THE GRAMMAR OF GOTHIC

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CHAPTER 3

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF THE GOTHIC GENRE

§3.1. A rhetoric of binaries.

It is traditional for criticism to encode the relationship between Gothic and Enlightenment in such terms as 'opposition', 'confrontation', 'antithesis', 'transgression', 'subversion';[1] Gothic tends to be perceived as challenging the culture of rationalism. This view needs some qualification. The eighteenth century no longer faces the Baroque dilemma of having to choose between two antithetical modes of thought (§1.2); rather, it witnesses the triumph of Modernity, which raises pressing issues of identity, stability and adaptation. A metaphor of *mortmain*—the stifling grip on the present by the oppressive 'dead hand' of the feudal past—may lie at the hub of political Gothic, as Miles argues (§2.4); but other strands of Gothic disport a much more ambivalent relationship to olden times. For it is just as true that the past that used to be understandable has, for the eighteenth century, become alien and cryptic, and the age experiences an urgent need for both restoration and exegesis. Hence that recurrent curiosity (when not nostalgia) evinced by collector and antiquary, and manifested in the birth of modern historiography (Voltaire, Hume, Gibbons), as in much medievalism and—Walpole's word—'gothicising' (§1.12). What emerges in 1764 with Walpole's *Otranto* is antiphonal to the Neoclassical reaction to the Baroque—a response to a response. It queries (though it does not reject) the limits of the one world postulated by Enlightenment, limits that seem to exclude other cultures, other ways of thinking, and other times. Gothic can then be said to build on rational principles while interrogating the consistency and efficacy of their application. It does not 'subvert' Enlightenment positions, rather it explores the regions of terror in the name of reason.

[1] See, e.g., *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression*, ed. Kenneth Graham (New York: AMS Press 1989); Nicola Trott, 'Gothic', in *Romanticism*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), 482-91.

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In Baroque art, tension or conflict arise between two extremes neither of which will yield pride of place to the other (§1.2). Neoclassicism introduces order into the conflict by containing both poles within one rational system and converting the tensions into a neat interplay of balances and subordinations. For this it resorts to a *rhetoric of binaries* which not only establishes a series of pat contrasts between opposites but harmonises the two terms and, where necessary, makes one subservient to the other. This rhetoric conceives of an object X only in correlation with another object Y. The precise relation holding between its terms varies; it may be opposition (not X but Y), comparison (more/less X than Y, X as much as Y), increment (not only X but also Y), complementation (both X and Y), contrast (X in appearance, Y in reality), equilibrium (on the one hand X, on the other Y), and so on. The following lines by Alexander Pope offer a practical illustration:

> All nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
> All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
> All Discord, Harmony not understood;
> All partial Evil, universal Good.[2]

The first of the two sides of these equations is *contained* within the second; the apparent conflict does not lie in the object itself but in our insufficient grasp of it, so that a greater understanding will dispel the false quandary and reveal true balance. The two terms of any conventional opposition (Nature/art, evil/good, chance/direction, and so on; and similarly, chaos/order, darkness/light, illusion/truth, etc.) can now coexist because a higher, overarching principle is accepted—the empire of the rationalist one-world view which is meant to contain and rank all. In its fourfold iteration of the same double structure, the very versification—strengthened by the couplet form chosen—embodies this rhetorical principle and creates the harmony which it depicts.

Within the pale of reason, all oppositions are kept in check; beyond it, only illusion, false appearance—which is to say, nothingness—obtains, the result of our inability to know, see or understand. As the century grows older, it transpires that large tracts of human experience—such emotions as the fear of ghosts, such traditional beliefs as are now labelled 'superstition', such givens as the principles of authority and social stasis—become discredited by this method and are relegated to the status of unreality or inoperancy. Gothic sets out to explore the borders of the rationalist domain and to analyse (and often enough question) their patness, and does so not in the spirit of transgression but of rational enquiry; as Fred Botting puts it,

[2] *Essay on Man* (1734), in *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., no date), ll. 77-80.

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> Gothic fiction is less an unrestrained celebration of unsanctioned excesses and more an examination of the limits produced in the eighteenth century to distinguish good from evil, reason from passion, virtue from vice and self from other.[3]

Gothic, then, takes up Baroque positions modulated through Enlightenment. Equipoise, order, hierarchy, so vital to the latter, are retained as desirable goals; but, faced with the conception of one single reality subject to the empire of reason, Gothic glimpses another dimension 'beyond' or (in a characteristically ranking move) 'below' the cosmos acknowledged by Rationalism. This double reality is not one more theme of the genre but its most fundamental strategy, and a correlative of the rhetoric of binaries. It will be referred to henceforth as Rule 1 in the 'grammar' of Gothic (for a discussion of the rules see §3.5 below):

