THE GRAMMAR OF GOTHIC
Manuel Aguirre

CHAPTER 4.

THE SYSTEM OF HORROR FICTION

§4.1. Systems, and the four stages of horror fiction.

This chapter is concerned with situating Gothic fiction within the larger, historical context of horror fiction. It looks at this genre as a system, and attempts to segment its historical development into four periods, to identify each of these in terms of a *Dominant* feature, and to account for literary events in the light of *Dominant shifts*.[1]

A system is *an organized whole* which exists in some environment. Between system and environment a fuzzy, and porous, boundary obtains which (to a point) allows us to determine which elements belong in the system and which belong outside it. Depending on the type of interaction with the environment, three basic kinds of system are usually considered.

The simplest kind is known as *equilibrium systems*, which tend towards maximal equilibrium. A rock pile or a mechanical clock tend towards the point where no further tension or disequilibrium occur, and where no further expenditure of energy will therefore be necessary. The clock slowly winds down, then stops; the rock pile collapses gradually under the influence of wind, rain, gravity and so on, until there is no instability left to it.
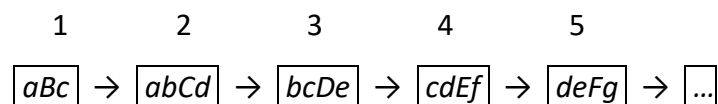
A more complex type is the *homeostatic* or *organismic system*, which maintains a specific structure within fairly definite limits. When the temperature inside a fridge has risen above a certain pre-programmed level, a thermostat comes into action and brings it down until it reaches a certain lower level; then the thermostat stops, and the temperature begins slowly to rise again. This is a *feedback mechanism* capable of internal adjustment—within limits. Organisms are another example of homeostatic systems. When confronted with changes in the environment (e.g., rising temperatures), the organism reacts by adjusting to the change (e.g., by modifying its own internal temperature, hibernating, migrating, etc.); human beings may also wrap

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[1] For an earlier statement on the history see my *The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1990).

themselves up in warm clothes or use heating devices to fight cold: they can to some extent manipulate the environment to maintain their body heat.

The third type are called *adaptive* or *processual systems*. These are *morphogenetic*: they adapt to the environment by creating new forms for themselves in order to remain viable; paradoxically, their best bet to preserve themselves lies in changing. An organism has a limited resistance to environmental forces, but a population changes itself as the price of survival (survival of the group, not of the individual). Biologists speak here of *persistence with modification of complex systems*. Further examples of adaptive systems are societies, languages, literatures, literary genres.[2]

One way to describe an adaptive system is to say that it possesses a number of features one of which is Dominant, the rest secondary or peripheral (§2.3). The Dominant is the feature that organises and controls the system at a given time. As dominance shifts from one feature to another, the entire system evolves in time. The following is a schematic representation of systemic evolution:[3]

$$1 \qquad 2 \qquad 3 \qquad 4 \qquad 5$$
$$\boxed{aBc} \rightarrow \boxed{abCd} \rightarrow \boxed{bcDe} \rightarrow \boxed{cdEf} \rightarrow \boxed{deFg} \rightarrow \boxed{\ldots}$$
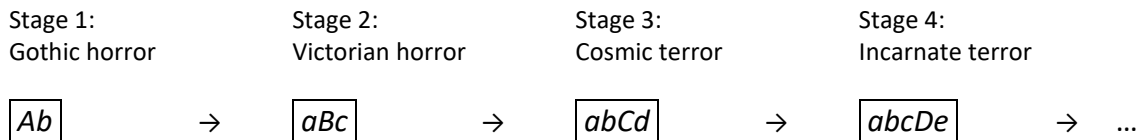
Numbers identify stages; letters stand for features (the number of features in each stage is immaterial); the Dominant feature is capitalised. Instructively, stage 5 displays none of the features that entered into stage 1, and yet we are able to recognise that 1 and 5 are part of the same system—there is *persistence* even with wholesale modification, because what endures is not simply a set of elements but a structural arrangement.

Let us now look at horror literature as an adaptive system. I will confine myself here to a genre of western literature in English, aware that other languages have produced horror literatures which may or not differ from the Anglo-American tradition by much or little. I will also confine myself (mostly) to fiction, aware that poetry and drama should require much more detailed treatment. The Anglo-American horror tradition shapes a *genre* that (so far) spans over 250 years. Its various stages can be handled as *sub-genres*, Gothic being the first of these. The model allows us to schematically outline the stages of the adaptive system of horror fiction as characterised by a succession of Dominant shifts. Early features tend to be retained as

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[2] Robert D. Stevick, 'The Biological Model and Historical Linguistics', in *Language*, 39:2 (1963), 159–69; April and Robert McMahon, *Evolutionary Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2012); Itamar Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies*, in *Poetics Today* 11:1 (1990, 1997); 'Polysystems Theory (Revised)', in *Papers in Culture Research* (Tel Aviv: Porter Chair of Semiotics (Temporary electronic book), 2005), http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.112.4768 (last accessed 25 Sept 2020).
[3] This model is indebted to a lecture delivered by Itamar Even-Zohar at the University of Antwerp in the mid-1970s.

peripheral rather than discarded, which may suggest a 'conservative' strain in the genre.

