

Fig. 1 Jacek Yerka,
Beneath the Dunes
(1991).



Jacek Yerka's Rhetoric of the Impossible

Joe Young

In 1994 art publisher Morpheus International released *Mind Fields*, a book resulting from collaboration between painter Jacek Yerka and author Harlan Ellison. Each two-page spread in this book featured one of Yerka's paintings with a short story of Ellison's, inspired by that painting, on the facing page. To Ellison, for example, Yerka's *Beneath the Dunes* (Fig. 1) prompted a monologue by an artisan reflecting on a career spent inventing such things as warm summer breezes, the smell of coffee and 'the terrific sound a small hatchet makes when you're cutting wood' (38). Others of Yerka's paintings prompted sentimental love stories, cryptic reports of mysterious conspiracies, narratives ruminating on the consequences of the Holocaust to Yerka's native Poland, and an explanation of how, contrary to widely disseminated reports, Icarus survived his fall and works as a notary in Berne. Ellison is fulsome in his praise for his source material. 'Most of Mr Yerka's paintings', he says, 'sparked instant, fully plotted stories or aphoristic fables.' (69) Elsewhere he notes that 'Mr Yerka's work [...] requires you to use your noodle' (70).

Jacek Yerka and his work require some introduction before the implications of Ellison's comments are examined. Yerka was born in the Polish city of Torun in 1952 and has been working as a professional painter since 1980. He cites such painters as Hieronymus Bosch and Albrecht Dürer as influences.¹ His images are colourful, intricately detailed and often endearingly humorous. Subject matter is often drawn from memories of his childhood in post-war Poland; domestic kitchens, dwellings and cityscapes frequently appear, as do pastoral scenes and plant life. Animal life also appears, but as his career has progressed human figures have become rare. Nevertheless Yerka displays an abiding interest in human material culture: brick walls, cars and domestic paraphernalia such as sewing machines and plumbing fixtures are typically rendered in meticulous detail. Crucially, however, Yerka's paintings almost invariably incorporate elements of the impossible, the magical, the contradictory, or the absurd. He depicts objects and structures of preternaturally unusual sizes, or endows them with attachments that turn them into bizarre robots or organic life forms. Cities and dwellings are constructed underwater; underground, or on the brinks of fantastic precipices. Buildings move, often taking flight; pastoral landscapes sprout in domestic interiors (or vice versa); water retains shape without containment. Yerka's imagination is sufficiently fertile to preclude any one image being presented as 'representative' of his work as a whole. The galleries on his official website provide perhaps the best selection of his work yet assembled. He has been called a surrealist, although he seems comfortable with a different label – in the same

year as *Mind Fields* his agents published a portfolio of his paintings entitled *The Fantastic Art of Jacek Yerka*, and he received the 1995 World Fantasy Award for Art.

That Ellison was able to see complete stories in Yerka's paintings is testimony to the remarkable narrative quality of his work. This quality is by no means confined to the paintings included in *Mind Fields*. The viewer of Yerka's *Aquarius* (Fig. 2), for example, is barraged with narrative queries. What is this machine? Who built it? For what purpose? Was it the fish in the cistern, attempting to make their way down a dry riverbed? Can fish make such a commission? If so, how on earth did they pay for it? And where, in a painting riddled with gestures towards the general concept of moisture – the umbrella, the hydrants, the naval mine suspended in the tank – did all the rest of the water go? Earth only cracks like that, after all, as water evaporates out of it. There is, in short, an interesting story going on here. Yerka's self-identification as a painter of fantasy, furthermore, raises an interesting question: if Yerka's work 'requires you to use your noodle', might it require viewers to use their noodles in the same way required by fantasy literature?

