THE FANTASTIC IN THE PARABOLIC LANGUAGE OF JESUS

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents analysis of selected parables and other short enigmatic sayings attributed to Jesus and recorded in the canonical Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas, in the light of contemporary theories of the literary fantastic developed by T Todorov and E Rabkin. These theories describe the fantastic as a narrative structure within which the implied reader hesitates between the genres of the marvelous and the uncanny. This fundamental indeterminacy of reference reverses or subverts the ground-rules of narrative realism.

The fantastic structure plays an important role both in the parabolic sayings and in the interpretations of those sayings by biblical scholars. This is most clear at the levels of the sayings tradition represented by the Gospels of Mark and Thomas. In contrast, the Q material displays very little of the fantastic. Matthew and Luke also tend to determine the reference of sayings material, either to the marvelous or the uncanny; this eliminates the element of the fantastic in favour of theological coherence. The larger narrative becomes increasingly certain of who Jesus is. John reverses this tendency and 're-fantasises' the sayings material, but John also moves the fantastic hesitation to a different stratum of the narrative, thereby disarming this aspect of the narrative.

The paper concludes with a few general observations on the relation between the fantastic and the credibility of narrative, and the consequences of this relation for understanding these texts.

And they brought children to him, so that he might lay his hands on them. And his disciples scolded them. But seeing this, Jesus was vexed and said to them: Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for of such is the Kingdom of God. Truly I tell you, he who does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child may not enter into it (Mk 10:13-15).

Jesus said: 'The Kingdom of the Father is like a certain man who wanted to kill a powerful man. In his own house he drew his sword and stuck it into the wall in order to find out whether his hand could carry through. Then he slew the powerful man.' (GTh 98)

1 PARABOLIC SAYINGS

Eissfeldt described the word 'mashal', or parable, as perhaps originally referring to magical sayings, associated with riddles, and developing
eventually into sayings of ‘the wise’ (1965:82–86). Eissfeldt did not explore the etymology of ‘magical saying’, but it cannot be too far removed from the Greek notion of ποιήσις as mastery over the powers of language, powers which stupefy or enchant the auditors. There is considerable evidence that collections of ‘sayings of the wise’ (λογοί σοφῶν) attributed to Jesus, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the common source (Q) of Matthew and Luke, form the basis of the discourse portions of the canonical Gospels.

Many of Jesus’ sayings take the form of short, paradoxical narratives, in some of which paradox nearly disappears into narrative, and in others of which the narrative order is disrupted by paradox. At this extreme limit, the parables become paradoxical aphorisms such as, ‘for he who wishes to save his life shall lose it.’ The parables of Jesus, like those of the Hebrew scriptures, feature concrete, vivid images, often taken from the natural world and always from the everyday world of the narrative, which serve as figures for a mystery which apparently cannot be described in a more direct manner. Via (1967:66) notes that ‘there is often in the parables an element of surprise or shock, of the extraordinary, which cuts across the prevailing realism and suggests another dimension of reality which impinges on the strictly human one.’

Crossan describes the structure of parable as a contrast between expression and expectation within the implied dialogue, a polysemic and paradoxical structure generated by an infinitely regressive metaphor. This structure repels any normative reading; the parables are ‘dark sayings’ or ‘enigmas’.

If the last becomes first, we have the story of Joseph. If the first becomes last, we have the story of Job. But if the last becomes first and the first becomes last, we have a polar reversal, a reversal of world as such....a world is reversed and overturned and we find ourselves standing firmly on utter uncertainty (Crossan 1973:55).

The ‘reversal of world as such’ is central to Rabkin’s definition of literary fantasy (1976:78). Like fantasy, parable is fictional, self-referential, and anti-generic; it exposes the fundamental mythic structures and referential limits of narrative.

