

THE GRAMMAR OF GOTHIC

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CHAPTER 2

MODE AND GENRE

Before the 1990s, the consensus was that the decades between the seventeen-sixties and the eighteen-twenties constituted the *Gothic* period properly so called. There was little quarrel with the start of the period: 1764, the date of publication of the first Gothic novel, Walpole's *Otranto*. There was a broad consensus, too, on two propositions: that Gothic was basically a British phenomenon (with some notable North-American contributions, and with meaningful correspondences vis-à-vis French and German texts of the period); and that it came to an end around 1820, after the publication of Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824).¹ This overly narrow conceptualisation of Gothic has since the 1990s been brought into question, but the understanding that has replaced it is not without serious drawbacks, and central to it is a confusion as regards the concept of genre. The present chapter aims to propose some criteria for an alternative grasp of Gothic.

§2.1 Defining Gothic

Our first step will be to examine critically some popular approaches to this type of writing. Project Gutenberg offers the following definition:

Gothic fiction is a genre of literature that combines elements of both horror and romance. As a genre, it is generally believed to have been invented by the English author Horace Walpole, with his 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*. The effect of Gothic fiction depends on a pleasing sort of terror, an extension of essentially Romantic literary pleasures that were relatively new at the time of Walpole's novel.

¹ See, for instance, Maurice Lévy, *Le roman "gothique" anglais, 1764-1824* (Toulouse: Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse 1968).

Prominent features of Gothic fiction include terror (both psychological and physical), mystery, the supernatural, ghosts, haunted houses and Gothic architecture, castles, darkness, death, decay, doubles, madness, secrets and hereditary curses.²

Four problem areas can be singled out in these lines. First, they speak of a genre of *fiction*, which implicitly excludes drama and poetry. Secondly, the word ‘extension’ makes Gothic *derive from* Romanticism—a most problematic notion chronologically; if anything, Gothic is best viewed as *preceding* Romanticism. In the third place, the passage describes Gothic purely in thematic terms, by means of a list of motifs (most of them conveyed by emotion-laden words) which, through pell-mell accumulation, are expected to provide an impressionistic idea of the genre. Lastly, the list resorts to alliteration (‘ghosts’/‘Gothic’; ‘haunted houses’; ‘darkness, death, ... doubles’), which in this context devalues the object described (‘it is not to be thought serious, see how neatly it lends itself to a jingling diction’). In other words, Gothic is presented as a derivative, trivial, emotional genre constructed solely out of motifs: it does not have a *form*—not, at any rate, a form that matters.

I am aware that this is an unfair critique, since providing definitions is not at all the brief of Project Gutenberg. I offer it merely to illustrate a trend among popular ways of handling the subject. Let us consider the entry ‘Gothic Novel’ from a reference book which does aspire to critical rigour:

Gothic Novel

Literary genre established by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and marked by mystery, violence, and horror; other pre-20th century practitioners were the English writers Ann Radcliffe, Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis, Mary Shelley, the Irish writer Bram Stoker, and the US writer Edgar Allen [sic] Poe. The late 20th century has seen a huge revival in interest in the genre, particularly in film, and the novels of the US writer Stephen King are carefully crafted examples.

The gothic is best distinguished from horror by gothic's inbuilt morality. Whilst there are macabre and violent acts, no one dies unjustly in a true gothic novel. The vampire or creature unleashed is a scourge to test the righteous and bring weakness, evil, and folly to account. A plot requirement is one or two ordinary people, with whom the reader identifies, who survive and record events (for example, Jonathan Harker in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, 1818). Evil is ultimately destroyed and has beneficial consequences for the gothic novel in terms of character development.

The gothic became so popular in the 19th century that it was incorporated into works of other genres. Wilkie Collins employed gothic conventions in his mystery novel *The Woman in White* (1860) and Arthur Conan Doyle did likewise with his detective fiction in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). Jane Austen satirized the gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey* (1818).³

Again the reference is to a *genre* (of fiction) that now ranges from Walpole to King. The entry claims to distinguish Gothic from horror but fails to declare what it means by

² Gutenberg gives this definition as ‘Excerpted from [Gothic fiction](https://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gothic_Fiction_(Bookshelf)) on *Wikipedia*, the Free Encyclopedia’ (see [https://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gothic_Fiction_\(Bookshelf\)](https://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Gothic_Fiction_(Bookshelf)), last accessed 24 May 2020); but the latest version of this Wiki page no longer carries the second paragraph of the definition (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_fiction, updated 20 May 2020).

