

Paolo Spinicci

Notes for an imaginary zoology

Abstract

Hippogriffs and unicorns have a fixed role in philosophical reflection: they serve as interchangeable examples of fictional objects. The purpose of this article is to show that there are many different forms of imaginary objects and that drawing a taxonomy of these objects actually means rethinking the relation that binds imaginative products to our world – a relation that is far from being univocal.

Keywords

Imagination, Fictional objects, Imaginary objects

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paolo.spinicci@unimi.it (Università degli Studi di Milano)

1.

In many philosophical papers, imaginary animals play an unexpected role, and hippogriffs and mermaids, fire-breathing dragons, and talking crickets come into view as the main characters of complex reasoning. And yet, beyond the variety of examples, philosophers always ask the same question. It does not matter whether they are unicorns or mermaids: imaginary animals are shining examples of those fictional objects in which philosophers are interested.

Fictional objects are, of course, a subject that deserves attention. However, I would like to focus my reflections on these strange creatures that usually play the role of freely changeable examples.

I do not believe this to be the case, and I would like to justify my conviction. The first move consists in distinguishing between imagined and imaginary animals. *Imagined animals* are easy to define: fictional characters, *constructed* step by step by fairy tales or acts of fantasy; they consciously belong to the ethereal space of fiction because of their origin. On the contrary, *imaginary animals* are much more elusive. A first attempt to grasp their definition could be the following: imaginary animals appear to be the product of the imagination *by their very nature*. Argus in *Odyssey* and Rocinante in *Don Quixote* are *imagined animals*; the hippogriff and centaurs, mermen, and sirens belong to the family of imaginary animals – animals whose very shape seems to force us to think of a sort of irruption of the plays of the imagination within the laws of nature¹.

This distinction may seem trivial at first glance. However, it is not easy to understand its meaning: what imagined animals are, *on the whole*, is clear, but it is not at all easy to say with the same clarity what we mean when we talk about imaginary animals. Dragons, newts, or mermaids break the rules of our naive zoology, but to say that is not enough. Nature has many forms that do not conform to what we – out of laziness or ignorance – believe to be *natural*. Some birds do not fly (penguins), and a few mammals lay eggs (monotremes), and we all learned as children that

¹ Together with Margarita Guerrero, Jorge Luis Borges has written a *Manual de zoología fantástica* (1971) that brings together the many animal species that humans have dreamed of but which have the defect of not having come into the world. It is a beautiful project, and it allows us to range over a repertoire of metaphors that follow one another in a game of variations that reflects the combinatorics implicit in animal taxonomy. It is a fascinating game, but very different from the one I would like to propose on these pages.

there are “fish” that are not *fish* at all – cetaceans. However, no one would say that dolphins, killer whales, platypi, and penguins belong to the imaginary family.

However, the animal world is not only diverse and, to some extent, abnormal: it is also monstrous. In the depths of the sea, hidden from view, some creatures seem to come out of the wildest imagination². Deep-sea fishes are strange, but they are not imaginary: they are real, and their shape does not depend on our fantasy but on the peculiarities of their living conditions. We may feel astonishment at them, but we are ready to recognize that nature also has these unexpected forms.

The same is true if we look at the behavior of animals that sometimes seems to be a figment of our literary imagination. Just like Tiresias, *Pseudanthias squamipinnis* changes sex according to circumstances. However, from this bizarre behavior (further proof that the expression ‘against nature’ does not really mean anything), we cannot deduce that this little fish is an imaginary animal: it is a real fish, just like cod and salmon. For something to be an imaginary animal, it is not enough to have some traits that deviate from the usual image of nature.

In short, some creatures contradict our image of reality, but this is still not enough for us to speak of imaginary creatures. *It would seem* necessary, then, to maintain that *imaginary* animals are not only capable of shattering our convictions about the order of nature but are, at the same time, the result of fantastic construction. First of all, before any other determination, imaginary animals would be *imagined* objects: their world would not be our world but the ethereal universe of fiction. There would be a subset of imaginary animals within the set of imagined animals: Argus and Rocinante would belong only to the second set, the Talking Cricket, and the Sirens to both.