Theological interpretation of the parables may be divided into two approaches, one treating them as allegories of a supernatural realm, and the other regarding them as moral examples or limit cases of the natural. Either of these two mutually exclusive exegeses distorts the parabolic story. Divergence of interpretation often occurs around the ambiguous term, ‘the kingdom of God (or the Father, or heaven)’, which is the focus of most of Jesus’ parables. It is a disagreement regarding the genre of parable, whether it falls into the narrative category which Todorov (1973:25) calls the ‘marvelous’ or rather into that which he calls the 'uncanny'. The marvelous story is one for which the supernatural is a crucial explanatory principle; the uncanny story presents bizarre phenomena for which, however, natural explanation can be provided.
Todorov (1973:31-33) argues that the literary fantastic arises as a structural indeterminacy between these two genres, in which the implied reader (a function of the narrative) is unable to determine the reference of the narrative at crucial points. Todorov (1973:41-44) notes that the fantastic is an inherently unstable literary structure; the fantastic hesitation cannot be sustained and usually tends to be 'decided' by the narrative itself in one direction or the other. That the Gospels themselves occasionally 'encourage' the interpretation of the parables as either marvelous or uncanny is therefore not decisive. In any case, interpretation is always intertextual; a single text cannot interpret itself.

The literary fantastic is most evident in the parables and other enigmatic sayings of Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Mark and in the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas. Saying 98 in Thomas, the parable of the assassin, violates the reader's expectations because no justification is given for the murder of the powerful man, and because it is difficult to imagine the same speaker uttering this parable and the words of Mark 10:15 concerning children: 'he who does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child may not enter into it.' Yet at saying 22 of Thomas, Jesus also says: 'These infants being suckled are like those who enter the Kingdom' (see also GTh 46).

Thomas 21 compares the disciples to children 'in a field which is not theirs.'

When the owners of the field come, they will say: 'Let us have back our field.' They (will) undress in their presence in order to let them have back their field and to give it back to them. Therefore I say to you, if the owner of a house knows that the thief is coming, he will begin his vigil before he comes and will not let him dig through into his house of his domain to carry away his goods. You, then, be on your guard against the world. Arm yourselves with great strength lest the robbers find a way to come to you, for the difficulty which you expect will (surely) materialize.

The last two sentences are similar to Thomas 103, the only saying near the assassin parable which has any similarity of content to it, although sayings 99 and 100 are also about discipleship (see also GTh 93).

However, there is nothing in the immediate literary context of saying 98 which allows the reader to determine what 'the kingdom of the Father' is. The two preceding sayings are also parables of the kingdom, and one of them (96) has a Synoptic parallel (Mt 13:33, the leaven in the flour), but they do not help to clarify the parable of the assassin.

Davies (1983:136) notes the apparent randomness of Thomas' order, despite his own considerable efforts to explain it, and he argues that the sayings must have been supplemented by oral instructions given at the times that the text was read. Since that instruction no longer exists, the reader is left with no more than a list of sayings. Because the explanatory instruction was oral, the living presence of the community was necessary to the utilisation of the text, and when the community died, its hermeneutic control over the text died also. The written text of the sayings is by its very nature independent of that control and can no
longer be 'rescued' by the community's interpretation. Ironically, Thomas presents its collection as sayings of 'the living Jesus', the one who is 'living in your presence' (saying 52), and yet the text like all texts is a corpse, a dead body, even though it refers again and again to the search for life. This is so whether the book was 'intended' to present a post-resurrection discourse or the words of the pre-Easter Jesus. The lack of narrative context prevents identification.

2 THE QUESTION OF REFERENCE

In the synoptic Gospels, the parabolic sayings are juxtaposed with other sayings having similar content, or with allegorising clarifications by Jesus or others, or with narrative material (such as miracles) in terms of which their indeterminacy can sometimes be resolved. Mark 10:14-15 is part of a larger collection of diverse sayings concerning discipleship and the kingdom of God, in which desires for authority, power, or wealth are rejected (Mk 9:33-37). This context tends to resolve the ambiguity regarding what it is to receive the kingdom 'like a child' (ὡς παιδίου). Not only do these sayings remain in use in communities of instruction, as the canon, but they also appear to require less in the way of supplementary commentary, because of a continuous narrative context which provides metatextual commentary. Thus the synoptic Gospels disguise by writing it the lack or death which generates them in a way that Thomas does not.

If Gospel of Thomas 98 were located alongside of Luke 14:26-33, in a context of sayings about renunciation and discipleship, its content would be less problematic. Conversely, the aphorism on hating one's own family (Lk 14:26) or the parable of the warring kings (Lk 14:31), if isolated from its literary context, becomes more difficult, although not as 'dark' as saying 98. Even in a Lukan context, saying 98 would establish a relationship between disciple and assassin, still a problem for all readers except terrorists (however, note also Mt 11:12 and Lk 16:16). It would become uncanny.