Stage 1: Gothic horror		Stage 2: Victorian horror		Stage 3: Cosmic terror		Stage 4: Incarnate terror		
$\boxed{Ab}$	$\rightarrow$	$\boxed{aBc}$	$\rightarrow$	$\boxed{abCd}$	$\rightarrow$	$\boxed{abcDe}$	$\rightarrow$	…

§4.2. The first stage: Gothic horror (1764-1824).

The word 'Gothic' comes into English in the early 17th century to designate 'the Goths and their language'; this is sense 1 in the *OED*.[4] By extension, the adjective was applied to Germanic cultures (sense 2, 1647), and used to identify the pointed-arch architectural style of the 12th through 16th centuries (sense 3.b, 1641). At the turn of the century, 'Gothic' appears in the work of Dryden (1695) and Shaftesbury (1710) to signify 'medieval' as opposed to 'classical' and, therefore, with a derogatory value, meaning 'Barbarous, rude, uncouth, unpolished, in bad taste, […] savage', with further connotations of the antiquated, the wild, the superstitious and the ignorant (sense 4).[5]

As a name for a literary genre, 'Gothic' first appears when Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto, A Story* went into its second edition one year later as *The Castle of Otranto, A Gothic Story*.[6] 'Gothic' here associates a) with the medieval period in general and Gothic architecture in particular; b) with a feudal Catholic past (Walpole presented his book as taken from a manuscript 'found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England');[7] and c) with a 'barbarous' disruption of eighteenth-century Neoclassical tenets.

The truism that the Gothic genre begins with *Otranto* is, like all truisms, apt to be disproven. Several researchers have pointed out how arbitrary this dating is, and how there are grounds for assuming that Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753) or Thomas Leland's *Longsword* (1762) count as forerunners of

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[4] *The Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, vol. IV (1933; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1978).

[5] On the semantics of the term see Robin Sowerby, 'The Goths in History and Pre-Gothic Gothic', in David Punter (ed.) *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell 2015), 25-37. Mark that the adjective 'medieval' did not come into use until the 19th century; before that, 'Gothic' approximately covered its semantic range.

[6] See pages 1 and 3 of Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W. S. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford UP 1996). All subsequent references will be to this edition.

[7] *Otranto*, Preface to the first edition, p. 5.

Gothic.[8] Before coalescing into a British *genre* in the late eighteenth century, then, Gothic must have existed as a diffuse *mode* (§2.2). But a date, 1764, can be assigned to the definite moment when a horror mode first condensed into what has come to be called the *Gothic genre*. Leland's or Smollett's novels did not set a genre in motion; Walpole's did, in that it was consciously refracted by other writers, so that his 'recipe' became a convention.

The formal Dominant of the Gothic genre is the rhetoric of binaries; its thematic Dominant, the liminal site where two realities—ordinary, extraordinary—converge (§2); its poetics, the rules of Gothic (§3); its code, the *strong forms* that arise from the rules (§2.5). Texts that abide by these features (among others) shape the Gothic genre. A Dominant shift will transform Gothic horror into Victorian horror.

The thematic Dominant of Gothic is the haunted place at the interface between the human and Numinous domains. *A haunting is, in our context, an unwelcome, disturbing visitation or occupation of a specific site by numinous entities or forces, whether or not supernatural*. Some hauntings are the result of illusion or contrivance, but will be experienced as real or possible by certain characters and, often, by readers (the so-called 'explained Gothic' of Radcliffe's novels). Other buildings than castles can be (or appear to be) haunted (the inn in Teuthold's *The Necromancer*). As the ghost haunts a building, an equivalent function is performed by the forces of repression (a convent's despotic abbess in Lewis' *The Monk*), of subversion (outlaws on the mountains, pirates at sea), of nature (forests embattled by the elements or frequented by wild beasts), or of the human psyche (villains haunted by their moral conscience: 'remorse for his crimes tortured him').[9] In an eighteenth-century context, such figures and forces (whether or not supernatural) are feared because they challenge the physical, social or moral order; because they cling to past, often feudal mores and oppose change; or because they undermine the criminal's resolution with a memory of his past upright self. In all cases, the stability and trustworthiness of the status quo is threatened.

Built by and for human beings but occupied by a numinous presence, the haunted castle (like all the other haunted sites mentioned earlier) is, and is not, human territory: it is a perfect instance of what Victor Turner called the liminal—'a place that is not a place' (§3.2). Whether this is an actual Other site or a neglected part of our own world, or whether the numinous element is embodied in a supernatural being, in a man-made creature, or in the passions of mere men and women, is a secondary consideration. What counts is the threshold nature of the site, the fact that it constitutes an equivocal space where the unthinkable happens and human and Numinous meet. The horror resides in the destabilisation that is generated on and by the liminal. Characters will unfailingly confront, shun or cross—willingly or otherwise— the line that has risen before them and that signals the end of safety. Their world has

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[8] See chapter 2 in David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (New York: Longman 1980).
[9] Percy B. Shelley, *St. Irvyne*, in *Zastrozzi and St. Irvyne* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1986), 105-199, p. 132.

become *two* worlds, and they must negotiate the threshold that sunders and joins these.