It is a coherent solution in itself. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to realize how problematic it is to make the imaginary a proper subset of the set of fictional objects and thus attempt to circumscribe its field within the pages of fictional stories. Of course, no one would look for Talking Cricket in the real world. However, there seems to be an irrepressible tendency to believe that imaginary animals can sometimes exist, at least in a hidden and baffling

² Deepsea fishes of the family Melanocetida do not look like normal fish at all, but like traps created by the imagination of a madman, and a similar argument applies to the *Psychrolutes marcidus* – a strange fish that repeats in its appearance the caricatured and deformed features of a human face.

way. Despite their strangeness, sometimes we think they exist but not in the form of natural, albeit slightly bizarre creatures, but as apparitions charged with mystery, as irruptions of the imaginary into this world of ours. We look for the Loch Ness monster in the icy waters of that lake. However, if there were a dragon, it would not simply be a new animal that finally has a place in the family album of living species. This album is enriched every year by a hundred or so specimens. What we are looking for in that distant lake is not a new lizard, albeit a much larger and probably fierce one, but a mysterious creature that could only break into reality if it occupied an eccentric and unstable position in it. Of course, there is no monster in the waters of Loch Ness, but that is not the point: what invites us to reflect is that we *can look for* something that we *cannot find* if we do not want to lose what makes it attractive. Nessie is an imaginary creature, but he is not content to live in the pages of a story. Conversely, Argo is a merely imagined dog, but he is not an imaginary animal. Therefore, being fictionally constructed animals is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for belonging to the set of imaginary animals.

However, this does not mean that imagination is not among the authors of zoology of the imaginary. On the contrary: the Loch Ness monster has a place in our imaginary zoology precisely because it does not have a stable and obvious one in the lake that is supposed to house it, and something similar also applies to those strange fish we have been talking about: if the sea viper no *longer* belongs to the zoology of the imagination, it is because we have immersed ourselves too often in the depths in which it lives and because its *monstrous* and *mysterious* form has become, with time, unusual but explainable – because it has compelled us to change our mind about the nature of fishes. The sea viper no longer forces us to imagine it, at least not when reading about it in a natural science book. But what if we have only heard about this strange fish in the tales of an old sailor? Moreover, what if bioluminescence appears to us like a mysterious and *unnatural* phenomenon? If this were the case, the sea viper would force us to imagine it once again, even if it is right there in the hidden depths of our seas, and this would be enough to give it back the place it deserves in the pages of our imaginary zoology. In short, imagination plays a role in defining the meaning and nature of imaginary objects – but which one? The following pages attempt to answer this strange question³.

³ I will not address the problem, which does arise somehow, of what relationship exists between fictional objects and the different forms of imaginary objects. It is possible

2.

The imaginary dimension is rooted in and springs from experience, despite its eccentric character. The hippogriff is a winged horse, and such things do not exist, but the impression that horses, when they run, fly like the wind (which, incidentally, does not fly at all) is difficult to silence. Geri-cault paints them that way as if they were flying, and it took Muybridge's series of photographs to show that hooves very rarely come off the ground all at once. Horses do not fly at all: indeed, they are decidedly heavy animals, but what is fast seems to *contradict* the idea of heaviness, and running seems to put on wings, forcing us to think of a creature that seems not only strange but unreal. Mermaids and mermen break the chain that binds aquatic animals to the sea. This stateless existence has a clear echo in their bodies, divided in half between the demands of submerged life and human existence. Every good mermaid story must end with a moral that is as reassuring as it is darkly parochial: the dividing line between land and sea must somehow be re-established, rescinding the possibility of their actual fusion. Somehow the contradiction must be removed, and the ancipitous creature – the mermaid who belongs to the sea and seeks the land – must be returned to her secret life, deep in the abyss.

It is possible to indulge in many different examples, but they all have one trait in common. Imaginary animals are ancipitous creatures that conceal a sort of contradiction in their nature. After all, Ariosto was right: if they want to maintain their rightful place in the chapters of *imaginary zoology*, hippogriffs must inhabit remote and inaccessible areas. They must be born infrequently because a miracle (or a monster) cannot manifest itself too frequently without forcing us to alter the norm that makes it the incredible exception that distinguishes its nature.