> R1. *Gothic constructs a world consisting of two ontological zones*. The one is the human cosmos, a domain of rationality and relative order. The other is the realm of the Numinous (whether or not supernatural), characterised by its incognoscibility.[4]

In Gothic, this second domain tends to be projected upon backward Catholic countries, upon untamed central Europe, upon the less civilised fringes of Britain (northern England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, the American colonies), upon wild nature, or upon various versions of an unenlightened past which, it is felt, has been mercifully overcome but which now haunts modern Britain. '[I]n a city where superstition reigns with such despotic sway as in Madrid,' begins Lewis's *The Monk*. A short story starts with a reference to Germany as 'that native country of everything non-natural'.[5] Jane Austen spoofs this convention in *Northanger Abbey* when her narrator mildly doubts that the wild horrors displayed in Gothic fictions might reflect human nature, 'at least in the midland counties of England'.[6] Such peripheral settings of place and time come to embody the second space of Gothic ontology, a domain which, discredited and left behind, now looms unfathomable and threatening to the modernity. Due to their unintelligibility, these borderline environments breed sublime emotions—both fascination and terror—and exert a kind of vertigo from which characters (and readers) would flee but to which they are (not always forcibly) drawn.

The rhetoric of binaries inherited from Neoclassicism trains us to expect a world consisting of two 'sides' which stand, nominally, in contraposition but which must be amenable to harmony through regimentation. Failing this, we will expect the privileged side to take all, the other to be relegated beyond the edge of things rational and natural. What Gothic does is scrutinise this 'space' beyond.

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[3] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge 1996), p. 8.
[4] This formulation is meant to echo Burke's distinction between the beautiful and the Sublime (§1.11). On the Numinous, see §1.15. On the *spatial* quality of Gothic see my *The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (Manchester: Manchester UP 1990). See also Jerrold E. Hogle's (ed.) introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2002), 2-3.
[5] Anon., 'The Monster Made by Man', in *The Penny Story-Teller* for December 5, 1832, 161-166, p. 161.
[6] *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Michael Sadleir (London: The World's Classics 1955), p. 214.

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§3.2. Thresholds.

Having said this, one can advance at least two reasons why the picture offered by R1 looms considerably more complex. The first has to do with the nature of the 'frontier' between the two zones; the second, with the way the rhetoric of binaries not only underpins R1 but also conditions other aspects of the genre. As regards the first, we can formulate as a corollary to R1 the following:

> R4. Not least among the terrors of the unintelligible Other is the fact that *we cannot quite tell it from our own world*; that we cannot determine its boundaries is congruent with the fact that the Other partakes of the nature of boundaries: it is a threshold area or a threshold quality.

R4 amounts to saying that in Gothic there is no clear frontier separating the two sides of the polarity; or, the frontier itself is equivocal. Thus, for example, forward progress is in our genre often identified with a return to an idealised past of benevolent feudal structures (as in Walpole's *Otranto* or Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*, 1778); traits characteristic of eighteenth-century rationalism are frequently projected back onto the medieval institution of knighthood (as in Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, 1789); conversely, feudal despotism is uncovered in the very here-and-now (as in William Godwin's *Caleb Williams,* 1794). Many Gothic characters shuttle between elation and depression, or tread the no-man's land between heroic stature and moral dereliction (Ambrosio in Lewis' *The Monk,* 1795; the protagonist of Joanna Baillie's play *De Monfort*, 1798).[7] Others find themselves trapped in the interstice between options, 'unable to return, yet fearful to proceed' (Radcliffe, *Athlin and Dunbayne*). Plots thrive on scrutinising this elusive boundary between contraries, and abound in significant crossings of both physical and figurative doorways, and in acts of transgression. Needless to say at this point, it is not transgression that Gothic capitalises on, but the exploration of the edge of the familiar, or of the line between past and present, between spaces, between states of mind, between opposites. Put simply, a large number of compositional strategies find a rationale in the Gothic concern with the equivocalness of the threshold. Later chapters will examine these strategies.

The other source of complexity has to do with how the rhetoric of binaries sets up reverberations throughout this writing. To begin with, Gothic straddles the line between two contrasting literary genres. Here is Walpole on the design of *The Castle of Otranto*:

> It was an attempt 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

[7] See Jeffrey N. Cox (ed.), *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825* (Athens: Ohio University Press 1992).