Gothic environments (castles, landscapes, atmospheres, friends, antagonists, etc.) may defy the conventions of the physical, social or moral order of things, but they are (in part at least) extensions of this order. Their function is to make visible that which, though known or knowable, is intangible for the reader, particularly the inner world (often, e.g., the same lexicon, syntax and imagery apply to character and location).[10] However, they operate not as metaphors or symbols but as *metonyms*; they do not *stand for* the subjects but *stand next to* them: the individual can enter or traverse such settings, enjoy or dread such views, converse or struggle with such enemies. The milieu clarifies aspects of the character, and can be conveniently used to convey or illustrate mood, fear or desire. The physicality of body and environment acts as a metonymic correlative of psychic experience, furnishing it with tangible traits.[11] 'The gloom in which all nature was clad seemed in unison with her feelings':[12] without detailing the character's emotions, this writing (a standard application of the rhetoric of binaries) provides a glimpse of them by establishing an explicit contiguity between her mood and the surrounding darkness.

Both Walpole's *Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), exactly thirty years apart, deal centrally with a castle seemingly haunted by spectres. This means that, notwithstanding their differences in many other respects, both writers adhere closely to the same thematic Dominant: in fact, they represent respectively a first-generation Gothic building up a Dominant, and a second-generation Gothic, drifting towards a Dominant shift. For reasons to be given in another chapter, I propose that every sixty years or so a noticeable change occurs in the system of horror fiction, a change that may have been building up slowly, but which eventually crystallises in one or more innovative publications. On this hypothesis we would expect a significant innovation to take place around 1824. And indeed, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, the last of the great Gothic novels, was published in that year.

Hogg's novel constitutes a watershed between Gothic and Victorian horror. The first part of the book, much in the Gothic vein, appears to deal with an old mansion and a series of strange events in the lives of its occupants, particularly of its young heir George Colwan, haunted by his half-brother Robert Wringhim. In the second part, however, Wringhim is in turn haunted by a more ambiguous villain, Gil-Martin, who follows him everywhere (and whose existence is never quite demonstrable). This is the new Dominant of Victorian horror fiction—the haunted individual. A line near the end encapsulates the change. On the run from his demonic pursuer, Wringhim records in his journal how he has taken shelter in a farmhouse and how, because the place is reputed to be haunted by a ghost from time immemorial, his hosts pay no heed to the

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[10] See my '"Dreary Abodes": Gothic Formulaic Discourse as a Technique of the Surface', in *Neophilologus* 104:1 (2020), 1-20.

[11] See my '"The Voice of Thunder": The Formulaic Nature of the Gothic Type-Scene', to appear in *Gothic Studies* (2023).

[12] Francis Lathom, *The Midnight Bell* (1798; London: Skoob Books 1989), 88.

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appalling noises heard. Then, his entry notes: 'of late, however, they are beginning to suspect that it is I that am haunted' (237). Not the place but the man is now the object of a disturbing visitation.

§4.3.   The second stage: Victorian horror (1824-1884).

The term 'Victorian' is given here a somewhat different latitude than would strictly correspond to the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Of course Gothic fiction continued to appear in the Victorian period, and as late as 1847 George P. R. James published a 3-volume novel titled *The Castle of Ehrenstein* which largely adhered to the strictures of Gothic. This simply means that the border between historical genres is a fuzzy one: every genre will have epigones. Haunted sites remain popular in this second stage, but place is often modulated as haunted room, piece of furniture, or even object;[13] more importantly, the Dominant now shifts to the pursuit of an individual by a personal haunter who is no longer bound to a specific locale but accompanies, leads, or follows its prey. In consequence of this realignment, place will become a secondary feature and gain psychological overtones; and liminality will be transferred from the site to an individual who, as a result, begins to appear ambiguous, irresolute, or 'beside himself'.

Anticipating this development, some late Gothic characters already find they cannot shake off their numinous pursuer or are dogged by guilt, suspicion or perplexity:

> Alphonsus was stretched on the rack of doubt … he threw himself on the ground, he rose again, he walked about the room, he entered the garden, he walked, he sat: it was in vain; the mind cannot fly from itself (Lathom, *The Midnight Bell*: 23).

The closeness of the bond forged between pursuer and pursued will be a commonplace in the Victorian genre; witness, for instance, this description of the vampire's attachment to her victim in another limit text, Raupach's 'Wake Not the Dead!' (1823):

> it was in vain that he endeavoured to flee her. Again, when he awoke, he found her the partner of his miserable bed. Nay, had he sought the centre of the earth as his hiding place … still had he found her his constant companion; … he had rendered himself inseparably hers; so fatal were the links that united them.[14]

Clearly, the theme of the haunted individual predates 1824. This is because themes do not arise overnight, nor are the dates proposed for each period to be taken absolutely, rather they mark moments at or around which one or more publications come to embody standards for the next thirty years, and so moments when major

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[13] Amelia Edwards, 'The Phantom Coach', 1864; Richard Marsh, 'The Haunted Chair', 1902.