³ *The Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Literature* (Helicon Publishing: Oxford 2006).

the latter term (another genre? No entry for either ‘Horror’ or ‘Terror’ is found in this encyclopedia), which leaves us with no definition. It accurately points at the morality of the early genre, but classes Poe among its practitioners though his fictions are notoriously a-moral; furthermore, it ignores the extent to which eighteenth-century Gothic *challenged* the morality of the time. It mentions one single ‘plot requirement’ which is hardly a constant in the genre—no survivor chronicles events in the majority of Gothic novels and tales—and caps it all with the mention of two Gothic-inspired works and one parody (the entry confuses Harker, from *Dracula*, with Walton in *Frankenstein*). The assertion that ‘no one dies unjustly in a true gothic novel’ is belied by, e.g., the deaths of Matilda and Antonia in *Otranto* and *The Monk*, or of the countless victims in Lovecraft’s oeuvre—but, of course, what is meant by ‘a true Gothic novel’ is by now anybody’s guess. That ‘[e]vil is ultimately destroyed’ will not satisfy readers of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* or Jeffrey Campbell’s *The Homing* (1980), unless, of course, these do not rate as ‘true Gothic novels’, though it is difficult to exclude them from what has been presented as one uninterrupted chain. As with Project Gutenberg, such an impressionistic view does not really define. And it is part of its impressionism that the entry identifies Gothic according to a brief list of extremely abstract themes: ‘mystery, violence, and horror,’ ‘inbuilt morality’ (on the other hand, the observation that Gothic can be borrowed ‘into works of other genres’ will be worth pursuing below).

Outlooks such as these percolate into undergraduate and graduate courses. One student wrote: ‘we could describe Gothic fiction as a type of writing involving dark motifs and a picturesque setting with a plot filled with mystery and a fearful atmosphere.’ The vague catalogue of items says nothing and can apply to everything. What is a ‘dark motif’, what a ‘fearful atmosphere’? Was the student aware of the technical sense given to the word ‘picturesque’ by William Gilpin in the late eighteenth century? In the absence of further clarification, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* meets all these requirements—dark motifs, a picturesque setting, mystery, and a fearful atmosphere; plus, of course, castles, madness, and most of the traits listed in Gutenberg. *Macbeth* is no isolated instance, as there is already some critical talk of Elizabethan Gothic;⁴ and it is but one step from this to Leslie Fiedler’s grand claim that the whole of US fiction ‘is almost essentially a gothic one.’⁵ The vagueness of terms promotes expansive understandings, and a definition of Gothic becomes a well-nigh impossible task.

The motif-list approach is old: it was already used by the Romantics to disparage Gothic fictions. The anonymous satirical author of *The Age, A Poem* (1810) offered a ‘rule of novels’ for, ‘like machinery in factories’, concocting a sentimental novel out of a Gothic romance: ‘Where you find a castle, put an house’; and in like manner, a cavern = a bower; a groan = a sigh; a giant = a father; a bloodstained dagger = a fan;

⁴ See Dale Townshend, ‘Gothic Shakespeare’, in David Punter (ed.), *A New Companion to the Gothic* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell 2015), 38-63; see the discussion of the ‘positive Gothic double’ in Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* in Alison Milbank, *God & the Gothic: Religion, Romance & Reality in the English Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2018), pp. 151-75.

⁵ *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian Books 1967), 124-25.

and so on.⁶ The recipe hinges on a list of motifs only, as if neither genre could offer anything else. Four years later, Walter Scott, eager to distance himself from Gothic practice, defended the subtitle of his novel *Waverley*, *'Tis Sixty Years Since* in the following terms:

had my title borne, "Waverley, A Romance from the German", what head so obtuse as not to image forth a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke, a secret and mysterious association of Rosycrucians and illuminati, with all their properties of black cowls, caverns, daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors and dark lanterns?⁷

Note how, in initiating his catalogue of Gothic props, Scott waxes lyrical in a string of almost flawless iambic pentameters (I take a horrid license with 'profligate'), alliterations included: 'a profligate abbot, an oppressive duke, / a secret and mysterious association / of Rosycrucians and illuminati, /with all their properties of black cowls, caverns, / daggers, electrical machines, trap-doors'. There is an insistent confederacy between the catalogue of motifs and a devaluing use of sound.