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> 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. The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days, were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion.
>
> The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, he wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions.[8]

This writing delights in binaries. 'Dammed up', 'cramped', 'excluded' contrast with 'boundless', 'liberty'; 'ancient', with 'modern'; 'the powers of fancy', with 'the rules of probability'; 'mere', with 'extraordinary'. In opposition to the medieval romance, which gives imagination loose rein to the point of extravagance, stands the modern novel, bent on curbing it in the name of an incipient realism. In a true Neoclassical spirit, Walpole's goal is to harmonise them (mark the mediating terms 'blend', 'reconcile') by devising imaginative situations but making his characters respond to them in credible ways. To the extent that this aim was adhered to by other writers, it became a blueprint for a genre built on a double poetics. Then again, on the level of the fictional universe, Walpole's statement delimits two dimensions—the human, the Other—as formulated in R1, and stresses the possibility of meaningful if terrifying contact between them: if 'mere men and women' can interact with and react to the extraordinary, the latter cannot abide exclusively on the Other side but in the interface between them, and so, partly within our own reality. This again makes the threshold a pivotal tool in the construction of Gothic. The key term for its study is *liminality*, and the concept requires a brief excursus.

§3.3. Liminality.

Ritual theorists categorize rites of passage into three distinct types: *pre-liminal* rites of separation, which disengage initiands from their familiar world; *liminal* rites of transition, which subject them to various deprivations and tests; and *post-liminal* rites of incorporation, which return them to the familiar world after undergoing physical, psychological or social change.[9] Properly viewed, this model is a flexion of the Aristotelian account of plot as consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end; it is, therefore, an eminently *narrative* model and can be applied to fiction. Concentrating on the liminal stage, anthropologist Victor Turner first codified its paradoxical nature when he defined it as 'a place that is not a place, and a time that is not a time'.[10]

[8] Horace Walpole, Preface to the Second Edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (Oxford: OUP 2008), p. 9.
[9] Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (1909; Paris: Éditions Picard 1981).
[10] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter 1969). Many researchers have since explored the concept and its applicability to other disciplines, including literature studies. A theoretical statement is offered in Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance and Philip

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Though we do not need to resort to anthropology, this is an apt descriptor for that ambiguous second reality of Gothic which is not *and yet is* part of our world.

Given that favourite eighteenth-century metaphor of *light* for the faculty of understanding, Gothic finds it expedient to represent this second reality by means of images of confusion. This is the logic of depicting the Other site as irregular or dark, and of resorting to storms, marshlands, wild mountains and maze-like spaces, for in challenging our sense of order, knowledge and control, these are all fit repositories of the Numinous. It is not just a matter of emotional atmospherics, rather atmosphere and setting are placed in the service of precise rhetorical, structural and thematic requirements. Manning the ramparts of the fortress of reason in order to explore the edge of the one world (§3.1), Gothic discovers that this edge actually constitutes an equivocal dimension of unsuspected extent and frightful complexity—a dimension that apparently threatens to encroach upon ours. In seeking—like all empires—to expand, the empire of reason begets its own opposition; to see its borders *colonised* by the power it opposes is a source of profound confusion and disquiet. To record and analyse such anxieties, Gothic will need to set up sites of disorder and chaos.

But the border between ontological domains is not the only threshold explored by our genre. We saw that Walpole situated his book at the meeting-point between medieval romance and modern novel; another line Gothic straddles is that which separates literature from folklore, and here it is important to grasp that Gothic inherits formal as well as thematic conventions from oral tradition (§1.12).[11] Like ballad, epic, legend and folktale, Gothic relies on recursive patterns, formulaicity, 'formula writing' and folk-narrative structures to a much greater extent than did the canonical novel of the eighteenth century. In other words, a folk-narrative poetics underlies Gothic fiction. The genre's peculiarities are then not to be seen as resulting from a defective or inconsistent application of literary principles—as 'bad writing'—but as reflecting a *compromise* between folk and literary codes. Yet another threshold emerges from the polarisation of rational beauty and sublime terror (§1.11): characteristically, Gothic locates its fictions in the shifty, ambiguous limen between these—in the domain of the irregular or flawed which yet proffers its own kind of wild beauty—the domain of the *picturesque*, half-way between Burke's terms.[12]

But Gothic does not simply straddle a number of thresholds—the result of multiple coincidences—rather, it makes of straddling its *raison d'être*; whatever two-place

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Sutton, *Margins and Thresholds: An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies* (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2000).

[11] A later chapter will develop this point. On the theory of oral-formulaic composition see Mark C. Amodio, ed., *New Directions in Oral Theory* (Tempe, Ar.: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies 2005); John Miles Foley, *Oral Tradition and the Internet: Pathways of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2011).

[12] William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (London, 1792). See Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: Putnam's Sons 1927).