[14] Ernst Benjamin Raupach, 'Laßt die Töten Ruhn' (English translation from 1823; see *Gothic Bournes,* http://www.limenandtext.com/gothic_cat.html). The story has been most frequently attributed to Johann Ludwig Tieck.

changes are expected to occur. A number of second-generation Gothic texts already assign to this theme a central place: William Beckford's *Vathek* (1782) and Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) exploit the demonic tempter motif; William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) records a relentless persecution of man by man; the protagonist of Joanna Baillie's play *De Monfort* (1798) sums up his unconquerable hatred towards his nemesis Rezenveldt in 'He haunts me—stings me—like a devil haunts'.[15] In other words, the ascent of the haunted-man theme to a controlling position in the system of horror fiction is gradual: peripheral in the Gothic stage, central to the Victorian stage. Every genre will have precursors, and such Gothic instances as rely on the Haunted Man rather than on the Haunted Place are no exceptions but harbingers of the grand Victorian concern.

E. A. Poe may be the most important author to make a clean break with the Gothic tradition while remaining a practitioner of horror fiction, and many of his stories (one thinks of 'The Cask of Amontillado' or 'The Imp of the Perverse', depicting respectively persecution by another and by the self) occupy a key position in first-generation Victorian horror. The median for this period falls in 1854, and close to this year I single out the publication of Sheridan LeFanu's first tale collection (*Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery*, 1851) as initiating the second generation of Victorian horror. One of its stories, 'The Watcher', offers another standard example of the new trend. It tells of a man stalked by a vindictive shadow that comes ever closer to him: not his home but his 'solitary path' is, he feels, 'infested by a malignant influence,' so that 'I am haunted and dogged, go where I may, by—by a Demon'. Instructively, it is never made clear whether the 'demon' is a spirit or a living man.

In the hands of Victorian writers that programmatic motif of Gothic fiction, the haunted house itself, is apt to become a *haunter.* Such is the case in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', where the edifice is—in Roderick Usher's view—endowed with sentience, and displays traits that—without the narrator's sanction but with his unwitting compliance—make it resemble Roderick. Or the house may psychologically 'accompany' the protagonist when he tries to get away from it by travelling:

> The Uninhabited House took its ticket for Brighton by the same express; it got into the compartment with me; it sat beside me at dinner; it hob-nobbed to me over my own wine; uninvited it came out to walk with me; […] Where could I go that the Uninhabited House would not be a haunting presence?[16]

Wherever the haunted-site theme is retained as a secondary feature in the system of Victorian horror literature, it is apt to be handled in terms of the psychology of characters rather than simply as an intrinsic property of the site. Put another way, in the Victorian period locations and atmospherics come to be associated with individuals' minds and may even lend themselves to subjective interpretation as mere

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[15] Joanna Baillie, *De Monfort*, in *Seven Gothic Dramas, 1789-1825*, ed. Jeffrey Cox (Athens: Ohio University Press 1992), I, ii.

[16] Charlotte E. Riddell, *The Uninhabited House,* in *Five Victorian Ghost Novels*, ed. Everett Bleiler (New York: Dover Books 1971), 1-112, p. 66, p. 82.

tropes for psychological states. The focus of our attention shifts from the *res extensa* to the *res cogitans*, from place to mind, from a point in space to a point of view. Emily Dickinson (1891) wrote when she adapted the grand Gothic theme to a Victorian mould:

> One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted,
> One need not be a House,
> The Brain has Corridors surpassing
> Material Place.

A culmination of this process is found in H. G. Wells' 'The Red Room' (1894), where, after a devastating night in the dreadful chamber, the narrator concludes that no haunter was present but his own fear-filled mind.

§4.4   The Double.

A special avatar of the theme of the haunted individual is found in the *Doppelgänger* motif, imported into British tradition from German Romanticism. Classic German instances include the novel *Siebenkäs* (1797) by Jean Paul (who coined the term *Doppelgänger*, 'he who walks by one's side', 'double-goer', 'lookalike'), Adelbert von Chamisso's *The Marvellous Adventure of Peter Schlemihl* (1814) (where a Mephistopheles-like figure buys the protagonist's shadow off him, and will return it only at the cost of his soul), Hoffmann's 'A New Year's Eve Adventure' (1815) (where the bargain involves the man's reflection) and, most notably, *The Devil's Elixirs* (1815), where Medardus is pursued by his half-brother, who seems to embody aspects of his personality. But almost no known British Gothic text resorts to the Double motif. Ann B. Tracy finds Doppelgängers in only four out of 208 Gothic novels (two of them translations from the German and French).[17] Her one significant example is Hogg's *Private Memoirs*, precisely our borderline text*.* There is no meaningful way of speaking of the *Gothic* Double, whereas the concept of the *Victorian* Double yields a fruitful harvest.

