The Literature of Terror

A history of Gothic Fictions
from 1765 to the present day

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LONGMAN
London and New York

Longman Group Limited London

Associated companies, branches and representatives throughout the world

Published in the United States of America by Longman Inc., New York

First published 1980

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Punter, David
The literature of terror.
1. Gothic revival (Literature)
2. English fiction – History and criticism
I. Title
823'.009'16 PR830.T3 79–40934

ISBN 0-582-48920-2
ISBN 0-582-48921-0 Pbk

Printed in Hong Kong by
Wilture Enterprises (International) Co Ltd

To Maryjane

Preface

This book has grown out of a combination of interests. First and most important is my fascination with much of the literature, which has been considerably increased by experiences of teaching it to students, at Cambridge, but with far more interesting results over the last five years at the University of East Anglia. Associated with this has been a growing dissatisfaction with the adequacy of available approaches to Gothic, a point to which I address myself several times in the course of the text. Behind this, however, there lurks a more general dissatisfaction, which can be summed up like this: it has seemed to me that the most valuable general approaches to literary criticism, which I take to be grounded in Marxist and sociological ways of thinking, have acquired the habit of falsely restricting themselves (with one or two honourable exceptions) to examining literary material which we can broadly term 'realist'. I hope this book can be seen as a contribution to a dialogue about this persistent tendency.

I want to use this brief Preface to make a few methodological points, some large and some small. Firstly, I assume that the consequence of my remark above is that the best literary criticism is written from a standpoint which is at least implicitly interdisciplinary. However, I have found the task of fulfilling this demand while attending to an enormous range of material difficult. It seems to me that the main orientation of the book

has therefore remained 'critical'; on the other hand, I hope that it suggests lines of argument which could be borne out by the proper processes of cultural research, even where considerations of space and time have prevented me from filling out the relevant connexions.

Secondly, I have planned this book as an introduction to Gothic fictions for the student and for the interested general reader, and have adopted one or two devices in furtherance of this end. In terms of quotations and references, I have varied procedure. With fiction which is currently available, I have cited the most readily obtainable version, even where this might be a paperback reprint. With fiction which is unavailable outside central libraries, I have reverted to the usual scholarly procedure, citing the original text. With poetry, where textual variation is of greater consequence, I have relied on standard editions of complete works where possible. There are various points in the text where I have had to take a choice as to whether to support my argument with esoteric quotations, or with those which are more frequently referred to in the critical literature. I have consistently tended towards the latter, as conducive to furthering a continuing and focused *debate* about the nature of Gothic.

Thirdly, I am aware that some of these comments may make the reader suppose that he or she will find much reference in the text to Marx and to Marxists. This is not the case. On the other hand, there is a good deal of specific reference to Freud. It would be ponderous to attempt an explanation of this here; I hope the reasons emerge in the course of reading. It is, however, perhaps worth pointing out the obvious, that Marx had little to say about literature in general, and nothing whatever about Gothic fictions, whereas Freud's theory both contains an implicit aesthetic dimension and centres upon an analysis of fear; the uses to which I have put this configuration seem to me at no point incompatible with an underlying historical materialism.

I began to write this book in 1976. Since then there has been a sizeable increase in the quantity of criticism of Gothic. I have rarely included explicit reference to this very recent critical material in the text (although I am aware that some arguments,

about for instance the relations of women to and in Gothic and about the formal nature of Gothic, have crept in anyway). This is because this material is as yet largely unavailable to the student or general reader. There are, however, relevant references in the Bibliography.

Finally, I should point out that the chapter divisions are not based on a simple historical sequence. My principle of organisation has been based on historical progression, but has also taken into account other considerations. Each chapter is centred on what I take to be, in one way or another, a coherent body of literary work; and most of the chapters also specialise in one of a series of linked critical approaches to the material.