Make-believe, after all, has rules – or rather, the act of reporting it to somebody else has rules. Authors use the conventions and emotive properties of language to shape and direct the reader's engagement with their narrative. An author metaphorically describing an unsympathetic character as 'a mean old witch' is doing precisely this. Some authors, however, will go further and include in their works departures from what critic Kathryn Hume calls 'consensus reality'.² Roald Dahl states flatly in *The Witches* that a conspiracy of evil, child-hating, magic-wielding witches does, in fact, exist.³ This statement, for the purposes of Dahl's story, must be taken literally; the reader may not interpret it in the way they might interpret 'a mean old witch'. In fantasy, references to the supernatural must be presented as records of narrative fact, not allegories, metaphors or symbolic allusions. This imperative is, arguably, the defining feature of fantasy, agreed upon or at least heavily implied by commentators with otherwise conflicting definitions of the genre.⁴ Fantasy stories are inescapably stories, records of events that happen not to have happened. Readers must accept this. Authors who make this demand on their readers have a responsibility to deploy the impossible in such a way as to ensure those readers find some sort of imaginative recompense for that effort.

Yerka would seem to be proposing much the same compact with his viewers. By repeatedly consenting to his works being labelled as 'fantasy' or 'fantastic' art, he invites viewers to interpret his works in the same way as fantasy prose must be interpreted: as representations of worlds that happen not to exist. They are therefore attempts at the sort of 'fully developed and autonomously persuasive illusion'⁵ upon which most definitions of literary fantasy hinge. The viewer must incorporate literal interpretations of his images into any ongoing engagement with them; like Dahl's witches, these are pictures 'of' things rather than abstract exercises in allegory or surrealism. If the viewer of *Aquarius* accepts the machine, not as a mere compositional flourish, but as an actual machine, filled with

Fig. 2 Jacek Yerka,
Aquarius (2008).



Fig. 3 Jacek Yerka,
The Agitators (1982).



actual water and actual fish, rolling down an actual dry riverbed, the narrative questions mentioned earlier flow from that notion. Like somebody using prose to create fantasy, Yerka demands a specific interpretation of his work, then sets out to reward those who adhere to that interpretation.

The question therefore arises of whether and how Yerka's use of the impossible in his paintings responds to the theories on such use in literature. These frameworks vary widely, partly because many have been developed to illuminate specific groups of subject texts favoured by individual theorists. Nevertheless these theoretical frameworks of fantasy provide critics with various tools for the analysis of the genre. Such frameworks may be compared to the mazes that scientists use to test the abilities of laboratory mice. By running a narrative through a theoretical system, we can discern the impact of that narrative. Putting Yerka's fantasy art through some of the theoretical systems erected to further the study of fantasy literature may bring interesting discoveries.

The fact that Yerka's paintings use supernatural or preternatural elements to pose questions immediately brings to mind theorist Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic. Todorov defines the literary fantastic not as a genre but as a mode that literature adopts. The fantastic is, he avers, a period within a story when the reader must decide whether untoward events in the narrative are caused by natural or supernatural agency – essentially, the period of the story between something going bump in the night and anyone finding out what that something was.⁶ An author can keep this ambiguity running for as long as their narrative continues to feed the reader inconclusive or contradictory messages about the precise nature of the events depicted. Perhaps the most obvious Anglophone example of the Todorovian fantastic is Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, in which the reader is never fully enlightened as to whether the governess is experiencing the visitations of actual ghosts or the misapprehensions of an unstable mind. This lack of a conclusive explanation contributes to the resonance of the narrative, as succinctly demonstrated by the abundance of critical literature dealing with the tale. The foregoing discussion of Yerka's *Aquarius*, full of unresolved questions prompted by the image, demonstrates that he is capable of providing incomplete information of the sort Todorov discusses.

Sometimes this capability of Yerka's only becomes clear when the title of the painting is known. The title of a painting, like that of a book, is part of the text, part of the information the creator has provided to those who seek to engage with and interpret their creative effort. This can settle ambiguities in paintings with narrative content or intent. In 1892, for example, J.W. Waterhouse exhibited a painting of a grim-looking woman pouring green liquid into a pond. By naming the composition *Circe Invidiosa* he identified the woman and her activity, answering many questions of interpretation. But titling a painting can have the opposite effect, as in the case of Yerka's *The Agitators* (Fig. 3). The title immediately suggests some sort of conflict or agitation. Exactly what sort of agitation is being referred to is unclear, although Yerka's obviously deliberate care in making tombstones visible in the background

adds a distinct air of menace to the issue. The question of what is going on in *The Agitators* is therefore intriguing.

