex which sucks what little life is left in him, and he perhaps sees the creature which "gli strappava il supremo bacio" (II:893). In the end the unknown creature rises from the notary's empty corpse and runs free.

The *succubus* is a perfect, ready-made horrific fantastic concept; the embodiment of *eros* and *thanatos*, desire and prohibition ("il supremo bacio"). She represents at once D.'s desire and his repression of that desire. His initial reaction to the kisses is described as "turbato, deliziato e sbigottito". Through his attempt to evoke his own desire he brings about his own death. As in all the other stories

examined, Landolfi's fundamental pessimism is manifested in the protagonist's inability to fulfil his desire without its concomitant prohibition. This fatalism is not a result, as in classical tragedy, of a natural moral law but is ingrained in the human condition — the protagonist repeatedly harking back to the pre-Oedipal phase and constantly being denied access by his own conditioning. In the end Notaio D. resigns himself (knowing that he cannot escape a projection of his own mind) to death, in the hope that he will see the creature that is sucking the life out of him. At this point desire and death become the same thing; D.'s desire for the succubus is his desire for death.

In its folk incarnation the succubus is a malign spiritual being which has objective existence. The psychoanalyst, however, would agree with the protagonist that it is a hallucination born of repressed sexual desire. Landolfi chooses both options; not in the either/or manner of choice between natural and supernatural explanations found in Todorov's *Pure Fantastic*, but both together, equating the validity of material and psychological realities. In effect, Landolfi is laying bare the subtext of repressed sexuality immanent in earlier forms of the horrific fantastic but, importantly, remaining within the boundaries of the fantastic mode.

Landolfi's recurrent preoccupation with the uncovering and representation of his protagonists' psychological motivation (in effect presenting the reader with a world where subjective and objective realities are intertwined) betrays the writer's roots in modernism in general and surrealism in particular. However, his writing is also peppered with all manner of metaliterary devices (parody, pastiche, intertextual references and allusions) more commonly associated with postmodernism than with modernism. In "Il racconto del lupomannaro" and "Il bacio" Landolfi's reworking of the traditional fantastic concepts of the werewolf and the succubus serves, after a fashion, to deconstruct these mythical mainstays of the nineteenth-century fantastic tradition. From a purely modernist

perspective, Landolfi is writing about the fear that is an essential component of the human condition but through his use of metaliterary techniques (such as allusions to the fantastic tradition of the last century) suggests a further possible level of interpretation of the omnipresent preoccupation with fear in his work: as the unconscious creative force that motivates the writer (or, indeed, any artist).

The "postmodernist" aspect of Landolfi's writing is more clearly defined in the last two stories I wish to look at: "La moglie di Gogol" and "Il babbo di Kafka". In any analysis of these two stories one must tread a thin line between, on the one hand, Landolfi's reworking and re-examination of literary forms and, on the other hand, his love of parody/pastiche. In "Il racconto del lupomannaro" and "Il bacio" Landolfi reinterprets figures from the Gothic tradition in a way that lays bare their psychological and existential motivations; in "La moglie di Gogol" and "Il babbo di Kafka", although the same uncovering of motivation takes place, the emphasis is different. Both stories take the form of spoof biographical reminiscences and are, on one level, parodies of literary biography. Parody of varying forms of academic writing is used with relish in several of Landolfi's stories, such as "La tenia mistica", "Da: La melotecnica esposta al popolo", "Nuove rivelazioni della psiche umana. L'uomo di Mannheim", in *La spada* and "Da: 'L'astronomia esposta al popolo'", in *Il mar delle blatte e altre storie*. On another level, both stories are attempts to examine the psychological motivation behind the works of Gogol and Kafka and perhaps all writers. Landolfi does this by situating the authors in question in the type of horrific fantastic worlds evoked in their own fiction (in effect, via clever pastiches of their writing styles).

