THE GRAMMAR OF GOTHIC
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CHAPTER 1

THE 'LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY'
AND THE RISE OF HORROR FICTION

The following five chapters provide a grounding in the theory of horror fiction. Chapter 1 deals with the background necessary to understand the rise of Gothic in the late eighteenth century. Chapter 2 offers a distinction between two current (and often confused) understandings of Gothic: as a mode, and as a genre. Chapter 3 offers a provisional definition of the Gothic genre. Chapter 4 traces the evolution of Gothic into other forms—other genres—of horror fiction down to the twentieth-first century. Chapter 5 explores the link between Gothic and folklore.

§1.1. The 'Long Eighteenth Century'

The 'Long Eighteenth Century' (the Long C18) is a concept historians use to compensate for the shortcomings of a strictly chronological approach to events. Many developments in the 18th century can be seen to begin well before 1700, or to resolve themselves (to the extent that history can be said to 'resolve' anything) well beyond 1800. 'The Long C18' encompasses a period which, it is thought, does more justice to these.

Much justification, for instance, can be found in beginning the study of the Enlightenment with the English Civil Wars (1642-51) which put paid to the monarchy's absolutist tendencies in Britain (tendencies which survived much longer on the continent). Less agreement exists as to when precisely the Long C18 ends, and various alternatives have been proposed: the French Revolution (1789-99), the end of the Napoleonic Wars (1815), or the end of the Romantic age (with the deaths of Shelley, Byron and Keats before 1825).

Since Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy (1534), the King was head of both the English State and the English Church. The vicissitudes of the Church of England are therefore

inextricably linked to the deeds of the various kings and queens. The literature of the Long C18, marked as it is by the rise and development of Protestantism, requires a study of both the political and the ecclesiastical history of the age. The following is a commentary on a number of phenomena that configure the setting against which we need to view the rise of Gothic. These pages should be read in conjunction with the historical survey of the Long C18 provided in Appendix A.[1]

§1.2. The Baroque.

This contested term usually covers a period in Western culture between the Renaissance and Neoclassicism. The inception, extent and end of the Baroque vary depending on each cultural area and discipline. Though there is a broad consensus that Baroque literature went into decline during the second half of the seventeenth century, in Polish or Russian poetry it stretched into the eighteenth; in architecture, Versailles (substantially built between 1668 and the 1880s) is in the Baroque style; while Baroque music reached a height with J. S. Bach (d. 1750).[2] Used on the Continent to cover the arts and literature generally, in Britain the term 'Baroque' has often been restricted to the domain of painting, sculpture and architecture, and mostly in reference to Continental rather than to British developments. A number of critics, however, do recognise the usefulness of the term to designate not just a period but a veritable cast of mind that, in many different guises and for different lengths of time, prevailed throughout Europe.[3]

Baroque art and literature capitalise on such thematic and compositional strategies as antithesis, *chiaroscuro*, hyperbole and conceit (a far-fetched metaphor 'distended' to near-breaking point), as well as on an intense struggle between extreme contrasts (particularly between tormented spirituality and profound sensuousness), heightened tensions, and a sense of the excessive.[4] As Burgard (2019:12) puts it, 'excess is *constitutive* of the Baroque'. Factors usually associated with this tension include the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation; the devastation of the Thirty-Years' War (1618-1648); the conflict between absolutism and the emergent public sphere; and the intensification of the witch-hunts from the late 16th century

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[1] For in-depth readings, the following are recommended: Simon Schama, *A Complete History of Britain, 3000 B.C.—A.D. 2000* (London: BBC Worldwide 2003, vol. 2), and Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: How the Enlightenment Transformed the Way We See Our Bodies and Souls* (London: Penguin Books 2003).

[2] Harold B. Segal, *The Baroque Poem: A Comparative Survey* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 31.

[3] Besides Segal (1976), see Frank J. Warnke, *Versions of Baroque: European Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press 1972); Christopher Johnson, 'Baroque', in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th edn. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 2012); Peter J. Burgard, *Baroque: Figures of Excess in Seventeenth-Century European Art and German Literature* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2019).

[4] See Segal 1976, 66-129.

onwards.[5] But this is also a period of enthusiasm for discovery on both the geographical and the intellectual planes, including not only the exploration and conquest of the New World but also the rise of the rationalist philosophies of Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza or Leibniz; the efflorescence of drama in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, 'Golden Age' Spain, and France; and the triumph of Metaphysical poetry in Britain, Marinismo in Italy, Conceptismo and Culteranismo in Spain, and other variants of Baroque poetry.