Importantly, Yerka has used a disruption of reality to deepen the viewer's intrigue – what sort of agitation or conspiracy requires genuflection to a church the size of a potting shed? This immediate, ridiculous, arresting detail seizes the attention and draws the viewer into the image. While demanding that they get on with the effort of interpretation, this tiny church also vastly complicates that effort. Unlike *Circe Invidiosa*, this is not an illustration of a pre-existing narrative. The reader has no indication of why the church is that small, or of the identities of those kneeling before it, or why they are kneeling in front of the church (surely they should be doing so inside?). The tiny church trips the viewer up with something they were not expecting, something that does not fit with the world as they know it, creating a profusion of incomplete and disjointed ideas which they cannot ignore. Ambiguity between the real and the unreal therefore prompts ongoing engagement with this image.

Todorov notes that the fantastic as he defines it 'may evaporate at any moment'.⁷ Indeed, Todorov's fantastic is less of a genre than an authorial balancing act between two 'adjacent' genres, the uncanny and the marvellous, that result from the resolution of Todorovian ambiguity in one way or another. Should an author see fit to provide their reader with conclusive information demonstrating that the supernatural elements of the narrative were rationally explicable, Todorov argues, the fantastic 'evaporates' into the uncanny, a genre that creates tension by ambiguously presenting a counterintuitive oddity. Similarly, if the author ever resolves the hesitation in the other direction – proving that magic does exist in this narrative – the fantastic becomes another 'adjacent' genre, the marvellous. This is the Todorovian category that most fantasy literature fits into. It might be argued that much of Yerka's work belongs there as well; he is seldom as restrained in his depiction of oddities as he is in *The Agitators*. Nevertheless even the wildest of Yerka's paintings combine the magical with the mundane, provoking moments of hesitation in which the viewer must guess exactly what they are looking at. This is the essence of the Todorovian fantastic. Since Yerka seldom conclusively settles these eye-catching ambiguities, it would be fair to say that his work fits Todorov's scheme neatly. Certainly *The Agitators*, like James's *Turn of the Screw*, never settles anything. In this painting in particular, the Todorovian fantastic never evaporates.

Preoccupied by equivocation between the marvellous and the uncanny, Todorovian critics typically accord only brief attention to narratives that immediately declare themselves as one or the other. Langford suggests this focus has contributed to the critical marginalisation of much modern fantasy literature.⁸ It possibly also limits the applicability of their ideas to much of Yerka's work: few of his paintings depict such subdued departures from reality as *The Agitators*. A different piece from the *Mind Fields* collection, *Please Don't Slam the Door* (1993, Fig. 4), is arguably more representative. The painting depicts not just an arresting oddity but a wholesale departure from possibility – chunks of landscape resting on what appear to be clouds. The painting contains details – the telephone poles and the

Fig. 4 Jacek Yerka,
*Please Don't Slam
the Door* (1993).

