

CHAPTER 2

The origins of Gothic fiction

Sentimentalism, Graveyard Poetry, The Sublime, Smollett, Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee

The origin of Gothic fiction cannot be separated from the origin of the novel form itself. As we are all now well aware, the eighteenth century was the era of the rise of the novel. There had, of course, been many forms of literary prose prior to the eighteenth century, some of them well developed, particularly the prose romance; but the works of Richardson and Fielding in the 1740s nevertheless marked an enormous change in prose writing – specifically, the abandonment of the fanciful in the name of a realistic depiction of contemporary life. This statement would need much amplification and qualification if we were concerned here with attempting to define the novel: but for our purposes it is sufficient to bear in mind the new realism which appeared in the writings of the mid-eighteenth century, a realism of course in some ways prefigured by the semifictional narratives of Defoe. Where the romance-writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had chosen archaic, mythic or fanciful settings, events in *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) and *Tom Jones* (1749) occurred in the midst of a contemporary world, and were related to the production and vindication of a contemporary morality. The question of the relation between Gothic and the rise of the novel in general is related to that of how it was possible for a new literary form to emerge in this way; and what occasioned such a massive change in the panorama of literary production.

The principal point here is the eighteenth-century change in English social structure and the associated development of the reading public. Where the writer in the mid-seventeenth century had

usually perforce produced within the system of patronage and for the benefit of a closed aristocratic circle, increasingly the appearance of a trading middle class and the growth of urban centres combined to produce other potential readers. Raymond Williams notes the growth in the number of printing-houses in London, from sixty at the Restoration, to seventy-five in 1724, and to between 150 and 200 by 1757.¹ Of course, the printing-houses were concerned with all kinds of different work, but Ian Watt's tentative figures on the appearance of works of fiction show us that, at least from the 1740s on, increase in this area would have been a significant factor in the growth of the houses: 'the annual production of works of fiction', he writes, 'which had averaged only about seven in the years between 1700 and 1740, rose to an average of about twenty in the three decades following 1740, and the output was doubled in the period from 1770 to 1800'.² Watt emphasises that these figures are only approximate, but the growth is nonetheless obvious; and the middle-class reading public clearly developed in these years a taste for a kind of reading which, while dealing in unreal incident, nonetheless located such incident in a readily recognisable world, rather than in the idealised and remote countries of the Elizabethan romancers.

Under these conditions, the sales of individual works of fiction increased markedly. Williams again quotes some figures: Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) sold 6,500 copies in thirteen months, Smollett's *Roderick Random* (1748) 5,000 copies in a year, Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754) 6,500 in a few months (*Long Revolution*, p. 161). It is, in passing, interesting to note that, although to a certain extent things changed later, the best-sellers then were very much those books which we still read now. The real take-off point, in terms of both the expansion of printing-houses and the sales of individual novels, seems to have been around 1740; and it is precisely in this decade that we can locate another major alteration in reading habits, the sudden growth of the circulating libraries, libraries, that is, which lent out books for a membership fee, generally of some 10s. or £1 a year. The importance of the circulating libraries is twofold: first, price thereby ceased to be as much of a barrier to varied reading by the middle classes as it had been; and second, books could now percolate through to some extent to those classes of society who were literate but who could never have dreamed of buying books of their own, principally the domestic servants.³

But despite all these things – the composition of the reading public, the increase in sales figures, the rise of the circulating librar-

ies – despite these factors, it is very important not to overemphasise the changes which the eighteenth century saw. The price of books was in general prohibitive. In the late seventeenth century, duodecimo novellas cost 1s. each; examples would have been Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and Congreve's *Incognita* (1693). And during the eighteenth century, these prices increased considerably: in the case of the Gothics in particular, Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne*, published in 1789, cost 3s.; her *Mysteries of Udolpho*, published five years later, cost £1.5s. for the full four volumes; while Lewis's *Monk*, published in 1796, cost half a guinea for three volumes.