Hence the first answer to our problem: imaginary animals are creatures that seem to contradict the laws of nature and, for this very reason, cannot have a place in the *ordered* web of existing things. We all know that the world could be different from what we thought it to be, but drake

that, starting from these considerations, we can draw arguments to rethink the nature of fictional objects, moving towards an unrealist position, in the direction suggested by authors like Walton (1990) or Sainsbury (2010). However, to open this discussion would take us too far and would undoubtedly exceed the limits of this contribution and perhaps also those of its author.

and mermaids do not ask for inclusion in the great family of normal animals. Imaginary animals have something that prevents us from *peacefully* accepting their existence. Nevertheless, sometimes they creep in like a suspicion. We cannot believe that they exist like any other creature. However, we cannot silence the thought that somewhere in the world, there is something that does not belong to the world *properly*, that nature harbors *supernatural* creatures – whatever this strange expression means.

On the one hand, there is the voice of reality that invites us to believe that imaginary animals cannot exist because they contradict the laws of nature and, on the other, the suspicion that incredible creatures can nevertheless be part of the world. In the end, human beings have discovered lots of unbelievable things, and they have compelled themselves to change their minds. Imagination is *tolerant*: it holds these two poles together without altering them. Incredible creatures and the realm of our beliefs live together, side by side, in the imaginative stage, shaping the idea of the supernatural and the magical, the fabulous and the mythical – of imaginary creatures. And that is as much as to say: the imagination is not necessarily involved in the *construction* of these strange creatures – after all, the sea viper does exist – but it does determine how we experience them; the imagination allows us to give space to these strange creatures, without forcing us to give up our certainties, thus creating supernatural entities and, sometimes, a supernatural niche in reality for what is unreal.

However, delineating imaginary zoology does not only mean to carve out in the world a niche for what is magical or supernatural: it also means to understand why we sometimes look for imaginary animals in our world, while at other times we are content to house them in the pages of our fantastic bestiaries or fictional tales. After all, the hippogriff only flies in Ariosto's poem: the hippogriff is a literary creature. In this case, imagination has severed the knot that bound the hippogriff to the world: it has not canceled the infraction that makes its existence implausible, but it has made the contradiction light, freeing us from the obligation to comply with the grammar of reality. The hippogriff is a fantastic creature, but there is nothing magical or mysterious about its fictional presence. But what about mythological animals? Charybdis cannot exist alongside other animals, and its existence goes against all our beliefs, yet this monster that cannot exist seems forced to live out its non-existence right here – in our world.

We have seen it: in its discussion of imaginary animals, philosophy usually seems to proceed on the assumption that imaginary zoology knows no

genres, but – as I observed – I do not think this is the case. On the contrary, it is possible to outline a taxonomy of imaginary animals: the criterion of their partitions will be their relationship with our world. To do this, I would like to dwell on four different animals. They belong to the four genera into which I would like to try to structure (my) imaginary zoology: Dürer's rhinoceros, Ariosto's hippogriff, Homer's Charybdis, and, finally, the most illustrious guest of all imaginary zoology – the unicorn.

3.

The story of the rhinoceros that Dürer drew in 1515 has a melancholy ending, but it is a beautiful one to tell. Dürer had never seen a rhinoceros in his life. What he knew of these giant animals was the result of his classical education: Pliny, Aristotle, Strabo, and many others speak of the rhinoceros. But in May 1515, something new had happened: an Indian rhinoceros had landed in Lisbon, a gift from the Sultan of Cambay to the Portuguese king. It was a gift even more eccentric than it sounds. No rhinoceros had set foot on European soil since the days of the Roman Empire. In May 1515, a page from Pliny's *Naturalis historia* landed in (much) flesh and blood in Lisbon. The echo was great, and the fame of Ulysses – this was the rhino's name – soon crossed the borders of Portugal. After only three months, Ulysses was already the hero of a poem, decidedly less happy than the one dedicated to its namesake. The author – Giacomo Giovanni Penni – accompanied his rhymes with the first sketch of the rhino landed in Lisbon⁴.

