The Rise of the Gothic Novel

Maggie Kilgour

ROUTLEDGE

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In *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* Maggie Kilgour argues that the ghost of the gothic and its impetus as a means of social critique are now resurrected in the critical methodologies that investigate it. She presents a cogent analysis of the sudden rise and fall of the gothic as a popular form through its representation of the struggle between rising and falling, revolutionary and reactionary forces, and considers its legacy in modern criticism.

Kilgour juxtaposes the writings of William Godwin with Mary Wollstonecraft, and Ann Radcliffe with Matthew Lewis. Through close textual readings of their work she demonstrates that the dynamics between these authors both suggest the gothic's complication of the black and white divisions it seems to set up, and reveal how gothic intertextuality is a response to modern ideas of autonomy and individuality. She concludes with a reading of the quintessential gothic novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.*

An impressive and highly original study, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* is an invaluable contribution to the continuing literary debates which surround this influential genre.

Maggie Kilgour is an Associate Professor of English at McGill University. She is the author of *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation.*

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Acknowledgements

Like Mary Shelley, I am often asked what a nice girl like me is doing with a bunch of ghouls like this. So I have had to think about why I like brooding on sensational, grotesque, gruesome stories, and digging up the past. As this book will show, it would be appropriate for me to trace my present pursuit back to some trauma in early childhood, or, perhaps even better, the *lack* of trauma in early childhood. That could account too for my having wasted the best years of my life in a darkened theatre, watching Dracula rise from the dead – again and again and again. From that depth, my development into an academic was obviously inevitable. As the medievalist and writer of gothic stories, M.R. James, especially showed, all scholarship is a necromantic art, in which we bring the dead back. Part of the appeal for me of this kind of literature is the way in which it so graphically embodies the desire to hold on to the past, to strive against loss and mortality. At the same time, however, the fact that it often does so in crude and parodic forms seems to suggest a useful caveat for criticism, and, more broadly, for an age which sees itself as progressive to the point of being 'postmodern,' but which obsessively resurrects and recycles everything, from dinosaurs to bell-bottoms and Elvis.

It is also tempting for me to claim that I wrote this book in the grip of an irresistable impulse, and therefore am not responsible for the consequences. However, *Frankenstein* provides a sobering warning of the dangers of repudiating one's creation, and so I acknowledge this thing of darkness mine. At the same time, there are many people whose help and encouragement I have depended upon. I am again grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their support. I want to thank my series of Igors, who dug up the ghastly bits and pieces from which

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I assembled my textual body – Steven Bruhm, Lisa Brown, Sue Laver, Tara Walker, and Laura Killian. My very ungothic Australian relations, the Herci, Bennies, and Grants, cheered me up so much that it made getting back to my tower of filthy creation extremely difficult. Mary Grant's exuberance for life and literature was especially distracting, but also inspiring. Talia Rodgers, Tricia Dever and everyone at Routledge led me through the labyrinthine passage of publication with care, kindness, and good humour. With her usual alacrity, Megan Williams conjured up something nice and nasty for the cover. The rest of my thanks go to the usual suspects, who in their various weird ways have inspired me as I toiled away: Hugh Roberts (whose brains are always delicious to pick), Rachel Gamby, Chris Heppner, Ian 'the Barbarian' Duncan, and my own gothic double, Lisa Darrach. Brian Trehearne deserves a special medal for heroic valour and sheer patience, for repeatedly releasing me from my entrapment in gothic fantasy, reminding me that there is a difference (most of the time) between art and life. I regret deeply, however, that my muse Kit, the Montoni of the budgie world and *rara avis*, did not live to tear to atoms the final draft of this manuscript:

exequias ite frequenter, aves!
ite, piae volucres, et plangite pectora pinnis
et rigido teneras ungue notate genas;
horrida pro maestis lanieter pluma capillis,
pro longa resonent carmina vestra tuba!

(Ovid, *Amores* II. vi. 2–6)

Part I

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1 The Nature of Gothic

One of the powerful images conjured up by the words 'gothic novel' is that of a shadowy form rising from a mysterious place: Frankenstein's monster rising from the laboratory table, Dracula creeping from his coffin, or, more generally, the slow opening of a crypt to reveal a dark and obscure figure. This iconography has haunted various critical representations of the rise of the genre. The imagery supports psychoanalytical critics' contention that the gothic reflects the return of the repressed, in which subconscious psychic energy bursts out from the restraints of the conscious ego. The emergence of the gothic in the eighteenth century has also been read as a sign of the resurrection of the need for the sacred and transcendent in a modern enlightened secular world which denies the existence of supernatural forces, or as the rebellion of the imagination against the tyranny of reason. Recent historical studies have positioned the genre more specifically in relation to the rise of the middle class and the novel proper, with which that class has been identified, since Ian Watt especially. In general, the gothic has been associated with a rebellion against a constraining neoclassical aesthetic ideal of order and unity, in order to recover a suppressed primitive and barbaric imaginative freedom. Until recently therefore, the gothic novel has often been treated also as a kind of generic missing link between the romance and the novel, a very low road to Scott, whose rise is a deviation in the evolutionary chain that leads from Enlightenment to Romanticism. Manifesting prematurely, and therefore understandably somewhat crudely, the emerging values of romanticism – an interest in the bizarre, eccentric, wild, savage, lawless, and transgressive, in originality and the imagination – the gothic itself is a transitional and rather puerile form which is superseded by the more mature 'high' art of the superior Romantics, such as Coleridge, Keats, and, especially, Byron who both realises and renders redundant the gothic hero–villain. Like so many of its hero–villains, its development is one of rapid rise and fall, which occurs roughly between 1760 and 1820.