D.G.P.
University of East Anglia
December 1978

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my warm thanks to the following people, without whose conversation, support and ideas this book would not have been written:

Andy Barnett, Prof. John Broadbent (University of East Anglia), Jon Cook (UEA), Dr Nick Davis (University of Liverpool), Dr Thomas Elsasser (UEA), Dr Colin Filer (University of Glasgow), Prof. Roger Fowler (UEA), Dr Rosemary Jackson (UEA), Barbara Lloyd (UEA), John Oakley (Portsmouth Polytechnic), Elspeth Railson (UEA), Lorna Sage (UEA), Dr Bernard Sharratt (University of Kent at Canterbury), Dr Allan Smith (UEA), Robert Windsor (Matlock College of Education); my mother; the students to whom I have taught Gothic fiction and related subjects, especially Debbie Philips and Doug Whitaker; and my wife Jenny.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introductory: dimensions of Gothic

In a book on Gothic fictions, it seems reasonable to begin with a brief examination of the word 'Gothic' itself. It is a word which has, even now, a wide variety of meanings, and which has had in the past even more. It is used in a number of different fields: as a literary term, as a historical term, as an artistic term, as an architectural term. And as a literary term in contemporary usage, it has a range of different applications.

In a literary context, 'Gothic' is most usually applied to a group of novels written between the 1760s and the 1820s. Their authors are now, with few exceptions, not the object of much critical attention, although some names still stand out: Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, C. R. Maturin, Mary Shelley. As we shall see, there are important differences between the better-known Gothic novels; nonetheless, literary history has tended to group them together into a homogeneous body of fiction. When thinking of the Gothic novel, a set of characteristics springs readily to mind: an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant. Used in this sense, 'Gothic' fiction is the fiction of the haunted castle, of heroines preyed on by unspeakable terrors, of the blackly lowering villain, of ghosts, vampires, monsters and werewolves.

And indeed, if this were the only literary meaning of Gothic, the term would be reasonably easy to describe and define. But it is not: over the last two centuries, it has acquired a number of other usages, some of them apparently only tangentially related to the 'original Gothic', and at the moment, in the 1970s, it is a term which crops up continually both in academic discourse and also in more popular reviews of fiction. For instance, 'Gothic' is the term which publishers still use to sell a particular genre of paperback historical romance. The genre can be conveniently identified from the blurb on the back of *The Spectral Bride* by 'Margaret Campbell', marketed in 1973 by Sphere as a 'QueenSize Gothic':

> James Daintry, Lord Manton, was the heir of a noble line. And like his father before him he brooded on the ancient crime that marred so hideously his family's history. It was said that the ghost of the murdered Harriet Bond haunted the grave, seeking revenge, seeking to become James's spectral bride. The arrival of the lovely young Adelaide Fenton and her sister Caroline drew James from his brooding, until a vengeful ghost arose to possess the young lord in search of awful justice for an ancient crime.

Inside the covers is a turgidly-written medley of slightly perverse romance and tame supernaturalism, a *Woman's Own* story set precariously in the 1870s. The elements which seem most universal in the genre are the apparent presence of a ghost, often finally explained away by non-supernatural means; the very real presence of one or more members of the aristocracy, with castles and other props to match; and a dominant love-plot, generally set in the past but with very little attempt at real historical distancing beyond, perhaps, occasional vocabulary and sometimes the interpolation of references to actual historical events. The novels show the marks of being written for a largely captive audience: the same themes are repeated with only the slightest of variations, and assumptions are frequently made which point to a readership already thoroughly familiar with a certain set of narrative and stylistic conventions.

And there are other contemporary uses of the term 'Gothic': a cardinal example is its reappearance as a description of a certain kind of American fiction of which the main practitioners

are usually taken to be James Purdy, Joyce Carol Oates, John Hawkes and Flannery O'Connor. At first glance, it is not easy to see what these writers have in common, but what the critics seem to have in mind is a literature of psychic grotesquerie. This 'New American Gothic' is said to deal in landscapes of the mind, settings which are distorted by the pressure of the principal characters' psychological obsessions. We are given little or no access to an 'objective' world; instead we are immersed in the psyche of the protagonist, often through sophisticated use of first-person narrative. It may or may not be coincidence that writers and settings alike have connexions with the American South; in one way or another, feelings of degeneracy abound. The worlds portrayed are ones infested with psychic and social decay, and coloured with the heightened hues of putrescence. Violence, rape and breakdown are the key motifs; the crucial tone is one of desensitised acquiescence in the horror of obsession and prevalent insanity.