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construct it tackles, the genre will seek to chart its interface. The hypothesis to be pursued in this book is that thematically, structurally, rhetorically, liminality is central to Gothic. In mathematics, a fractal organisation is the outcome of recursively applying one single rule of construction on a variety of levels.[13] To the extent that it plies liminality as a compositional principle on multiple textual strata (character, plot, diction, setting, narrative structure, etc.)—to the extent that it is an aggregate of self-similar layers—Gothic can be said to disport a *fractal architecture*.[14] This formal characteristic in turn furnishes the equivalent of what in biology is known as 'reproductive efficiency'—redundancy is a survival strategy.[15] This is particularly relevant because, from the start, Gothic was challenged by the critical establishment. In the face of pressures to conform to the strictures of the literary canon of its day, Gothic resorted to *strong forms*—forms which are recurrent and relatively rigid, forms which override the specific needs of the single text. In this way it ensured its viability as a genre: it was its liminal nature that allowed Gothic to survive.

The other side of the evolutionary coin is that survival depends on adaptation. Some critics have postulated that during the first decades of the nineteenth century the Gothic impetus ran out (§2.2).[16] Others have questioned this claim; Ann Williams, for example, objects to the notion that the 'primary phase' of Gothic 'lasted about fifty years, from Walpole through Maturin':

> Such an approach provides no satisfactory way of justifying one's sense of the affinities between Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), […] LeFanu's *Carmilla* (1865), Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), and the works of Stephen King.[17]

The statement both harks to the *modal* understanding of Gothic (§2.2, §2.3), which stresses the similarities between authors and periods, and pleads its singularity, as if only in Gothic could such intense affinities be detected over several centuries. By the logic of Williams' objection, we should strenuously deny the proposition that Romanticism 'ended', in view of the obvious affinities between the poetry of Keats or Shelley and the early work of Tennyson and Browning. Yet the fact is that these two are not commonly classed as Romantic poets; rather, there is a general consensus that the Romantic impulse underwent a sea change in the 1820s and 30s, eventually to become other things—Victorian poetry, the sensation novel, social realism, symbolism—things which, aware though we are that they often capitalise on Romantic themes and strategies, we are agreed *not* to call Romantic. In the same way, Poe's

[13] See Benoît Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, rev. edn. (New York: W. H. Freeman & Co. 1999).
[14] See my 'Narrative Structure, Liminality, Self-Similarity: the Case of Gothic Fiction', in *Gothic Horror: A Guide for Students and Readers*, ed. Clive Bloom, 2nd edn (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2007), 226-47.
[15] See my *The Thresholds of the Tale: Liminality and the Structure of Fairytales* (Madrid: The Gateway Press 2007), 161-63; and sources given there.
[16] See, e.g., Robert D. Mayo, 'How Long Was Gothic Fiction in Vogue?', in *Modern Language Notes* 58 (1943), pp. 58-64.
[17] Ann Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995), 16.

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debt to Gothic writers does not qualify his work as Gothic but simply brings out a continuity. Let us by all means acknowledge that Poe writes to some extent in the shadow of Gothic: there yet remains to point at the *differences* between Gothic ('from Walpole through Maturin') and later horror writers (such as Poe or Irving) because to harp solely on affinities is to elide history. Put simply, in its bid for survival Gothic *evolved* into other genres. This is no facile biological metaphor, for it derives from the general theory of complex adaptive systems, to be considered in Chapter 4. What we must do now is study how these notions may help us construct a provisional definition of Gothic.

§3.4. Formal and thematic Dominants.

A profound unease prevails in mid-eighteenth-century Britain concerning the instability brought by the coming of the *modern* age. The Gothic response to this unease consists in probing the limits of the reality defined by Enlightenment. For this, Gothic avails itself of a rhetoric of binaries which provides it with a *formal Dominant* and which regularly organises the text around axes of contrast, balance, comparison or equivalence, and calls for corresponding techniques of symmetry, mirroring and iteration. The formal aspects of Gothic constitute a repertory of procedures gravitating around this Dominant. Thus, for instance, embedding tales which replicate the frame narrative (mise en abyme, R7), setting up thresholds athwart the flow of the text (phasing, R7), iteration (R12), or formulaicity (R21) are all entailments of the rhetoric of binaries.

If this rhetoric mandates that every item be related to its complementary or its contrary, the postulation of a twofold reality (R1) will be its logical consequence. In the contraposition of two ontological domains—the ordinary, the extraordinary—Gothic finds its central topos: two spaces, one of them displaced 'below' or 'beyond' the other and marked as numinous. The exploration of the boundary where the two realities overlap, mesh or clash necessarily elicits certain emotions which have both a cathartic effect and a didactic purpose. The genre then (like every linguistic utterance) performs a number of speech acts:[18] beyond merely depicting the horrors of the perimeter where the accepted reality ends, it seeks to expose readers to and familiarise them with issues arising on it, and to warn of both possibilities and perils attached to the threshold (needless to say, it also aims at simply entertaining).