But we need definitions. The 'Double-ganger' is said to be 'the apparition of a living person; a double, a wraith';[18] a fetch, 'the *alter idem*, the second self;'[19] the soul;[20] a replica of the person who resembles him or her physically, or 'a character whose divided mind or personality is represented as two characters'.[21] Though Falkland in *Caleb Williams* is a mobile predator, he is not Caleb's Doppelgänger in these senses of the word—he is no supernatural emanation of him, and he neither bears physical

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[17] *The Gothic Novel 1790-1830: Plot Summaries and Index to Motifs* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky 1981).

[18] *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. III (Oxford: Oxford UP 1933).

[19] Karl Miller, *Doubles* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1985), p. vii.

[20] Jacques Goimard and Roland Stragliati, eds., *Histories des doubles* (Paris: Presses Pocket 1977), p. 33.

[21] Edward Quinn, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (New York: Facts on File 1999), p. 93.

resemblance to his victim nor stands for a part of his divided mind. Frankenstein's creature resembles his creator generically only, as any human shape or mind resembles another. The Victorian haunter often takes the form of a Double, but the latter does not exhaust the former, unless we commit ourselves to calling 'Doppelgänger' *any* antagonist figure (Achilles' Hector, Richard II's Bolingbroke); if we do, we throw away both history and precision.

We can, however, say that such Gothic haunters as Frankenstein's creature and Falkland foreshadow the figure of the Double. The emergence of the Doppelgänger motif is gradual, and a further key trait is communication. Frankenstein's creature hoped to establish a *rapport* with his creator and to be his companion; William Wilson's double (Poe, 1839) still tried to talk sense to his original. But a point comes when the haunter appears as a *part of* the man he pursues, and aims not to consort with but to *replace* him; from *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (G. W. M. Reynolds, 1846) to *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (R. L. Stevenson, 1886), no effective communication is possible between the two Victorian selves. The Double, then, can be looked at as one successful variation on the personal haunter which has ceased to be a metonymic extension and become instead a metaphoric substitute.[22]

We can now reach for more precision in our definition of the concept. Robert Miles has argued that the Gothic deals with the fragmented subject;[23] and the idea is a fruitful one so long as we understand this as a gradual process. The Double, one logical expression of that fracture of identity, in turn responds to a new philosophy—from Shaftesbury's doctrine of two persons in one self[24] to Hegel's concept of *Zerrissenheit* ('tearing, dismemberment, fragmentation')[25]—according to which inner forces may drive the mind unwittingly in directions at variance with its rational decisions. In this light, the Double is a *historical* figure that finds precedents in the demonic tempters of Gothic fiction, begins to gather form in the personal haunters of late Gothic and Victorian horror, and crystallises in certain classic Victorian narratives (Poe's, Dostoevsky's, Stevenson's, Wilde's), paving the way for a Freudian reading of the Double as a manifestation of the subversive unconscious.

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[22] Consonant with this idea, Miller differentiates between the more traditional duplicating self and the modern 'competing self' (Miller 1985: 31-32).

[23] Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (Manchester: Manchester UP 2002: 3-4)

[24] Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury, *Soliloquy, or, Advice to an Author* (London: John Morphew 1710), 184-88.

[25] First used in his *Phenomenology of the Spirit,* 1807. See Christoph Houswitschka, 'Zerrissenheit', in *The Handbook of the Gothic*, ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 2nd edn. (1998; Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009), 263-65.

§4.6. The short horror story.

'The original or "first wave" of the Gothic tradition', writes one critic, 'peaked around 1810 and then fell out of fashion very quickly'.[26] Another sees the true decay of the genre in the 1830s, with the decline of bluebooks.[27] The Romantic poets, from Wordsworth to Shelley, are keen to distance themselves from what they consider Gothic's embarrassing vulgarities (§2.1).[28] Parodies of the genre begin to proliferate at this time.[29] All the evidence available points at a decline of Gothic as a genre during the first third of the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, contributors to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (founded in 1817) are producing very influential horror stories which may use place but concentrate on the characters' physical and (especially) psychological suffering.[30] But this Dominant shift affects the very form of the genre. Of the 101 entries in Benjamin F. Fisher's survey of what he aptly calls the 'residual Gothic' period (1824-1873), fifty-nine are short story collections;[31] of the forty-two novels, only three constitute unambiguously horror narratives of numinous persecution: Frederick Marryat's *The Phantom Ship* (1839), George W. M. Reynolds' *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-47), and James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47, also attributed to Thomas Peckett Prest). Four others are, as Bleiler perceptively says of James' *Ehrenstein* (1847), 'late survivals' of the Gothic age.[32] The remaining novels—including those by canonised authors like Scott, the Brontës, Melville, Collins, Hawthorne or Hardy—borrow Gothic props and strategies but orbit such genres as the adventure and sensation novels, mystery, crime detection, historical fiction, or social realism. On the other hand, these and many other authors— Poe, Le Fanu, Dickens, Riddell, Amelia Edwards, Elizabeth Gaskell, Ambrose Bierce, Robert L. Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, Margaret Oliphant, Henry James—have left us memorable pages of personal hauntings in the short story format—for it is in this genre that horror fiction blooms in the Victorian era.