This developmental model plays an important part both in critical discussions of the rise of the gothic and in the novels themselves. However, one of the factors that makes the gothic so shadowy and nebulous a genre, as difficult to define as any gothic ghost, is that it cannot be seen in abstraction from the other literary forms from whose graves it arises, or from its later descendants

who survive after its demise, such as the detective novel and horror movie. It feeds upon and mixes the wide range of literary sources out of which it emerges and from which it never fully disentangles itself: British folklore, ballads, romance, Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy (especially Shakespeare), Spenser, Milton, Renaissance ideas of melancholy, the graveyard poets, Ossian, the sublime, sentimental novelists (notably Prevost, Richardson, and Rousseau), and German traditions (especially Schiller's *Robbers* and *Ghost-Seer*). The form is thus itself a Frankenstein's monster, assembled out of the bits and pieces of the past. While it therefore can at times seem hopelessly naive and simple, it is, at its best, a highly wrought, artificial form which is extremely self-conscious of its artificiality and creation out of old material and traditions. The narratives of Walpole, Radcliffe, Maturin, Stoker, as well as Shelley, thematise their own piecemeal construction, drawing attention to the relation of the story and unfolding of the plot. Gothic creation thus suggests a view of the imagination not as an originating faculty that creates ex nihilo, but as a power of combination. As one charitable reviewer noted in relation to Matthew Lewis's 'borrowings' from other texts (which later critics have occasionally, though not always accurately, identified as plagiarism): 'the great art of writing consists in selecting what is most stimulant from the works of our predecessors, and in uniting the gathered beauties in a new whole, more interesting than the tributary models. This is the essential process of the imagination. . . . All invention is but new combination.'[1] Gothic creation is a Frankensteinian process, as described also by Mary Shelley in her 1831 preface to her own textual monster: 'Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of a void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded; it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself.'[2]

Gothic criticism often inverts this creation of a whole from fragments: what the writer puts together, the critic pulls apart. It seems easier to identify a gothic novel by its properties than by an essence, so that analysis of the form often devolves into a cataloguing of stock characters and devices which are simply recycled from one text to the next: conventional settings (one castle – preferably in ruins; some gloomy mountains – preferably the Alps; a haunted room that locks only on the outside) and characters (a passive and persecuted heroine, a sensitive and rather ineffectual hero, a dynamic and tyrannical villain, an evil prioress, talkative

servants). However, this dismemberment of the text seems often justified by narrative incoherence, which has been the subject of much critical complaint, and generally leads to the denigration of the form for its lack of aesthetic unity. Made up of these assorted bits and pieces, gothic novels often seem to disintegrate into fragments, irrelevant digressions, set-pieces of landscape description which never refer back to the central point. Such a tendency towards dismemberment may be encouraged by the fact that they also often look to lyric poetry and painting as models for their own mode of representation. At times the gothic seems hardly a unified narrative at all, but a series of framed conventions, static moments of extreme emotions – displayed by characters or in the landscape, and reproduced in the reader – which are tenuously strung together in order to be temporised both through and into narrative, but which do not form a coherent and continuous whole.

Given its corporate identity, it may not be surprising that the gothic seems also a confused and self-contradictory form, ambivalent or unsure about its own aims and implications. Criticism has reflected these contradictions. Some modern critics have wanted to assert its psychological complexity; Robert Hume claimed that 'Robert Lovelace is a simpler character than Lewis's Ambrosio', a somewhat outrageous statement which seems to reflect a desire to vindicate the form according to inappropriate criteria.[3] Others have agreed with J.M.S. Tompkins that the gothic is simplistic in its representation of character, which it subordinates to plot, scenery, and moralising. According to Tompkins: 'The fates of the human beings merely illustrate the nature of these places, while they themselves make the story and brood over it. The intricate plots of the romances are mainly a working-out of the suggestions of mountain scenery and Gothic architecture.'[4] Critics who agree on this point, however, still debate its implications. Elizabeth Napier argues that this focus on surfaces reveals that the gothic, far from being psychologically profound, is a shallow and superficial form.[5] According to Robert Keily, however, the subordination of person to place enables the gothic to explore 'the whole concept of individual identity', to show 'human personality as essentially unstable, inconsistent'.[6] William Patrick Day similarly reads it as reflective of a fragmented fable of identity, while for Robert Miles it is a site, a 'carnivalesque' mode which represents 'the subject finding itself dispossessed in its own home, in a condition of rupture, disjunction, fragmentation'.[7] Recent criticism has often

focused on the gothic's fragmentation as a response to bourgeois models of personal, sexual, and textual identity, seeing it as a Frankensteinian deconstruction of modern ideology.[8]