In the 1740s, most labourers and domestic servants earned around 2s. to 3s. a week. Regardless of questions of literacy, to buy a book would have been financially unthinkable. Later in the century, this income might have increased to around 8s.; the matter remained unthinkable. And, perhaps more significantly, the skilled craftsmen, shopowners, small tradesmen were in a scarcely better position: throughout the century, a one-volume book would probably have cost at least half their weekly income, while to buy a four-volume novel could have involved up to a year's saving. Money, then, was one principal constraint on the public: the other was literacy, but here we are in a field which is even more difficult to assess. It is far from clear what literacy means, and no reliable statistics from the time are available; but from what little we know of attempts at self-education and of the abilities of domestic servants, it seems fair to hazard a guess that there were more literate people than there were people financially able to buy books, although these former could never have amounted to more than one-third of the population, on the most liberal scale of measurement. It would, of course, be this situation which would account for the success of the circulating libraries. Taking both constraints together, we are enabled to place the changes in perspective. If, in a population of between six and seven million, book sales rarely exceeded a few thousand copies, it seems profoundly unlikely that novels were reaching any kind of mass audience, no matter what their content. Richard Altick doubts that the audience for books ran as high as Edmund Burke's contemporary guess of 80,000.⁴ It is for this reason that Gothic fiction should not be characterised as a popular literature in the sense which we would now recognise. Labourers and domestic servants might be in a position, rarely, to acquire small penny romances, or certain kinds of ephemeral and periodical literature; they would never have been able to afford the novels of

Radcliffe or Lewis. And although a small number of domestic servants might have found themselves with access to their mistresses' copies of such books, it is highly improbable, as we shall see when we move on to look at the novels themselves, that they would have been able to make head or tail of them; for they are not written in anything remotely resembling a popular style. Walpole and Radcliffe write within a complex web of classical and Shakespearean allusions. Lewis writes an admittedly dramatic but very complicated prose. Mary Shelley's work is packed with elaborate and erudite social argument. Radcliffe, it is true, received the then colossal sums of £500 for *Udolpho* and £600 for *The Italian*; but it could not have come, directly or indirectly, from the lower classes. Indeed, the evidence seems to point quite clearly to the hypothesis that, despite the differences between the realistic novel and the Gothic, and despite the attacks mounted on Gothic fiction by various arbiters of middle-class taste, the readership for the two genres must have been pretty much the same. In some way, the middle-class audience for whom Fielding had catered must have changed its tastes quite radically during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, as well as developing in size; contemporary settings were again in part supplanted by settings inherited from the old romances, and the exotic was drawn into the realm of the novel itself, and this was largely at the implicit behest of the bourgeoisie.

Part of the explanation for this shift might lie in a specific contradiction in the history of eighteenth-century ideas, a contradiction between 'official culture' and actual taste. On the official side, the eighteenth century was the great era of rationalism and Enlightenment. Associated principally with the French thinkers Diderot and Voltaire, but also in different ways affecting English thinkers from David Hume to William Godwin, the Enlightenment saw itself as the bearer of a radically progressive philosophy. Eschewing all reliance on faith and revealed religion, it declared itself in favour of scientific progress towards knowledge. Perhaps its most typical product was the *Encyclopédie* (1751–80), which professed to be a systematic account of all human knowledge; perhaps its most persistent claim was that man was potentially all-powerful, that there were no secrets of the universe which would remain unrevealed to him if he were only to pursue the paths of science and reason. The human reason was the only guide to truth; if there was a God, his only function had been to create the universe, and he had no further role to play.

But it is, of course, possible to interpret this eighteenth-century

reliance on reason in several different ways. Although the removal or distancing of the divine and the insistence on human knowledge can be seen as progressive, the reduction of the human to the rational can also be seen as circular and sterile; this, for instance, is how Blake saw it.⁵ Reliance on reason may appear to remove mystery, but only at the expense of outlawing large expanses of actual experience, the experience of the emotions, the passions. This is the view of Enlightenment as 'mythic fear turned radical. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is no more than a, so to speak, universal taboo. Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear.'⁶ According to such an interpretation, fear is both the root and the product of the attempt to bring all things under rational control, and rationalism will be a self-defeating system because that which cannot be thus assimilated will therefore become all the more taboo; reason will create its own enemies. To consider the passions and the emotions as mere subject faculties to be brought under the sway of an all-dominant reason, as the Enlightenment thinkers did, will render those faculties all the more incomprehensible, and in some ways eighteenth-century fiction shows an increasing awareness of this problem.