The problem of defining Gothic is complicated by the contemporary tendency to, on the one hand, restrict the term to narrative (ignoring Gothic poetry and drama) and, on the other hand, make it encompass a large variety of cinema and TV productions, video- and computer games, comics, fashion and music styles (the last two well outside the *narrative* domain). There are, furthermore, projections of the term 'Gothic' onto texts from other cultures, both European (German, French, Russian or Spanish 'Gothic') and non-European (Japanese 'Gothic'), plus retroactive applications to texts from previous centuries (should we not think Gothic when we read the description of the realm of the dead in *The Odyssey*?). Stretching the point (unfairly, no doubt): since so many folktales and ballads handle castles, violence and murder, the supernatural or the ghostly, should we not be justified in proclaiming the essential 'gothic-ness' of British folklore? Not just the US novel, as Fiedler surmised, but all narrative, all literature, all culture might ultimately fall within the province of Gothic. At this point, would the word 'Gothic' retain any meaning at all? The problem is one of *demarcation*: what are the criteria for distinguishing Gothic from non-Gothic?

§2.2. Mode

Our problem stems from the fact that, currently, two very different senses of the word 'Gothic' are available. In Victor Sage's formulation:

⁶ *The Age, A Poem: Moral, Political, and Metaphysical*, in *Ten Books* (London 1810), p. 209.
https://books.google.co.il/books?id=aswIAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

⁷ Walter Scott, chapter 1, *Waverley* (1814), ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford: World's Classics 1986), 3-4.

the ‘watershed’ of c. 1820 forms a convenient guideline, but it is really the sign, not so much of the death of the Gothick as of the scattering and transmutation of the tangible literary *form* into a *mode* of sensibility (my emphasis).⁸

In one sense, ‘Gothic’ designates a historical *genre* that possesses its own repertory of formal techniques, themes and conventions which distinguish it from other genres, both synchronically and diachronically. This genre began in 1764, and ended during the first quarter of the nineteenth century (though the justness of the terms ‘beginning’ and ‘ending’ will be examined later). In another sense—the one in vogue since the mid-1990s—‘Gothic’ names an a-temporal *mode* that enters into many kinds of literary texts and genres and inspires other types of cultural production; this mode cannot be identified in terms of either limits or forms, only of certain motifs and themes, irrespective of the way these are organised on the page and of historical period or culture.

The various definitions discussed earlier shunt equivocally between mode and genre, now contracting now expanding the range of the signifier; vagueness and inconsistency are the result. What counts as Gothic? Does the presence of this or that trait suffice to establish the gothic-ness of a work? Inclusive labels stress similitudes; in the absence of clear criteria, what prevails is a modal understanding that repeatedly masquerades as generic but that effectively dismisses the concept of genre, since no genre demarcation is possible. Shakespeare, *The Odyssey*, the Bible, folklore or a sports chronicle can be deemed Gothic simply because there is no accepted criterion to *exclude* them from a monstrously capacious Gothic field.

Such an absence of boundaries in turn encourages a search for the master tropes that supposedly run like leitmotifs through two and a half centuries of horror fiction, or else invites us to measure the old *par raptort* to the new. David Punter and Glennis Byron, while taking the broad view of Gothic, acknowledge that its modern manifestations exhibit important differences vis-à-vis the ‘original’ Gothic. At this point, however, the authors advance the following:

Yet despite these differences—and it is obviously a very long way from Ann Radcliffe to William Gibson—one can also point to the extraordinary persistence of certain motifs—the vampire, for example, or the monstrous potential of science and technology—and as well to the way in which these motifs seem to continue to be recycled in the ‘Gothic textual body’.⁹

In order to argue the continuity of the genre the authors stress *persistence* over difference, and for this they predictably fall back on thematic elements—vampires, science—which allow for an a-temporal view. H. P. Lovecraft was partial to the second approach: writers either came close to or else fell short of the true standard—which,

⁸ Victor Sage, ed., Introduction to *The Gothic Novel: A Casebook* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan 1990), 8-28, pp. 21-22.