In order to serve this end, Gothic resorts to a fundamental prop derived from R4, *the liminal site at the threshold between two domains*. This is the thematic Dominant which organises and controls all other thematic elements of the genre (we recall that a Dominant must be envisaged for each aspect of the genre; see §2.3, §2.4). It is built on a number of subservient motifs which shape a repertory; they may replace one

[18] On genres as 'macro speech acts' see Carolyn R. Miller, 'Genre as Social Action', in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984), 151-67.

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another, or they may combine. They are not independent motifs but functional parts of the central theme, the liminal site. One or more of them can be dispensed with because others from within the repertory will take up the slack, but, as in the case of the repertory of forms, they constitute a mandatory set that is activated by the necessity to situate characters and readers in a liminal environment.

Thus, for example, instead of a ghost the discovery of an old document or a hidden corpse will reveal the secret; instead of an irregular building or an inextricable forest, a set of embedded tales will create disorientating detours. Moral dereliction may be conveyed by means of an architectural ruin or by rise-and-fall patterns, instead of through an explicit narratorial finger pointing at the wickedness of a character. In order to diagnose the text as Gothic it does not suffice that we detect ghosts, secret chambers, or ruins: these are merely motifs used to convey a central concern, the liminality of the site. Most of these techniques and motifs can be derived from the rules of Gothic, to which we must now turn.

§3.5. The Rules of Gothic.

The leading hypothesis here is that a set of structural and semantic principles go into the composition of all Gothic narrative and constitute part of what may be called a 'grammar' of Gothic. The principles are conventions, the grammar a study of the way they provide patterns to fashion Gothic discourse. These conventions merit the label 'rules' insofar as they are not writing customs more or less widely observed by authors so much as constraints authors choose to labour under (or to depart from) whenever they purpose to work within the Gothic genre. The rules are not to be identified with techniques; rather they are the ground that generates possible writing strategies. They amount to a poetics of the genre, if by a poetics we understand 'a model of the laws of literary structure.'[19] Three main assumptions underpin the postulation of the rules.

The first is a definition of Gothic in historical (rather than 'modal') terms (§2), as a genre that began in 1764, reached an apex in the 1790s, and evolved into other kinds of horror and non-horror literature around the 1820s and 30s. No effort is made at this stage to confirm or disprove the applicability of the rules to later horror fiction.

The second is that form is decisive for semantics, and critical attention must be directed not only to themes or meanings but equally to lexicon, grammar, patterning, structure, style, technique: put bluntly, the terror lies in the language of the text, and that is where we must look for it.

The third is that, if the patterns of Gothic narrative are a modification of those found in wondertales, the strategies of folk narrative research will be relevant to the

[19] David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin 2000), p. 301.

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study of Gothic fiction (§3.3). Vladimir Propp pointed out that action, not the characters' intentions or motives, is the decisive criterion for assessing the structure of wondertales.[20] The same assumption is made here as regards Gothic narrative structure, if with a heavy qualification: Gothic characters exhibit an often rich psychology which finds no counterpart in wondertales. Propp further argued that the wondertale is composed of a limited number of main actions he called 'functions'; these, always following a predetermined order (some codified exceptions are recognised), occur in *sequences*; and each tale is shaped by one or more sequences of functions.[21] This structuring principle can be fruitfully applied to Gothic fiction, though again some caveats will be necessary. Another insight comes from folklorist Max Lüthi, who points out that the wondertale explores not only the hero's success but also failure; both possibilities are therefore actualized, albeit the second is congruently projected onto secondary characters.[22] Gothic will be shown to resort to a modified version of this.

THE RULES[23]

R1. *Gothic constructs a world consisting of two ontological zones or dimensions. One is the human cosmos, a domain of rationality and relative order; the other is the realm of the Numinous, characterized by its incognoscibility.* The liminal site stands in-between the human and the numinous realms. It is a half-way or frontier building (castle, monastery, abbey, mansion, hut, inn); a forest, mountain range, wilderness or ocean; a region ('The Glen of the Green Women'),[24] a country (Germany, 'that native country of everything non-natural'), or a human being. Typically, it is (thought to be) a haunted site.