On the other hand, if saying 98 were placed alongside of the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mk 4:26-29), it might refer to an eschatological (marvelous) event, and stabbing the wall might symbolise preparation for the end ('the time of harvesting'). In turn, the teleology of the seed growing secretly, emphasised by its juxtaposition with parables of the mustard seed and of the sower in Mark 4, would be less evident if it were juxtaposed instead only with saying 98, and its themes of mystery and sudden violence would be more evident.

The seed grows 'without (the man's) knowing it', and when the time comes, 'he puts forth the sickle'. Note also the penultimate sentence of Thomas 21: 'When the grain ripened, he came quickly with his sickle in his hand and reaped it.' Matthew's very similar parable of the darnel (13:24-30, cf GTh 57) is far more decisively eschatological than Mark's harvest parable, especially given Jesus' allegorising interpretation (13:37-43). The enemy planting weeds replaces the mystery of the seed growing.
However, since the assassin parable stands in Thomas free of any context (except the seemingly random order), it is neither uncanny nor marvelous; it is fantastic. The knife striking into the wall is in some sense even more brutal than the stabbing of the man to which it leads. Likewise, the suckling infants are in a state of sensual, physical immediacy - what Barthes called 'bliss' - far beyond that of the children in Mark 10 (see also Lk 18:15 and Jn 3:4). Yet even the children in Mark receive Jesus' caresses. The child is in either case the one who transgresses the borders between the everyday world and the kingdom (Patte 1983:28,38), like the assassin. Each image is fantastic.

There are paradoxes here: those who suckle at the maternal breast enter the kingdom (of the Father), which is like the one who slays 'the powerful man'. In each case, the reference to the kingdom is subverted by a disruptive metaphor, a metaphor which makes the reader aware of its own metaphoricity and therefore of its failure as the symbolic. Sayings 22 and 98, like all of the parables, compare the kingdom to images of sheer materiality and thereby refer back to themselves. The parable is a knife, a nipple. Saying 22 concludes:

When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female; and when you fashion eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter (the Kingdom).

The two become one, and male/female as 'one and the same', reverse the aboriginal splitting of male and female recounted in Genesis 2:21-22. Davies discusses the importance in the Gospel of Thomas of images of salvation as the return to an Edenic paradise, and of Adamic androgyny. The child at its mother's breast enters the kingdom of the Father, and the two become one; but the child is also the likeness (the re-presentation or double) of the parent - 'eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand', etcetera - the child is the physical body which carries over (as a meta-phor, or transport), entering the kingdom which 'is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it' (GTh 113). The suckling infant is the likeness of the disciple. Judas Thomas, who has transcribed the sayings according to Thomas' introduction, is also 'the twin' (of Jesus?), the fantastic double.

A similar image is present in the treasure parable of Matthew 13:44. I have discussed the paradox and self-referentiality of this story elsewhere and here note only the interplay of this story with the Eden myth: this ordinary field becomes paradise, and vice versa. In the man's exchange of 'all he has' for the infinite treasure lies the intersection of the uncanny and the marvelous. The parable also appears in Thomas 109 where it seems to have been combined with another rabbinic treasure saying (Crossan 1979:65-66), but the result in Thomas is that the fantastic paradox is eliminated, as the order of finding and buying is reversed.

The non-paradoxical order of Thomas' version of the treasure parable allows an allegorising which obliterates the fantastic element in the
parable. As Todorov (1973:58-63) notes, the literary fantastic is neither
terntory (the sensual interplay of language with itself) nor allegory (the
construction of a system of symbols), but rather somewhere in between. The
fantastic is fictional and yet literal; in it, the materiality of language
and its power of signification are at war with each other.

In Matthew, the grouping of the treasure parable with the parables of
the pearl (13:45-46) and of the fishing net (13:47-48) also tends to
interpret metatextually all three of the parables; the reader looks for
themes common to them all and overlooks the paradoxes. Furthering this
tendency, the latter two parables are progressively less paradoxical - the
net parable perhaps not at all - and they lack the self-referential
allusion to the myth. Finally, Jesus' commentary on the sayings in Matthew
13:49-50 and 52 seem irrelevant to the stories, turning the 'hidden good
thing' in all three into the righteous rather than the kingdom.