One way to account for the tensions and contradictions of the Baroque age is to view it as the watershed between lingering feudalism and nascent capitalism, between the 'ancient' world and Modernity. It is a period of much political but also intellectual and spiritual conflict when two understandings of world and humanity struggle for dominance. On the one hand, the old feudal/Catholic *Weltanschauung* grounded on a valorisation of strong authority and hierarchy, as of community over the individual, and a concomitant acceptance of a universal and social status quo. On the other, the emerging awareness that improvement—personal as well as social—is possible and desirable, and that greater individual freedom should be the *sine qua non* condition for this. Out of this struggle Empiricism, the scientific method, Rationalism, Deism, and our modern ideas of democracy, education and progress eventually emerge as the victors, consolidating a drive towards degrees of toleration and compromise, and a political organisation of checks and balances that will free energies for some other causes—the coming of mercantile capitalism, industrialisation, and Empire. 'Liberty', 'progress', 'modern' and 'system' become bywords in the Long C18.

§1.3. The Thirty Years' War

Between 1618 and the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), war ravaged Europe. It stemmed, among other causes, both from religious conflict and from the struggle between absolutist tendencies and a growing bid for liberty on the part of Protestant-led states. Though each power (Austria, Holland, the Spanish and German Empires, France, Sweden, etc.) had its own reasons for engagement, among the more general outcomes of the war the following can be singled out: a) the decentralisation of the German Empire; b) an end to religious wars, as henceforwards the German states were free to remain Protestant or Catholic; c) the English Civil Wars (1642-51), which can be seen as a last spasm of the wars of religion (see below); d) the foundations were laid for the modern, secular nation state; and e) the seeds were planted for what Starobinski has called the 'invention of liberty'.[6]

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[5] Brian P. Levack gives 1580 through 1650 as the height of the European hunts, with some areas—Scotland, Scandinavia—lingering into the 1660s or early 1670s. See *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (2nd edn). London: Longman 1995.

[6] Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty*, trans. Bernard C. Swift (Geneva, New York: Skira/Rizzoli 1964, 1987).

§1.4.   Puritanism and the English Civil Wars

The Puritans, viewing their doctrine as a form of 'advanced Protestantism', emerged as a radical faction of the Anglican Church which claimed that more had to be done in order to *purify* the church from its Catholic origins. Repressed or rejected by the Anglican establishment, thousands of Puritans emigrated to Holland and especially to America (where they initiated enduring colonial settlements, earliest of all in Massachusetts). The great Puritan moment came when, allied to the Parliamentarian party (the 'Roundheads'), they defeated the supporters of Charles I (the Royalists or 'Cavaliers'), and had Charles I executed in 1649. In 1651 they abolished the monarchy and established a *Commonwealth* (a kind of republican government), replaced in 1653 with a *Protectorate* (a kind of dictatorship) headed by Oliver Cromwell. In what is known as the Restoration (1660), Prince Charles, son of the executed Charles I, was invited to return to Britain as king—with some parliamentary checks on royal prerogative introduced; and the Puritan experiment came to an end. After that, a climate of relative toleration prevailed; when Charles II's successor, James II, was seen to favour Catholics and to seek to recover a measure of absolute power (by now Catholicism and absolutism were thought two sides of one coin), Parliament directly invited a foreign Protestant prince, William of Orange (married to James II's daughter Mary) to oust James and rule Britain—subject to a further reduction of royal power. With this—the so-called Glorious Revolution (1688)—constitutional monarchy had become a fact of political life.

§1.5.   Science and Rationalism.

The 'Scientific Revolution' is a long and slow process, underway since at least the sixteenth century. Some of its landmarks are the astronomical discoveries of Nicolaus Copernicus (*De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, 1543), Johannes Kepler (*Astronomia Nova*, 1609) and Galileo Galilei (*Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo*, 1632); the philosophies of Francis Bacon (*Novum Organum*, 1620) and René Descartes (*Discourse de la méthode*, 1637); the mathematical discoveries of Gottfried Leibniz and Isaac Newton (*Principia Mathematica*, 1687, considered the synthesis of previous work since Copernicus); the founding of the Royal Society (1662) for the sciences; and the empiricist philosophies of George Berkeley, David Hume and John Locke built on experiment and induction. Descartes' notion of *philosophie pratique* (also known as 'natural philosophy') is the direct ancestor of modern science. The Scientific Revolution reaches its culmination in the early eighteenth century, after which point science can

be said to have absorbed or replaced other means and forms of knowledge (such as alchemy, magic, theology and mysticism, as well as scholastic philosophy).[7]