Ian Watt, however, argues that superficiality is due to the displacement of complexity from characters onto the readers' response to the situations presented,[9] as the gothic's main concern is not to depict character but to create a feeling or effect in its readers by placing them in a state of thrilling suspense and uncertainty. From its origins, the gothic has been defined in terms of this peculiar and palpable effect upon its audience. As a result, it has also frequently been involved in discussions concerning the relation of art to life, aesthetics to ethics. With its cast of extreme characters, unnatural settings and perverse plots, the gothic played a significant part in late eighteenth-century debates over the moral dangers of reading. Such debates were of a partially political origin, in England looking back to Milton's argument in *Areopagitica*, a text much cited in the eighteenth century. From the seventeenth century on, with the rise of literacy and the increase of the press, reading became a focal point in debates over authority and self-determination; indeed, it became identified with self-determination. Originating in the Protestant ideal that every man had the right to read the scripture for himself, a right viewed with some concern in the seventeenth century with the rise of dissenting movements (which sometimes even extended that right to women), the idea that to read for oneself was the property of the self-governing individual permeated discussions of both literature and politics. At the same time, however, there was a mistrust of the reader's ability to handle this heavy responsibility, and a wariness of the potentially pernicious influence of literature on a broad but naive market. The spread of literacy, the growth of a largely female and middle-class readership and of the power of the press, increased fears that literature could be a socially subversive influence. Prose fiction was particularly suspect: romances, for giving readers unrealistic expectations of an idealised life, novels for exposing them to the sordidness of an unidealised reality.

As a hybrid between the novel and romance, the gothic was accused on both accounts. The gothic was seen as encouraging a particularly intimate and insidious relationship between text and reader, by making the reader identify with what he or she read. As one contemporary reviewer said of Radcliffe: 'it may be true that her persons are cold and formal; but her readers are the virtual

heroes and heroines of her story as they read.'[10] According to Scott as well, the purpose of the gothic author was 'to wind up the feelings of his reader till they become for a moment identified with those of a ruder age'.[11] Ideally, this identification served a moral purpose, as it allowed readers to exercise safely and so educate their emotions; the danger was when the means became an end in itself. To many early concerned critics, gothic novels were the unlicensed indulgence of an amoral imagination that was a socially subversive force. The possibility that the gothic represented simply a fairy-tale world created by an imagination, an artistic aesthetic realm that was completely irrelevant and detached from the social order and norms, made it more, rather than less, threatening. The escapist imagination was denounced as corruptive of family values, as, when uncontrolled by reason, it rendered the vulnerable proverbial 'young person' unfit for real life. The art that is completely fanciful, an autonomous creation that does not refer to reality, offers a tempting alternative to the mundaneness of everyday life. It was feared that readers of fictions, seduced by the enticing charms of an illusory world, would lose either their grip on or their taste for reality: 'the false expectations these wild scenes excite, tend to debauch the mind, and throw an insipid kind of uniformity over the moderate and rational prospects of life, consequently adventures are sought for and created, when duties are neglected and content despised.'[12] Too much mental stimulation of the sensibilities was seen as producing insensibility and apathy in real life. As Coleridge warned, novel-reading may be 'especially injurious to the growth of the imagination, the judgment, and the morals, especially to the latter, because it excites mere feelings without at the same time ministering to an impulse to action . . . they afford excitement without producing reaction'.[13] Imagination and appetite are too closely connected, and reading itself a way of feeding destructive and anti-social desires. The ill consequences of reading works which fill 'the mind with extravagant thoughts and too often with criminal propensities'[14] are dramatised in numerous gothic stories in which the heroine is the victim of her own imagination and sensibility, indulged in reading, through which she loses the ability to differentiate between art and life.[15]

Some of the most powerful critiques of the force of the gothic appear within the gothic, which internalised external criticism, both in stories such as those described above, and in tales of works of art that take on lives of their own. As I will discuss further (see

pp. 85–7; 156–8), in its various versions of the familiar Pygmalion myth, the gothic seems to both represent and punish the imagination's power to realise its own desires. It therefore seems also to denounce precisely the transgressive qualities with which it was associated. While to earlier conservative moralists the gothic's offer of an imaginative retreat from reality was seen as a potentially amoral subversion of social order, to many modern critics this, contradictorily, has proved it to be a reactionary, socially conservative form. In the Radcliffean model, especially, the imagination is indulged through suspense, only to be ultimately contained, imprisoned by the final authority of morality, in which the good and bad are separated out by a poetically just system of rewards and punishments. The gothic appears to suggest that the inevitable can only be pleasurably, and fictitiously, deferred for a time, as the domestic sphere is the only appropriate end of a woman's adventures: whether that woman be the heroine or the reader herself, who, the thrilling adventure of reading over, closes the book and returns to her daily duties. The gothic thus both represents in the story of its heroine and offers to its readers a momentary subversion of order that is followed by the restoration of a norm, which, after the experience of terror, now seems immensely desirable.[16] Reading is thus a dangerously conservative substitute for political and social action, offering an illusory transformation to impede real change by making women content with their lot, and keeping them at home – reading.