⁹ David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell 2004), p. xix.

be it noted, was not for him the *Gothic* but the *weird tale*.¹⁰ Either way, the inclusive use of 'Gothic' befogs a historical perspective.

We can certainly choose to dispense with the notion of genre altogether when discussing the Gothic; but our critical stance will flounder in contradiction the minute we apply the label 'genre' to fable, *Bildungsroman* or science fiction while withholding it from Gothic. Alternatively, we can plead the singularity of Gothic. A lucid restatement of the modal view is found in Robert Miles's claim that Gothic is 'an aesthetic', to be looked at not as a genre, not as 'a set of prose conventions, however flexible, but as a discursive site crossing the genres'.¹¹ This modal view is certainly useful in accounting for the plurality of genres (novel, short fiction, drama, poetry) through which Gothic surfaces (and most of which have too often been neglected by a critical establishment bent on studying Gothic novels only). The problem with this view is that it grants Gothic an unjustifiably unique status—unjustifiably because every time-hallowed genre can be deconstructed into a discursive site that traverses different genres. The existence of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association, for example, with its Rhysling and Elgin Awards for best sf poetry, bespeaks another 'aesthetic' that crosses the genre boundary. How often must this be shown to happen before the argument *ad* singularity collapses?

One favourite version of this appeal to uniqueness is the claim for the special *hybridity* of Gothic. Catherine Spooner states that 'Gothic has always been a hybrid genre', one which, in the twentieth century, has been 'increasingly hybridised with romance, science fiction, crime fiction, and a plethora of other genres, to the point that the term Gothic became progressively more difficult to pin down.'¹² Maggie Kilgour, noting 'the wide range of literary sources out of which [Gothic] emerges', concludes that '[t]he form is thus itself a Frankenstein's monster, assembled out of the bits and pieces of the past.'¹³ The image is seductive, but deceptive on two counts. First, no reason is given as to why the form of the genre should resemble a figure in one of its many texts; Second, hybridity is a property of all genres: opera, jazz, the novel, ballads, science fiction are generic forms resulting from and thriving on the combination of several genres; all have as much of a claim to the status of 'Frankenstein creatures' as Gothic has.

But refuting the singularity of Gothic does not do away with our problem; we need a concept of genre which will respect the polymorphism of horror writings without branding them as unique. Restating Sage's point, Fred Botting identifies the difficulty involved:

The diffusion of Gothic forms and figures over more than two centuries makes the definition of a homogeneous generic category exceptionally difficult. Changing features, emphases and

¹⁰ See *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927-45; New York: Dover Books 1973).

¹¹ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (London: Routledge 1993), pp. 1, 176.

¹² 'Gothic 1950 to the Present', in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, eds. William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2013), 294-303, p. 294-95. On hybridity, see below.

¹³ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge 1995), p. 4.

meanings disclose Gothic writing as a mode that exceeds genre and categories, restricted neither to a literary school nor to a historical period.¹⁴

Mode *exceeds* genre: here, in the precise relation between these two, lies the crux of the matter, and this is the problem we have to elucidate. For my starting point I will take up Chris Baldick's definition of mode:

a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre. Examples are the satiric mode, the ironic, the comic, the pastoral, and the didactic.¹⁵

Other modes would include the fantastic, the elegiac, the erotic, or the terrifying. I will distinguish this use of 'mode' from French *mode* as used by Gérard Genette to designate the narratological equivalent of the grammatical mood of the verb (though Genette's usage shares with Baldick's 'mode' a concern with stance), and from 'mood' in M. H. Abrams' sense as largely synonymous with 'atmosphere' (except that, again, it shares with Baldick's in emotive tone).¹⁶ 'Mode' is not classificatory: instead of *grouping* texts, as genre does, it identifies broad concerns and attitudes which run along and across genres. Further, mode is atemporal (but not a-historical): whereas the novel genre exists in western culture only since the sixteenth century, the satiric mode is well-nigh universal (which does not mean satire has remained unchanged since antiquity).