§1.6. The Public Sphere

'The Public Sphere' (*Öffentlichkeit*, a term coined by German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in 1962) designates a phenomenon that begins towards the end of the sixteen-hundreds, consisting in the emergence of various kinds of forums for the exchange of views and debate.[8] Whereas this had been formerly possible only along individual lines by means of letters, private communications, or papers and books of limited circulation, now several opportunities began to open up for a massive dissemination of ideas. Among these we must count the media of the day—theatre, books, painting, the press: the first newspapers (weekly or twice-weekly) began appearing in England in the second half of the seventeenth century.[9] The coffee house became in Britain a centre for the distribution of papers containing news and comments, as well as a public space for debate. In France, this function was mainly performed by the *salons* where aristocratic ladies entertained gatherings of prominent individuals. Language academies and scientific bodies were set up throughout Europe, often with royal patronage. In all of these, class difference became a secondary matter, and democratic exchange of knowledge and opinion among experts and interested persons prevailed. Dictionaries and encyclopedias thrived, becoming precision instruments at the disposal of a growing number of scholars and students.

The public sphere bridges the gap between the private sphere and the state, fosters an exchange of views conducive to the formation of *public opinion*, and begins to exert a regulatory pressure upon state authority. Profiting from the consolidation of a number of freedoms (of assembly, of speech, of opinion, of information, of publication), the public sphere sustains that democratic spirit which is the hallmark of the eighteenth century. The literature of the seventeen-hundreds, seeking both to entertain and to educate the rising middle classes, becomes an important part of the public sphere with a marked critical function. Gothic fiction is no exception, as will be seen below.

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[7] See John Henry, *The Scientific Revolution and the Origins of Modern Science.* London: Palgrave Macmillan 2008.

[8] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* 1962; transl . as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass: Cambridge University Press 1991).

[9] See Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (London: Yale University Press 2014).

§1.7. Enlightenment, Neoclassicism, and the Industrial Revolution

The success of Newton's mathematical model of the universe represents the climax—rather than the inception—of the scientific revolution, and inspires an almost unbounded confidence in the power of the intellect and science to explain—even control—the natural world. The *French garden*, exemplified in Versailles, is a consummate manifestation of this spirit, imposing as it does a relentlessly geometrical order upon nature. Light becomes the grand metaphor for the rational faculty, because of the latter's capacity to 'illuminate', clarify and explain reality and thereby to *enlighten* the mind and dispel the 'darkness' of ignorance.[10] A couplet by Alexander Pope neatly encapsulates this notion:

> Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
> God said, Let Newton be! and all was light.[11]

God creates both the laws of the universe and, at the appropriate time, the genius who will unveil them, then withdraws—a true *deus otiosus*—to contemplate from the distance the smooth unfolding of His master plan. Instead of carrying on a permanent act of creation which had begun with the words in *Genesis* 'Let there be light!', He delegates His work on this key figure who, like a surrogate deity, will perform a secondary creative act—the casting of a new light over the universe. Chiastic alliteration in the first line ('Nature'-'laws'-'lay'-'night') becomes reversed and symmetrical in the second ('Let'-'Newton'-'light'), providing order and orderly transformation. The opposition between darkness and light is reconciled by the rhyme that balances contraries. A third act of creation—the poet's supremely elegant couplet—appoints Newton to his rightful position in the cosmos. Order, harmony, clarity—the couplet *does* what it describes.

   The Enligthenment does not quite do away with the tensions of the Baroque age, rather it recasts them in the form of an equilibrium between contrary stances; because either pole is thought excessive, polarisation must yield to poise; balance is all, and moderation becomes a key criterion. This generates a cultural transformation now known as Neoclassicism which takes the arts of Greece and Rome as models and consciously sets out to imitate these, placing decorum, elegance and symmetry at the centre of the work of art. In many ways it constitutes a response to Baroque, converting tension into balance, conflict into complementarity. In literature, this yields a peculiar *rhetoric of binaries* best illustrated by the widespread use of the heroic couplet; multiple correspondences and contrasts are systematically established, and simultaneously reconciled by the rhyme that brings together the two lines of the

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[10] Hence the terms used in the major western languages: Fr. *Illustration*, G. *Aufklärung*, It. *Illuminismo*, Sp. *Ilustración*, Dutch *Verlichting*.