Like the carnivalesque, the gothic appears to be a transgressive rebellion against norms which yet ends up reinstating them, an eruption of unlicensed desire that is fully controlled by governing systems of limitation.[17] It delights in rebellion, while finally punishing it, often with death or damnation, and the reaffirmation of a system of moral and social order. However, the fact that the endings are often, as Robert Keily notes,[18] unsatisfactory when compared to the delicious experience of the middle of the text, might in itself suggest a radical, antiteleological, model for reading, in which closure, which necessarily involves some restabilisation of categories, is deprivileged. For Sir Walter Scott, the notorious dissatisfaction of Radcliffe's endings could not diminish our pleasure in the rest of the text, and 'the impression of general delight which we have received for the perusal remains unabated'.[19] The dissatisfaction of the moral at the end in fact forces us to focus on the aesthetic pleasure of the middle.

Some recent critics have claimed further that in its potential as a vehicle for female anger the gothic provides a 'plot of feminine subversion'.[20] Its escape from the real world has a deeper moral purpose, as distance enables literature to become an indirect critique of things as they are; in Punter's nicely gothic description, the gothic is 'not an escape from the real but a deconstruction and dismemberment of it'.[21] The female gothic itself is not a ratification but an exposé of domesticity and the family, through the technique of estrangement or romantic defamiliarisation: by cloaking familiar images of domesticity in gothic forms, it enables us to see that the home *is* a prison, in which the helpless female is at the mercy of ominous patriarchal authorities. For Kenneth Graham, therefore, the gothic generally: 'was as rebellious in letters as its contemporary parallel in France was in politics. It challenged fundamental notions of aesthetics and psychology.'[22]

More critics argue, however, that whatever radical and subversive implications the gothic might have are radically limited by its own inconsistencies. Coral Ann Howells attributes the contradictory nature of the gothic to the fact that: 'Gothic novelists didn't know what to do with their own feelings of frustration and rebelliousness. . . . Their fiction is both exploratory and fearful. They are not always totally in control of their fantasies, for having opened up new areas of awareness which complicate life enormously, they then retreat from their insights back into conventionality with the rescue of a heroine into happy marriage and the horrible death of a villain.'[23] For Robert Keily, 'Gothic fiction was not only about confusion, it was written from confusion'.[24] Terry Lovell argues further that its irresolution exposes the conflicts within bourgeois ideology that it is supposed to hide, a conflict between morality and aesthetics, work and pleasure.[25] Similarly, for Wylie Sypher, the ambiguity of the gothic is created by a tension between its reactionary moral and revolutionary aesthetic values, both of which, however, are bourgeois creations. The gothic therefore reveals 'the naked contradictions intrinsic in bourgeois romanticism', but only through 'a revolt so radically inhibited that it failed to be in a deep social sense creative'.[26] Its ambiguity reflects tensions it cannot solve. For Hume, this makes it secondary to Romanticism, which asserts the power of the synthetic imagination to reconcile and resolve all contradictions; the gothic imagination, in contrast, cannot transform or transcend the everyday world: it 'has no such answers and can only leave the "opposites" contradictory and

paradoxical', ending in 'only unresolvable moral and emotional ambiguity'.[27] For Day, however, the gothic exposes the gothic reality of modern identity, and by failing to represent an adequate solution it forces its readers to address them in real life, thus (ideally) using literature to encourage social change.[28] In her rejection of such recent assumptions that the form is deep and significant, which she connects to a current post-romantic idealisation of fragmentation, Napier argues, however, that the gothic represents a flight from meaning into a quest for sensations. Its self-contradiction and critiquing reveal only that it is an irresponsibly escapist form marked by 'profound uncertainty about its genuine status and intent', which lacks the guts to confront its own moral and aesthetic implications.[29]

The gothic seems a puzzling contradiction, denounced and now celebrated for its radical imaginative lawlessness, feared for its encouragement of readers to expect more from life than is realistic, and also for its inculcation of social obedience and passivity. Revolutionary or reactionary? An incoherent mess or a self-conscious critique of repressive concepts of coherence and order? Apolitical or a direct product and artistic equivalent of the French Revolution? Transgressive and lawless or conformist and meekly law-abiding? Psychologically deep in its representation of characters or motives, or totally superficial in its interest in mere appearances and coverings? While at its origins, a concern with the social role and effects of reading made the gothic a debated genre, current critical interest in the politics of literature has turned it into a 'contested castle' [30] that is both attacked and defended for the secret it supposedly conceals in its hermeneutical dungeon.