"La moglie di Gogol" purports to be a fragment of a chapter of a learned biography of the great Russian writer concerning the vexed question of his wife. The biographer, an intimate friend of Gogol's, is able to reveal the truth at last — Gogol was married to an inflatable rubber doll! The appearance of the anatomically perfect and incredibly

life-like doll, named by Gogol (for some obscure reason) after the Venezuelan capital Caracas, is repeatedly changed by the author. He dyes her hair, changes her skin tone and varies the air pressure to create ever new versions of his wife, falling in love anew each time. Despite this, the biographer feels that Caracas has her own independent character and on one occasion she speaks very rudely, much to Gogol's embarrassment. As the years pass, the doll somehow manages to exert a tyrannical influence over Gogol. He begins to suspect that she is being unfaithful to him, and this is confirmed when he contracts syphilis from her. Gogol is tormented by extremes of love and hatred for the doll and finally, on the night of their silver wedding anniversary, he kills Caracas by inflating her until she bursts. The biographer, who was witness to all of this, is even more amazed when, after burning the remnants of his wife, Gogol also burns a small doll — his son! The narrator concludes by saying that he hopes that he has put to rest all the rumours about Gogol's (unprovoked) mistreatment of his wife.

Landolfi is clearly enjoying himself in this story, which brims with all manner of contortions of facts known about Gogol: the most obvious of these is that he never married. Interestingly enough in the context of the horrific fantastic, the only woman whom Gogol is said to have had a sustained love/hate relationship with was his mother, Marya. Nabokov, in his biography of Gogol, describes her as "fantastical, hysterical, superstitious and hypersuspicious"⁸, which compares with the biographer/narrator's (contextually ludicrous) description of Caracas as "una creatura acida o, francescanamente, acariastra, ipocrita e affetta da manie religiose" (685)⁹. Gogol, as represented in

8 V. Nabokov, *Nikolay Gogol* (1944), Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1973: 13.

9 "La moglie di Gogol", *Opere*, vol. I. It is also interesting to note that Landolfi included an essay on Gogol in his collection of critical pieces *Gogol a Roma*, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1971.

the story, could be a character from *The Nose*, *Diary of a Madman* or *The Overcoat*, as well as from any of Landolfi's tales. He is also, unmistakably, the real Gogol, for the Russian writer teetered constantly on the verge of madness. In essentially the same manner as in "Il bacio", the material and the psychological, the biographical and the fictional, the real and the fantastic are intertwined in "La moglie di Gogol".

The central horrific/fantastic figure in the story is, of course, the doll. In "The Uncanny", Freud alludes to dolls, automata, etc., as frequently inducing feelings of unease which he attributes to a reminder of the pre-Oedipal phase, when children, the subject/object division still not fully realized in their minds, see their toys as projections of themselves, as having independent personalities. Although Freud does not consider it in these terms, the doll/automaton may be seen as representing a corpse, which, as explained earlier, can, from the point of view of an Oedipal individual, inspire horror. In "La moglie di Gogol", however, the horrific edge is taken off the figure of Caracas for the reader by the elements of parody and repeated comic *reductio ad absurdum*.

Caracas remains a horrifying figure for Gogol because of the mixture of fear and desire she arouses in him. The mixture of the two emotions occurs gradually in the story. Initially, Caracas is a symbol of Gogol's desire, which is constantly gratified through his repeated manipulation of her form and appearance — although the narrator notes that nonetheless she always remains Caracas:

Altra cosa è tentar di stabilire in che propriamente consistesse la qualità comune a tutte quelle forme. Può darsi fosse né più né meno che il soffio creatore medesimo di Nikolaj Vasilevic. Ma in verità sarebbe troppo singolare che egli si fosse sentito tanto scisso da se stesso e tanto a se stesso avverso. Giacché, per dir tutto subito, Caracas, chiunque fosse difatto, era comunque una presenza inquietante e, giova esser chiari, ostile. (684)

This constant hostile element, despite the incredulity of the fallible biographer/narrator, comes from Gogol himself: his desire is imposed on the outward appearance of Caracas, his repressed fears are in the very forms he gives her. It is the protagonist's repressed emotions which give the doll independent existence. Caracas is a fantastic figure because she is the objective projection of a subjective reality. The horrific fantastic world of the text objectively represents to the reader the contents of Gogol's psyche, symbolically playing out the tensions which motivate his writing, as Landolfi interprets them.