He was not the only one to draw it: Valentim Fernandes, a Moravian printer, saw the rhinoceros in Lisbon and, in June 1515, intrigued by the animal, sent a letter to his painter friend in Nuremberg. Dürer read it, looked at the drawing, and the creature that had landed in Lisbon gradually took on a precise outline: those features and those words stood out for him against the background of classical culture. Pliny's words must help him to see what he cannot directly observe. Thus, it is not by chance that Dürer accompanies the drawing by repeating Pliny's words: the rhinoceros has the color of the spotted tortoise and is entirely covered with thick scales. It is the size of an elephant but has short legs and is almost invulnerable. On the top of his nose, he has a sharp horn that he sharpens

⁴ Penni's poem is published and commented by G. Serani (2006).

on stones. As for its dislikes – it hardly needs saying! – in the very first place is the elephant, of which it is the bitter enemy. The rhinoceros that lands in Lisbon is a page in classical culture: it speaks of a centuries-long history, and it does so in defiance of all reason, prompting us to imagine a *fabulous creature*, far removed from the forms and customs of the animal world⁵.

As for Ulysses, the animal immortalized in the pages of classicism, his life in Europe was short: the king of Portugal decided to give it to Pope Leo X, but the ship carrying the gift sank off at the height of Porto Venere. The rhinoceros, chained because of “its proud and invincible character”, fell from the boat during a storm and died. In short, Ulysses was a real animal and a rather unfortunate one at that. However, in Dürer’s eyes, the rhinoceros looked as it did in the classical tradition: drawing it meant interpreting it in the light of *literary imagination*, full of classical references and fantastic suggestions. The rhinos are natural creatures and live in our world. However, they had to take on the imaginative look demanded by their warrior nature. Rhinoceros had to look like a fully armed warrior, a hoplite who throws himself into battle with his body protected by an armor that makes him invincible. That alone allows it to face the elephant openly. Dürer drew it that way: as a real incredible animal, as an irruption of what is *fabulous* into the habitual prose of reality. Dürer’s rhinoceros is a *fabulous creature* that appears to us in the aura that literary tradition builds around things – especially if they are distant in space and time.

Our second imaginary animal is primarily a literary creature: it is the hippogriff. The hippogriff is born both of an imaginative hyperbole – horses are as fast as the wind – and of a silenced desire: a flying mount, taking its rider where he could never move on his own – into the sky. Lucian mentions it, but the hippogriff only takes on the form of a perfect literary game in the pages of Ariosto, who describes it as one would a

⁵ Dürer is not alone: the strange creature that appears on the frontispiece of Penni’s poem (1515), Burgkmair’s rhinoceros (1515), and Paolo Giovio’s rhinoceros in his *Dialogo delle imprese militari et amorose* (1551) all take the form of warriors in armor, ready for combat. They are genuine animals, but the imagination modifies them in the light of an ancient knowledge that gives them a fabulous nature: at sea, not far from the Ligurian coast, an animal like any other dies, but Dürer and Penni and Burgkmair give us the image of a terrible, loricated fair – of an imaginary creature that has its place in reality, but at the same time asks the real to stand a little apart, so as not to force us to make it the measure that falsifies our imaginative claims.

newborn child, saying how it resembles its father and how it resembles its mother⁶. Moreover, its fictional nature is coherent with a metaliterary notation: the hippogriff is the consolidation of a metaphor for what is impossible because – so it seems – horses and griffins are like cats and dogs⁷. It is therefore unthinkable that they should come together to produce offspring.

In short, horses and griffins exist, but the hippogriff is only a *fictional creature*: it only lives in the pages of books. Once again: it would be wrong to believe that there is no objective basis for this literary fiction. We, slow and heavy animals, can hardly renounce the hyperbole of lightness and speed and must therefore give wings to a horse, tying into a single knot what nature keeps entirely separate. Because it breaks the rules of nature, the hippogriff is imaginary in its nature and renounces from the outset to occupy a place in reality. It does not ask even to occupy a fabulous niche in our usual world: the hippogriff is a fiction we are conscious of. Ariosto does not describe an entity that exists in some possible world but immerses himself in a creative game that the reader must continue with him – the game in which we decide step by step how we are to imagine this fictional creature.

