



ISSN 2348 – 3369

Singularities

a peer reviewed international transdisciplinary biannual research journal

Vol. 11 Issue 1 January 2024

'The Strange' : The Fantastical Other

Abstract

Fantasy arises from man's impulse to envision, create and experience the extraordinary. It presents not that which is, but that which could be imagined to be. By defamiliarizing what is considered familiar, fantasy holds undeniable potential to inspire new and alternate conditions of being. Rather than being a limitation, the perceived ontological distance between the fantastical and the real contributes to a productive sense of displacement. Foregoing any claim to reality, fantasy exists outside of its restrictions and suppressions.

Fantasy reimagines the self, the other and the world and weaves a unique existential fabric through their interrelations. This paper looks at how representations and descriptions of 'the strange' within fantasy complicate these relations. For the reader, an encounter with 'the strange' wouldn't just be an encounter with the 'not-me' but with the 'unlike-me'. Exploring these encounters as sites of disengagement and reengagement with sedimented notions of the self, the paper presents the challenges posed by fantasy to man's instinct of security regarding his reality and its inevitability.

In other words, 'the strange' within and beyond the world of fantasy appears to interrupt an otherwise unfractured and natural way of being in the world. By thus complicating the standards of normalcy, 'the strange' provokes a larger inquiry into whether any form of existence, even the most ordinary, can escape being inherently disruptive. Moreover, by easily lending itself as an allegory, 'the strange' through its representations and descriptions within fantasies simultaneously contributes to and undermines essentializing perspectives.

In considering classic examples of 'the strange' such as the ghost, the creature, and the monster, the paper offers an oriented reading of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Kafka's Metamorphosis and Borges' House of Asterion. In all three texts, 'the strange' is present and perceived in varying degrees and to various ends. "Metamorphosis" poses the question of liminality and of strangeness as a lapse between unities, with a before and an after. "The House of Asterion" presents the possibility of an autonomous, self-determined and coherent self even within strange forms, and Shakespeare's Hamlet utilizes the transgressive license and potential ascribed to the unnatural. The paper's engagement with these texts and these themes will be set in the philosophical context of phenomenology, in a critical relation to the narrative of lack, lapse, and derivative identity that is often assumed about 'the strange'.

Keywords: Fantasy, representation, strangeness, self, other

Fantasy arises from man's impulse to envision, create and experience the extraordinary. It presents not that which is, but that which could be imagined to be. By defamiliarizing what is considered familiar, fantasy holds undeniable potential to inspire new and alternate conditions of being. Foregoing any claim to reality, fantasy exists outside of its restrictions and suppressions. Rather than being a limitation, the perceived ontological distance between the fantastical and the real contributes to a productive sense of displacement.

Fantasy reimagines the self, the other and the world and weaves a unique existential fabric through their interrelations. This paper looks at how representations and descriptions of 'the strange' within fantasy complicate these relations. For the reader, an encounter with 'the strange' wouldn't just be an encounter with the 'not-me' but with the 'unlike-me'. Exploring these encounters as sites of disengagement and reengagement with sedimented notions of the self, the paper presents the challenges posed by fantasy to man's instinct of security regarding his reality and its inevitability.

In other words, 'the strange' within and beyond the world of fantasy appears to interrupt an otherwise unfractured and natural way of being in the world. By thus complicating the standards of normalcy, 'the strange' provokes a larger inquiry into whether any form of existence, even the most ordinary, can escape being inherently disruptive. Moreover, by easily lending itself as an allegory, 'the strange' through its representations and descriptions within fantasies simultaneously contributes to and undermines essentializing perspectives.

In considering classic examples of 'the strange' such as the creature, the monster and the ghost, the paper offers an oriented reading of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Borges' "The House of Asterion" and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In all three texts, 'the strange' is present and perceived in varying degrees and to various ends. *The Metamorphosis* poses the question of liminality and of strangeness as a lapse between unities, with a before and an after. "The House of Asterion" presents the possibility of an autonomous, self-determined and coherent self even within strange forms, and the ghost in *Hamlet* utilises the transgressive licence and potential ascribed to the unnatural. However, before we attempt to address the particular implications of 'the strange' within these texts, it is important to engage with certain ethical and philosophical concerns that the category itself presents.