And 'Gothic' is also used in a less tendentious sense to refer to horror fiction itself, in the common form of the ghost story. Here there is a clear historical element in the usage: many of the best-known masters of recent supernatural fiction – Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James, H. P. Lovecraft – derive their techniques of suspense and their sense of the archaic directly from the original Gothic fiction, and many of their crucial symbols of the supernatural were previously the property of these older writers. This is not, of course, to say that all twentieth-century horror fiction has its roots in the Gothic: but it is remarkable how much of it does, how much it relies on themes and styles which, by rights, would seem to be more than a century out of date.

A crucial example here, and one to which we shall return, is the horror film. These, clearly, come in all shapes and sizes, but several of the major sub-genres – for instance, the American films of the 1930s and the products of England's Hammer Studios – deal constantly in settings and characters taken from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The reasons for this are difficult to see: there are many films of terror, Alfred Hitchcock's and Roman Polanski's among them, which ably demonstrate that fear is at its fiercest when it is seen to invade

the everyday contemporary world, yet alongside these films Hammer still goes on turning out further versions of the staple Gothic fictions, with every appearance of continuing commercial success.

And then again, there are many contemporary and near-contemporary writers who have nothing to do with any of these genres, and yet who in one way or another regard themselves as personally indebted to the Gothic tradition. One of the most notable was Mervyn Peake, who created in his *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946–59) a fantasy world entirely out of the elements of early Gothic fiction.

> The while, beneath the downpour and the sunbeams, the Castle hollow as a tongueless bell, its corroded shell dripping or gleaming with the ephemeral weather, arose in immemorial defiance of the changing airs, and skies. . . . Stone after grey stone climbed. Windows yawned: shields, scrolls, and legendary mottoes, melancholy in their ruin, protruded in worn relief over arches or doorways; along the sills of casements, in the walls of towers or carved in buttresses. Storm-nibbled heads, their shallow faces striated with bad green and draped with creepers, stared blindly through the four quarters, from between broken eyelids.
>
> Stone after grey stone; and a sense of the heaving skywards of great blocks, one upon another in a climbing weight, ponderous and yet alive with the labour of dead days.[1]

The resonances here force us back to the castles of Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis, to the angry and potent ruins from which the first Gothic novelists built their literary dreams and nightmares. Another type of interpretation of Gothic is suggested by Angela Carter in the Afterword to her collection of tales, *Fireworks* (1974), where she discusses her own debt to the 'Gothic tradition' as represented by Edgar Allan Poe and E. T. A. Hoffmann:

> The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism. Character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural – and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function – that of provoking unease.[2]

A particular attitude towards the recapture of history; a particular kind of literary style; a version of self-conscious un-realism; a mode of revealing the unconscious; connexions with the primitive, the barbaric, the tabooed – all of these meanings have attached themselves in one way or another to the idea of Gothic fiction, and our present apprehension of the term is usually an uneasy concatenation of them, in which there is a complicated interplay of direct historical connexions and ever-variable metaphor.

To see the reasons for this flexibility, we have, however, to look back beyond Gothic *fiction* and into the history of the word 'Gothic' itself, which is not of course exclusively or even primarily a literary term; we need particularly to mention a set of cultural and linguistic changes during the eighteenth century which largely conditioned later uses of the word. The original meaning, not unnaturally, was literally 'to do with the Goths', or with the barbarian northern tribes who played so somewhat unfairly reviled a part in the collapse of the Roman empire, although even this apparently literal meaning was less simple than it appears, because the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers who used the term in this sense had very little idea of who the Goths were or what they were like. One thing that was known was that they came from northern Europe, and thus the term had a tendency to broaden out, to become virtually a synonym for 'Teutonic' or 'Germanic', while retaining its connotations of barbarity.

