

## WHEN ORNAMENTS GO WALKING

**F**antastic stances, in both literature and the arts, seem to range among the most discretely perceivable and exhaustively definable aesthetic standpoints. Fantastic novels as well as fantastic pictures taste distinctly and unmistakably at the first glance, from the very first line or look, the way exotic food tastes, that is strong, pervasive, exciting, precious and mysterious, appealing and outlandish. Provocative, and yet not inaccessible, they usually lead to a paragon of positive, consummate aesthetic experience that indulges into a thorough assimilation of alterity, skipping the prerequisite of its knowledge.

The Fantastic as a genre of typically (post) Romantic artistic cuisine specializes in wizard-like, sophisticate and hallucinatory constructions, like some tremendously decorated, though also lightly poisoned cakes. It is a craftily balanced mixture of dazzlingly multifaceted diamonds and exquisite, secret amounts of lethal arsenic, administrated in a homeopathic fashion in order to enhance a finally healthy, although somehow eccentric, baroque lust for life. This is why sometimes the fantastic could be easily operated, as a mechanical program, like a blatant receipt of visionary incantation.

One cannot imagine a fantastic novel or picture that doesn't hint at both death and paradise, through the depiction of mysterious, nebulous other worlds and their hallucinatory, illuminating and bewildering experiences. As it is a too narrowly-built and explicit genre, exceedingly focusing on the tension between the

*ultimate and nethermost matter of (always) mysterious extinction and its counterpart, the Parnassian light of beatitude, the fantastic frequently takes advantage on and even overstresses the twin emotions of fear and deliverance. Anxiety, trembling, and unconcealed playful "jouissance" are the luring bet of the fantastic in many of its embodiments. And that opens it to plain (sub)cultural consumerism. Too often the fantastic provides only cheap revelation and gross consumption.*

*On the traces left by 19th century Symbolism, Surrealism has heavily capitalized on the fantastic, turning it into a favorite means of reaching a certain sense of uneasiness and versatility of the picture. One can even say that a tacitly codified and largely shared sense of fantastic is actually the most specific and crude mark of Surrealist mannerism, one that culminates in a visual fable with willingly suspended or loose ends presented as an equivocal gift to a complacent beholder.*

*Ion ȚUCULESCU (Craiova 1910 – Bucharest 1962) is neither a Symbolist nor a Surrealist. However unclassifiable, his work is permeated by a radically, profoundly fantastic feature. In his case, the fantastic resides in a perturbation that fascinates. In Surrealist painting, the intricate organization of the narrative (that is the drawing) usually provides the cultural, mythological, sexual and psychological web onto which the image is elaborated. Such, paintings are frequently rather colored discourses, charades, puns, and witticisms using "as if" alphabets and vocabularies.*

*Opposing common Surrealist practices, ȚUCULESCU starts from real, powerfully structured vocabularies, developed by traditional ornamental figures and frameworks recurrent in popular carpets and tapestries from his homeland, the region of Oltenia. Paradoxically, although he works on a given sign-system, his is not a realist vocabulary either, but a coherently codified lexical-like series of abstract figures and a strongly defined grammar of both color syntax and geometric sequence.*

*It was not ȚUCULESCU that revealed for the first time the fantastic or rather fascinating features of a common, given sign-system. Persian and Arabic decorative writing and especially Irish*

and later Medieval miniatures expanded letters and words into amazing, suffocating ornamental and symbolic jungles that made characters themselves the very, quintessential image of the sense, surpassing the text proper. The letters encoded signification comprised by a whole Codex. However, Țuculescu turns a non-literary vocabulary, a formal, abstract and meta-semiotic one, back into a now fantastic and aesthetic reality. What traditional craftsmen conceived of as a code encapsulating reality is re-worked and opened into a labyrinthine new world. It is like adventuring into the hypertrophied spiral of an ornament and searching for life there instead on Mars.

ȚUCULESCU praises the moment when the traditional formal vocabulary of carpets and tapestries becomes itself a story, a narrative. One cannot distinguish if it is art enlivening the ornament or the ornament swallowing life. ȚUCULESCU propagates fascination from the disturbance he creates into the common order of signs and narrative. In his case, signs become the real narrative and the narrative turns into an abstract juxtaposition dominated by the geometric syntax of the carpets instead of the readable one of, say, the Surrealist painted page. Like some inchoate, flourishing letters in *The Book of Kells*, his pots and handled poles receive a hallucinatory visual substance. There is no place for Surrealist fables and intellectual tricks. A sometimes gloomy, sometimes strident drama occurs among the formalized, yet now re-humanized abstract figures.

The fascination reveals a hidden, but paradoxically palpable, real, and touching symbolism inside the rigid framework of traditional figures and signs. Archetypes, pulsating totems, bloody abstract fights and sunny contemplation suddenly emerge when the painter penetrates the fold of life that ornaments conceal. Turgid, powerful chromatics boosts a fever-like, tremendous agony in a garden of stylized flowers. As the apex of this visionary intermingling, ȚUCULESCU portrays himself with his body turned into an earthen jug while his figure comes closer to vegetal life. Symbiosis, another mark of the fantastic, is at its peak here.