In any case, at a simpler level, the principles of the Enlightenment never came into easy relationship with the novel form, in its realistic or any other manifestation. In more abstract literary genres like the meditative poem, it may be possible to support such an over-consistent view of man; but the panoramic nature of the novel, its ability to sustain the contradictions of actual behaviour, meant from the beginning that it never bore the full burden of rationalism, and, presumably, also that this was not what its readers demanded. In Defoe, rationalism becomes submerged under a set of arguments about the nature of self-interest, and a novel like *Moll Flanders* (1722) ironically suggests the severity of the circumstantial limitations on reasonable behaviour. In Fielding, nominal acquiescence in rational principles is set against an awareness of complexity and simple messiness that again turns Enlightenment against itself, again to the apparent delight of his readers. In fact, the noted irony of the eighteenth-century novelists appears to stem in large part from their awareness that the official account of human behaviour and motivation could not stand much scrutiny from the point of view of everyday life.

One major eighteenth-century novelist did not share this irony, and that was Richardson: not by any means because he accepted

the official canons of Enlightenment, but because he was barely concerned with them at all. Richardson's whole project was founded on an investigation into the emotions, into the strength of those feelings which the rationalist tried to suppress; and it is Richardson who is by far the most important progenitor of the kinds of fiction being written in the final three decades of the century.

We have already mentioned that much of that fiction was Gothic; but there is another, more general term, which covers quite a lot of the Gothic itself and almost everything else that was popular between 1770 and 1800, and that is sentimentalism. 'Between Richardson and Jane Austen', a critic writes, 'sentimentalism gave the prevailing tone to fiction; few writers were untouched by its stigma';⁷ and the only relation between sentimentalism and rationalism is negative. The same critic defines sentimentalism as the 'cult or creed of sentimentality', which is 'not merely high emotionality; it is a stimulated consciousness of emotion, and even a certain vanity in that consciousness. Needless to say, when self-conscious emotionality becomes a test of fineness of nature, it can, like any other mental trait, become a part of social education. It can likewise become a fad' (Steeves, p. 161). And, indeed, a fad is what it became. The sentimental novel was one which dwelt upon the fine emotions of its characters, tracing their feelings minutely, choosing situations to bring out their heightened self-consciousness, situations filled with pathos and anguish. Preeminently, sentimentalism was a tone: an example can be taken from the model of the genre, Henry MacKenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771). The scene is a visit to a sick-bed by an erstwhile benefactor of the invalid:

On something like a bed lay a man, with a face seemingly emaciated with sickness, and a look of patient dejection; a bundle of dirty shreds served him for a pillow; but he had a better support – the arm of a female who kneeled beside him, beautiful as an angel, but with a fading languor in her countenance, the still life of melancholy, that seemed to borrow its shade from the object on which it gazed. There was a tear in her eye! the sick man kissed it off in its bud, smiling through the dimness of his own! – when she saw Mountford, she crawled forward on the ground and clasped his knees; he raised her from the floor; she threw her arms round his neck, and sobbed out a speech of thankfulness, eloquent beyond the power of language.

'Compose yourself, my love,' said the man on the bed; 'but he, whose goodness has caused that emotion, will pardon its effects.'⁸

It is a tone which it is very difficult for us now to appreciate, and we shall come across it again in the early Gothic novels, particularly those of Radcliffe and her school. Its universality at the time was

remarkable, and we can even sense it lingering in some of the bleaker passages of Dickens. It rests partly on a number of stylistic conventions: the reference to the speech which transcends language; the oddly well-formed discourse delivered by the sick man; the exclamation marks placed to point out to the reader those moments at which his sentimental appreciation is to be particularly delighted – by the well-placed tear in the girl's eye, by the emotionally correct reaction of the invalid. The angelic beauty, the fading languor, the excess of thankfulness have nothing to do with the reasonable, and very little to do with the real: they are designed to angle the scene towards the demonstration of the moral and aesthetic lesson which it so obviously preaches.

The strength of sentimentalism, the aspect of the real which nevertheless underlies all this conventional paraphernalia, was the minute and detailed observation of emotions, as we can see from a further passage from MacKenzie, where the protagonist is in the presence of the recently deceased Man of Feeling himself:

I entered the room where his body lay; I approached it with reverence, not fear: I looked; the recollection of the past crowded upon me. I saw that form, which, but a little before, was animated with a soul which did honour to humanity, stretched without sense or feeling before me. 'Tis a connection we cannot easily forget: – I took his hand in mine; I repeated his name involuntarily: – I felt a pulse in every vein at the sound. I looked earnestly in his face; his eye was closed, his lip pale and motionless. There is an enthusiasm in sorrow that forgets impossibility; I wondered that it was so. The sight drew a prayer from my heart; it was the voice of frailty and of man! the confusion of my mind began to subside into thought; I had time to weep!