What It Means To Be Strange

"Esse est percipi" or "to be is to be perceived" is a phrase famously used by the philosopher, George Berkeley. As an understanding of ontology, it has much to contribute to a discussion of 'the strange'. The notion of being as an effect of perception lends itself to a particular understanding of existence. Following Berkeley's thought, to exist then would be to exist in the perception of another, an inference that has particular value within religious philosophy, wherein God is given the position and function of an all-

constituting perceiver. The premise of the thought, therefore, rests on the assumed presence of an absolute consciousness, which has the power to survey this world and man from up above. Within such an all-encompassing perception, Berkeley proclaims, existence comes into being.

Even in the absence of such a metaphysical assumption, the assertion of “*esse est percipi*” holds relevance. In the absence of what Merleau-Ponty calls the *kosmotheoros* or the sovereign gaze, the world presents itself as an intentional object, not to God but to each individual. To exist within the perception of fellow human beings is fundamentally different from existing within the perception of an omniscient being. Here, the perceiver too is subject to the perception of the other whom he perceives. The world, therefore, always comes with the possibility of the other. Hence, it might be useful to modify Berkeley's original statement from “to be is to be perceived” to “to be is to be in relation”. 'The strange' in this sense does not exist in isolation but is constituted through its relations.

When understood in terms of the phenomenological conception, existence is ontologically relational in nature, and the ethics of such a relation warrants great importance. With the world available to each individual to experience and interpret, difference is present at the level of the individual. How one chooses to relate with such difference is a question of intention. In other words, perception not only characterises the seen but also implicates the one who sees. “Strange” as an adjective, therefore, signifies at multiple levels.

One can choose to treat the other as an object to be known or as a subject with their own experience of the world. When treated as an object of knowledge, the other is robbed of its subject position and is reduced to a concept, a 'whatness' that denies the living 'thatness' of their particular existence. Recognition of the reductiveness of such an approach underlies the work of psychiatrist R.D. Laing, whose method of practice and extensive writings on mental health sought to radically re-conceptualise the field of psychiatry. Laing's subject of concern is mental illness, a type of “difference” that is seen as diagnosable but not understandable. His observations, however, carry value beyond his field and are relevant to any difference that is considered too different to be understandable, that is, to anything that is considered not just different but strange.

Conventional approaches to such differences essentialize them as concepts, marked by their deviation from what is considered the normal. Such methods fail to understand the existential experience of difference. Labels, be they of a disorder, race, gender or any other collective identity, are prone to neglect the distinct experiential world within which an individual exists. Offering an alternate approach, Laing in *The Divided Self* attempts to demonstrate how even the most unrecognisable of differences can be understood existentially and phenomenologically, that is, by acknowledging a person's experience of herself and the world. Difference, in other words, can be understood by considering the unique existential position from which each individual relates to and interprets the world.

The self is constituted within its distinct and plural relations with the world, and these relations form the context of being. A particular form of being, therefore, cannot be abstracted from the *lebenswelt* within which it is experienced. An other's existential position then cannot be assumed to be derivative. Rather, difference in its distinctiveness ought to be recognized for its possibility as one of the many forms of being in the world.

Each particular comes with its own frame of reference and cannot be understood through another's. The other, Laing asserts, exists as a “form of unity that is specifically personal”, a unity created in a particular relation to the world (23). Understanding difference thus requires plasticity, a capacity to orient oneself to another's world and to see the other as a subject in their own terms and not as an object in ours.