When writing about Gothic we should be careful always to specify whether genre or mode is meant; to confuse the two is a sure recipe for disaster. A horror *mode*—Sage's 'sensibility', Miles' 'aesthetic', Baldick's 'manner'—may always have existed in narrative; whether it is to be called 'Gothic' is something else. Werewolf stories told by Petronius, Gerald of Wales, Marie de France or Cervantes cannot simply be labelled 'Gothic texts'. To write of ancient Mesopotamian Gothic or of Tibetan Gothic is to slap a modern western category onto non-western traditions—it smacks of the parochial when not of the neo-colonialist.¹⁷ And to postulate that a *genre* of Gothic existed in Britain or elsewhere prior to the eighteenth century would be equally hazardous. We now need to examine in what way 'genre' differs from 'mode', and this second problem stems from a contemporary determination to see genre monolithically.

¹⁴ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge 1996), p. 14. For the distinction see also Nicola Trott, 'Gothic', in *Romanticism*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), 482-501.

¹⁵ Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015).

¹⁶ Gérard Genette, *Discours du récit*, in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil 1972), ch. 4; M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 9th edn (with Geoffrey G. Harpham; Boston: Wadsworth Cengage 2009 [1957]), under 'Atmosphere'.

¹⁷ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books 1978). On the danger that the search for 'Asian Gothic' may turn 'into yet another episode of colonisation', see Katarzyna Ancuta, 'Asian Gothic', in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, vol. I, pp. 44-50, p. 49.

§2.3. Genre.

To resort to Baldick once again, ‘genre’ designates classes and sub-classes of literary composition

which are defined according to several different criteria, including formal structure (sonnet, picaresque novel), length (novella, epigram), intention (satire), effect (comedy), origin (folktale), and subject-matter (pastoral, science-fiction).¹⁸

Before all else, genre is a convenient tool. Readers use the concept to classify what they read into groupings that make sense and that encode horizons of expectation. Writers use it as a frame within which to work or from which to deviate. For scholars, genre is a signpost to keep in mind when studying a text. Publishers, librarians and booksellers resort to it because it provides audiences with practical access to specific products. All use the concept of genre in order to pattern the formless in various ways. Like every category devised by the human mind, genre configures and naturalises a view of reality—in our case, of the literary reality. Unlike mode, genres can be dated (if often only approximately). Genre begins at the point where rarefied or dispersed ideas, trends or attitudes coalesce into a set of regular co-occurrences—into *conventions* that readers wish to see respected (to a point; see below). *Genre can be usefully seen as a condensation of mode.*

Two aspects of genre—its organisation, its dynamics—need to be discussed. In point of organisation, the word ‘genre’ does not identify one specific level of categorisation but a *principle of categorisation* at different levels. Genre is best seen not as a simple cluster of works but as an organised *system* characterised by certain features. One of these, or a constellation of these, governs the system and constitutes a *Dominant* around which the other features gravitate. Jurij Tynjanov described it as ‘the preeminent component or group of components in a system’, its ‘organising property’.¹⁹ Within the novel genre we find several subsystems (subgenres): *Bildungsroman*, novel of manners, Gothic novel, and so on; within Gothic, sub-subgenres such as orientalist, political or historical Gothic. Genre is given cohesion and stability by a *poetics*—a set of codes, conventions, rules, favoured forms and techniques which are not mandatory but *orientative*: adherence to rule varies from flexible to rigid (‘formula writing’). Reader reception, the market, ideologies further stabilise the genre.

But these forces change in time, and this brings us to the other aspect of the system, its dynamics. Much of the confusion surrounding genre may be dispelled by viewing it as in a state of flow. Though framed and stabilised by rules, readers and the

¹⁸ Baldick 2015, under ‘Genre’.