The pearl parable also appears alone as Thomas 76, in essentially the
same form as in Matthew but with the addition of the comment: 'You too,
seek his unfailing and enduring treasure where no moth comes near to
devour and no worm destroys.' Explaining the metaphor of the kingdom
de-fantasises the parable. However, a distinct version of the net parable
appears as Thomas 8.

The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew
it up from the sea full of small fish. He threw all the small fish
back into the sea and chose the large fish without difficulty.

In Matthew, the parable as elaborated by Jesus symbolises 'the end of the
world', with the good fish as the righteous and the bad fish as the evil,
but in Thomas, it depicts the simple prudence of a wise man, for whom the
large fish is merely the smarter choice, although the explicit reference
to wisdom may imply that the fish is more than just a fish (Davies
1983:9-10).

It appears that an earlier version of the net parable has been
'de-fantasised' towards each of the neighbouring genres, and one might
wonder whether the reference of the 'original', like the parables of the
treasure (in Matthew) and of the assassin, was not so easily decided. That
these paradoxical sayings tend on the one hand toward the marvelous and on
the other toward the uncanny in various texts suggests that the
trajectories of the traditions tended to neutralise the fantastic in the
sayings. Generic indeterminacy could not be maintained.

Elsewhere in Thomas the theme of seeking and finding is clearly
fantastic. Sayings 1 and 2 are self-referential.

And he said: 'Whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will
not experience death.' Jesus said: 'Let him who seeks continue seeking
until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes
troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All.'

Davies (1983:39) pays little attention to the themes of being troubled and
astonished, passing quickly to the image of salvation as dominion.
However, these themes are crucial, as they reflect the fantastic as described by both Todorov and Rabkin. Given Davies's (1983:136) own claim that the text requires the supplementation of an oral commentary (the interpretation ἑρμηνεία which must be found), presented to initiates at the moment of baptism or entry into the kingdom (as naked children), then it is the text itself of Thomas which stands at the point of bewilderment/astonishment. The saying itself is a fantastic gate. This is reflected in other seeking/finding sayings.

Whoever has come to understand the world has found (only) a corpse, and whoever has found a corpse is superior to the world (saying 56).
He who has recognized the world has found the body, but he who has found the body is superior to the world (saying 80). Whoever finds the world and becomes rich, let him renounce the world (saying 110).

Finding the corpse/body/world leads to superiority over it, or renunciation of it, which amounts to the same thing; by uncovering the body of the text (sayings 21, 37), by devouring the corpse (sayings 7, 11, 60), one can then dispense with it - one has mastered it. This requires, however, that the reader go 'beyond' the text, by interpreting it. The text exists only so that it can be stripped, consumed, and surpassed, in a community of interpretation.

This theme is also present in Jesus' instruction of the disciples in Mark 4:11-12 (citing Is 6:9-10) and 33-34, in which the purpose of the parabolic sayings is to divide those who are inside and have received the supplementary instruction - the disciples - from those who are outside and have not - the crowd. As Kermode (1979) argues, this makes outsiders of all those who do not understand and legitimises an institutionalised hermeneutic, with its authorised insiders. In contrast to Thomas, throughout Mark the implied reader, like the disciples, is privy to the secret instruction, including the allegorical de-fantasising of the sower parable (the parallel in Thomas 9 has no commentary). Yet despite this the reader, like the disciples (in Mark), remains uncertain, or stupid; the instruction has not produced faith (Mk 4:35-41).

The secret of the kingdom is a metaphoric abyss, an enigmatic text. The reader must already be one of the disciples, but a disciple who has not yet seen the resurrected Jesus in Galilee (16:7); perhaps the only true disciples/insiders in Mark are the centurion (15:39) - clearly an outsider - and the mysterious young man (16:5-7, but also 14:51-52). Others also understand without becoming disciples: for example, the Syrophoenician woman (7:27ff) and the scribe (12:28ff). The insiders fall outside, and outsiders can come inside, for 'everything is in parables'.

3 THE NEUTRALISATION OF THE FANTASTIC
Matthew's account of why Jesus speaks in parables (13:34-35) claims that they are told in order to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, and the line between insiders and outsiders is neither so sharply drawn nor so ambiguous as in Mark (Kermode 1979:29-33). In the parable collection of Matthew 13, only the parables of the treasure and the pearl remain free of explicit or implicit allegorisation, as comparison with the parallels in Mark or Thomas makes clear. The grouping of parables around a common theme - the
hidden made manifest, the small become great - provides a metatextual commentary for the parables, as it does also for the parables of Mark 4.