(*Man of Feeling*, p. 131)

The Gothic could not have come into being without a style of this kind, for it is in this style that we begin to glimpse the possibility of the balance and reason of the Enlightenment being crushed beneath the weight of feeling and passion. Despite the chronic indulgence which vitiates sentimentalism, there is a kind of precision to passages like this, almost a stream-of-consciousness precision, a precision in the attempt to cope with psychological facts for which no rational explanation exists. There is also a movement, a movement of excitement: the sentence is broken, distorted by the pressure which feelings exert on the ordering of the mind. The specificity of 'reverence, not fear' may appear merely self-congratulatory, but it also economically effects a real discrimination; again, the interjection of 'I wondered that it was so' is gauche, but it also shows MacKenzie's discontent with the neat picture of the

interplay of separate faculties which had passed in earlier years for psychology. The argument is perhaps best evidenced from Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (1768), where, in the very act of parodying sentimentalism, Sterne simultaneously provides a fine example of the absurd richness of the mode.

The popularity of the sentimental novel demonstrates the contradictions in taste of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie. It also shows, more precisely, the area in which these contradictions were most strongly felt: the area of the passions, of the emotional life. Of course the emotions presented by the sentimentalists seem odd, distorted, artificial; but this is hardly surprising at a time when for generations social and cultural life had been dominated by a set of ideas which attempted to reduce the power and practical effectiveness of these emotions and, in the end, deny them. In sentimentalism, the middle classes are gropingly moving back towards the notion of psychological depth which the bland superficialities of the Enlightenment had tried to obliterate, towards the important perception that an account of behaviour cannot substitute for an account of motivation. The connection which needs to be made in terms of the novels of the period 1770–1800 is that this project, which itself penetrates deeply into Gothic fiction, is closely allied with another more obvious Gothic project, the recapture of history.

This is not, of course, by any means the prerogative of the Gothic novel as such; it is, as we have seen, the essence of the Gothic cultural emphasis. The catalogue of works of the later eighteenth century which contribute to the reappropriation of the past would be endless: Hurd's *Letters*; Percy's *Reliques*; the work of 'Ossian'; Thomas Chatterton's Rowley poems; John Carter's *Specimens of Ancient Sculpture and Painting* (1780–94); Joseph Ritson's scholarly collections of ancient poetry: these are only the outstanding works. What they all have in common is a questioning of assumptions about what constitutes the civilised. The thinking which the scholarly antiquarians and Gothics were questioning was Augustanism; and without some understanding of Augustan principles and their role in eighteenth-century thought it is difficult to understand the real purposes of the Gothic revival, either in terms of history, or in terms of the way in which it purported to offer a new conception of the relations between the human, the natural and the divine.

Augustanism took its name from the Augustan period of the Roman empire. The Augustans saw their period of national history as analogous to this past age, in that it too seemed to them a silver age: that is, it seemed poised between golden achievements in the

past and possible future collapse into a barbarian age of bronze. In Augustan thinking, the barbarians are forever at the gates; the writer's role is to maintain the defensive fires of culture. In this sense, Augustanism was perforce conservative; reason was again the dominant mental faculty, and was the main barricade against invasion and the death of civilisation. It is tempting to see in Augustanism the doctrine of a small cultural élite holding on to power and status under increasing pressure, and that pressure as precisely that exerted by the new reading public on the homogeneity of the old literary establishment.