Though Laing advocates for such a reorientation, the language he uses and the categories he constructs betray a limited understanding of difference. For instance, the schizophrenics, according to Laing, suffer from a “rent” in their relation to the world and a “disruption” in their relation with themselves (17). Their experiences do not correspond to reality” and rationality, and therefore, he claims that they are “ontologically insecure” (39) and are unable to experience themselves as “real, alive and whole” (39).

Though Laing's observations are specifically concerned with a form of mental illness, they exhibit the failing of any method that approaches the other as an object in an external field of reference. It is only from an assumed position of ontological security that the different seem ontologically insecure. Difference is then regarded as synonymous with defect. The different are found to be lacking and incomplete, with a rent or a disruption that separates them from the ideal. The ontologically different, thus, become the ontologically insecure. The different becomes the strange.

Laing further claims that the “reciprocal recognition of identity”, which is taken for granted between ontologically secure individuals, fails to occur with the ontologically insecure (35). This failure to be recognized and approved by the normal is then proof enough of the abnormality of the other. When the identity that the other claims for himself does not correspond with what Laing calls the “unquestionable, self-validating certainties” (39) of reality and rationality, the other is found to demonstrate a “low threshold of ontological security” (42). In other words, the other is unrecognisable and, therefore, assumed to be anomalous.

However, the other's lack of correspondence with the way in which we inhabit the world does not signify a lack of internal coherence or integrity. Such an inference stems from the assumption that there is one ideal form of being in the world, which we claim for ourselves. The ethical impulse, however, would be to acknowledge even the unrecognisable difference as a legitimate form of existence. Though ontologically different, the other retains its own form of unity. An ethical relation with the other can only arise from accepting the coherence of this specific and personal form of unity, even when that coherence is unfamiliar to us.

Cohesiveness of the other is to be understood in terms of their existence within their world. When removed from their world and placed in ours, the other will inevitably be found lacking in terms of what we understand as normal and rational. A derivative identity is thus constructed for the other, and terms like “ontologically insecure” and other such adjectives of deficiency are attributed as features of being different.

It is clear then that it is intention that drives the interpretation of the other. The intention to meet difference in its own form of existence comes with the willingness to yield one's frame of understanding in order to understand the possibility of another. The interpretation of the other that emerges from such an intention would be wholly different from the interpretation that sees the other as derivative and deficient.

This detailed discussion on the ontology of 'the strange' was meant to demonstrate the assumptions that representations of the unrecognizably different within fantasy address and challenge. Intention practised as interpretation characterises the process of reading a literary text. In literature, especially in fantasy, one finds possibilities of existence, worlds different from the one that I, as a reader, inhabit, and experiences of the world that I do not experience myself. Therefore, being itself is defamiliarized in literature. How the difference is then read depends on the intention with which it is read. The reading of a text implicates the reader.

A particular intention, therefore, is what prompts Laing's reading of literature as a demonstration of the categories of the ontologically secure and the ontologically insecure. In Kafka, he claims to find characters who have been “stripped of all that is becoming to a man” (40) and who lack a “strong sense of personal identity” (40). Life as experienced by the complete and secure man is thus distinguished from the life as experienced by the ontologically insecure. In the absence of the assurances of what Laing called the “unquestionable, self- validating certainties” (39), the latter is “life, without feeling alive” (40). Thus, a form of being by virtue of being different is excluded from the possibilities of legitimate existence. However, our understanding of difference as a valid form of being warrants a reading of Kafka against the one offered by Laing.

The Creature In *The Metamorphosis*

The novella *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka presents itself as the most appropriate candidate for such a reading. It tells the story of Gregor Samsa, who wakes one morning to find himself inexplicably transformed into a creature. According to Laing, Gregor is an example of a character stripped of his beingness. Whether this is indeed the case will have to be discovered through our own reading of the text.

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed to a gigantic insect” (Kafka 89), thus the story begins by introducing a strange state of being in the world. From there, the reader is presented with both Gregor's experience of himself and others' experience of him. As Gregor's difference reveals itself in degrees, the reactions from others around him grow extreme and hostile.