2 Past and Present

Since Ian Watt, the rise of the British novel proper has been tied to the emergence of Protestant bourgeois culture. The novel's focus on character as the motive, and causality as the form, for narrative is seen as an extension of middle-class faith in individualism, self-determination, 'getting ahead', reason, autonomy, and progress.[31] The gothic's relation to the class that, for the most part, produced and consumed it has seemed more convoluted, involving a kind of gothic doubling.[32] The gothic is part of the reaction against the political, social, scientific, industrial, and

epistemological revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which enabled the rise of the middle class.

Like Romanticism, the gothic is especially a revolt against a mechanistic or atomistic view of the world and relations, in favour of recovering an earlier organic model. The gothic is symptomatic of a nostalgia for the past which idealises the medieval world as one of organic wholeness, in which individuals were defined as members of the 'body politic', essentially bound by a symbolic system of analogies and correspondences to their families, societies, and the world around them. This retrospective view of the past serves to contrast it with a modern bourgeois society, made up of atomistic possessive individuals, who have no essential relation to each other. While the medieval individual was defined by his relation to other groups and the world outside of himself, modern identity is defined in terms of autonomy and independence.[33] Relations are not organic but mechanistic, based on scientific laws of cause and effect and sheer self-interest, which prompt the artificial construction of a society seen now as based on a 'social contract'. While in the feudal world the individual will had been restrained by external systems, in the modern world, authority is transferred to the autonomous and self-regulating individual. The belief in the ability of the individual to govern himself rationally is necessary for the modern liberal definition of freedom as the absence of external restraints. It is a logical extension of the Protestant faith in individual conscience,[34] which we will see later in Godwin pushed into a philosophy of anarchism, in which all external systems of regulation are unnatural and evil.

As we will see with Godwin also, however, the gothic extends the Protestant tradition of self-scrutiny into a critique of Protestant bourgeois values. Its potential to serve as an attack on dominant modern notions of identity has increased its current popularity. As a corporate hybrid genre made up through relations with other forms, it suggests a 'relational model' as an alternative to the modern view of autonomous identity. Moreover, it frequently attacks, especially, the modern liberal assumption that the individual is a self-regulating autonomous entity who is able to govern his own passions rationally without the help, or hindrance, of external restraints. The location of authority within the individual, rather than in external systems, is suspected of leading to rampant and anti-social individualism, as is most clearly shown in satires of religious enthusiasm and non-conformity, such as Hogg's and

Brockden Brown's. The gothic villain is frequently an example of the modern materialistic individual taken to an extreme, at which he becomes an egotistical and wilful threat to social unity and order: even Dracula, who is obviously a holdover from a foreign past, is, as Harker notes with admiration, a good modern businessman, who 'would have made a wonderful solicitor'.[35]

The gothic is thus a nightmare vision of a modern world made up of detached individuals, which has dissolved into predatory and demonic relations which cannot be reconciled into a healthy social order. It shows the easy slide of the modern Cartesian mind from autonomy and independence into solipsism and obsession, depicting the atomistic individual as fragmented, and alienated from others and ultimately from himself. In the gothic, 'normal' human relationships are defamiliarised and critiqued by being pushed to destructive extremes. Incest in particular, both in the gothic and for the later Romantics, suggests an abnormal and extreme desire (a violation of natural familial ties) that is antithetical to and subversive of social requirements. At the same time as it opposes the needs of modern society, it is also an exaggerated form of the relations they require, a parody of the modern introverted nuclear family. [36] Individualism further creates a broader conflict between individual desire, frequently idealised as natural and authentic, and social duty, often denounced as artificial and hypocritical, a conflict which is exaggerated in the gothic, and replayed especially in terms of sexual relations. Most commonly, gothic novels revolve around a battle between antithetical sexes, in which an aggressive sexual male, who wants to indulge his own will, is set against a passive spiritual female, who is identified with the restrictions of social norms. With its simplistic black and white division of good and evil figures, the gothic seems to suggest that the reward of modern change is the emergence of a world made up of alienated obsessed individuals, who can relate to each other only as enemies. Self-government by reason is exposed as the rule of pure appetite; genteel, harmonious, bourgeois relations conceal deadly oppositions and struggles between victors and victims.

Attacking a dehumanising modern world, the gothic is thus a part of the rise of medievalism, manifested in works such as Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, which attempted to defend 'gothic' art and romance on its own merits, and so to recover the 'world of fine fabling' succeeded by that of 'good sense'.[37] What was new about this nostalgia for the past, compared to the earlier Renaissance

revival of the classical and foreign dead, was its focus on recovering a *native* English literary tradition. The gothic revival thus played an important part in the development of both political and literary nationalism.[38] While most critics have tended to position the gothic in relation to the French Revolution, it was originally a part of the legacy of the English Revolution of 1688. Throughout the eighteenth century, as agitation for government reform increased, writers were preoccupied with defining exactly what had occurred at that time: whether a new social order had been created, or England had returned to its 'old Constitution'. According to Robert Walpole, 1688 had marked a revolution which had freed England from an original state of gothic tyranny:

> To bring the government of England back to its first principles, is to bring the people back to absolute slavery: the primitive purity of our constitution was, that the people had no share in the government, but were the villains, vessels, or bondsmen of the lords, a sort of cattle bought and sold with the land . . . our Modern constitution is infinitely better than the Ancient Constitution . . . the New England, or England since the Revolution, is vastly preferable to Old England.[39]

Walpole identified himself with the middle-class forces of enlightened progress that saw themselves as having liberated Britain from a dark age of feudal slavery.