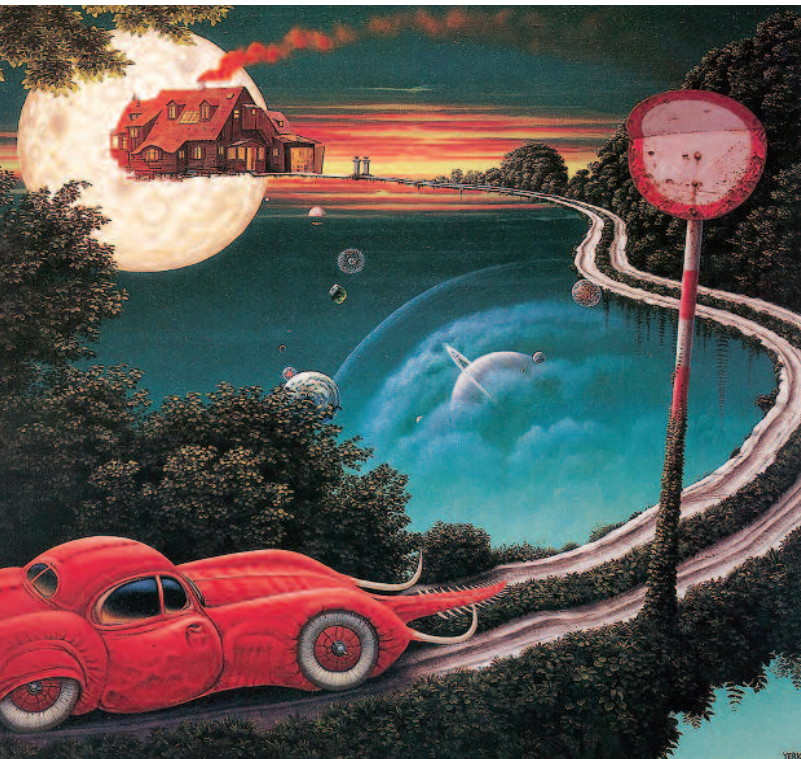


Fig. 5 Jacek Yerka,
Returning Home
(1992).

well bucket – that make it clear that this homestead is part of two of the various topographical planes depicted here. Multiple ground levels are a favourite device of Yerka's, invariably depicted as clear, unambiguous fact within a painting's internal world. To the various scholars who accept Todorov's definitions, such depictions are not fantastic but marvellous. The ideas of such scholars are therefore only barely applicable to unambiguously magical paintings like *Please Don't Slam the Door*. Thankfully, as Mendlesohn notes,⁹ other scholars are more accommodating.

Mendlesohn herself provides useful ideas about fantasy literature. She examines the differing rhetorical techniques with which authors introduce the supernatural into their stories, offering commentary on the diligence and ingenuity with which various authors provide such 'infodumps'.¹⁰ This gives rise to a loose, porous taxonomy of different narrative strategies an author might use to explain the supernatural, which in turn provides a framework within which the strengths of given texts can be judged. On more than one occasion Mendlesohn compares different rhetorical strategies to the artistic techniques painters use to construct images in their work.¹¹ The question naturally arises – can Mendlesohn's ideas elucidate fantasy paintings?

Yerka's paintings contain a lushness of detail – the farm buildings in *Please Don't Slam the Door* have plants growing in their roof thatch – that might bring to mind the fastidiousness of the Pre-Raphaelites. Mendlesohn describes the 'overbright' detail characteristic of that movement as similar to the rhetorical techniques of the portal-quest fantasy.¹² In such fantasies, the reader observes a protagonist moving from a situation where they understand the rules of reality to one in which they must have new rules carefully and accurately explained to them. The reader is therefore informed about the supernatural at the same rate as the characters; Mendlesohn mentions J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels as 'archetypical' examples.¹³ Such a shift, however, requires a narrative transition from the known to the unknown world that is hard to place in any of Yerka's paintings. Even when Yerka depicts a door or window opening on an impossible landscape – as he occasionally does – that portal is generally set in the wall of a building or setting that already includes manifest impossibilities. Such presentation of the unusual without introductory comment is mirrored in some of Ellison's contributions to *Mind Fields*:

During the standard twenty-four hour torture of a captured Logodaedalian incursionary (followed pro forma by the removal of his or her tongue by way of red-hot extracting pliers, the amputation of both hands without anaesthetic, and the piercing of both eyes with a knobbed graphite router), it was revealed, en passant, that the printing press of the Resistance Readership Alliance (RRA) was in a bizarre tool shed on an abandoned farmsite in central Ohio. Now, at last, we had them damn Logos! (30)

This is what Mendlesohn terms immersive fantasy. There is no specific exposition, merely a matter-of-fact narrative report implying that such brutality is so normal that there is a codified institutional procedure for it. The reader is simply expected to know who the Logodaedalian incursionaries are and why they are treated so harshly. This assumption creates what Mendlesohn calls an 'irony of mimesis'¹⁴ – the text's departures from reality are emphasised by the rhetorical pretence that there is nothing unusual about them. Such rhetoric furthers the reader's engagement with the narrative. The worlds of immersive fantasy, says Mendlesohn, are 'frequently constructed from *pointers*, glimpses of a world that hint at something more concrete.'¹⁵ Readers spot the irony, sit up and take notice, and are pointed in vague directions – this world is bedevilled either by a viciously repressive regime or horrifying criminal activity – until the author sees fit to enlighten them by further hints.