As with all large terms, it is difficult to find particular figures whom the term 'Augustanism' entirely fits. Fielding was undoubtedly Augustan in his belief in the stability of social roles and in the necessity of social and psychological compromise, but his mocking, half-amused attitude towards the doctrine of literary kinds shows his detachment from the more rigid Augustan formulae. Johnson, on the other hand, was a firm believer in these literary rules, and yet it was his view of Shakespeare which became the first significant breach in them. To find the ideas in their purest form it is necessary to stay early in the century, with essayists like Addison and Steele and with the master of Augustan poetry, Pope; and to see how Augustan cultural ideals were translated into literary terms, to look at Pope's own work of critical theory, the *Essay on Criticism* (1711):

*First follow Nature, and your Judgment frame
By her just Standard, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,
One clear, unchang'd, and Universal Light,
Life, Force, and Beauty, must to all impart,
At once the Source, and End, and Test of Art.
Art from that Fund each just Supply provides,
Works without Show, and without Pomp presides:
In some fair Body thus th'informing Soul
With Spirits feeds, with Vigour fills the whole,
Each Motion guides, and ev'ry Nerve sustains;
It self unseen, but in th'Effects, remains.
Some, to whom Heav'n in Wit has been profuse,
Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
For Wit and Judgment often are at strife,
Tho' meant each other's Aid, like Man and Wife.
'Tis more to guide than spur the Muses' Steed;
Restrain his Fury, than provoke his Speed;
The winged Courser, like a gen'rous Horse,
Shows most true Mettle when you check his Course.
Those Rules of old discover'd, not devis'd,
Are Nature still, but Nature Methodis'd;*

*Nature, like Liberty, is but restrain'd
By the same Laws which first herself ordain'd.*⁹

The outstanding feature here is the image of the 'Muses' Steed'; Pope claims that restraint and control are more important than the 'spur'. The Augustan critical attitude despised spontaneity and wildness and argued instead for a controlled, reasonable poetry marked by balance and closed structure. The argument is not that poetry has nothing to do with emotion or passion, but that these must accept the dominion of reason; the 'winged courser' must accept the bit.

The relations which Pope depicts between the faculties are in fact ambiguous: on the one hand, wit and judgement should be 'like Man and Wife', which we might naïvely suppose to imply an equality of partnership, but restraint is also valued more highly than speed and flight. The balance is not really an equal one: rather, the function of balance itself is being vindicated at the expense of any sign of rebellion against the rational mind. Pope's argument about freedom and poetry has a similar shape in claiming that to be bound by laws of your own devising is not to be bound at all. These laws, he says, have been 'discover'd, not devis'd': that is, they are not man-made impositions, but discoveries about how nature works. And these discoveries were made by the classical poets, primarily Homer.

The notion that the classical poets discovered nature's secrets is very convenient, in that it enables one to identify on good authority not only the rules of nature but also the rules of literary form. Poetry, the argument runs, must stay close to nature – that is, it must avoid the improbable or fanciful – but it best achieves this end by drawing on the classics. This produces a strange paradox: a poetry which claims proximity to nature while demonstrating a full use of the resources of literary artifice.

The laws of nature are, for Pope, permanent and all-embracing, and the task of the poet is therefore not to attempt presumptuously to discover novelty but to continue to express old truths in increasingly perspicuous and beautiful forms; such was the central tenet of Augustanism, but its hold on English poetry was brief. We have already seen the 1740s as the decade of Fielding and Richardson; but in poetry it was also an important decade, the decade which saw the growth of a kind of poetry which was radically different from anything Pope had advocated, and which came to be called 'graveyard poetry'. At this point, it is worth going into graveyard

poetry in some detail for several reasons: because its involvement with death and suffering prefigures the Gothic novel; because it marks an early stage of the renewed desire for literary 'novelty' which characterised the later part of the century; because it challenges rationalism and vaunts extremity of feeling; and because its actual influence on Gothic fiction was considerable, although in a rather curious way: it exerted an enormous influence on German writers of terror-fiction, and through them retained an influence in Britain well into the 1790s and beyond.

Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* came out between 1742 and 1745; Robert Blair's *The Grave* in 1743; James Hervey's major work, *Meditations among the Tombs*, between 1745 and 1747; Thomas Warton's work *On the Pleasures of Melancholy* in 1747; and Gray's famous *Elegy* in 1751. We can best appreciate the difference between Augustan and graveyard poetry, and at the same time perceive the continuity of tone and feeling between graveyard and Gothic, by comparing a further passage from Pope with two of the most impressive pieces of graveyard writing, Thomas Parnell's early 'Night-Piece on Death' (1722) and the notorious *Night Thoughts*. Parnell's poem was written before the intensive Gothic revival of Miltonic and pre-Miltonic poetry was properly under way, Young's at the heart of this revival.

Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733) was the most important single statement of Augustan philosophical and social ideas, and it also exemplifies in its form the cultural criteria and attitudes which it sets out to justify. A passage on man's place in the world provides a particularly apt comparison with Parnell and Young:

*Go, wiser thou! and in thy scale of sense
Weigh thy Opinion against Providence;
Call Imperfection what thou fancy'st such,
Say, here he gives too little, there too much;
Destroy all creatures for thy sport or gust,
Yet cry, If Man's unhappy, God's unjust;
If Man alone ingross not Heav'n's high care,
Alone made perfect here, immortal there:
Snatch from his hand the balance and the rod,
Re-judge his justice, be the God of God!*

*In Pride, in reas'ning Pride, our error lies;
All quit their sphere, and rush into the skies.
Pride still is aiming at the blest abodes,
Men would be Angels, Angels would be Gods.
Aspiring to be Gods, if Angels fell,
Aspiring to be Angels, Men rebel;
And who but wishes to invert the laws*

Of Order, sins against th'Eternal Cause.

*Ask for what end the heav'nly bodies shine,
Earth for whose use? Pride answers, 'Tis for mine:
For me kind Nature wakes her genial pow'r,
Suckles each herb, and spreads out ev'ry flow'r;
Annual for me, the grape, the rose renew
The juice nectareous, and the balmy dew;
For me, the mine a thousand treasures brings;
For me, health gushes from a thousand springs;
Seas roll to waft me, suns to light me rise;
My foot-stool earth, my canopy the skies.'*

*But errs not Nature from this gracious end,
From burning suns when livid deaths descend,
When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep
Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep?
'No ('tis reply'd) the first Almighty Cause
Acts not by partial, but by gen'ral laws;
Th'exceptions few; some change since all began,
And what created perfect?' – Why then Man?
If the great end be human Happiness,
Then Nature deviates; and can Man do less?*

(*Poems*, III i, 129–34)

The most prominent stylistic feature here is, of course, a balance, the variety of which is astonishing. In its simplest form, there is the internal rhythmic balance which gives strength to 'When earthquakes swallow, or when tempests sweep/Towns to one grave, whole nations to the deep'. In the couplet 'For me, the mine a thousand treasures brings;/For me, health gushes from a thousand springs', both rhyme and the displaced repetition of 'thousand' work together with the rhythm. In the line 'Re-judge his justice, be the God of God', parallelism and balance are not working in a void, but point the paradox which Pope is exposing: the very simplicity of the structure is supposed to replicate the paucity of the argument. Again, the placing of the words 'Of Order', precisely dis-ordered *vis-à-vis* the rest of the line, is rhetorical evidence of the disorganisation – and hence, naturally, the incorrectness – of the beliefs under attack.

For this passage is fundamentally an attack, on those who claim that nature's purpose is merely to serve man's needs. To Pope, this is the sin of pride, which makes men out to be gods, and it is in this context that the references to the rebellion of the angels have their meaning. The condemnation is dual: not only of the proud, but also of any literature which displays pride by attempting a task

outside its orbit. The failure of Satan's rebellion is also the failure of Milton's epic poem, which attempted a task beyond human means. The form of the passage, the arrangement of the couplets, the marshalling of the verse-paragraphs, all are signs of the limitations which the poet should accept. For Pope, there is licit and illicit knowledge: to suppose that one can fully interpret the laws of nature is illicit, and will incur that punishment reserved for the unnaturally aspiring.

Parnell's 'Night-Piece'¹⁰ is a blend of Augustan and non-Augustan ideas; it opens with a comparison of different kinds and sources of knowledge:

*By the blue taper's trembling light,
No more I waste the wakeful night,
Intent with endless view to pore
The schoolmen and the sages o'er:
Their books from wisdom widely stray,
Or point at best the longest way.
I'll seek a readier path, and go
Where wisdom's surely taught below.*

Subdued though his language is, Parnell is saying something quite startling. Unlike Pope, he is not impressed with the attempts made by reason to define the limits of human understanding; like Wordsworth later, he claims that nothing can be learnt from books, from abstracted experience. To learn aright, one must take the quicker path, which is the path of intense feeling; one can best learn the secrets of life from meditation on its extreme limit, death. One has to ask why this should be a 'readier' path: whether it will convey wisdom seems doubtful, but then it seems rather to be excitement which Parnell is seeking, that thrill of entering forbidden realms which was to become so all-pervasive in the Gothic novel.