The relationship between Gogol and Caracas may also be seen as the relationship between the writer and his work. In the construction of any text an author consciously attempts to represent reality as he sees it (metaphorically rather than literally in the case of the fantastic) but also included in the subtext of choices and omissions that go into that construction will be all his unconscious desires and the traces of the mechanisms which repress them¹⁰. By writing this "Biography of a Madman" Landolfi reveals Gogol's actual desires and repressions but combined in the manner in which they appear in his work.

In "Il babbo di Kafka" Landolfi again mixes pastiche with an uncovering of author motivation, but in even more overtly Freudian terms. The story begins with the narrator/biographer asking Kafka what he would do if a giant spider with a human head were to enter the room. Would he kill himself? Kafka replies that he would not, whereupon a large spider with the head of his father indeed enters the room. Kafka looks at his father/spider and like an insolent child demands to know what wrong he has done now. The creature retreats from the room and Kafka chases after it. The narrator flees. Kafka

10 A singular demonstration of Freud's own repressed desires in the subtext of "The Uncanny" is given in H. Cixous, "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny)*", in *New Literary History*, 7, 1976: 525-48.

searches incessantly for the creature without success. One evening it reappears no longer threatening but supplicatory. Kafka kills it without mercy. The story ends as follows:

Con ciò Kafka credeva d'essersene liberato per sempre, anche se a duro prezzo. Ma quanti ragni grossi o piccini non alberga un vecchio maniero. (I:291)

“Il babbo di Kafka” is Landolfi’s rewriting of *Metamorphosis* — with a large dose of Freud for good measure. In *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, Rosemary Jackson sums up the psychoanalytic subtext of Kafka’s original:

Metamorphosis is structured around an Oedipal conflict. Father and son are set in opposition and the power of the first leaves no room for the second. The father’s place (the bourgeois family home) is threatened by the space introduced by the son’s metamorphosis (which effects literal emptying of the domestic enclosure) and the father eradicates the threat by driving him to suicide. (1981:160-161)

Landolfi recognises all of the above in Kafka’s work but turns the situation around (the father metamorphoses; it is the son’s space that is invaded) in a way that throws light on the psychological basis of Gregor Samsa’s experience and Kafka’s motivation as a writer. The spider, as we have already seen, is a symbol of the castrating power of the father (perhaps even more so than the original beetle), and Landolfi reveals the repressed Oedipal conflict that lies behind *Metamorphosis* and which fuels Kafka’s writing. In Kafka’s tale, Gregor’s metamorphosis into a beetle is the objective correlative, the symbolic transformation, of the Oedipal conflict which forms the psychological subtext of the story. The human-headed spider in “Il babbo di Kafka” fulfils the same function but its identification with the father brings the

psycho-drama of Oedipal conflict onto the thematic level of the text rather than remaining submerged as subtext as in the original.

The fact that the horrific fantastic image intrudes on the son's (Kafka's) space in this story illuminates Landolfi's ideas on the Czech writer's literary motivation and on literary motivation in general. Property — the "vecchio maniero" in which Kafka lives — is often associated in the fantastic with the space of the self, and so the appearance in it of the horrifying represents the repressed horrors of the writer's own psyche¹¹. Beyond this, however, since the protagonist is a writer, the "maniero" — the reality in which the story takes place — can also be seen as artistic space. The setting becomes emblematic of the reality in which all Kafka's writings are played out; the story becoming an allegory of the processes that motivate artistic creation. In order to write, or rather, in the very act of writing, Kafka, according to Landolfi, is killing his father, exorcizing his repressions, although, as the story's final line suggests, that exorcism is never complete — if it were there would be no rationale for writing.