[11] Alexander Pope, 'Epitaph Intended for Sir Isaac Newton', in *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., no date), p. 71.

couplet: 'Where order in variety we see, / And where, though all things differ, all agree'.[12]

A number of far-reaching changes had been taking place in Britain since the late 17th century, among them the 'Agricultural Revolution'. The spread of Enclosure (privatisation of the Common land), which had been occurring piecemeal before 1700, accelerated in the early 18th century, placing land in fewer and fewer hands and letting it be run by capitalist farmers who used hired labour and devoted their produce to the market rather than to the support of a family. Along with more efficient uses of land, improved fertilisation, and a rotary crop system, it meant a surplus of food which enabled faster population growth. To this we must add the Transport Revolution (expansion and improvement of the network of turnpike roads and canals); gradual mechanisation of manufacture; increased output in commodities (textiles, instruments, machinery); and increased trade and export. These developments, together with the 'Financial Revolution'—creation of the National Debt (1693), establishment of the Bank of England (1694), the Great Recoinage (1695)—contributed to a massive transformation of Great Britain.

The grandest manifestion of this change is, of course, the Industrial Revolution. This owes its success to the conception of an inert, mechanistic natural world and to the ensuing proposition that the study of its laws, causes and effects grants understanding of and control over natural processes. What is remarkable about this revolution is its acceleration. Its most emblematic find, steam power, had been discovered several times since antiquity; but a first commercially viable steam engine was invented by Thomas Savery in 1698, quickly improved by Thomas Newcomen in 1712, and vastly perfected by James Watt between 1762 and 1774. This machine in turn generated applications that transformed the world. Britain was expanding its empire not merely over the globe but over the whole of nature too.

§1.8. Rise of the middle classes.

The Long C18 cherishes the prospect of knowledge of nature, but also of human nature and the mind. The title of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) is eloquent enough; and the rise of the English novel is concomitant with this interest in human psychology. Hence it is no coincidence that the coming of industrialisation matches the growth of literacy, while the rise of science dovetails the growth of literary criticism.

Around 1750, three quarters of the population of Britain were occupied in agriculture; by 1800 only one third was.[13] This decline of the agricultural labour force resulted from, and in turn encouraged, a massive migration from country to town.

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[12] Alexander Pope, *Windsor Forest*, in *Poetical Works*, pp. 95-107, ll. 15-16.
[13] Malcolm Falkus & John Gillingham, *Historical Atlas of Britain* (London: Granada 1981), pp. 184-85.

Urbanisation—the process of adapting to life in an urban centre—in turn set a new standard of polite conduct and acquired a secondary meaning—*urbanity*—that conflated the concepts of cleanliness, elegance, manners, education and morality into a social norm. Tradesmen, artisans and artists, scientists, professionals and businessmen, occupying the social space between those who own the land and those who work it, emerge as the class which *de facto* generates the wealth of the country. These have a decided interest in the protection of capital and investment, and in opposing feudal tendencies. They associate themselves with liberalism and progress at this time (even though their liberalism helps condemn millions to increasingly despotic treatment by an unregulated labour market). In their bid for respectability they also look to bettering themselves, their manners, their 'culture'. John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Lord Shaftesbury's *Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author* (1710) build on the premise that the individual can change, and improve, through an appropriate training of the mind.

     The literature of the age moves along complementary grooves. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) extols the efforts of the man who, through hard labour, unremitting study, and experiment guided by rational thought, manages to gain dominion over his wild surroundings. The book becomes a metaphor for both the early Industrial Revolution and the growing British Empire. At this time, too, is born a literature which aspires to educate the middle classes by providing explanations of the physical and moral reality. The Augustan poets (John Dryden, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, John Gay and others) stress the public, *social* importance of the individual's actions. Literary criticism is on the rise thanks to the efforts of, amongst others, Dryden, Pope, Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson. The success of such periodicals as Defoe's *The Review* (1704-13), Richard Steele's *The Tatler* (1709-11), Addison and Steele's *The Spectator* (1711-12), or Benjamin Franklin's *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (1728) underscores the importance this culture attached to the explanatory and educational value of the press. An overwhelming sense of the order of things pervades the *belles lettres* of the time—an order which many will see threatened by the coming of the novel and, most particularly, from the late eighteenth century onwards, of the Gothic novel.

§1.9. The One-World View.