To his family, Gregor in his strange form is terrifying and unrecognisable. In his state of difference, he is, for them, an animal that has usurped the position of a beloved son and brother. Their reactions to him stem from this perception. His sister, the only family member who ventures into the room to which he is banished, acts as if she were in the presence of an “invalid or even a stranger” (Kafka 107). The bowls he eats from are not touched by her bare hand but with a rag. In spite of her efforts, she finds his appearance “repulsive” (Kafka 113) and struggles to “to stay in his presence without opening a window” (Kafka 113). The family's concern for what once used to be Gregor is complicated by their disgust for his new form. Their strained tolerance is merely a fulfilment of “family duty” that “required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience” (Kafka 122). Incapable of understanding his strangeness, they attempt to withstand it and fail at that as well.

In his strangeness, Gregor not only loses a recognizable form but also a recognizable existence. He ceases to be Gregor for his family not just in his appearance but in his being as well. His speech comes out in an animal's voice, so they proceed to treat him as one, responding to his efforts to communicate with fear and violence. Gregor and his intentions, therefore, become incomprehensible to his family. (“No entreaty of Gregor's availed, indeed no entreaty was even understood, however humbly he bent his head, his father only stomped on the floor the more loudly” (Kafka 103)).

The family's inability to comprehend him leads them to believe that he is, in turn, incapable of comprehension. (“For since what he said was not understood by the others it never struck any of them, not even his sister, that he could understand what they said” (Kafka 109)) For them, a being capable of comprehension does not and cannot exist in a form so different from their own. The possibility of a meaningful existence is thus denied for 'the strange' because of its unrecognizability, and strangeness is understood in terms of an incapacity to form relations. It is this phenomenon that Laing refers to as the failure of reciprocal recognition of identity. However, this failure arises more out of assumptions about the other than from some inherent lack in the other.

How does Gregor experience his self? Does he not continue to exist as himself within the strangeness of his new body? Or does he exist as a grotesque deformation of his former self, as a conspicuous absence of the unity that he once possessed? Within the perception of others around him, Gregor is deprived of beingness itself. However, for the reader who is privy to Gregor's thoughts and experiences throughout the story, it ought to be clear that his difference does not deprive him of a coherent and secure sense of self. Rather than an absence of beingness, Gregor presents an alternate form of being.

Gregor is not displaced within the difference, nor does his strangeness erase the concern and love that he has for his family. Gregor feels “shame and grief” for the hardships faced by his family (Kafka 112) and is so moved by the music that his sister plays that he wonders, “Was he an animal that music had such an effect on him?” (Kafka

130). Experience as a conscious and feeling self, therefore, is not a property exclusive to a particular form of 'valid' existence but is shown to be possible even within strange forms.

However, Gregor's state of being, his strangeness, is treated by his family as a lapse between unities, a lapse in being itself. His mother, therefore, hopes for a return and says, "I think it would be best if we tried to keep his room exactly as it has always been, so that when he comes back to us he will find everything unchanged and be able all the more easily to forget what has happened in between." (Kafka 116). Difference, therefore, is not recognized as a stable state of being. Rather, it is considered a state of absence. Self is thought to be suspended for the strange, and Gregor is not understood as who he experiences himself to be but is limited to who he once was for the family, who he could one day return to be.

"You must try to get rid of the idea that this is Gregor" (Kafka 134), offers the sister as a solution to the family's plight. Unable to reconcile the Gregor she knew with the strangeness that she was now confronted with, she forsakes him. ("I will not utter my brother's name in front of this creature" (Kafka 133)). The family's inability to consider the possibility of a different form of existence limits their ability to understand Gregor and leaves them with something unnatural in his place, an 'it'. "If only he could understand us" (Kafka 133), laments the father at the end of the story, without realising that Gregor could indeed understand them in spite of his strangeness.