Landolfi, in his way, is asserting the Post-Freudian notion of writing as an attempt to overcome Oedipal repression in favour of pre-Oedipal, open-ended desire. The differentiation of semiotic systems learnt and crystallized at the Oedipal stage is rejected in favour of the indeterminacy and undifferentiation provided by literary language. In the horrific fantastic this tension between Oedipal and pre-Oedipal comes to the fore in the images it creates. The fantastic is the most literary of literary forms of representation since it lifts the basic defamiliarity central to literary language onto the level of representation through the creation of fantastic images¹². The horrifying elements,

11 For a further discussion of the concept of the "maniero" in Landolfi's work see O. Macrì, *Tommaso Landolfi*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 1990: 46-49, 55-57, 78-99.

12 The concept of "defamiliarity" (or *ostraneniye*) was coined by the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique". Shklovsky sets literary language (and the language of art in general) apart from everyday language in that the former functions to upset the "automatism of perception" and cause the reader to

suggestive of death and castration, which appear in the movement from simple fantastic concept to horrific fantastic image provide a symbolic representation of the desire to transcend the symbolic order of language and return to the pre-Oedipal, pre-symbolic that is ever held in check by the repressive structures of the Oedipal threat to desire.

Landolfi's particular contribution to the horrific fantastic lies in his texts' ability to lay bare the psychological substratum of desire/repression in the works themselves. In the Gothic the horrific fantastic images of the supernatural become *exempla* of what awaits those who try to subvert the divinely ordained social order. In the non-mimetic works of writers such as Gogol, Kafka and, in the field of Italian literature Pirandello and Buzzati, the horrific fantastic image serves to encapsulate the strange and disquieting nature of human existence. Landolfi (although he may be clearly included in the latter group) goes one step further, as is evident in the last two stories, interweaving the problems at the heart of existence with those at the heart of the artistic enterprise.

perceive familiar concepts in new ways. He writes: "The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object itself is not important.*" V. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", 1917 (Shklovsky's italics).

According to Shklovsky's theory, all literary devices (from irony and self-referentiality to rhythm and rhyme) function to defamiliarize the ordinary concepts of everyday and to make us look again at them. Fantastic writing, in my opinion, is the quintessential form of literature in that (by redefining everyday objects to produce impossible, paradoxical concepts unlike anything we know from knowledge and experience of the "real" world) it allows us not simply to the familiar in a new light but literally as it has never been seen before.

References

- Freud, S. 1953-73 "The Uncanny", in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by J. Strachey, 24 vols, London, The Hogarth Press & the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, XVII: 217-56.
- Jackson, R. 1981 *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen.
- Landolfi, T. 1991 *Opere*, 2 vols., edited by I. Landolfi, Milano, Rizzoli.
- Shklovsky, V. 1965 "Art as Technique", in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated by L.T. Lemon & M.J. Reis, Lincoln, Univ. of Nebraska Press: 3-24.
- Todorov, T. 1970 *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris, Editions du Seuil.
- 1973 *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, (translated by R. Howards), Cleveland and London, Case Western Reserve.

Works by Tommaso Landolfi

- Dialogo dei massimi sistemi*, Firenze, Fratelli Parenti Editori, 1937.
La pietra lunare, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1939.
Il mar delle blatte e altre storie, Roma, Edizioni della Cometa, 1939.
La spada, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1942.
Il principe infelice, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1943.
Le due zitelle, Milano, Bompiani, 1946.
Racconto d'autunno, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1947.
Cancroregina, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1950.
La bière du pecheur, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1953.
Ombre, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1954.

La raganella d'oro, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1954.
Ottavio di Saint-Vincent, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1958.
Landolfo VI di Benevento, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1959.
Se non la realtà, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1960.
Società, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1962.
Rien va, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1963.
Scene dalla vita di Cagliostro, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1963.
Tre racconti, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1964.
Un amore del nostro tempo, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1965.
Racconti impossibili, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1966.
Des mois, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1967.
Un paniere di chiocciole, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1968.
Fausto 67, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1969.
Breve canzoniere, Firenze, Vallecchi, 1971.