Natural philosophy *de facto* perceives this 'order of things' as consisting in one single universe bound by the 'laws' of nature (both those already known and those still to be discovered). All other realities are implicitly redefined either as illusions or as ancillary to the human one. The divine domain is thus progressively demythologised and rationalised to the point where God becomes a largely anthropomorphic figure credited with a very human love of reason and causality, whose actions and motivations are *understandable* (even when not *understood*) by us, and whose virtues and powers are but aggrandised versions of human attributes. While conceding that

God created the world, rational religion increasingly assigns to God the status of *deus otiosus* whose interference in the human universe either is limited or has run its course: God sits back and simply enjoys the spectacle of a world developing along the lines he had set up from the start. Miracles and the supernatural are granted (if at all) on theoretical grounds but evicted from the practical reality. Elves, fairies, magic recede into the backwater of discredited *superstition* to which all folk tradition is being consigned (see §1.12 below on Folklore).

Many bona fide rationalists, it is true, view with alarm what they consider the growing 'atheism' of the times and seek to counter it with proofs of the reality of God, angels, devils and portents in daily life. Many works of this nature are published in this period: Henry More's *An Antidote Against Atheisme* (1653), Joseph Glanvill's *Saducismus Triumphatus* (1681), George Sinclair's *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* (1685), Daniel Defoe's *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727); but emphasis on the defeat of *Sadduceism* (a loose term covering atheism, scepticism, disbelief or agnosticism) may be but a mark of the success it is credited with. Witchcraft has lost its grip on the collective ideology (though not on the collective imagination): the last execution for witchcraft in England took place in 1689, in the American colonies in 1693, in Scotland in 1727; while the Witchcraft Act of 1735 pointedly replaced existing legislation on witchcraft with legislation on the *pretence* of witchcraft. At some juncture theological treatises bent on attacking witches began to turn into or to be replaced by vindications of the existence of the supernatural, and even by collections of narratives of wonders for the amusement rather than edification of the reading public.[14] The age is moving towards redefining the world as one single material universe.

In this shift of attitudes lies one mainspring of Gothic fiction, which builds on the postulation of a *second* space on or beyond the borders of the reality acknowledged by Rationalism. Horace Walpole, in his preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), writes much to this effect: the book, presented as the work of a Renaissance writer, may no longer be taken as seeking to either persuade or disabuse readers as regards the truth of ghosts or miracles, only 'as a matter of entertainment.'[15] But the 'entertainment' hinges on the imaginative reconstruction of a parallel world of ghosts and divine acts that interfaces with ours.

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[14] See Jonathan Barry, 'News from the Invisible World: The Publishing History of Tales of the Supernatural c. 1660-1832', in Jonathan Barry, Owen Davis and Cornelie Usborne, eds., *Cultures of Witchcraft in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2017), pp. 179-212.

[15] Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764; Oxford: Oxford UP 1996. All further references will be to this edition.

§1.10.   The Evangelical Revival and the literature of sensibility

In the midst of this rationalist culture, a change begins to be felt around the 1730s. George Whitefield, the brothers John and Charles Wesley, and others start a religious revival that came to be known as Methodism. In the American colonies a comparable initiative, 'the Great Awakening', is set in motion by Jonathan Edwards. These movements—loosely known as 'Evangelical'—urge believers to spiritual regeneration not through formal ceremony but through the religious 'enthusiasm' of a direct, personal contact with God. Evangelicalism deprecates rationalist attitudes towards religion and promotes instead an intensely emotional approach to it.

This primacy granted to emotional fervour lies also at the root of the poetry which comes to dominate the mid-eighteenth century. Derogatorily identified as 'the Graveyard School', such authors as Edward Young ('Night Thoughts', 1742), Robert Blair ('The Grave', 1743), William Collins ('Ode to Fear', 1746), Thomas Gray ('Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', 1751), Oliver Goldsmith ('The Deserted Village', 1770), James Beattie ('The Triumph of Melancholy', 1770) and others practise an introspective, often gloomy kind of poetry which in some ways flies in the face of the earlier Augustan generation (see §1.8). The Graveyard poets place the poetic 'I' at the centre of emotional meditations on nature and death, and usher in an attention to sentiment, the subjective self, and the natural world which heralds the coming of Romanticism. Related to this change is the rise of the *English garden*—irregular, picturesque, seemingly 'natural' as opposed to geometrical—which supersedes the Versaillesque model from the 1730s onwards (§1.7).[16]