Parnell recounts his explorations 'among the livid gleams of night', and sees the tombs of the poor and forgotten, and of the vanished mighty. Then the dead come forth:

*Hah! while I gaze, pale Cynthia fades,
The bursting earth unveils the shades!
All slow, and wan, and wrapp'd with shrouds,
They rise in visionary crowds,
And all with sober accents cry,
'Think, mortal, what it is to die'.*

*Now from yon black and funeral yew,
That bathes the charnel-house with dew,
Methinks I hear a voice begin;*

*(Ye ravens, cease your croaking din,
Ye tolling clocks, no time resound
O'er the long lake and midnight ground!)
It sends a peal of hollow groans,
Thus speaking from among the bones.*

The first paragraph is straightforwardly Virgilian, but in the second a more febrile and indulgent tone creeps in. Most obviously, the lines are already containing an array of Gothic props: charnel-house, ravens, tolling clocks, hollow groans. But it is not just that: the actual flow of the lines is different. The couplet structure is momentarily dissolved, and replaced by a more extended, incantatory flow, as the voice – the voice of Death – takes over from the discourse of the poet. This replicates the holding back of time, the perpetuation of a moment of ghastly revelation in which reason reels before the onset of the irrational. Death's message is, in the first instance, reassuring:

*'When men my scythe and darts supply,
How great a king of fears am I!
They view me like the last of things:
They make, and then they dread, my stings.
Fools! if you less provok'd your fears,
No more my spectre form appears.
Death's but a path which must be trod,
If man would ever pass to God;
A port of calms, a state of ease
From the rough rage of swelling seas.*

*'Why then thy flowing sable stoles,
Deep pendant cypress, mourning poles,
Loose scarfs to fall athwart thy weeds,
Long palls, drawn hearses, cover'd steeds,
And plumes of black, that, as they tread,
Nod o'er the scutcheons of the dead?'*

In other words, man's fear of death is self-created: if he ceased to adorn it with the symbols of fear, he would lose the fear itself. The message is rational; the moment of dread has passed and the poet has been taught the mistake of abandoning himself to a reverie of feeling. And yet the ending of the poem is still surprising:

*'As men who long in prison dwell,
With lamps that glimmer round the cell,
Whene'er their suffering years are run,
Spring forth to greet the glittering sun:
Such joy, though far transcending sense,
Have pious souls at parting hence.
On earth, and in the body plac'd,*

A few, and evil years they waste;
But when their chains are cast aside,
See the glad scene unfolding wide,
Clap the glad wing, and tower away,
And mingle with the blaze of day.'

The poet has received the knowledge which should make him feel at peace with the human condition, yet the final word of the message is that life is made up of 'a few, and evil years'. The voice of Death is positively seductive as it portrays the grandeur which awaits, not specifically in heaven, but beyond the bounds of the 'prison' of life.

What is proposed in the last four lines is precisely the conversion of men into angels against which Pope rails. The knowledge which the poet has gained is one calculated to make him dissatisfied with his destined place in the great chain of being, to encourage him towards a 'rush into the skies', a divine consummation, albeit beyond the bounds of death. The 'Night-Piece' is an uneasy poem in that it alternates between moral prudence and recklessness, seeming to subjugate the demands of feeling to the dictates of reason while suggesting an apotheosis to be attained through abandonment to the deathly impulse.

Some passages from Young suggest other problems of the transition from the 'peace of the Augustans' to the restlessness of the later eighteenth century:

Silence and darkness! solemn sisters! twins
From ancient night, who nurse the tender thought
To reason, and on reason build resolve,
(That column of true majesty in man)
Assist me: I will thank you in the grave;
The grave, your kingdom: there this frame shall fall
A victim sacred to your dreary shrine.
But what are ye? Thou, who didst put to flight
Primeval silence, when the morning stars,
Exulting, shouted o'er the rising ball;
O Thou! whose word from solid darkness struck
That spark, the sun; strike wisdom from my soul;
My soul, which flies to Thee, her trust, her treasure,
As misers to their gold, while others rest.¹¹

One is immediately struck by Young's cosmic perspective: the soul of the poet, not bounded by earthly chains, invokes the powers of darkness to assist his journey, but this journey is not a hesitant probing among tombs but a visionary voyage embracing the earth, the stars, the whole universe. Formally, Young rejects Augustanism

for the sonorous lines of Milton; 'ancient night' is also familiar to us from association with Milton's Satan, whose aspiration and descent among the stars are continually invoked. The poet's soul, much like the persona of Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', is passive yet exalted; it is not that which *achieves* wisdom, but that from which wisdom can be struck, yet, with assistance, it is able to mingle with the angels.