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[26] Rictor Norton, *Gothic Readings: The First Wave, 1764-1840* (London: Leicester UP 2000), p. viii. For a very similar view see Robert D. Mayo, 'How Long Was Gothic Fiction in Vogue?', in *Modern Language Notes* 58 (1943), 58-64.

[27] Franz J. Potter, *The History of Gothic Publishing, 1800-1835: Exhuming the Trade* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005.

[28] See Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, 'Gothic and Romantic: An Historical Overview' in *Romantic Gothic*, ed. Wright and Townshend (Edinburgh UP 2016), 1-34.

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818), Washington Irving's 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' (1820), John and Michael Banim's *Revelations of the Dead Alive* (1824), James Hogg's 'An Expedition to Hell' (1827). See chapter 8 in Maurice Lévy, *Le roman 'Gothique' anglais, 1764-1824* (Toulouse: Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, 1968); and Natalie Neill, 'Gothic Parody', in Wright and Townshend, eds. (2016), pp. 185-204.

[30] See the anthology edited by Chris Baldick and Robert Morrison, *Tales of Terror from Blackwood's Magazine* (Oxford: Oxford UP 1999).

[31] Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, 'The Residual Gothic Impulse: 1824-1873', in *Horror Literature: A Core Collection and Reference Guide* ed. Marshall B. Tymn (New York: R. R. Bowker Company 1981), 176-221, p. 191.

[32] Everett F. Bleiler, *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press 1983).

I have been writing about a thematic Dominant, but for each aspect of composition (characterisation, syntactic structure, narrative voice, style, etc.), a Dominant will be found (§2.3, 2.4, 3.4). In terms of style, we have noted a preference for metonymic relations between character and environment in the Gothic period, contrasting with a shift to the metaphorical in Victorian horror; and, similarly, while early haunters accompany, confront or even discourse with their first self, in the subsequent period they aim to *replace* or destroy him. But take publishing format: although short Gothic narratives existed since the eighteenth century, the Gothic Dominant was the long, often double- and triple-decker *novel*. This format had become peripheral for horror fiction by the 1820s.[33] A new publishing Dominant appeared in the horror field: the short story, an heir to pamphlet, broadside, chapbook and bluebook (these latter, mostly abridged versions of Gothic novels) as well as to the large number of 'true relations', sketches', 'accounts', 'tales', 'narratives' and 'fragments' published in the magazines of the Gothic period.[34] As mentioned above, plain horror novels were, by contrast, few at this time. Poe, for instance, only published one, *Arthur Gordon Pym* (1842) (an adventure novel with horror effects); Dickens, though he made use of Gothic elements in such novels as *Bleak House* (1853) or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), did not produce a single horror novel (though he wrote twenty ghost tales).[35] This decisive shift in the horror genre from novel to short-story format merits an excursus.

Much has been written about the difficulty of defining the short story as a genre. The strictures laid down by E. A. Poe and codified by Brander Matthews—brevity measured in terms of reading hours, unity of effect or impression, concentration on a moment of crisis, and conclusiveness or 'symmetry of design'—have proven inoperative in many or most modern short stories.[36] This much can be said: the short story focuses on extracting significance from the incidental, on translating the single experience, moment or state into a visible category.

Since the eighteenth-century, the novel had busied itself with the temporal chain of events, subordinating incident to development and insisting (in the face of the episodic nature of the older model, the picaresque) that incidents were ancillary aspects of a longer narrative arc. The Victorian short story, by contrast, concentrates on a threshold point (which can be a cusp or a crisis, but equally an interim or a slump in between events), and its intensity is a direct consequence of this. Episodes or situations which had commonly been viewed as parts of an advancing process are now singled out and assigned pride of place, with the broader developmental arc becoming

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[33] Potter (2005: 96) finds that '90 per cent of all Gothic material published after 1821 in [his] survey took the form of tales.'

[34] The actual term 'short story' for this genre goes back to the eighteen-eighties. See Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story: A Historical Survey* (New York: Biblo and Tannen 1923).

[35] Peter Haining, ed. *The Complete Ghost Stories of Charles Dickens* (New York: Washington Square Press 1982).

[36] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', in *Graham's Magazine* 28:4 (1846), 163-67; Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1884; New York: Longmans, Green and Co.1917); Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (1977; London: Routledge 1994).

background (or even disappearing). The short story can be said to be a liminal genre;[37] liminal, that is, in relation to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel (while its liminality is apt to change or disappear at some later period).

The short *horror* story follows suit by giving duration and import to what for the horror novel writer had been the interstitial. Not death but the lengthy agonies that precede it come to the fore in William Maginn's 'The Man in the Bell' (1821) or Ambrose Bierce's 'The Man and the Snake' (1890); not murder but the detailed retrospective analysis of motives, reflections and moves leading up to it in the anonymous 'Extracts from Gosschen's Diary' (1818) or in Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843); not the long uneventful life of the protagonist but an interim night when he lost his road and hailed the wrong conveyance in Amelia Edwards' 'The Phantom Coach' (1864). The nineteenth-century short horror story undertakes a piecemeal job of unfolding the often nigh-invisible junctions a character's life was made of in Gothic novels—the cracks in the pavement, the liminal sites and moments.