During the course of the eighteenth century, however, this was to change. In the first place, less weight came to be placed on the geographical significance of the word and correspondingly more on the historical. Here again the problem occurred that very little was known about the history of the Dark Ages, or even about medieval history; it is well known that the eighteenth century possessed a somewhat foreshortened sense of past chronology, and from being a term suggestive of more or less unknown features of the Dark Ages, 'Gothic' became descriptive of things medieval – in fact, of all things preceding about the middle of the seventeenth century. Another connotation naturally accompanied this: if 'Gothic' meant to

do with post-Roman barbarism and to do with the medieval world, it followed that it was a term which could be used in opposition to 'classical'. Where the classical was well ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a set of cultural models to be followed, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilised.

These extensions in meaning have a perceptible logic; but what started to happen in the middle of the eighteenth century had more to do with a shift in cultural values. For while the word 'Gothic' retained this stock of meanings, the value placed upon them began to alter radically. It is not possible to put a precise date on this change, but it was one of huge dimensions which affected whole areas of eighteenth-century culture – architectural, artistic and literary; for what happened was that the medieval, the primitive, the wild, became invested with positive value in and for itself.

Gothic stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern; the barbaric as opposed to the civilised; crudity as opposed to elegance; old English barons as opposed to the cosmopolitan gentry; indeed, often for the English and provincial as opposed to the European or Frenchified. Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilised values and a well-regulated society. And various writers, starting from this point, began to make out a case for the importance of these Gothic qualities and to claim, specifically, that the fruits of primitivism and barbarism possessed a fire, a vigour, a sense of grandeur which was sorely needed in English culture. Furthermore, they began to argue that there were whole areas of English cultural history which were being ignored, and that the way to breathe life into the culture was by re-establishing relations with this forgotten, 'Gothic' past.

Many of the crucial texts which made this point were written in the 1760s; perhaps the most important of all was Bishop Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762). Hurd was a littérateur and no historical scholar, but he summarised a very widespread flow of thought in his enquiry into the nature and value of the Gothic:

> The greatest geniuses of our own and foreign countries, such as Ariosto and Tasso in Italy, and Spenser and Milton in England, were seduced by these barbarities of their forefathers; were even charmed by the Gothic Romances. Was this caprice and absurdity in them? Or, may there not be something in the Gothic Romance peculiarly suited to the views of a genius, and to the ends of poetry?[8]

The arts of our ancient forefathers and the folk traditions on which they drew, Hurd is saying, may have been rude and may indeed not have conformed to rules which we have since come to regard as constitutive of aesthetic success and propriety; but may not this very rudeness and wildness be itself a source of power – a power which Spenser and Milton saw and which we may not be able to reclaim by any other means?

It is not simple to pin down precisely who the 'forefathers' were to whom Hurd refers, but one can point to four principal areas of past literature which were brought back into cultural prominence under the aegis of the 'revival of the Gothic'. Firstly, there was the truly ancient British heritage, insofar as any of it was available in the eighteenth century. The poet Thomas Gray regarded himself as well read in old Welsh poetry; James Macpherson, the celebrated forger, was referring back to an ancient British 'tradition' in his 'translations' of the imaginary Gaelic poet 'Ossian'; Thomas Percy's translation in 1770 of P. H. Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* was designed to reacquaint its readers with the ancient history of northern Europe. Secondly, there were the ballads. Percy's crucial collection, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, was published in 1765, and it was the re-establishment of the credentials of this form of 'folk-poetry' which led on, through poems like Blake's 'Gwin, King of Norway', written in the 1770s, to Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' (1797–8) and thence to Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' and Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, both written in 1819.

Thirdly, Gothic was taken to include English medieval poetry, pre-eminently the works of Chaucer, which were given a scholarly edition by Thomas Tyrwhitt in 1775–8. And fourthly, it included, at least for some critics and writers, the major work of Spenser and of the Elizabethans which, it now came to be thought, had been buried under the reputation of