Though dating a phenomenon as elusive as the rise of a 'literature of sensibility' is fraught with dangers, there are grounds for affirming that in the 1730s there develops a fascination with the irregular, disorderly, emotional or non-rational aspects of world and mind. It is not—this point bears much emphasis—a matter of the historical pendulum 'swinging back'. What we witness here is not so much a reaction 'against' rationalism or 'in favour of' Baroque positions as an effort to take the rationalist agenda to its logical consequences, and a subsequent querying—and often, indeed, challenging of—its limitations. Is it true—the new age enquires—that the Enlightenment has managed to cast light on all corners of reality? Have we not neglected some important aspects of the human mind, precisely because of their unsavoury nature? Has rational philosophy properly accounted for the world of emotion, for tendencies towards irrational behaviour? Are we as civilised as we claim to be? That study in oppression which Richardson's sentimental novel *Pamela* (1740) undoubtedly contains veers towards darker examinations of tyranny in *The Castle of Otranto* and its successors, towards a relentless exploration of deeds and experiences beyond the pale of the rationalist agenda—the extreme, the excessive, a surplus not reckoned with by enlightened philosophy.

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[16] See Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (London: Doubleday 2010), chapter 12, 'The Garden'.

§1.11. The Sublime.

It seems to be generally agreed that most if not all cultures establish some manner of contrast between the ordinary reality and a divine, infernal, wondrous or simply *other* domain. The second is held to be more or less ungraspable by the human intellect, and access to it is reserved for mystics, the possessed (and, in the late eighteenth century, the child and the poet). Inasmuch as it is granted a non-rational quality, this second reality overwhelms the human subject. This irreducible otherness has been variously labelled 'the sacred' (Durkheim), 'the Numinous' (Otto), or—the standard term in the eighteenth century—'the Sublime'.[17] To be *sub limine*, 'under the lintel', is to come up against an upper limit and attain the border of the intelligible. What lies beyond exceeds the rational capacity, so that as we peer over this threshold our composure is shaken, as Hamlet puts it, 'with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls'.[18] This *limen* or threshold will be one key to our understanding of Gothic fiction.

Burke's 1757 *Inquiry* outlined the nature of the Sublime, and its relation to notions such as beauty and horror, for the following generations. Some of the fringes and underpinnings of the book have become increasingly frayed for our time—for instance, its pat identification of the Sublime with man (excess, aspiration, a potential for disorder but also for the infinite, etc.) and of the Beautiful with woman (order, softness, limitation, etc.)—but on the whole Burke's book remains an impressive exercise in analysis of the emotions. And what he surmises is that *terror* lies at the root of the sublime experience:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime;* that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (*Inquiry* I, vii).

Burke discerns a stark contradiction between two domains of experience, between rationality and sublimity: the second ousts the first, and this eviction of the rational faculty is associated with 'the strongest emotion', horror:[19]

> The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror (Ib., II.i).

No student of Gothic fiction can afford to ignore Burke's book, since his definitions became so many signposts for the construction of literary terror.

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[17] Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1912); Rudolph Otto, *Das Heilige*, trans. as *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1917); Edmund Burke 1757, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. J. T. Boulton (London: Blackwell, 1987). For the differences between these terms see §1.15 below.
[18] *Hamlet* I.iv.56, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare (London: Cengage Learning 2006).
[19] Though much criticism chooses to overlook this, Burke uses 'horror' and 'terror' interchangeably.

§1.12. Folklore and the revival of the past.

Massive migration to towns meant that an increasingly large segment of the population was forced to adjust to an urban setting, and this entailed a growing rejection of rural culture, a discredit of traditional beliefs—that 'remnant' of past ages—as mere *superstition* (a hot topic for debate in the magazines of the period), a jettisoning of country mores, of peasant ways, of *folklore*.[20] Paradoxically, folklore begins to be looked at with great interest as a cultural manifestation of lost modes of thinking, and ballads are eagerly sought out by collectors such as Samuel Pepys, Robert Harley, or, most famously, Bishop Percy (*Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765). Popular productions and ancient texts are assiduously studied (see, e.g., Addison's papers on the ballad, Harley's collections of Old and Middle English manuscripts); they also become objects of artistic forgery, as in Roland Chatterton's *Thomas Rowley* poems (pre-1770), James Macpherson's *Ossian* poems (beginning with 'Fingal', 1761) in Scotland, or, in Wales, Iolo Morgannwg's *Barddoniaeth Dafydd ab Gwilym*, 'The Poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym' (1789). And the ballad will be deemed a fit object of revival by Robert Burns, Walter Scott, and other Romantic writers.