R2. *Gothic plots build on a deed (whether physical, intellectual or moral) that opens up the human to the Other*. This can be a plain act of courage (Edmund spends three nights in the haunted apartment in Reeve's *The Old English Baron*); a social or moral transgression (Frankenstein's tampering with life); an act of revolt or subversion; a criminal deed which places an individual beyond the pale (versions of the Satanic pact);

[20] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale,* trans. L. Scott, new introduction by A. Dundes, 2nd revised edn. (1928; Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 1968, 1994).
[21] See my 'An Outline of Propp's Model for the Study of Wondertales', in *The Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Myth*, eds. Jonathan Miles-Watson and Vivian M. Asimos (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing 2019), pp. 163-74.
[22] Max Lüthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairytales*, trans. Lee Chadeayne & Paul Gottwald (1962; Bloomington: Indiana UP 1976).
[23] A preliminary version of the first sixteen rules appeared in my 'A Grammar of Gothic: Report on a Research Project on the Forms of the Gothic Genre', in *Romantic Textualities: Literature and Print Culture, 1780-1840* 21 (2013), 124-34, http://www.romtext.org.uk/reports/rt21_n07; see also Beatriz Sánchez Santos and Manuel Aguirre, 'The Grammar of a Genre: Rules, Rhetoric, and a Liminal Poetics', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gothic Origins*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
[24] In Walter Scott's poem 'Glenfinlas'.

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or a purposeful or accidental entrance into the concealed space where numinous forces dwell or hidden objects lie (the protagonist discovers his master's shameful secret in Godwin's *Caleb Williams*). Conversely, an ordinary space becomes the scene of a haunting visitation by ghost, monster, tempter, outlaw; or a man is haunted by his own moral self (Santmorin is tormented by his 'consciousness of guilt' in Radcliffe's *Athlin and Dunbayne*).

R3. *Gothic fiction applies a cause-effect pattern to the crossover and gives it a moral slant.* Regardless (just like wondertales) of characters' intentions, Gothic often presents the cause as a transgressive move into or against the Other (which often enough will be deemed a move against the norms that uphold the human world), its effect as a corresponding move by the Other by way of retribution. Symmetry, mirroring, parallelism and other binary strategies frequently establish causal links between events (the sins of the fathers are descended upon their heirs in *Otranto*).

R4. *The Numinous is part of and yet profoundly alien to the human realm. Our inability to grasp the Other makes it disorientating, hence terrifying; and not least among its terrors is the fact that we cannot quite tell it from our own world.* Inherently ambiguous, its position vis-à-vis us is best viewed as liminal; that we cannot determine its boundaries is congruent with the fact that the Gothic Other partakes of the nature of boundaries: it is a threshold area or a threshold quality. Paradox, ambiguity, ambivalence, darkness, disorientating or labyrinthine structures will be resorted to so as to convey the instability and/or confusion of the limen.

R5. *In the course of the 'passage' that all adventure consists in, the traditional departure-initiation-return formula is soon problematised*. Gothic characters, unlike wondertale heroes, are detained in the liminal stage, the victims of an incomplete or perverted passage (see R7).

R6. *The Gothic ghosts are direct heirs to the ghosts of folktales and represent variations on the folklore figure of the Threshold Guardian*. As such, they are liminal entities.

R7. *Delay (spatial, temporal or narrative) is an essential strategy in this genre*. As the liminal stage in the traditional hero's tale is lengthened in Gothic fiction (R5), the passage risks never to be completed; and Gothic plots revolve around just such a contradiction—a dangerously drawn-out sojourn in a supposedly transitional stage. Techniques propitiated by this rule include recurrence; mise-en-abyme; phasal arrangements which elicit a labyrinth experience; anisotropic structures which favour entrance and hinder exit;[25] embedded narratives that generate confusion or procrastination.

[25] See my 'Geometries of Terror: Numinous Spaces in Gothic, Horror and Science-Fiction', *Gothic Studies* 10:2 (2008), pp. 1-17.

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R8. *Gothic fiction centres upon the flawed type rather than upon the paradigmatic hero of traditional narrative*. This creates equivocal, liminal figures—peripheral yet central, evil yet appealing, ineffectual yet burdened with the responsibility of heroes. One way to understand Gothic fiction is to say that it tells the 'other' story of the wondertale, the narrative of the failed hero.

R9. *The liminal is a site of disturbed order. The broken, the worthless, the deprived, the misshapen are to be counted among the natural adjuncts of threshold space.* Gothic characters, objects, actions, environments are regularly flawed or diminished with respect to an often implicit yet always compelling paradigm. An aesthetic of the standard manqué, a sense of lost wholeness, governs Gothic. Buildings exhibit a ruinous condition, irregular layouts, a labyrinthine configuration, darkness, or contain secret spaces, documents, objects or haunters (R4). Manuscripts are incomplete, effaced, or crumbling. Forests are invaded by darkness or shaken by the storm. Characters are often deprived or degraded, a wreck of their former selves: Carwin (in Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*, 1798) is a man without an identity, Montoni (in Radcliffe's *Udolpho*, 1795) a bankrupt nobleman turned *condottiere*, Manfred of Otranto loses his heir apparent and, with him, his hold on the principality.