Yerka often seems to be providing such pointers with his brush. *Please Don't Slam the Door* clearly depicts a house, which implies at least one resident. These residents are not nomads. They have a telephone and a well; their homestead has outbuildings and storehouses; they own a ladder. Clearly, living among suspended, grassy clouds is not particularly unusual for these people. They have put down roots even if their topography has not. This is a common theme in Yerka's work. A great many of his paintings dwell, in loving detail, on physical evidence of people or communities having quietly and unassumingly built lives for themselves in supernatural situations. The actual inhabitants are seldom depicted, but evidence is generally presented to suggest they have long since adapted to living in such circumstances. In *Returning Home* (1992, Fig. 5) a road has existed along the giddy brink of an impossible cosmic precipice long enough for the street signs (erected by whom exactly?) to become dented, overgrown and rusty; the driver of that odd car might have created the ruts in the road over years or decades of evening commutes. And who, this evening, got home first to light the fire? Yerka himself may not know, but by including such details he creates something similar to Mendlesohn's 'irony of mimesis' – the irony, to the viewer, that these bizarre places and circumstances are quite normal to those living in them. Such dissonances create pointers that the viewer is left to fill out through their own imaginative effort.

Fleshing Yerka's worlds out in this way requires more consideration of normality than fantasy. The title of *Please Don't Slam the Door*, for example, is one of the pointers Yerka has provided, which a viewer may interpret as one of the standing rules in such a house, a domestic prohibition as sensible in this context as those on running with scissors or television before homework are in others. In doing so they might revisit concepts of normality, comparing their own ideas about domestic discipline to those that Yerka ironically presents as normal in his fantasy art. This is what irony does – it draws attention to current states of affairs by contradicting them and thereby forcing, however briefly, reassessments of them. Painting a car with tusks, as Yerka does in *Returning Home*, prompts the viewer to reconsider the car in which they arrived at the gallery, specifically with regard to its lack of tusks. For

this to happen, the device must be recognisable as a car, which it is. Such is also true of the workshop in *Beneath the Dunes*, the machine in *Aquarius*, the church in *The Agitators* and the farmstead in *Please Don't Slam the Door*. Running Yerka's mice through Mendlesohn's maze has shown that he forces reassessments of the familiar by confronting the viewer with images of it being, having or doing the unfamiliar.

David Sandner reduces the entire experience of fantasy literature down to this confrontation. Sandner's investigation into 18th-century discourse on fantasy leads him to categorise the genre in terms of the affective response produced by 'the anxiety of the sublime moment'¹⁶ – that is, the manner in which the reader is supposed to react to the disruption of their existing understanding of reality that results from being confronted with a ghost, a dragon or a car with tusks. Like Mendlesohn he schematises such responses into a porous typology – we can fearfully try to cram the genie back in his bottle, haughtily force him to do our bidding and so on. A skilled writer should be able to deploy or report their sublime moment in a way that directs our emotions to their own ends.

As with Mendlesohn, the first step to utilising Sandner's ideas is to observe which of his categories Yerka's characteristic gambits fit into, which route Yerka's mouse takes through Sandner's maze. Sandner provides four different (and non-exclusive) categories of response. Two are 'closed' – they 'move towards the frames and closure of neatly explained and comprehended stories'.¹⁷ Such responses seek to limit impact of the fantastic, allowing the reader to remain 'at a safe distance from the dangers of the sublime abyss'. A reader who responds in this way is spared the necessity of revising their perceptions of the universe or their place in it. This is hardly an apt description of the open narrative questions prompted by *Aquarius* or the imperative for revision of perception raised by the rhetorical emphasis of *Return to Home*. Everything examined so far emphatically suggests that Yerka wishes us to keep looking at such images and keep wondering about them. He deploys the fantastic so as to evoke what Sander calls an 'open' response to his work.