However, the parabolic structure of the larger Markan narrative subverts the tendency toward resolution, whereas the greater narrative followability of Matthew and Luke readily produces insiders. Concluding comments and internal adjustments transform the parables into allegories, usually marvelous. The parable of the lost sheep in Thomas 107, despite its claim that the missing sheep was the largest one (at which point it is similar to saying 8), lacks the final, intensifying comment of Matthew 18:10-14 indicating the heavenly Father’s care that the ‘little ones’ not ‘be lost’ or the conclusion of Luke 15:3-7 concerning the ‘joy in heaven’ over the repentant sinner. Both canonical versions de-fantasise the parable in the direction of the marvelous, but to different degrees. Furthermore, the conjunction of the Lukan parable with the succeeding parable of the lost coin again reduces the paradox of the ninety-nine abandoned sheep.

Crossan has shown in his studies of the parables of the sower, the great supper, and the tenants in the vineyard, among others, that the stages of the tradition reflected in Thomas, Mark, and Matthew/Luke suggest a trajectory of increasing allegorisation and resolution of paradox. The treasure parable is a striking exception. Crossan and others draw the conclusion that this is evidence of chronological sequence, a process whereby originally paradoxical and disturbing (but authentic) parables of Jesus continue to generate new layers of (re-)interpretation. The parable is not the pearl of great price but the worthless grain of sand which stimulates its production; it is the material text, the treasure chest (or corpse) which readers dig up in order to bury again (or consume) so that we may make it our own and find life, or as Thomas says: ‘rule over the All’. Williams (1988:89-90) (following Beardslee) describes this as ‘intensification’. The parables become more clearly referential and thus more ‘realistic.’ We see here the emergence of an institutionalised hermeneutic, one of whose functions is to neutralise the fantastic.

The Gospel of John consists of a great many sayings (παροιμίαι) of Jesus woven together to form lengthy discourses. According to Dewey (1980:81-82), a significant number of these are ‘intentional literary enigmas’ which ‘invite misunderstanding’. Many of these sayings stand in an uncertain relation to their literary context, and Dewey argues that the disciples, as in Mark, continue to misinterpret them.

Many of the sayings of Jesus in John are similar to those in Thomas, but because the sayings are usually embedded in longer discourses in John, the fantastic element is either transformed or it disappears. The (non-)order in Thomas renders the reference of these sayings uncertain, or the saying refers to the words of Jesus themselves and to the search for an interpretation of them; they are self-referential. In this light, saying 38 (‘There will be days when you will look for Me and will not find Me.’) suggests that the living Jesus is himself the interpretation of his words. The one who finds the interpretation finds and becomes (like?) Jesus.
John, however, often provides a self-commentary, either in Jesus' words, as in 7:33 ('then I go to him who sent me'), or in the narrator's words, as in 7:39 ('this he said concerning the spirit, of which those who had put their faith in him would partake...'). Sometimes John even underlines the ambiguity, as in 7:36 and 16:17ff, in order to resolve it later in the narrative. In each case, the paradox is resolved in John; however, this may lead to the generation of another paradox.

For example, in Thomas 13 Jesus speaks of 'the bubbling spring which I have measured out'; in saying 28 Jesus finds no one who is 'thirsty'; and in saying 108

He who will drink from My mouth will become like Me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him.

Compare John 4:13-14, in which Jesus claims to 'give' water which 'will turn...into a spring of water jetting up into everlasting life'. Davies argues that the sayings in Thomas refer to the baptismal waters; this would also be a likely reading of John (especially in light of 3:5). However, again this requires (for Thomas) an extratextual supplement.

The resolution of the metaphor of Jesus as water generates the paradox of John 6:55-56. This text is reminiscent of Thomas 108; however, the metaphor in that saying of the consumption (and the digestion?) of the words from Jesus' mouth has been literalised in John to a cannibalistic extreme. Only a re-metaphorising of the words through an extratextual sacrament can resolve this paradox; unlike the synoptic Gospels, John's much lengthier and more highly detailed account of the last supper makes no clear reference to the eucharistic consuming of Jesus.