R10. *Freedom of the will is another standard which, central to eighteenth century thought, Gothic both heeds and undermines*. Whether associated with the will of divine or infernal agents, with the crushing weight of the social order, with the twisted motivations of the human mind, or simply with the burden of the past (see R11), Gothic posits a constraining power which heroes bow to as Providence but which failed heroes vainly strive against as Fate.

R11. *Information is manipulated or withheld*. Spatial perspectives, a curtailment of the extra-diegetic narrative voice, and a growing use of free indirect style (Ann Radcliffe is as assiduous a practitioner as Jane Austen) help convey viewpoint, ignorance and uncertainty. By means of a hidden sequence—an initial key segment in the story which is only revealed late in the plot—, Gothic destabilizes the characters' present and reveals it to be a deceptive lull in a long-enduring turmoil. False beginnings are the rule, for behind the most Once-upon-a-time-ish start there lurks some untold event (murder, curse, birth, etc.) that will turn out to have conditioned the narrative from the outset. The cause of the disturbance (R9) is a secret deed that took place in the distant past, before the start of the narrative, or a trait—typically a character's 'ruling passion'—that he or she is unaware of. Hiding information as to the true state of affairs, the liminal site promotes illusion, deception or self-deception, and thus raises questions regarding belief, superstition, trust, identity. Occupancy of the threshold problematises notions of innocence or naïve assumptions about the self. As a result, an atmosphere of suspicion and fear clings to the site and elicits a sense of uncertainty and danger. Both mystery and tragedy ensue from these strategies.

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R12. *The liminal regions in Gothic fiction are sites of power, apt to imprison or engulf those who venture near them*. This is the logic of the physical or figurative dungeons, caverns, labyrinths or wastelands to which Gothic characters are drawn. 'Perplexed', 'bewildered' or 'inextricable' are indispensable terms in the language of the genre. Iteration, formulaicity, overpatterning are elementary strategies for suggesting the liminal. Repetition, as Lüthi remarked of wondertales, infuses a sense of 'the permanent';[26] anything repeated ceases to be unique, therefore becomes foreseeable. Recursion (like the hidden sequence gambit, R11) fosters a sense of the inevitable. Fate (R10) is hence often an entailment of Gothic narrative structure. Insofar as it disrupts the linear flow of time, recursion introduces a measure of chaos which it simultaneously contains within an order of the pre-established.

R13. In a frequent metaphor of descent, itself indicative of another standard cherished and breached (R9, R10), *the journey of transformation (the anthropologist's 'passage') acquires in Gothic the lineaments of a moral, ontological, social (sometimes even physical) fall.*

R14. Resorting to hyperbole, intensity and loss, *Gothic subverts another standard—this time of balance and moderation—prevalent in Augustan diction, and dons a language of excess and its opposite, meagreness or deficiency (R9), to depict the liminal domain and to elicit the experience of the Sublime*.

R15. *Gothic dwells on the liminality of the human condition, its potential for social, moral, psychological change*—change which, in the eighteenth-century debate on identity, is all too often seen as degrading or annihilating. Caught in the threshold region, Gothic characters are, if not destroyed, transformed. They acquire numinous features and may come to resemble such denizens of the limen—ghosts, monsters, demons—as perform the function of Threshold Guardians (R6), and to exhibit a non-rational (compulsive, excessive, repetitive, mindless, bestial) behaviour.

R16. *One major theme that arises from the very forms of Gothic is the exploration of the liminal experience, which often amounts to an exploration of the condition of the lost.* The regular references to the satanic, the imagery of Hell, the abyss, or darkness visible are a by-product of this concern.

R17. Emerging at the confluence between folklore and literature, *the Gothic is a liminal genre that exists in the tension between two different poetics*. To withstand pressures to conform to the literary mainstream, it resorts to 'strong' forms, highly conventionalised devices—often borrowed from folklore—that will ensure its visibility and survival as a genre. These include techniques for detainment (R5) and delay (R7), hidden sequences (R11), deprivation (R9) and excess (R14), formulaicity and formula writing (R12, R21), and so on.

[26] Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. D. J. Niles (1948; Bloomington: Indiana UP 1986), 47.

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R18. *The rhetoric of binaries is the formal correlative of a dual conception of the world (R1)*. It views every object as complete only when a) considered under two aspects or as consisting of two complementary or contrastive parts of itself, or b) as compared to another object. This rhetoric is *metonymic* in that it places one object side by side with another as a precondition for understanding; aspects of the one clarify aspects of the other. Hence, paradoxically, in order to reveal its true nature the object must be shown to be part of a set. But whereas this strategy invites expectations of wholeness and harmony, it is all too often used to convey dissonance, instability and conflict. This yields, among others, two further principles of Gothic composition: equivalence, and visibility.