Sandner's schema provides for two such responses – 'fragmentation' and 'dispossession'. Fragmentation sees the reader released from their current perceptions of the universe, but that perception is replaced by one of a universe controlled by dictatorial supernatural forces. People are not accorded the dignity of dialogue on their fate in this new universe; sense of self splinters and is not made whole again, leaving us at unpleasant emotional and spiritual loose ends. Sandner offers Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Lewis's *The Monk* as examples.¹⁸ The other 'open' possibility is dispossession. Dispossession also splinters the self, but allows for remedial dialogue with the fantastic, by which readers are encouraged to reconstruct themselves in greater emotional and spiritual stature in light of the revelations of the sublime moment. Where fragmentation provokes horror and misery, dispossession provokes joy via renewed personal engagement with an expanded and continuously enriched universe.¹⁹

Harlan Ellison narrates an experience akin to dispossession in *Mind Fields*. His story accompanying Yerka's *Back to Nature* (1983, Fig. 6) is a 139-word vignette in which an anonymous narrator rejoices over the thought of a renewed experience of a nebulous, possibly imaginary woodland idyll. They will cavort 'naked' in this place, wake to its scents, hear birdcalls compared to the music of Debussy, gaze on a sky compared to stained glass, and drink 'diamond' water from its streams. The piece concludes:

This is what we remember, this is what we dream about. To come once more to the open childlike stare of the unspoiled land. Here I am, I say. Here I am in the heavenly pasture. Back to nature. Draw a deep breath. (12)

These are not the sentiments of one maintaining 'a safe distance from the sublime abyss' – they have thrown themselves over its edge, giving themselves wholly to an intense, longed-for emotional catharsis. Metaphorically or literally naked, they will turn an 'open childlike stare' on their world and savour the privilege they have to 'draw a deep breath'. This would seem to be a textbook example of Sandner's concept of dispossession.

So who feels this way? Ellison himself? Ordinarily a critic would be suspicious of such a suggestion: anonymous first-person narration cannot necessarily be taken as directly recording the opinions or experiences of the author. In this particular case, however, the critic has Ellison's afterword to the story to go on. Some of Yerka's images sparked fully plotted stories, he says,

But a few brought forth demented gags, visual puns that I could not – try though I might – shake out of my venerably adolescent mind. I tried, so help me, I tried; but a couple slipped through. This was one of them. I saw that surreal lavatory, that cosmic loo, that celestial crapper, and I was driven mad and fluttering into the verbal antipode. Don't blame me, it's all Yerka's fault. (69)

Ellison's afterword to the *Mind Fields* stories displays as much literary artifice as the stories themselves – note his self-mythology as a possessor of a 'venerably adolescent mind'. Nevertheless here, speaking with what he purports to be autobiographical purpose, he describes how Yerka's odd image prompted a celebration of refreshed appreciation of and kinship with a world bursting with magic. The irresistibility of this urge is particularly worth noting. Ellison writes the story off as a frippery, but the fact remains that this painting compelled him, apparently against his more calculated authorial intentions, to such ebullience. The *Mind Fields* afterword contains numerous assertions of the intellectual and emotional impact of Yerka's paintings, but here, perhaps in spite of himself, Ellison records his strongest affective response to these images. In doing so he describes an experience very close to what Sandner terms dispossession. For all his



Fig. 6 Jacek Yerka,
Back to Nature (1983).



Fig. 7 Jacek Yerka,
Dead End (1980).

apparent reluctance, he abandoned his world as it was previously constructed and went 'fluttering' onto a higher emotional plane. This is what Yerka's work does: it ruptures established notions and boundaries, challenging the viewer to re-examine their world and their responses to it, and provides constructive guidelines on how to do so.