A revival of the past seems to be necessary whenever a culture develops a conviction that the past has been left behind: nostalgia breeds study. Britain is now 'modern' thanks to having shackled off the crippling inheritance of absolutism; but this new-gained freedom seems to entail a kind of disinheritance: some account is now needed to reestablish a continuity with the past it has shunned. Here is born the historical novel of Jane Porter (*The Scottish Chiefs*, 1810) and Walter Scott (*Waverley*, 1814). Long before these, the Gothic novel—the first 'historical' novel genre—, rather than dwell on contemporary subjects as did most English novelists of the day, delights in imaginative reconstructions of the remote, often idealised past (see, e.g., Walpole's *Otranto*, Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, 1783-85, or Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, 1789). Its principal sources for this are, unsurprisingly, Elizabethan drama, the medieval romance, and folklore.

The new middle classes, in particular, finding themselves cut off from a millennarian tradition, are eager for something that will recall it—though preferably in a modern, respectable garb that will belie its humble origins. In many ways a new cultural field emerges from adaptations of the old to the new city environment. This effort to recover remote matter—whether medieval (Bishop Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, 1762), traditional or pseudo-traditional (Mcpherson's Celtic *Ossian*), or non-British (Gray's translations from the Norse), when not all three—lies at the root of the emerging popular literatures (which begin to appear in print in such media as pamphlet, chapbook, broadside or magazine), and allows aspects of oral tradition to survive in the urban scene in new costumes. Both in its themes and in its forms, Gothic constitutes one of these emerging genres that blend the ancient and the modern, and

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[20] The term 'folklore' was coined in the nineteenth century. See my 'The "Heroic Biography", A Genre of Criticism' (*The Northanger Library*, https://www.northangerlibrary.com/nlproject_tool.asp).

attention will have to be paid to the Gothic debt to 'old' matter and 'old' forms (see Chapter 3).

§1.13.   Literary property.

Before the eighteenth century, a great many texts were oral and anonymous, and, for most written productions, it was not even clear that they were private property. Copyright legislation in fact resembles the gradual enclosure of the Commons: privatisation of land parallels that of intellectual property. The first copyright law—the Statute of Queen Anne in 1710—began the long process of privatization of the text for the author's benefit (formerly the book belonged—in a limited manner—to the editor-bookseller). The Statute granted authors fourteen years of rights, renewable once, after which the book fell into the public domain. There was of course no effective way of controlling what we call plagiarism, but plagiarism was a logical consequence of an attitude to books that seems alien only to us: the text was *public*, and it was never *singular*, for different editions, reprints, abbreviations, translations—what criticism nowadays calls *rewriting*—were the order of the day. In the case of Gothic, rewriting simply replicated a construction principle inherent in the writing itself: as we will see in later chapters, formulaicity, recursiveness, iteration govern the structure of the Gothic text.[21]

§1.14.   The Literature of Inhumanity

I am using here a term coined by my friend and colleague Robert K. Shepherd to identify a certain kind of fiction in which crime, whether perpetrated or just planned, transcends—when not by-passes—motivation and becomes an end in itself. The criminal in this kind of literature seems to relish the actual commission of the deed, irrespective of possible benefit, or else his performance is casual, guided by the need to meet a practical problem (while a combination of practical necessity and aesthetic enjoyment is frequent). From the viewpoint of our twenty-first-century western society, such actions smack of socio- or psychopathy, and brand their doers as mentally disturbed. The function of these characters, however, seems to be a cautioning the community as to its notions of 'sanity' and 'normalcy'; these writings hint at a potential for *transformation* in minds viewed by society as healthy, and query

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[21] On plagiarism in the eighteenth century see Robert D. Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazines, 1740-1815* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1962), 225-28; Jack Lynch, 'The Perfectly Acceptable Practice of Literary Theft: Plagiarism, Copyright, and the Eighteenth Century ', in *Colonial Williamsburg* 24:4 (2002), 51-54. For rewriting as an extension of formulaic composition, see my 'Formulaic Language in "Raymond: A Fragment"', in *Gothic Handbook*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2021), vol I, *Origins* (forthcoming).

our cherished assumptions regarding the rational, benevolent nature of the human soul.

Though its ultimate roots may be as old as fiction itself, a *literature of inhumanity* historically begins as an offshoot of such events as the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the growth of radical manifestations of both Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation; and the attrocities committed during the Thirty-Years War. 'Sociopathic' conducts which had been the property of exemplary villains in wondertales and morality plays (devil, ogre, dragon, witch) begin to manifest themselves in such human characters as inhabit the picaresque novel and the revenge tragedy of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. This violence will then be channelled into pamphlets about historically verifiable heinous deeds, the *Newgate Calendar,* sensationalist reports in newspapers and magazines, and thence into the Gothic genre. It will reach a peak in certain fictions of the late nineteenth century (notably in the wake of the Whitechapel Murders of 1888—the Jack the Ripper affair); and will bloom in the late twentieth century in specific types of crime fiction.