However, according to the more common Whig view of history, before the Norman conquest Anglo-Saxon Britain had been in an advanced state of freedom. While to some eighteenth-century radicals, tradition and freedom might seem antithetical, to a Whig like Burke, they were the same: the British tradition *was* freedom, lost in 1066 through, significantly, a *French* invasion, partially regained with the Magna Carta, and wholly regained in 1688. That Revolution was only revolution in its original sense – a return to an original state of being.[40] Change was the recovery of an ongoing tradition, if one sometimes suppressed by oppression, which identified past and present.

The gothic's appearance at this time suggests this political interest, and the concern with reinforcing a mythology of an unbroken British past and tradition of freedom. Studies of the word 'gothic' have tended to position it in relation to a shift in aesthetic values, also evident in the reversal of meaning in the word 'Romantic': during the eighteenth century both move from

originally pejorative connotations of savagery and barbarism, to signify a valuable imaginative freedom, thus heralding the Romantic aesthetic revolt against the tyranny of classicism and Enlightenment reason. [41] During the eighteenth century both positive and pejorative connotations co-existed. But the word was used also for the antithetical political purposes of condemnation and praise: to depict both an oppressive feudal past and a golden age of liberty. As the term could still be applied to aesthetic primitivism, it was also used to denounce the British past as one of barbaric oppression. However, as Samuel Kliger noted, the modern use of the word 'gothic' (the sense in which it becomes detached from the original Goths, or a more general meaning of barbarism) begins to appear first in the seventeenth century, where, through an etymological confusion between Goth and Jute, or Gete, it is connected specifically to the imaginary ancient constitution of Britain.[42] Gothic, that is, Anglo-Saxon, political freedom is contrasted with classical (especially Roman and later French neoclassical) tyranny to create a myth of a continuous British inheritance of freedom. From the seventeenth century on, the gothic is thus associated with native political freedom based on 'the true old Gothick Constitution' [43] which resists tyrannical foreign laws. The association of the gothic with liberty is continued by later nineteenth-century medievalists, such as Ruskin, who identified the gothic with the creative imagination, freedom of expression, as opposed to classical servility and modern mechanical reproduction. It is a peculiarly British characteristic, a sign of a national inherent love of freedom, liberty, that differentiates the country from servile foreign countries (especially, of course, France), and which is present even during times of tyranny (such as under William I or Robert Walpole).

While the term gothic could thus be used to demonise the past as a dark age of feudal tyranny, it could also be used equally to idealise it as a golden age of innocent liberty. Its meaning was the territory for a political battle between the ancients and the moderns over the nature of the past and its relation to the present. It was at the centre of a British version of its own history as the story of the fall: a myth of alienation from and return to an original state of harmony and innocence.[44] Such myths have a long tradition in England. The Reformation was imagined as a recovery of the original, pure form of Christianity, before it had been corrupted by the false (Catholic) systems of mediation that stood between a

man and his God; while Protestantism was obviously not a purely English phenomenon, this aspect of it certainly suggests one reason why it appealed to the imagination of a country that has as one of its major legends the story of the once and future king, Arthur, whose return is prophesied. The legend of Arthur, which has been constantly resurrected by British writers, was itself a potential subject for Milton's epic; his shift to the story of *Paradise Lost* may be only an expansion from a purely national to a more universal version of the same story of loss and return. As Robert Keily has noted, a similar impulse underlies the rhetoric around the rise of the novel, which was held up as being 'to the romance what the Reformation had been to poetry, a purification and return to unadorned truth'.[45] The use of the myth of the ancient constitution throughout the eighteenth century is a manifestation of a recurrent British argument that a better future is to be found by recovering the past. Present evils may be cured by returning to the purity of the past, through a Machiavellian return to first principles.[46] The gothic is thus haunted by a reading of history as a dialectical process of alienation and restoration, dismembering and remembering, a version of the secularised myth of fall and return, which, as M.H. Abrams showed, is central to Romanticism.[47] The fragmentation and estrangement of the gothic thus both reflects a modern alienated and estranged world made up of atomistic individuals, and suggests the hope of recovering a lost organic unity.