One consequence of exploring such interstices is that the horror acquires a domestic, almost intimate quality; readers are now invited to focus on the inconsiderable or the minimal, on threshold moments. And when this happens—when we are made to enter the crevice—the objectivity that was a distinctive mark of Gothic novels ceases to be a given. This 'liminalist' interpretation makes sense of that ambiguity of perception I discussed earlier, that vertigo of experience that ensues when characters (and readers) stand, Janus-like or 'beside themselves', uncertain as to whether they are responding to real or to illusory stimuli (§4.3). Much unlike what we were accustomed to in the Gothic novel (with most narrators providing sanction for one given reading), the narrative voice in the Victorian horror story either does not take a stand as to the 'truth' of the events described—leaving interpretation to others—or takes an equivocal one. Use of intradiegetic narrators, embedded tales, or free indirect style, ensures that subjectivity and point of view will rule. Or did it all happen in some shadowy interface realm between real and imaginary created by inconsistent reports, as in Dickens' 'The Signal-Man' (1866)? Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) brings the whole issue to its logical extreme and all but gives us a theory of narrative ambiguity.

At least four different Dominant shifts happen concurrently, then. Thematically, horror fiction moves from Haunted Site to Haunted Individual; stylistically, from metonymic to metaphoric readings of the environment; in terms of publishing format, from long novel to short story; and as regards narrative voice, from authoritative to non-committal or even unreliable narrator. These Dominant shifts go a long way towards defining Victorian horror as a genre qualitatively different from Gothic horror.

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[37] See Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann, eds., *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian and British Writing* (New York: Routledge 2015).

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§4.7.   The third stage: Cosmic terror (1884-1944)

A major change begins to take place around the eighteen-eighties. Haunted buildings
and haunted characters remain often in evidence after that date, but the Dominant
now shifts to a situation in which, whether the haunter is a single figure or a collective,
its potential victim is not an individual but an entire community, the human race, or
planet Earth. The adjective 'cosmic' has often been applied to the work of Lovecraft
and his circle; there are good reasons for extending it to cover many more horror
fictions published since the eighteen-eighties and -nineties.

   In the work of Sheridan LeFanu, second-generation Victorian horror writer, one
already finds intimations that characters may succeed in containing the source of
horror but not—not ultimately—in cancelling it, because it transcends the individual
case. To the terrified Reverend Jennings, accosted by a spectral monkey-like entity in
'Green Tea' (1869), psychic detective Dr. Hesselius grandly admits: 'We are all alike
environed. It is only that in your case, the *"paries"*, the veil of the flesh, the screen, is a
little out of repair, and sights and sounds are transmitted.' In other words, the
individual haunter is but one manifestation of a far vaster, if latent, power lurking
everywhere. Eleven years later, Margaret Oliphant's novella *A Beleaguered City* (1880)
tells of how an old French town is invaded by the dead, who for three days expel the
living and force them to camp outside the gates. This almost Kafkaesque tale will pave
the way for, e.g., William Hope Hodgson's *The Nightland* (1912), where the last of
humanity cowers in an 8-mile-high pyramid besieged by monstrous forces that have
conquered the rest of the planet.

   Instructively, the year 1890 saw the publication of two works of very different
persuasion. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contained a quintessentially
Victorian narrative of a haunted individual whose portrait comes to encode in physical
degeneracy the spiritual corruption of the man. In contrast, Arthur Machen's *The Great
God Pan* takes a vast leap forward. It tells of a doctor who operates on the brain of his
ward Mary and (in implicit homage to LeFanu) excises the *paries*—the 'veil' that
prevents humans from seeing into the beyond: and Mary sees Pan, but the god sees
her too, and in a travesty of the Christian myth he mates with her and engenders a
child that is destined to destroy human society. This is no cosy Victorian tale but a
narrative of truly universal implications, much more in line with Stoker's *Dracula*
(1897) and Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1897). Oliphant and Machen usher in a new age,
that of Cosmic Terror.

   As usual, two generations can be distinguished here. The work of Montague R.
James straddles the two periods. It has all the domestic quality of so much Victorian
horror, but in at least two traits James moves subtly beyond it: an urbane, witty, often
ironic tone which makes his a self-conscious, almost parodic Victorian work; and a
proliferation of haunters—associated with all manner of objects, places and persons—
which bears witness to Dr. Hesselius' dictum: 'We are all alike environed'. Oliphant,
Machen, Robert W. Chambers, Hodgson, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood among
others configure the first generation of Cosmic Terror, while H. P. Lovecraft and his

circle (Robert E. Howard, Frank Belknap Long, Clark Ashton Smith, August Derleth, Robert Bloch, plus a long list of younger writers who began in the Lovecraftian manner, including Stephen King and Ramsey Campbell) represent the second. The median for this period is 1914, and Lovecraft's first story, 'The Alchemist', appeared in 1916, followed by the now classic 'Dagon' in 1917.