¹⁹ See Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History-Doctrine*, 3rd edn (1955; New Haven: Yale University Press 1981), 199, 212. See also Peter Steiner, *Russian Formalism: A Metapoetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1984), 99-137. On the theory of literary systems see Itamar Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies*, in *Poetics Today* 11:1 (1990), monographic issue, 1-268; Even-Zohar, ‘Polysystem Theory (Revised)’, in *Papers in Culture Research* (Tel Aviv: Porter Chair of Semiotics 2005). For a detailed look at the Dominants of horror fiction see chapters 3 and 4 below.

market, it exists in permanent *transition* both synchronically and historically. ‘Genres are sites of contention between stability and change.’²⁰ Genre is a *process* and has a certain *duration*.²¹ Certain genres develop over centuries, others last the span of one generation. The novel emerged in the west in the sixteenth century; epic poetry may have ceased to be a productive genre of western literature after Milton.²²

Franz Potter notes that the rise of Gothic has been charted much more thoroughly than its ‘end’.²³ One reductive view has it that Gothic died out sometime during the first third of the nineteenth century; in contrast to this, there is the grand claim that Gothic has persisted into the twenty-first century. Between these two, we have to seriously consider a third alternative: that during the first decades of the nineteenth century the Gothic genre *transformed* into new forms (new genres) that connected better with the concerns of the succeeding culture. In other words, genre is an *open adaptive system*: it changes, disappears, or makes way for other genres. The historical novel of Jane Porter and Walter Scott, for instance, is an offshoot of historical Gothic that became an independent genre.

But genre does not simply evolve: it is a *complex system*. This means that, given a well-understood point of departure, we cannot predict its development because, among other things, it feeds back upon itself; results come to be part of the initial data, thereby constantly forcing us to modify our assessment. A definition of Gothic in light of Lewis’s novel *The Monk* (1796) will differ substantially from that which might have covered the first twenty years of Gothic fiction. Genre changes even within the oeuvre of the single writer: Radcliffe’s first Gothic novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789), is considerably different from her last, *The Italian* (1797)—not least in size, and not simply in respect of ‘quality’.

Synchronically as well as historically, genres are neither monolithic nor watertight, and cannot be expected to reach closure. A text, Derrida points out, does not *belong to* a genre, rather it *participates* in one or several of these.²⁴ *Genre is permeable, and may encompass, or cross, other genres*: as it feeds back onto itself, so it feeds, and is fed by, other genres. The novel absorbs elements of drama, lyric poetry, epic, and so on; the Gothic genre included novel, drama, poetry and short fiction, and borrowed from (among others) sentimental fiction, Elizabethan tragedy, medieval romances, and various folk genres (legend, wondertale, ballad). This is a way of saying that *cross-fertilisation*, hence hybridity, is the rule of genre, not the exception (see above). Works

²⁰ Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas N. Huckin, ‘Rethinking Genre from a Sociocognitive Perspective’, in *Written Communication* 10:4 (1993), 475-509, p. 481.

²¹ See J. R. Martin & D. Rose, *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture* (London: Equinox 2008).

²² It is true that Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) and Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* (1839-62) are tokens of a continuity in modern times, as are the oral Southern Slavic epic songs studied by Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord—see Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1960); but public attention in the west is nowadays squarely centred on the novel.

²³ Franz J. Potter, *The History of Gothic Publishing, 1800-1835: Exhuming the Trade* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 3.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘La loi du genre’, in *Parages* (Paris: Galilée 1986), 249-87, p. 264.

associated with a given genre may—as the *Hutchinson Encyclopedia* puts it—incorporate traits characteristic of another: Romantic and Victorian novels often borrow Gothic features for some aspect or segment of the total work; this explains the cases of *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*, novels that contain Gothic elements but belong to other genres—the late romantic novel, the Victorian social novel.

Here is a summary of the traits of genre discussed so far. In its concern with investigating these and other traits, current theory evinces a broad acknowledgment that genre is a protean form which yet, for a variable period of time, retains a (changing) identity.²⁵

1. Genre emerges as a condensation of mode.
2. Genre operates as a *principle of categorisation* at different levels.
3. It is a *system* consisting of a set of features which gravitate around a *Dominant* one.
4. It diversifies into subsystems: *subgenres*, *sub-subgenres*.
5. It is given cohesion by a set of conventions—a *poetics* that helps stabilise it.
6. It is controlled by *reader reception*, *market forces*, *ideologies*.
7. Withal, it is an *open adaptive system*.
8. It is a *process*, in permanent transition. Certain genres last longer than others.
9. It is a *complex system* that *feeds back upon itself*.
10. It is *permeable*, and may encompass, or cross, other genres.
11. *Cross-fertilisation* and hybridity are the rule of genre.