R19. *A principle of equivalence demands that X be always defined par rapport with Y, making of resemblance, difference, redundancy, harmony, resonance or discord central concerns in the organisation of the text*. A thing of textual importance must echo or mirror something else.

R20. *By a principle of visibility, this mirroring is reader-oriented, ensuring that meaning is displayed rather than just told of*. The principle mandates that an unfamiliar thing be represented by a familiar one, and privileges image over narrative, surface over depth. Equivalence (or its lack) must be posited between the tacit and the explicit; the inner must be given outward expression, the motions of the soul must be embodied. Thought and feeling, as well as the more intangible aspects of reality, will manifest themselves in setting, atmosphere or bodily stance: they must be *seen*. The text will insist on rendering experience visible by establishing *metonymic* rapports between, e.g., a character's mind and an architectural wreck.

R21. *Formulaicity governs the patterning of language, characters, diction, and plot ('formula writing')*.[27] It foregrounds the surface—the language of the text—and endows it with intensity (R14). It creates a liminal space-time of impasses, labyrinths and disorder (R12), and invites a sense of stasis or promotes a deterministic view of things (R12). It thereby renders the experience of the Numinous tangible (R20).

R22. *Gothic has often been described as concerned with externals, as resorting to 'techniques of the surface'*.[28] Though this term sometimes receives a demeaning sense,

[27] See my 'Formulaic Diction: The Case of "Raymond: A Fragment"', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gothic Origins*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
[28] See, e.g., Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel', in *PMLA* 96 (1981), 255-70; Coral Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (London: Athlone Press 1978), 15; Michael R. Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester UP 1986), 25 (à propos of melodrama); Elizabeth R. Napier, *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-Century Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987).

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as betokening 'the superficial',[29] it remains a suitable descriptor if we do not think of the genre as sadly unable to plumb psychological 'depths' (a notion which, anyway, was not easily available in the late eighteenth century). The term 'surficiality', increasingly used nowadays in science and architecture, is convenient to signify a world where all is visible (R20) yet which displays peaks (and troughs) on the familiar plane, salient points which our minds endow with an extra-ordinary quality—with *intensity* (R12). Because the interstitial transcends the ordinary and must be foregrounded, a rhetoric of both intensity and deprivation is part and parcel of the expression of the liminal (R14).

3.6 Conclusion.

From the above we can define Gothic minimally as a literary genre that thematises the liminal and performs a complex speech act: it entertains readers while it instructs them as to issues arising at the threshold of the rationalist world, warns them of both its possibilities and dangers, and provides catharsis by exciting our pity and fear. The genre consists (again, minimally) of a formal Dominant—the rhetoric of binaries—and a thematic one—the liminal site—; two corresponding repertories of techniques and motifs; and a set of rules of composition. To be consistent with the previous sections, ours should be a *historical* definition; rather than concentrating on similarities, it should stress continuity *and* differentiation. My contention will be this. Gothic 'began' as a more or less diffuse set of features—a *mode*—during the first half of the eighteenth century, coalesced into a *genre* with the publication of Walpole's *Otranto* in 1764 and the texts that followed it, and reached an apex with the work of Radcliffe and Lewis in the 1790s. Over the first three decades of the nineteenth century, such writers as insisted on perpetuating a tired stock sank the genre into the relative discredit of the penny dreadful, while for the most part it disaggregated into other genres.[30] Some of these busied themselves with other things while borrowing Gothic elements; in others (e.g., the Victorian ghost tale) the *mode* condensed once more, ensuring the continuity of the horror genre as well as significant change. What I have called the rules of Gothic grammar define *this* historical genre and cannot be applied to other genres or periods without due qualification. We will then expect, e.g., Victorian horror to differ significantly—both thematically and formally—from Gothic horror. To reach a sharper historical definition of the horror genre we need to look at it

[29] See, e.g., Gary Richard Thompson (ed.) Introduction to *Romantic Gothic Tales, 1790-1840* (New York: Harper and Row 1979), p. 4.
[30] R. D. Mayo finds that the short stories published by *Blackwoods* in the 1820s 'represent a definite break with the past'; see 'The Gothic Short Story in the Magazines', *The Modern Language Review* 37 (1942), pp. 448-54. For Gothic drama, very similar dates (1789-1825) are proposed by Cox (note 7), and recently (1768 through 1819) by Francesca Saggini (*The Gothic Novel and the Stage*. Oxford: Routledge 2016).

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as a *system* and to examine the crucial concept of the *Dominant shift*. This is the topic of the next chapter.

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