The tragedy of *The Metamorphosis*, therefore, lies not in Gregor's loss of self or ontological security, as claimed by Laing, but in the family's failure to recognize the ontologically different. Difference, therefore, cannot be equated with ontological insecurity. Instead, difference implies that there are plural ways of being. Being does not have to depend on "unquestionable self-validating certainties" and can lie outside of them. In fact, literature, especially fantasy, by presenting multiple possibilities of existence, questions such seemingly unquestionable certainties.

The Monster in "The House of Asterion"

Borges' story, "The House of Asterion", is another example that presents 'the strange' as an autonomous being capable of self-determination. Though based on the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, the story deviates from the original by presenting Asterion, the Minotaur, as the protagonist. The story is told entirely from the perspective of Asterion, except for the last paragraph of the story, where Theseus is introduced by way of a third-person narrator. Through the shift in perspective, the story demonstrates that the world, the self, and the other seem different and hold different meanings when seen from different existential positions.

In "The House of Asterion", the themes of isolation, connection, freedom, and confinement are explored. In Asterion, the Minotaur, these experiences aren't contradictory but portray the unique configuration of a particular existence. By

presenting such a complex and layered experience of existence, the story challenges the reductive mould to which the strange is often confined to.

Within the first-person narrative of “The House of Asterion”, what is presented in the story is the I's experience of the world and the I's interpretation of the self. By giving voice to the monster, the story complicates the relatability that is often expected to follow when the first-person voice is used. The reader is not allowed to claim the subject position for herself but is consciously displaced and urged to acknowledge a distinct perspective. The strangeness of the I in the story facilitates this process.

The others “accuse” and create “falsehoods”, says Asterion (Borges 129). What is then true for Asterion is what he himself experiences as the truth. Consider Asterion's account of an encounter with human beings: “One afternoon I did step into the street; If I returned before night, I did because of the fear that the faces of the common people inspired in me, faces as discoloured and flat as the palm of one's hand” (Borges 129).

These lines question the fixity of the category of 'the strange'. In other words, 'the strange' is revealed to be a malleable adjective rather than a definitive quality. What qualifies as strange depends on the one that perceives. The 'truth' of such a valuation is relative and does not indicate an essence. Instead, characterizations of the other follow from convictions that one holds about oneself.

Asterion views the humans in relation to what he knows and believes about himself. Seen through this lens, Asterion describes the people's reaction to him:

The helpless crying of a child and the rude supplications of the faithful told me that I had been recognized. The people prayed, fled, prostrated themselves; some climbed onto the stylobate of the temple of the axes, others gathered stones. One of them, I believe, hid himself beneath the sea. (Borges 129)

Asterion has his own interpretation of why his presence elicits such mayhem and explains it thus: “Not for nothing was my mother a queen; I cannot be confused with the populace...the fact is that I am unique” (Borges 129). It is thus made clear that Asterion does not recognize himself as frightful or strange. In fact, what is strange for him is the frightfulness of the “discoloured and flat faces” that the humans possess. The story thus does not aim to present the truth *about* him but is more interested in showing what is true *to* him. In doing so, the story demonstrates how his truth is formed on the basis of his experiences and on the basis of how the world presents itself to him.

The story ends with a shift in perspective. It shifts from first-person narration to third-person narration. The final line, by presenting the perspective of Theseus, offers the outsider's viewpoint: “‘Would you believe it, Ariadne?’ said Theseus. ‘The Minotaur scarcely defended himself’” (Borges 131). Here, Asterion stops talking and is instead

talked about, and we are presented with a different truth, one in which Asterion is the Minotaur and nothing more.

The story is thus effective in showing that the truth that is often used as a standard for comparison, for valuation, for naming and for judgement is the truth of a subject. It cannot escape the subjectivity of its speaker. This condition does not invalidate it but merely situates it as one among many. The people see Asterion as the Minotaur, the monster. However, by offering the reader Asterion's truth, the story displaces the people's truth from its status as the only possible truth. In doing so, the story presents the strange with agency that allows it to not merely be an object of perception but to be a subject that perceives. It poses the question of what the strange sees when it looks back at that which classifies it as strange. By placing the reader, along with Theseus and the humans in the story, as an object to be observed and characterised by the monster, Borges complicates categories and their seemingly fixed nature.