§2.4. Two models for genre

Two models for this polymorph object are frequently appealed to. The first, derived from mathematics and related to prototype theory, is the *fuzzy set* consisting, as Attebery describes it for fantasy literature, of ‘a cluster of works that share certain specific tropes or characteristics’:

Texts that display a great amount of these particular features would be considered to represent the quintessence of fantasy; while low employment of them would make unlikelier the association of the texts to the fantasy genre.²⁶

In the fuzzy set approach, genres ‘are defined not by boundaries but by a centre’:

²⁵ On genre theory, see Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l’architexte* (Paris: Seuil 1979); Claudio Guillén, *Entre lo uno y lo diverso: introducción a la literatura comparada* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica 1985), chapter 12; Carolyn R. Miller, ‘Do Genres Evolve?’, a talk at Indiana University, 11-16-2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Hh3dE7phE8>); John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2015).

²⁶ Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1992).

The category has a clear centre but boundaries that shade off imperceptibly, so that a book on the fringes may be considered as belonging or not, depending on one's interests.²⁷

The fuzzy set has different degrees of membership: prototypical texts shape the core, less prototypical ones exist in the outlying regions of the set. This model provides a criterion for differentiation between genres (they orbit different cores) and also an explanation of hard-to-classify textual cases (they obtain in the fuzzy areas between genres).

Attebery adds a pregnant little sentence: 'Furthermore, there may be no single quality that links an entire set' (p. 12), that is, the various texts may resemble the prototype in *different* respects. This brings us to the second model, derived from Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblances'. In this model, none of the members of the set need display all of the features, and no single feature need be found in all the members, but different kinds of likeness obtain amongst them. Wittgenstein's illustration was that of a long piece of thread which is spun by twisting short fibres together:

the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.²⁸

This set is *polythetic*, that is, each member shares a number of traits with other members, though no single trait is shared by all.²⁹ Some fibres resemble other fibres in length, others in thickness, pliability or colour, but, spun together, they give the thread unity and strength.

In her reflections on Attebery's work, Farah Mendlesohn has proposed that the fantasy genre operates not as one fuzzy set but as a *cluster* of them.³⁰ These can be looked at as subgenres, and the composite pattern they configure comes close to Wittgenstein's model: the identity of the whole—the fantasy genre—is determined here not by some common element—a Dominant—but by the similarities among the various subgenres. The two models, then, approximate one another. The fuzzy set allows for more focus but may be thought reductionistic; the family resemblance model takes the emphasis away from the centre and bestows more resolution on continuities among subgenres. We operate with two kinds of lens, and what from a certain vantage point appears to be a single core governed by a Dominant feature, from another angle resolves into a cluster of cores, each with its own Dominant.

If the core of the genre is a set of prototypical texts, the Dominant is a trait (or a complex of traits) controlling a specific level of the set. This is in agreement with

²⁷ *Ib*, p. 12.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell [1953], 1974), I.67.

²⁹ Rodney Needham, 'Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences', in *Man* 10:3 (1975), 349–69.

³⁰ Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008. I am grateful to Elena Bermejo for bringing the work of these fantasy critics to my attention.

Jakobson's observation that for each aspect of the work a Dominant will be found.³¹ According to Attebery, three major aspects identify the fuzzy set of fantasy: content, structure, and reader response. By the side of these macro-components (which can be roughly equated with the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic dimensions of the text), more specific components (style, plot, theme, characterisation, narrative voice, versification, and so on) can be singled out, each governed by its own Dominant.

To take up our second lens first. If one attends to what Northrop Frye called a 'radical of presentation' (the way authors—or, better, the voices controlling the text—establish a relation with their audiences), different Dominants will identify different subgenres: we will then have Gothic novels, Gothic drama, Gothic poetry, and Gothic short fiction. If we look for broad thematic radicals, we will distinguish historical Gothic (Walpole's *Otranto*), oriental Gothic (William Beckford's *Vathek*), political Gothic (William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*), sentimental Gothic (Eliza Parsons' *The Castle of Wolfenbach*), the 'German' school (M. G. Lewis' *The Monk*), and so on. Among these subdivisions, furthermore, all manner of blends can obtain: *Wolfenbach* may be sentimental, but it contains forceful passages of gory cruelty not dissimilar from matter found in *The Monk*.