It does so with pictures of toilets. Yerka's fascination with domesticity has been noted above, and his repeated depiction of domestic paraphernalia should be re-emphasised here. His oeuvre is full of pictures of bathrooms, kitchens or bedrooms, basically constituting visual catalogues of recognisable everyday things that have been oddly rearranged or reimagined. Most of Yerka's fantasy monsters are clearly recognisable as cars, clocks or vacuum cleaners with unusual new appendages. Dramatic edifices and megaliths are constructed out of house-bricks or planks, or boast the rows of windows typical of unglamorous apartment buildings. Such references to the everyday never result in bathos, however. Ellison's comments about and literary response to 'that celestial crapper' in *Back to Nature* are striking demonstrations of how, in Yerka's worlds, the fantasy ennobles the reality rather than the reality detracting from the fantasy. Yerka achieves revisionary, ennobling impact with pictures of what are, essentially, very ordinary things.

This is a central purpose of fantasy, as perceived by J.R.R. Tolkien. The last century's most famous fantasy author, Tolkien was also an enduringly incisive observer of the genre and its properties, and his ideas provide significant traction to a critical assessment of Yerka's art. Tolkien sees fantasy as providing Recovery. This capitalised term refers to the recovery of a clear view of the essential, resonant features of things to which the reader or viewer has become accustomed. Effective fantasy typically depicts 'simple and fundamental things' made 'more luminous by their setting'.²⁰ It therefore stems from a close, reasoned affection for what Tolkien calls the primary world:

Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give. By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were enobled.²¹

To Tolkien, therefore, fantasy clarifies and celebrates reality, inviting renewed engagement with and appreciation of things and ideas in that reality. Gram, the great sword of the *Völsunga saga*, is an excellent example. When the hero Sigurd tests the sword by bringing it down on the anvil upon which it was recently reforged, it cuts the anvil in two,²² reminding the reader of something they might otherwise overlook – iron is a heavy, solid, reliable substance that can be forged into tools that greatly augment the strength of a stout arm. By exaggerating those properties, Tolkien claims the fantasist could show iron, not in a new way, but in a way in which the audience might

have forgotten to look at it. He likens this to looking at the world through a freshly cleaned window.²³ We appreciate reality anew, with something akin to the 'open childlike stare' Ellison talked about in his response to *Back to Nature*.

It is worth reassessing *Back to Nature* in light of Tolkien's ideas. In the last hundred years the industrialised world has seen enormous leaps forward in standards of sanitation, with accompanying improvements in public health. People typically live with only a vague appreciation of the infrastructure that has made this improvement possible, taking for granted that our lavatories will flush when we need them to and forgetting how complicated – and important – it is to ensure they do so. Even so, we grasp that no domestic appliance has ever required the insanely complicated system of pipes and gears depicted in the upper portion of this canvas. By confronting us with this exaggeration, Yerka reminds us of the effort and complexity upon which our happiness rests. We look again at something we have forgotten, seeing its complexity and celebrating it anew. Some may argue that such banal matters are not worthy of such celebration. Anybody who has lost a child to cholera would disagree. In light of Tolkien's ideas, Yerka's painting serves as a reminder of how lucky we are to live in times when a device of such noble consequence is seen as banal.

Such deployment of the fantastic is common in Yerka's corpus. The tools hung on the wall in *Beneath the Dunes* (Fig. 1) are transformed by slight variation into bizarre objects. By begging the question of what the spiral-shaped handsaw on the right is for, Yerka provides a springboard for fresh consideration of the humble but constructive and empowering work of the household handyman. As with Tolkien's writing, there is biographical evidence to support such an interpretation of Yerka's art. As noted earlier, Yerka claims to be inspired by his childhood in Poland, spending much of his time in his grandmother's kitchen:

For me the 1950s were a kind of Golden Age. These were the happy years of my childhood, filled with wonder at the world around me. It is reflected throughout my work in buildings, furniture, and various pre-war knick-knacks.²⁴

However many jokes (and serious indictments) may exist about conditions in communist-era Poland, Yerka's remarks show that at least one imaginative child experienced 'wonder' in such a setting. Tolkien argues that the central purpose of fantasy is to overcome the contempt born of familiarity and show seemingly dull things in ways that enrich our understanding of their value and importance. Tolkien himself was famous for doing this with natural landscapes; Yerka's drive as a fantasist appears to stem from a desire to recapture and perpetuate the glamour and beauty that he experienced on first encountering the domestic world he was lucky enough to grow up in.

