



The Fantastic in Irish Art

RÓISÍN KENNEDY discusses a diverse group of artists from the forthcoming exhibition at the National Gallery who explored a highly inventive and subjective aesthetic

The forthcoming exhibition in the Print Gallery of the National Gallery of Ireland, 'The Fantastic in Irish Art', features artists working between the 1850s and 1940s. Most of the exhibits are from the Gallery's collection, including the Yeats Archive, but a significant proportion is on loan from public and private collections in Ireland. The guiding principle behind the exhibition, is an aesthetic one – to display a cross-section of Irish art which denotes the Fantastic.

The idea of the Fantastic in literature has been most famously defined by Tzvetan Todorov as an 'ambiguous vision of reality' or, in terms of literary narrative, as the hesitation between natural and supernatural causes. Fantastic literature, and visual art, is, therefore, characterised by the intrusion of mystery into the context of real life.¹

The Fantastic affected a wide range of Irish art, including that of such diverse artists as Daniel O'Neill (1920-1974), and Richard Doyle, (1824-1883). The former's *Scarecrows at Newtownards* c.1950 is a dramatic example of the uncanny, where the familiar is made strange and disturbing.

A more subtle use of the uncanny is evident in John Butler Yeats' (1839-1922), *Pippa Passes*, (Fig 1), where a young woman, dressed in peasant costume, wanders bare-foot through a forest. Lost in her own thoughts, she is a strange intrusion into the surrounding woodland. This gouache painting took Yeats two years to complete, and is assiduously attentive to detail. The almost geometric forms of the woman's windswept hair, arms and costume are contrasted with the gnarled forms of the tree trunks and roots. Based on a poem by Robert Browning, the work is indebted to English Pre-Raphaelite painting, which in its turn was influential on the development of Symbolism.

Symbolism, an international movement in the visual arts and literature of the 1890s, can be closely connected with the idea of the Fantastic. It grew out of dissatisfaction with contemporary society and its focus on industrialisation and rationalism. Rather than emphasising realism and a traditional sense of narrative, symbolist art was concerned with the creation of particular moods. The feeling imparted to the viewer by the work of art was far more significant than any didactic or moral meaning. Symbolism offered a vital alternative to the clawing sentimentality and bourgeois morality of much Victorian art.

Fantastic and Symbolist art has tended to cross over the conventionally discrete disciplines of painting, sculpture, literature and music. Often, in the case of Symbolism, this was an attempt to create a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or a total work of art. This has the potential to overwhelm the senses of the viewer and thus to evoke an entirely aesthetic experience. The strong correlation between art, literature and theatre in the work of Irish artists at the turn of the 20th century is evidence of their ability to escape traditional artistic parameters and to understand the potential power of the *gesamtkunstwerk*.

Contemporary European and Anglo-Irish literature provided Irish artists with a vital resource of subject matter. Significantly in the hands of artists like Harry Clarke (1889-1931), such literary sources were transformed into highly imaginative and original works of visual art. Clarke's *Song of the Mad Prince*, (Fig 2)

turns Walter de la Mare's short enigmatic poem into a fantastical image of a grief-stricken young man. Standing between his parents, at the side of his lover's grave, the mourning figure is fixed in its otherworldly state by the lavish colour and linear decoration applied by Clarke to the surface of the glass. Its complex patterning makes something modern and living of this strange medieval lamentation scene. The Prince, in spite of his archaic tunic, is a quintessentially contemporary figure, obsessed with mortality and isolated in his egotism. Set in a specially designed mahogany cabinet with an electric light made by the Dublin firm of Hicks, this work of art is concerned with creating a particular aura for its viewer, one that can transcend the mundane realities of its domestic setting.² It requires a willingness to depart into a world of fantasy and artifice.

The connection between the literary and the visual and their joint ability to transport the viewer or reader into an alternative realm of experience is also brought home in the strange art of Richard Doyle. Although resident in England all his life, Doyle was the son of a distinguished Irish artist. His bizarre imagination enabled him to create some of the most memorable imagery of Victorian London, most notably the cover design of *Punch*. Doyle's *A Girl Reading*, c.1850s (Fig 3) shows a strangely anachronistic figure, a young woman, seated in an exotic landscape with an open book in her hands. A bower of roses protects the girl from the approaching form of an enormous dragon. One is left to wonder whether this is an illustration of a morbid fairy tale or whether the beast represents the vivid imagination of the girl awakened by her reading material. This tiny watercolour sets up a dichotomy of innocence and experience which, like Clarke's *Mad Prince*, is intended to delight and amuse its beholder. Its

Fantastic literature, and visual art, is, therefore, characterised by the intrusion of mystery into the context of real life



small scale and iridescent colours make it a remarkably intimate image created, like a book, for close and private scrutiny.

The search for a purely aesthetic response which was central to Symbolism and to the Fantastic became bound up with the need for a national mode of creativity. Jack Yeats' (1871-1957), *The Pooka! The Pooka!* (1902), is a terrifying depiction of a riderless horse leaping through the sky, watched by a startled man (Fig 4). The Pooka is a nightmarish ghost who appears in various animal forms and whose delight is to torture drunkards by carrying them off.³ Yeats' image of the haunted Irish countryside provides a distinctly native version of the Fantastic.

A more historical adaptation of the Fantastic is found in Art O'Murnaghan's *Leabhar na hAisérighe* or *Book of the Resurrection*, (1924-52), commissioned to commemorate the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence.⁴ The resulting pages are sumptuously decorated in Celtic and Oriental ornament and patterning, a modern version of the Book of Kells, in which politics, spiritualism and art become intertwined. The artist's fascination with spiritualism is also evident in *Nature Rhythms*, 1930-33, highly stylised and visionary landscapes, dominated by the flowing forms of waves, sunlight and fire. The emphasis on mythology, spiritualism and fantasy



found in the Fantastic was ideally suited to burgeoning Irish national identity and its need to present Irish culture as anti-materialistic and mystical. But as this exhibition shows, Irish artists used the Fantastic

to more diverse ends. They delighted in its ambiguity and in its ability to engage the viewer's imagination and to evoke the visionary, rather than the real and the mundane. ■

RÓISÍN KENNEDY is Yeats Curator at the National Gallery of Ireland.

'The Fantastic in Irish Art', National Gallery of Ireland, 4 April -12 August

- 1 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic – A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Cornell University Press, 1975. See also Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.
- 2 Nicola Gordon-Bowe, *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, Irish Academic Press, 1989.
- 3 W.B. Yeats, *Irish Fairy Tales*, T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1892.
- 4 *Leabhar na hAisérighe* is on display at the National Museum, Collins Barracks exhibition, 'The Easter Rising: Understanding 1916'.

1 JOHN BUTLER YEATS (1839-1922)
Pippa Passes
1870-72
gouache on paper,
48 x 34cm

2 HARRY CLARKE (1889-1931)
Song of the Mad Prince 1917
stained glass
35.5 x 19cm

3 RICHARD DOYLE (1824-1883)
A Girl Reading
(Book illustration)
c.1850s ink,
watercolour on paper
22.7 x 16.5cm
Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the National Museums Northern Ireland
photo©National Museums Northern Ireland

4 JACK YEATS (1871-1957)
The Pooka! The Pooka! 1902
handcoloured line block print 16.5 x 22cm ©The Yeats Estate/ DACS, London 2007