But further sub-categorisation is possible, witness Robert Miles's suggestion that the brand of Gothic he calls 'political' can be decomposed into several strands. One of these would include Gothic Jacobin novels advocating a radical break with the past, another capitalises on conspiracy theories, yet another raises the banner of 'Loyalist' Gothic.³² Miles posits a central feature that governs the bulk of political Gothic, namely its thematisation of the legal concept of *mortmain*—'the dead hand of the past'—as a metaphor for the oppressive hold of the feudal system over the present.³³ This, then, is the Dominant that links the various strands of political Gothic. Applying the principle to the Gothic genre itself, there is little difficulty in accepting that, whereas one lens enables us to differentiate, the other allows us to attend to a central generic trait. Later chapters will consider the Dominants at work in the various genres of horror fiction.

§2.5. The 'grammar'.

If a bundle of features coordinated by a Dominant defines the set 'from within', its evolution is controlled and stabilised 'from without' by readers' *horizons of expectations*, mostly mediated by commercial and ideological concerns.³⁴ Stability,

³¹ Roman Jakobson, 'The Dominant' [1935], in *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska & Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press 1987), 41-46.

³² Robert Miles, 'Political Gothic Fiction', in *Romantic Gothic*, eds. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2016), 129-46.

³³ Miles (2016), 137.

³⁴ Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger. 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', in *New Literary History* 2:1 (1970), 7-37.

however, is always contingent, for such horizons are porous, wobbly, and subject to drift: genres evolve because, in the final analysis, readers expect authors *both* to toe *and* to overstep the line—to stay within familiar ground, but to introduce novelty.³⁵ The result is a process of gradual but ceaseless modification.

Between the internal organising principle (the Dominant) and the external one (a horizon of expectations and demands), *code* functions as a mediating element. Genre follows a system of rules or conventions that govern reading, within which texts are necessarily composed if they are to be understood by an audience, and without which the literary message cannot exist. ‘The study of genres,’ wrote Frye, ‘has to be founded on the study of convention.’³⁶ Code governs the production, consumption and dissemination of texts, and central to it is the reader’s and writer’s awareness of recursive, orderly, predictable arrangements. A *rule* is a description of such regularities. When we speak of language rules we mean that the regularities of language can be described in terms of a *grammar*, that is, by means of certain statements that summarise them. I will use the ‘grammar of Gothic’ as a metaphor to signify that Gothic displays regularities, recursive patterns, conventions which can be condensed into brief statements. Whereas the forms of canonised fiction are considerably pliable, Gothic’s formulaic nature exhibits *strong forms*—veritable rules of composition.³⁷

A caveat is needed at this point. The rules are not prescriptive but have both *descriptive* and *predictive* power.³⁸ They are there to be followed (to whatever extent), modified, or subverted, but not ignored. They do not ‘constrain’ the writer any more than the sonnet structure ‘constrains’ the poet’s creative impulse. On the contrary, convention is the channel within which alone an author can perform and a reader understand. Writers choose to adhere to certain existing conventions, but they will also modify these by much or little to suit their ends and to accommodate (or challenge) readers’ shifting expectations, and this results in constant evolution. That is why we need to isolate the rules that define the Gothic genre in its historical circumstance and that cannot be applied to other genres or periods without due qualification. This is what the next chapter will undertake.

³⁵ David Fishelov, *Metaphors of Genre: The Role of Analogies in Genre Theory* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1993), pp. 85–117.

³⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1957), p. 96.

³⁷ See my ‘Thick Description and the Poetics of the Liminal in Gothic Tales’, in *Orbis Litterarum Universarum* 72:4 (2017), pp. 294–317.

³⁸ See Beatriz Sánchez Santos and Manuel Aguirre, ‘The Grammar of a Genre: Rules, Rhetoric, and a Liminal Poetics’, in *The Palgrave Handbook on Gothic Literature* (3 vols.), vol. 1, *Gothic Origins*, ed. Clive Bloom (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

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