Things are different with our third imaginary creature that Homer, among others, tells us about: Charybdis, the monstrous and mysterious creature that lives hidden among the rocks, in a chasm that opens in the depths of the sea, right in front of Scylla. Charybdis is also a literary creation: it is an imaginative personification of sea currents and whirlpools. Charybdis is a shapeless monster: a sort of invisible, gigantic mouth that swallows and vomits up seawater three times a day. Homer says no more, and it is indeed a strange fact. Circe loses herself in a thousand details when she describes Scylla, the monster next door: Scylla has twelve feet, six necks, and six heads, and each head has three rows of sharp teeth that taste of death. Circe describes Scylla this way – but it is Charybdis who, in her shapeless nature, remains faithful to the visual dimension: Charybdis is nothing more than the imaginative staging of what is there – in front of everyone's eyes. Charybdis has no other form than this: it is the spectacle

⁶ “Non è finto il destrier, ma naturale, / ch'una giumenta generò d'un Grifo: / simile al padre avea la piuma e l'ale, / li piedi anteriori, il capo e il grifo; / in tutte l'altre membra pareo quale / era la madre, e chiamasi ippogrifo” (Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, IV, 10).

⁷ “Mopso Nisa datur; quid non speremus amantes? lungenitur iam griphes aequis” (Virgilio, *Egloga VIII*, 25-26).

of the boiling of the waves and the sea that *resonates in itself in our imagination*. Charybdis is not just a literary creature: imagining it does not mean following the dictates of a game a narrator calls us. Quite the opposite: Charybdis takes shape when what we have before our eyes is *staged*, and the actual event we witness imaginatively takes the form of a mythical event that happens before us in the *theatre of nature*.

Charybdis is present when the whirlpool of the sea appears to us as a subject that acts, as an animal force that drags everything down into the abyss. In this sense, Charybdis is *a monster that exceeds nature*. It only comes forward when the world in its usual nature disappears and in its place is acted out an event that seems to escape our naive ontology that cannot think that water is animate, even if it is forced to imagine it. The becoming a monster whirlpool is not an unexpected creature we are amazed by: it is a presence that becomes perceptible when the imagination silences our belief system and our grip on reality takes a step backward. Charybdis is not an animal we can believe in because its existence subverts the grammar of belief and the rules that underlie it. Charybdis is the animal movement of water, the insatiable stomach of depth, the wide-open mouth of the abyss. Looking at maelstroms, we can have similar thoughts, but we cannot believe our feelings and thoughts because they contravene our naive ontology. Charybdis is not fabulous: it is mythical. It does not belong to our world, and we feel her presence only when, falling in the universe of myth, we lose the grip on reality.

Finally, there is a fourth species of an imaginary animal, the unicorn. Unicorns are strange creatures: there is no serious reason to convince us of their existence, but despite this, there are many philosophers and naturalists who have *wanted to* believe in their presence. People want to believe in unicorns not only because there are endless stories about them but because they dream that if they existed, the world would be somehow better. Unicorns are animals *we look for*, starting from an open list of *desiderata*⁸.

⁸ According to Aristotle, unicorns would make nature more symmetrical. Although Aristotle is not prepared to bet on their existence, he believed that, if they ever existed, unicorns would occupy a place in the matrix of nature that their absence would leave uncovered. There are animals with hooves without horns and animals with hooves and two horns – if they existed, the unicorn would fill a vacant box nicely. And indeed, this need for symmetry seems to be linked in various ways to the search for the unicorn. There are many poisonous animals: it would be nice, therefore, if there were an antidote in the animal world – and here the unicorn can make impure and contaminated