3 The Sublime and the Odd

As a means of recovering a world of freedom, lost through the rise of the modern world, the gothic looks backwards to a kinder simpler paradise lost of harmonious relations that existed before the nasty modern world of irreconcilable opposition and conflict. It thus becomes easily allied with Rousseauian primitivism, in which the past is seen as closer to nature than the present, associated with the corrupting and artificial influence of society. While for Rousseau that past is irretrievable, the gothic tries to use its necromantic powers to raise it. However, such a past is always obviously an idealised myth, made to fit the needs of the present – which may also be one reason why so many of the 'relics' found in the eighteenth century were forgeries. An idealised past is constructed in order to deconstruct a degenerate modernity; Clara

Reeve prefaced her *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon* with a statement of the moral purpose in reviving history:

> to give a faithful picture of a well-governed kingdom, wherein a true subordination of ranks and degrees was observed, and of a great prince at the head of it.
>
> The new philosophy of the present day avows a levelling principle, and declares that a state of anarchy is more beautiful than that of order and regularity. There is nothing more likely to convince mankind of the errors of these men, than to set before them examples of good government, and warnings of the mischievous consequences of their own principles.[48]

In the works of the odd couple of Horace Walpole and Edmund Burke, the revival of the past is a means of revolting against a debased commercial and mechanical modern world, in which the dismembering of an already divided and fragmented atomistic present enables an organic whole gothic past to be put back together.

It seems appropriate that the genealogy of this genre begins with an idiosyncratic text, written by a truly eccentric individual, who hovered on the class border between bourgeoisie and aristocracy. It is fitting, too, that the first gothic novel was written by the son of Robert Walpole, the figure of authority for much of the early eighteenth century, whose government was denounced by Bolingbroke as the source of modern corruption that was threatening the tradition of British liberty re-established by the Glorious Revolution. His son escaped from the politics he believed had destroyed his father, into a gothic world he constructed for himself at Strawberry Hill out of bits and pieces of the past. Macaulay, who detested everything Walpole stood for, described him as 'an unhealthy and disorganised mind'; 'the most eccentric, the most artificial, the most fastidious, the most capricious of men. His mind was a bundle of inconsistent whims and affectations. His features were covered by a mask within a mask'.[49] Walpole was a mass of contradictions: a Whig who flaunted his hatred of authority (keeping a copy of the Magna Carta and the warrant for the execution of Charles I beside his bed), who yet, as Macaulay put it, was 'a gentleman-usher at heart', who 'liked revolution and regicide only when they are a hundred years old' and who during the French Revolution was 'frightened into a fanatical royalist and became one of the most extravagant alarmists of those wretched times'.[50]

What Macaulay objected to most in Walpole was the sheer perversity of the man: his total inversion of 'normal' values and standards of behaviour and taste, in which 'serious business was a trifle to him, and trifles were his serious business'.[51] Walpole rebelled against the aesthetic standards of the times, claiming the artistic superiority of Soame Jenyns over Pope and Swift. Furthermore: 'with the Sublime and the Beautiful Walpole had nothing to do, but . . . the third province, the Odd, was his peculiar domain.'[52] In writing his gothic *Castle of Otranto* he claimed to write as a revolt against all critical rules:

> I have not written the book for the present age, which will endure nothing but cold common sense . . . this is the only one of my books with which I am myself pleased; I have given reins to my imagination till I became on fire with those visions and feelings which it excited. I have composed it in defiance of rules, of critics, and of philosophers.[53]

However, like its author, the text is a hybrid made up of conflicting impulses: an eccentric individual's whim that yet indicts unrestrained egotism; a lawless pre-romantic work rebelling against limits, which in fact obsessively abides by the laws it claims to break, observing the neoclassical dramatic unities, so that, as the first preface says: 'Every thing tends directly to the catastrophe.'[54]

The Castle of Otranto has often been seen as indicative of Walpole's reactionary nostalgia, his longing to escape into an idealised past, later embodied in Strawberry Hill. The known past is more secure than the changing present: 'Old castles, old pictures, old histories, and the babble of old people make one live each into centuries that cannot disappoint.'[55] David McKinney has shown how Strawberry Hill was constructed also to idealise Walpole's family, giving it a central position in an idealised gothic past and a relation, especially to the ancient constitution which he claimed, contra Bolingbroke, that his father had preserved.[56] His gothic world, both architectural and fictional, wasn't a mere retreat from politics, but a place where politics were transformed into art. Furthermore, also like his museum of curiosities, his fiction is an attempt to create something new from the past; to return to older models for relations as a means of creating a new and truly original narrative form. The very name 'gothic novel' which was ultimately given to the form he created is an oxymoron that reflects its desire to identify conflicting impulses: both towards

newness, novelty, originality, and towards a return to nature and revival of the past. Walpole's text offers a myth of reconciliation of past and present, which suggests the past can be revived in a way that will be empowering and liberating for the present, freeing it from modern aesthetic and political forms of oppression.

Like Walpole's gothic play, *The Mysterious Mother*, the novel is a highly oedipal work, no doubt in part reflecting his relation to his own formidable and authoritative father. As a version of history it is closer to the view of Bolingbroke than that of Robert Walpole.[57] The novel introduces some of the most basic gothic ingredients: characters – the Miltonically satanic hero or fallen angel, with his complementary selfless and passive female counterpart, the bland hero who will inevitably turn out to be the rightful heir, the selfless victimised heroine; setting – the castle with its secret buried in its past that will finally emerge to determine the direction of the future, the portrait and other works of art that mysteriously come to life; plot – a story of usurpation, concerned with the issues of succession and inheritance, which flirts with the possibility of incestuous relations, but ends with the rightful distribution of persons and property. The development of the story juxtaposes Manfred's attempt to perpetuate his illegitimate line (both narrative and familial) into the future, with its final fragmentation: the annihilation of one false line with the recovery of the true one.