Beyond their obvious differences, what these all share is a concern with a power that threatens to permeate and subvert our reality. In the Victorian period we generally had a sense of satisfying equilibrium, even in stories with a downbeat ending, because the malignant force was neutralised, or else spent itself out in the destruction of its host (the cases of Stevenson's *Jekyll/Hyde* or Wilde's *Dorian Gray*). With the coming of Cosmic Terror, true closure is less and less assured. At the end of Hodgson's 'The Voice in the Night' (1907), the self-sacrifice of one man has heroically averted the spread of the plague that is ceaselessly transforming him, but the island where he was infected remains a potential source of devastation. In Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu' (1928), the catastrophic rise of the Elder God may be thwarted by man or accident; Cthulhu, however, is not destroyed and still lurks in a latent state, threatening all of humanity.

§4.8.   The fourth stage: Incarnate Terror (1944-2004).[38]

Without relinquishing any of the previous features (the haunting of a site, of an individual, or of an entire planet), in the horror fiction roughly following World War II the Dominant shifts to the haunter's ability to penetrate human society, mimic and replace humans, or enable its own birth as a human being. In its third and fourth stages the horror genre is densely intermeshed with that of science fiction.

Fritz Leiber's first novel *Conjure Wife* (1943) deals with a middle-class community one ordinary member of which discovers that his wife—an ordinary housewife in every other respect—is a witch; not only that, but she consorts with other wives who regularly practice efficient forms of witchcraft. In 1948 John W. Campbell's short story 'Who Goes There?' introduced the theme of the alien form which specialises in transforming humans into copies of itself; this led to a very productive stream of narratives—Christian Nyby's film *The Thing from Another World* (1951), Jack Arnold's *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1954), John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), Rudolph Cartier and Nigel Kneale's *The Quatermass Experiment* (TV, 1953), Larry Cohen's *The Invaders* (TV, 1966-7), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), Stephanie Meyer's *The Host* (2008)—narratives in which the haunter masquerades successfully as one of us or manages to be born of a human woman, or becomes a human-alien symbiote, or is a human child affected in the womb

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[38] Writing in the 1980s, I labelled this the *Modern Terror* period, its main theme being 'the Incarnation of the Numinous'. It was indeed a 'modern' theme at the time but, thirty-five years since, the adjective has become inappropriate.

by radiation, science, magic or other factors. It has become indistinguishable from its prey—like Leiber's conjure wife, it now is one of us and therefore cannot be defeated.

Machen's *The Great God Pan* preludes Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1966), with a difference: in that early Cosmic terror tale the child is born but the threat is eventually conjured away. In the Incarnate Terror period, the birth is the prelude to the triumphant rise of Satan in human child form. Alien or demonic invasions, mutant children, rebellious machines, or the onslaught of enraged Nature (Ishiro Honda's *Godzilla*, 1954, Gordon Douglas's *Them!*, 1954, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, 1963) are in this period the Dominant theme in literature, comics, TV and the cinema, and will be taken up in the nineteen-seventies by the second generation of Incarnate Terror writers. In particular, the threatened or threatening child (haunted, possessed, demonic, mutant) becomes a standard: William P. Blatty (*The Exorcist*, 1971), Tom Tryon (*Harvest Home*, 1973), David Seltzer (*The Omen*, 1976), Steven Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence* (2001). Spearheading the second generation of this period, Stephen King's first novel, *Carrie* (1974) tells of a bullied teenager who discovers she has telekinetic powers and, as if possessed, goes on a rampage of revenge against the town that had made life hell for her.

§4.9. Conclusion.

The dates, which may seem arbitrary, should not be understood as absolute limits but as milestones, mere indicators of when we can expect major changes to take place. They are a simple way of representing a fuzzy border between periods. A Dominant shift may be underway over several decades, but sometimes we get lucky and catch it in the making, as it were, in the form of one or more texts published in or around the 'predicted' year. Chapter 5 will give more resolution to the last two periods. Appendix B provides a chronology of horror fiction with close to 300 titles.

On the whole, this survey appears to make sense of most if not all horror fiction since *Otranto*. While making full allowance for precursors and epigones, it shows that the bulk of production in each period does exhibit thematic unity and a clear genre identity vis-à-vis other periods. Using systems theory it is possible to obtain a very precise demarcation for Gothic as a historical genre that endured for (approximately) sixty years; it did not 'die', it simply transformed into other genres. There is thus continuity between the various sub-genres of horror fiction (Gothic, Victorian, etc.), and much affinity, too, between these and the other popular genres born in the crucible of Gothic (science-fiction, the historical novel, detective fiction, and so on); but there are also a number of major modifications—Dominant shifts—that account for the evolution of the system. The next chapter will examine the logic of this evolution, and propose a hypothesis regarding a possible fifth stage in the history of horror fiction.

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