Hence the nature of this fourth species of imaginary animals: they are not fabulous, and no one would bet on their actual existence, even if caught through the alienating filter of what the imagination narrates. But neither are they mythological creatures: their presence does not coincide with the coming into the world of an imaginary and unnatural reality that subverts the order of phenomena. Finally, unicorns are not mere literary fictions. The hippogriff lives in fairy tales and poems, and we are content to look for it between the pages of books. In the case of unicorns, however, things are not like that: it is not enough for us that they exist in their way in the pages of a tale or a fable. To understand what unicorns are, we need to dwell on this point: unicorns are imaginary creatures that we look for in our world – even if we have no reason to believe they are there. We have only heard of unicorns, and yet we wish they were there. They are animals *we fantasize about*. It is precisely for this reason that unicorns, just like other utopian objects, do not fear the verdict of empirical investigation but the cooling of desire to follow their trails. It is not a problem if nobody succeeds in finding a candidate matching the unicorn description, but one can get *tired of* looking for it and be content with what she finds. It happened to Marco Polo – a great explorer, undoubtedly, but a lousy dreamer. As soon as Marco saw an Indian rhinoceros, he thought that he had finally found the unicorn. The search was over, but at a high price: it was hard to imagine that the candor of a virgin could tame such an animal. The rhinoceros that Marco Polo sees is a real animal that can only be confused with the unicorn if we forget the *fantasies to* which it owes its origin. Unicorns are *utopian* or, if you prefer, *fantastic animals*.

4.

In the considerations we have just made, we have focused on four imaginary animals that in principle allow us to identify the four different gen-

water drinkable. Animals allow themselves to be domesticated because they prefer life to freedom: not the unicorn, which likes death to captivity. Violence is the only means of forcing animals to obey us: the unicorn does not allow itself to be bent by force but only needs to see a virgin to abandon itself on her belly and fall asleep. Even heraldry subordinates the existence of unicorns to the law of counterpoint: there are solar animals, like the lion. Therefore, there must be a lunar creature that is the lion's arch-enemy – and the unicorn must be able to satisfy this need.

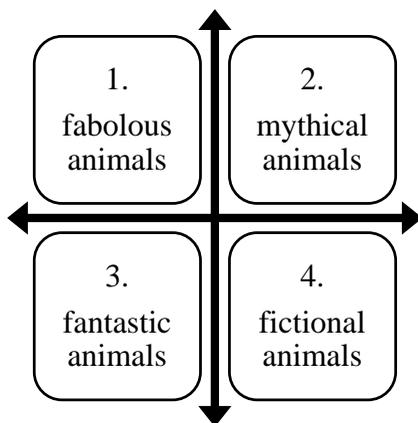
res, according to which we can divide the logical space of imaginary zoology: we have distinguished fabulous, fictional, mythical and fantastic animals, and together we have tried to indicate the relationship that these non-existent creatures have with the forms of the imagination.

The criterion we have followed in outlining this task is all too simple. We have drawn two perpendicular lines in the logical space of our imaginary zoology, and we have outlined four regions – the cells of a matrix on which we must dwell.

Let us begin with the vertical axis dividing what belongs to reality (or what we believe to be part of it) from what is imaginative in nature and is situated beyond the realm of what we believe to exist or not exist. In the left-hand cells of our matrix, then, we will find animals that claim to have their place in the world: Dürer's rhinoceros is a real animal, and Dürer would have known where to look it – in Lisbon. However, it is a fabulous animal because it results from an inseparable knot between evidence and imagination. On the same side, we find the unicorn, the phoenix, or the Loch Ness monster: their presence is not objectively proven. On the contrary, we dream of it, but we do not content ourselves with imagining it. We search for these animals in the world, even if only in distant and places far away.

On the other hand, in the cells on the right, beyond the axis we have traced, we find animals that entirely belong to the imagination and whose presence is at one with the dulling of the usual horizon of belief. Hippogriffs are fictional in nature, and to feel Carybdis's presence, we must put aside reality and its ontological claims.

Let us now draw the horizontal axis. Its task is to divide two different forms of imagination: the modifying imagination moves from given objects, altering their content and nature, whereas the productive imagination creates their object or the imaginative description of a matching object. In the upper cells, we have Dürer's rhinoceros and Charybdis; the unicorn and the hippogriff in the lower compartments. At the top are the fabulous and mythical animals; at the bottom are the utopian and fictional creatures. The following matrix schematizes what we have said:



It is worth dwelling upon the relationship that the imagination can take with the world. To grasp this relationship, we have to ask *whether we* can talk, and *how we* can talk, about the *veracity of* our imaginary zoology.