This drive is evident throughout his work. It reaches probably its fullest expression in his favourite visual trope: the impossible bedsit. Throughout his career he has produced numerous paintings of one-room apartments in impossible or preternatural settings; *Dead End* (1980, Fig. 7) is a particularly endearing example. It is, at heart, a catalogue of very ordinary objects; a stove, suitcases on top of a wardrobe, an unplumped pillow. And yet those objects have been depicted in such a way as to make their very normality bizarre. People cannot live on tram tracks, let alone on a set of tracks laid (presumably with a great deal of foresight and planning by the local authorities) on a route that would send the tram careening into a blank wall. And yet here is a depiction of a cosy little bedsit existing in precisely those circumstances, evidently long enough for the occupant to hang pictures on the wall. By depicting such a juxtaposition, Yerka prompts us to look once again at the domestic paraphernalia that surrounds our lives and reassess both its fitness for purpose and the quiet beauty that stems from that fitness. As is often the case with Yerka's work, one could live a perfect little life in this painting – a realisation that brings with it a reconsideration of the pleasures of life. Tolkien claims that the power of fantasy lies in its ability to locate and celebrate the overlooked glamour of the mundane. In *Dead End*, Yerka does precisely that.

This use of literary theory to illuminate visual art is ultimately experimental. Nevertheless it has prompted some meaningful discussion of the subject at hand – the very purpose of any academic theory. That discussion, moreover, has led in a particular direction. W.R. Irwin writes, 'A fantasist chooses to invent a narrative embodying this or that impossibility, and in this choice, if he is prudent, he will be governed by a discrimination between potential advantage and disadvantage. That is to say he will from the outset think like a rhetorician.'²⁵ Jacek Yerka uses the impossible in the same way in his art, to draw our attention to what is enduringly interesting or praiseworthy in the real world. And if he can make us look at a car or a milk carton or a lavatory pan in a clearer way, a way we had forgotten, then his creative efforts, like those of the great fantasy authors, will not have been in vain.

Joe Young

Notes:

Page numbers in brackets refer to: Jacek Yerka and Harlan Ellison, *Mind Fields* (Beverly Hills: Morpheus International, 1994).

1. Jacek Yerka, 'Yerka by Himself', accessed 13 November 2014. http://www.yerkaland.com/?page_id=12
2. Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 21.
3. Roald Dahl, *The Witches* (London: Random House, 1983), 9.
4. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve UP, 1973), 33; W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1976), 155-6; Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2008), xiv.
5. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, 175.
6. Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25.
7. *Ibid.*, 41.
8. Jonathan D. Langford, 'Why the Academy is Afraid of Dragons; The Suppression of the Marvellous in Theories of the Fantastic', *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization and the Academy*, eds George Edward Slusser and Gary Westfahl (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 51-2.
9. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, xiii.
10. *Ibid.*, 70.
11. *Ibid.*, 13, 71-2.
12. *Ibid.*, 71.
13. *Ibid.*, 2.
14. *Ibid.*, 59.
15. *Ibid.*, 72.
16. David Sandner, *Critical Discourses on the Fantastic 1712-1831* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 164.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 168.
19. *Ibid.*, 169-70.
20. J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories' (1947), *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 375.
21. *Ibid.*, 374-5.
22. *The Saga of the Volsungs*, trans. George K. Anderson (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1982), ch.15, 82-3.
23. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories', 373.
24. 'Jacek Yerka Biography', accessed 19 July 2014. <http://morpheusgallery.com/jacek%20Yerka/biography.php>
25. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible*, 63.

Further Reading

Jacek Yerka, *The Fantastic Art of Jacek Yerka* (Beverly Hills, CA: Morpheus International, 1994).