Walpole's form sets the pattern for later writers, who work with techniques of interruption, deferral, ellipsis, framing, to slice stories into bits and pieces and disrupt superficial narrative unity or linearity. In Walpole the structural and thematic fragmentation of the line of Manfred's narrative mirrors the breakdown of his succession and of himself as a character: he is increasingly incoherent and unable to get to a point.[58] The story opens with the death of his son Conrad, on the day that was both his birthday and the occasion of his wedding that was designed to secure the succession. Birth, marriage, death – the three crucial events that are supposed to mark the narrative of a life and organise it into temporal sequence – occur simultaneously, thus flamboyantly introducing at the genre's very inception the problem of constructing continuous narrative sequence, a problem that has haunted the static and disjointed gothic form. Moreover, to start off the story with a big bang that literalises the themes of fragmentation and collapsing, Conrad is grotesquely squashed by a gigantic helmet that suddenly and mysteriously (if one can call such a crudely

bizarre event mysterious) falls from nowhere. The origin of the story is the breaking of the genealogical line, which forces Manfred to find new ways of restoring it. The death of his son causes Manfred to try to take his place, to be in effect his own heir, realising a somewhat inverted or perverted oedipal fantasy of self-perpetuation. This attempt to secure his line against a prophecy that obscurely predicts its overthrow has, however, disastrous consequences. Through the dynamics that will become typical of the gothic, the more Manfred tries to assert his individual control over fate, the more he loses control; as he loses his inability to pull his ideas together into a coherent sentence, he also loses his ability to order the reality around him into a plot that suits his dynastic desires. He is finally the victim of total chance, which causes him to be the author of the destruction of his own plans, as he accidentally kills his own daughter.

As later gothic novels also show, however, such chances are always strictly predetermined. In Walpole's tale, cause and effect seem both opposed, as actions have ludicrously disproportionate consequences, and yet rigidly bound together, as past actions relentlessly effect the present. As Manfred's own story and family falls apart, the pieces of a gigantic statue to which the helmet that killed Conrad belongs gradually come back together, as the helmet turns out to be a grotesquely literal synecdoche both for the real owner of the titular castle of Otranto and for the structure of the plot. Against the disintegration of Manfred's story, its splintering into isolated and incoherent atoms, occurs the piece by piece re-membering of this statue, whose parts are restored into a new whole, which marks the recovery of an original, pure past. Manfred's literally poisonous line is shown to originate in the murder of a master by his servant. This act of usurpation is suggestive of the gothic's ambivalent representation of servants, which I will be discussing further later (pp. 62–3; 180–4 esp.): while Walpole associates them with Shakespeare's comic figures, they also reflect a contemporary anxiety about changing class relations, in particular, the basis of the master–servant bond in a new commercial world. At the end of Walpole's text, the rightful noble heir, Theodore, is recovered, and his marriage with Isabella (Conrad's fiancée, upon whom Manfred had incestuous dynastic designs) consolidates his rule and produces a new social order. The poisonous servile line is totally eradicated – ultimately, and rather neatly, by itself, since it is through Manfred's crimes that his children are murdered, thus

proving the moral offered by the fictitious editor of the first edition that 'the sins of fathers are visited on their children' (*Otranto*, p. 18). Moreover, the establishment of a new order is also a return to an original one: past and present join together when the original owner, Alphonso the Good, who was poisoned by Manfred's ancestor, descends at the end to recognise his look-alike heir. A false line and system of authority is broken down and replaced by a new one, which turns out, however, to be true because even older – the original, uncontaminated order.

In some ways this is a tidy way of suddenly resolving, in a highly oedipal text, the potential conflict between past and present, or guilt about the representation of the overthrow of a tyrannical father, by showing the father to have been a usurper all along. Theodore's claim is through his *mother*, a fact which prevents him from being a rival for his newly discovered father, who has become a spiritual 'Father', the priest Jerome. The glorious, though not totally bloodless, revolution that takes place in the text turns out to be a recovery of the rightful dynastic line. The story thus enacts Walpole's own desire to create a narrative line that will enable him to bring past and present together into an aesthetic whole:

> to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if, in the latter species, Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances.
>
> (ibid., p. 21)

As Bishop Hurd had also complained, the modern novel is ruled tyrannically by dry realism, which banishes the fertility of the imagination; in the past, however, the opposite was true, as the imagination had too unlicensed a rule. Rather than choosing one form, Walpole wants to find a balance between mimetic and fanciful forms of representation, in order to unite fruitfully past and present. His work is a hybrid form, born of the yoking of opposites.[59] In this, he claims that it is something totally new. Yet he de-emphasises his claim for originality, instead falling back on the very basis of British law and tradition, precedent, and takes as