The Ghost in *Hamlet*

Yet another way in which the strange is utilised to disrupt what appears to be true can be seen in Shakespeare's usage of the ghost in *Hamlet*. Though the play is set in the real world, Shakespeare incorporates the fantastical element of the ghost in order to question the reality that is presented. In *Hamlet* and in other Shakespearean plays, the unnatural often acts as a foil or as a catalyst, motivating actions that transform the real. In the case of *Hamlet*, the ghost is introduced in the exposition itself and provokes the actions that drive the rest of the plot.

Hamlet, written by Shakespeare around 1600, has to be read against the background of Elizabethan England and the prevalent Christian ethos of the time. Though the play is set in Denmark, Shakespeare's characters are guided by the convictions and moral standards of 16th-century England. The structure of feeling of the period was strongly influenced by the Christian belief system, and it is crucial to acknowledge this context in order to fully understand the foreboding significance that the apparition held for the Christian characters and for Shakespeare's audience.

The appearance of a person after his or her death is in direct contradiction to the dictates of Christian belief and hence cannot imply anything but the ominous. Here, the ghost is that of the dead king, which makes matters all the more complex and perilous. The fear that the ghost evokes in the characters is quickly followed by dread concerning what its appearance implies for the systems in place as is evident in Horatio's line, "the apparition bodes some strange eruption to our state" (Shakespeare 1.1.65-70) The presence of the unnatural questions and threatens the natural and leads both the characters and the audience to look upon the apparition as a portent:

As harbingers preceding still the fates
And prologue to the omen coming on,

Have heaven and earth together demonstrated

Unto our climatures and countrymen (Shakespeare 1.1.120-125)

The strangeness of the ghost also evokes the theme of appearance versus reality, characteristic of Shakespearean plays and the Renaissance era. The ghost has no place in reality, yet its presence proves itself to be undeniable to even the most cynical of characters. Its very presence, even when silent, is a provocation that raises questions regarding the authenticity of what appears to be real.

Moreover, the strangeness of the ghost attributes it with the unique potential to act as a catalyst for action. The divine right of kings, upheld by the society both within and outside the play, asserts that the monarch is ordained directly by God and is, therefore, not subject to any earthly authority. Set in this context, Hamlet's reasons to seek retribution against the king would not have been justifiable, and any action in this direction would have been judged as a crime against both the State and God. However, with the appearance of the ghost, such systems are toppled, and Hamlet is "prompted to revenge by heaven and hell" (Shakespeare 2.2. 545- 550) and not simply by his own vulnerable convictions. The tragedy of the play lies in Hamlet's inability to act in spite of this injunction.

The strange, therefore, allows for action that otherwise would not have been permissible. "Unquestionable certainties" are questioned by the appearance of that which is unnatural. Such a challenge provokes questions regarding ethics, duty and morality. By presenting Hamlet as a character condemned to navigate these questions, the play realises its tragic potential.

To conclude, our readings of the three texts demonstrate the way in which 'the strange' in literature acts as a fantastical other that has the potential to question established perceptions of the self and the world. As a transgression against the normal, 'the strange' is potent both as a literary tool and as a social allegory. In presenting 'the strange', fantasy offers itself as a site of productive provocations that engage the intentionality and imagination of characters both within and outside of the text.

Reference

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The House of Asterion." Translated by James E. Irby. *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, The Folio Society, London, England, 2007, pp. 129-131.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*. Translated by Willa Muir, Edwin Muir. *Franz Kafka. The Complete Stories*, Schocken Books, New York, 1971, pp. 89-139

Laing, R. D. *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Penguin, 2010 Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, The Folio Society, London, 1954

Address for communication:

Thekkinkattil, P.O. Pookkayil, Tirur
Malappuram (Dist), Kerala, India - 676 107