Something similar is also the case with the 'I-sayings' of Jesus, which play prominent roles in both John and Thomas. With the exception of saying 114, which Davies (1983:152-53) argues is an extraneous addition, these latter sayings have parallels or very similar versions in the canonical Gospels or I Corinthians, and in each case the version in Thomas is the more fantastic.

In saying 10 Jesus says: 'I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am guarding it until it blazes' (see also GTh 82). Luke 12:49, in the midst of a series of sayings on eschatological themes, has Jesus say: 'I came to cast fire upon the earth, and what is my will if it has already been lit?' Thomas refers to a present (or timeless) event; Luke refers to Jesus' intentionality. In saying 71, Jesus says: 'I shall destroy (this) house, and no one will be able to rebuild it.' The synoptic Gospels parallel this with uniform predictions of the destruction of the temple (Mk 13:2par), but John presents a radically opposed version: 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up again' (2:19), which is then allegorised as referring to his body and resurrection. A combination of Thomas' and John's versions is the 'false witness' brought against Jesus before the priests and elders (Mk 14:58; Mt 26:61).

Saying 13 contains the negative statement: 'I am not your master.' Saying 72 contains a question, also negative: 'I am not a divider, am I?' (cf Mt 10:34-35; Lk 12:51-53; 15:11ff). However, in saying 61 Jesus says:
I am He who exists from the Undivided. I was given some of the things of My father... If he is undivided, he will be filled with light, but if he is divided, he will be filled with darkness.

Who 'he' is, is not clear; a brief narrative context suggests that it is the disciple. The remaining Thomas saying of this sort (77) is consistent with saying 61.

It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the All. From Me did the All come forth, and unto Me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find Me there.

John also has Jesus identify himself in relation to his divine father, as above all, and as light, in several of his 'I am' sayings, as well as in John's commentaries on who Jesus is (e.g. 1:1-5; 3:19-21,31). Thomas 28 is also very similar to John's 'I am' language, and to the prologue of John.

According to Bultmann (1955:63-65), Jesus' 'I am' statements in John are self-referential and have no separable content; what they are about is Jesus' act in speaking them. If this is so, then John like Thomas refers to itself as text; insofar as it presents the reader with the words of Jesus, it presents the reader with Jesus himself, Jesus the Word, that is, Jesus the text replacing Jesus the living, present one. Koester (1971:178-79) notes further that the sayings in Thomas (especially 61 and 77) serve to identify Jesus as the divine revealer of secret knowledge, but that in John Jesus is calling for his followers to recognise in his person the salvation which they seek. In Thomas the 'I am' refers to Jesus' words, and the search for their meaning, whereas in John it refers to the historical event of Jesus.

In both cases, however, the 'I am' is a self-referential disruption of sense, a point where metaphor threatens to explode from within the limits of narrative realism. What seems in Thomas and John to be referential language turns out to be not that at all. If John's 'I am' sayings are self-referential, then Thomas' are too; however, the meaning of Thomas is less determinate than that of John.

4 CONCLUSIONS
Rabkin (1976) has shown how the literary fantastic operates as a generative principle in literary history. There is a tension continually at work between the novelty of the fantastic reversal of narrative ground-rules and the conventionality of the established genre. The fantastic endlessly generates new literary forms, which the literary tradition then absorbs and de-fantasises. Fantasy therefore always challenges belief. As Todorov (1973:31) says, it leads to 'near belief' - neither belief nor disbelief. However, if the fantastic resists the determinations of belief, then belief may also reject fantastic elements of the tradition - that is, it may need to de-fantasise them.

The literary fantastic forms a significant dimension of the parabola sayings of Jesus as they are represented in the canonical Gospels and the
Gospel of Thomas. It might be better to say that the fantastic plays a role in disrupting any clear significance for these sayings. This disruption is particularly apparent in the Gospels of Mark and of Thomas; a more extensive survey of the material would yield further examples. In a few cases the Thomas sayings are less fantastic than their Synoptic parallels, and the larger narrative of Mark may sometimes conceal the paradox of the sayings. However, in Mark and Thomas the sayings of Jesus are often caught in an indeterminate reference between the marvelous and the uncanny, and when a version of the same saying is found in Matthew, Luke, or John, that saying usually appears in a less fantastical form (a form which is more clearly referential, more realistic) or the larger narrative has provided a literary context which clarifies the saying's reference.