The Gothic genre incorporates and explores several aspects of the literature of inhumanity: extreme cruelty, the psychology of both spontaneous and premeditated crime, a conviction that the mind is capable of 'thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls', or prolix analyses of such destructive emotions as hatred or despair. What Gothic does with these elements is part of what we try to ascertain in this book.

§1.15.   Fear and the Limen

What is fear? The question is often answered in terms of 'things' we fear. The catalogue includes entities, objects, events, places, even ourselves. As if aware that the list *would* be endless, German filmmaker Fritz Lang is reputed to have said, a propos of his film *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (1931), that he chose to refrain from presenting murder on-screen, knowing this would force each viewer to imagine for themselves the worst possible event—the thing each of us fears most, and which is different for each one; for whatever he showed would be bound to disappoint most others. Clearly, then, we cannot hope to define fear by enumerating its objects.

The Age of Reason redefined the world as a fundamentally safe place which could be encompassed, measured, analysed, controlled and exploited by the human intellect, by science, by industry. Paradoxically, it was the Age of Reason that gave us the new genre of horror literature. Much prose and poetry, of course, had dealt with fear in previous ages, but only in the Enlightenment did a specific horror genre emerge. It is as if the very success of Rationalism had sparked a cultural curiosity—and anxiety—about the limits of the rationalist enterprise; and as if a new genre had been born to cater to the question, what is there for us to fear?

We saw earlier (§1.11) that, for Burke, the sublime is that which escapes our power of reasoning, not just a greatness but an *excess*, a transcendental something beyond the comprehensible and the measurable. The notion of the sublime is bound up with the notion of a *limen*—a threshold, the limit of what we can grasp. According to Burke, we *aspire* to the sublime that fascinates us; but terror, too, lies at the root of our experience of this threshold, precisely because whatever violates the cosy limits of our little universe scares us—denizens of an intensely rationalist culture—beyond measure.

Though what we dread differs from one individual to another, fear is what all of us experience when we come up against the edge of our narrowly defined world and realize it *is* an edge, beyond which something else appears which, by definition, we fail to understand—whether that something is an earth-shattering discovery or the simple realization that our system of securities ends there, that it is finite. And the thing we fear is that which exists beyond or (most disquietingly) *in* or *at* the limen.

This last we dread most, precisely because we feel that a threshold should have no dimensions, no autonomous reality. After all, it is only interstitial, a gap, a mere line between different spaces; to suppose that a one-dimensional line may *contain* anything discombobulates our system of expectations. Stephen King suggested in *Salem's Lot* (1981) that the source of all our fears is 'a closed door, slightly ajar'; the title of a 'posthumous collaboration' between H.P. Lovecraft and August Derleth, *The Lurker at the Threshold* (1945), points at the same source of dread: it is what emerges from the threshold itself.

The proper adjective for the thing that we fear is not 'supernatural' but 'Numinous'. These are not synonymous. The first term identifies an intrinsic property of its referent, the second defines the referent in terms of *our* experience of it. Wherever it may be found—whether in monsters, aliens, deities or demons, machines, or in ourselves—the Numinous is the incomprehensible, that which transcends our rational capacity. When we stand terrified of what may lurk behind (or at) the door, our terror does not depend on whether or not there really is something on the other side, nor on whether or not the thing on the other side is supernatural. While the moment lasts, we *experience* something that threatens to annihilate our rational powers or directly suspends them. At such moments the Numinous makes itself present to us.

Gods, angels, demons, ghosts are supernatural; Frankenstein's creature and the Martians of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* are not; neither is the Force that permeates the universe in Lucas' *Star Wars*.[22] 'Numinous' covers all of these to the extent that they strike the reader as incomprehensible, as violating not the law of Nature but the law of Reason. But while its experience is universal, its manifestation, just like our specific response to it, varies according to changing cultural codes that are enshrined in genres. In order to grasp this point we need first of all to examine the

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[22] The dwarfs, gnomes, elves, ogres, witches or hobbits of folklore and fantasy belong in yet another category, that of the Wondrous.

nature of Gothic writing, then to consider the place Gothic occupies in the evolving genre of horror writing. These are the topics of the next chapters.