It is not difficult to see how things are in the case of fabulous animals. Here, imagination merely sheds its light on something real without distorting our grip on the world. Descriptions of fabulous animals do not escape the judgment of truth because their objects are not fictional entities. Dürer knows very well that rhinos exist, and his splendid drawing aims to depict one of them, but the result is *questionable*: real rhinos do not look like this. Dürer's rhino is a *fabulous* animal, but real rhinos are not. His drawing is beautiful, but *it is not true*: the engraving of the formidable animal is not entirely in keeping with reality and is in many ways a forgery.

Things are different when we immerse ourselves in those forms of the imagination that take hold of reality and drag it into a playful or mythical universe. A cloth puppet becomes an enemy to be defeated, but that does not mean that the child believes that this is how things are. It is not *true* that the puppet is an enemy because it would make no sense even to suppose that one could discover in the game that things are (or are not) like that. On the contrary, we decide (and we do not find) that the puppet is an enemy in the game. This is not tantamount to saying that it is *false* that there is an enemy to defeat: in fact, playful praxis consists, at least in part, in not letting ourselves be distracted by these idle questions that have their *raison d'être* only beyond the space of the game.

The same reasoning applies to Charybdis. The *presence of* Charybdis may impose itself on those who fear the gaping of its voracious mouth.

However, it does not become true or false that Charybdis is dangerous or greedy. Charybdis *cannot* become the subject of a categorical proposition being part of a statement system that pretends to be true or false. Charybdis is a monster that only takes shape when our imagination forces us to dream of an impossible universe in which water becomes animated and devours everything, including itself. Thus, when we say that the whirlpool *is* Charybdis, we do not at all intend to enunciate a proposition stating that Charybdis is one object among others in the world. Far from it, we indicate the point of overlap between the natural world and the mythical scene, the place where one bursts into the other, forcing us to abandon *pro tempore* the everyday vocabulary of belief and the logical space of assertions, whether true or false. Charybdis is the fruit of an imagination that places its supernatural entities as belonging to a quasi-reality, to a mythical world. Therefore, the mythic imagination is neither true nor false, even if it sometimes imposes itself and dominates our consciousness – because it has the appearance of truth.

A similar, though not identical, discourse applies to fiction. Imaginative fictions live exclusively in fictional narratives – in those stories that do not seek to *represent* events in the world but to constitute them – imaginatively. But if this is the case, in the proper sense, it is not true or false that Astolfo recovered Orlando's wits by flying his hippogriff to the moon: it *simply conforms to the story*. According to the readers, hippogriffs are not objects in the world: they are fictional entities belonging to fictions readers are called upon to continue and share.

Finally, the imagination can take the form of a reverie, and reveries are ambiguous and humble creatures about which it is worth saying a few words. Fantasies resemble projects, but they are not because they have lost their planning seriousness: daydreams do not say *when* they will be realized and do not bind the dreamer to a commitment to the world. The clause "one day it will happen that..." – has no reason to fear the test of facts: fantasies do not bind themselves to anything except the formulation of the state of mind that gives rise to them. Fantasies are neither true nor false, but *they can* nevertheless *come true* – and we generally hope that they will. They are similar to utopias: nothing seems able to falsify them. Every future that becomes present leaves the door open to a new future where the dream could find its proper realization. Of course, it is not easy to believe that there are animals whose horn is a potent anti-poison or that become tame at the sight of a virgin. However, it is nevertheless true that reveries speak about our world: unicorns probably do

not exist and are the fruit of a dream, but we persist in looking for them here and not elsewhere.

In my opinion, the previous analysis could be the starting point for highlighting the different forms in which the imagination operates. However, even if the matrix we outlined could help us take the first step in this direction, it is perhaps appropriate to stop here. After all, you can't ask too much from animals that don't exist or are very different from how we depict them.

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