In several interesting cases this contextual resolution fails and the undecidable paradox continues to astonish the reader: for example, Luke's parables of the good Samaritan, the dishonest steward, and the importunate widow. The summations which conclude these fantastic, 'dark' parables fail to make sense of them and move instead in the direction of John's Gospel: in attempting to resolve one paradox, they create another. None of these sayings is from Q. Despite its similarity to Thomas, Q appears to consist largely of non-fantastic sayings. None of the fantastic material in Matthew or Luke is from Q only, and much of it is not from Q at all.

Matthew and Luke both remain well within the genre of the narrative gospel (like Mark), whereas John lies on its periphery. In John the paradox which lies on the surface of Thomas' and Mark's sayings, and which Matthew and Luke tend to dissolve in narrative followability and explicit christology, has re-emerged as a 'deep structure' of the fundamental conceptual framework which determines the narrative. John has re-fantasised that which had been de-fantasised, but in this process the fantastic element has become more subtle and less likely to interfere with the reader's search for reference. While it continues to draw upon the fantastic, John does so in a way that does not block faith but seems to encourage it. 'In the beginning was the Word' becomes a creed, not a paradox. John has always been very popular among theologians and faithful laity alike.

In contrast, the Gospel of Mark (and of course Thomas) has always presented difficulties for orthodox Christian reading. The language is too awkward, the theology is uncertain, and the ending is quite unsatisfactory. Mark presents fundamental textual obstacles to the reader's desire to believe. Robinson (1971:239) has argued that either Matthew or Luke alone would have replaced (and eliminated) Mark, but the early church's recognition that both of them, and therefore a plurality of Gospels, belonged in the canon made way for Mark as well, since it was clearly related to them. Neither Matthew nor Luke alone would have needed the supplementation of a multi-Gospel context. The canonical juxtaposition with the other Gospels, as well as with the Pauline letters, made Mark palatable to the reading of faith. Thomas, of course, did not fare so well.

What can we make of the role of the fantastic in the early strata of these traditions? Was the sayings tradition originally non-fantastic, as Q evidently is, and only later rendered fantastic through intensification in
works such as Mark, as Williams has suggested? It seems to me that the functions of the literary fantastic and of intensification are opposed to each other. According to Rabkin, when the literary fantastic transforms the non-fantastic, it does so through a reversal of narrative ground-rules - a transformation of the genre. Kelber (1983) and others have argued that such a transformation produced Mark. Yet there is no evidence in Matthew or Luke that the Q material has undergone a transformation of this sort. However, if Thomas represents a more original form, then Q has already de-fantasised such material by the time of its appearance in Matthew and Luke, even as those Gospels de-fantasised Mark. This de-fantasising, at whatever redactional level, may be the result of (or another name for) intensification. Q then represents the stabilisation of the sayings gospel genre, just as Matthew and Luke represent the stabilisation of the narrative gospel genre.

ENDNOTES
1 The translation of Thomas used here is that of Thomas O Lambdin (1982); canonical texts are from the translation of Richmond Lattimore (1979).
2 See also Kermode 1979:23-26.
3 Support for this claim may be found in my article: 'Literary fantasy and the composition of the Gospels', forthcoming in Forum 5(3) (September, 1989).
4 See also Pagels 1979:168.
5 Compare Jn 8:51. Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 654 varies slightly from the Coptic text and adds 'and reigning he will have rest.' According to Davies (1983:158), 'the All' biases the translation in favour of a Gnostic reading, and 'all things' is a better (theologically more neutral) translation.
6 According to Kelber (1983:96-98,108), the ongoing failure of the disciples in Mark is the failure of the oral tradition and of realistic narrative. See also his essay in Williams and Gerhart (1988), and Kermode's reply (Williams & Gerhart 1988).
7 This theme reappears in John at 6:35 and 7:37-38. Compare also GTh 38 and Jn 7:33-34 (and 16:16).
8 See his chapters 4 and 5. I also draw heavily on Todorov's (1973) and Rabkin's (1976) views in: 'Literary fantasy and the composition of the Gospels.' Substantial narratological and metaphysical questions lurk behind these questions of textual history. Is it realism or fantasy that is more fundamental to literature; which modifies the other? Do we have to choose? It is my view that fantasy is prior - that all literary realism requires and implies a previous de-fantacising.

WORKS CONSULTED


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