Young is self-consciously an orator, and *Night Thoughts* is an attempt at epic, despite its largely mental landscape, an epic in tone and in the implications for human status which that tone carries. But alongside the exaltation of the poet's stance and vision lies an intense and related dependence on images of death, guilt and repression:

Tho' nature's terrors, thus, may be repress;
Still frowns grim Death; guilt points the tyrant's spear.
And whence all human guilt? From death forgot.
Ah me! too long I set at nought the swarm
Of friendly warnings, which around me flew;
And smil'd, unsmitten: small my cause to smile!
Death's admonitions, like shafts upwards shot,
More dreadful by delay, the longer ere
They strike our hearts, the deeper is their wound;
O think how deep, Lorenzo! here it stings:
Who can appease its anguish? How it burns!
What hand the barb'd, invenom'd thought can draw?
What healing hand can pour the balm of peace?
And turn my sight undaunted on the tomb?

(Works, I, 57)

Where Parnell was content to say that he as an individual had derived a lesson from thinking on death, Young is far more insistent, ascribing all human guilt to forgetfulness of the fact of mortality. And where Parnell's gaze upon death was untroubled once the first shock of the vision had worn off, Young advises a tortured and self-torturing concentration, turning the 'invenom'd thought' in the everlasting wound. He concentrates on death not to acquire peace of mind but to experience the ultimate anguish, and at points in the poem this becomes a morbid indulgence which strongly prefigures the meditations of writers like Lewis and Maturin:

What awful joy! what mental liberty!
I am not pent in darkness; rather say
(If not too bold) in darkness I'm embower'd.
Delightful gloom! the clust'ring thoughts around
Spontaneous rise, and blossom in the shade;
But droop by day, and sicken in the sun.

Thought borrows light elsewhere; from that first fire,
 Fountain of animation! whence descends
 Urania, my celestial guest! who deigns
 Nightly to visit me, so mean; and now,
 Conscious how needful discipline to man,
 From pleasing dalliance with the charms of night
 My wand'ring thought recalls, to what excites
 Far other beat of heart! Narcissa's tomb!
 Or is it feeble nature calls me back,
 And breaks my spirit into grief again?
 Is it a Stygian vapour in my blood?
 A cold, slow puddle, creeping thro' my veins?
 Or is it thus with all men? – Thus with all.

(Works, I, 83–4)

A reversal of values is signified by the darkness in which one is not 'pent' but 'embower'd'; 'gloom' which is 'delightful'; thoughts which 'blossom' by night, 'droop' and 'sicken' by day. Young is, of course, meditating on recent death, but this is a slight occasion for the obsessive seeking after things of the night which we find here. Like the Augustans, Young regards day as the time of reason, night as escape, but for him reason is mere 'discipline', and darkness and death are thus mysteriously alluring.

For night has to do with fear, and fear has a positive place in Young's cosmic scheme. He asks why, in the end, death proves so elusive to thought; is it judgement, he asks, which prevents us from capturing its essence:

Or is it fear turns startled reason back,
 From looking down a precipice so steep?
 'Tis dreadful; and the dread is wisely plac'd
 By nature, conscious of the make of man.
 A dreadful friend it is, a terror kind,
 A flaming sword to guard the tree of life.

(Works, I, 90)

If this seems a mere tissue of paradoxes, it is nonetheless one which possessed a considerable cultural force: again, it is a blend of indulgence and moral rectitude which we shall find throughout Gothic writing. Essentially, it is a justification for a literature of terror, on the grounds that terror guards our sanity.

But alongside the dark side of Young's vision there is also a celebration of man, but of a very different kind from Pope's:

How poor, how rich, how abject, how august,
 How complicate, how wonderful, is man!
 How passing wonder He, who made him such!
 Who centred in our make such strange extremes!

From diff'rent natures marvellously mixt,
 Connection exquisite of distant worlds!
 Distinguish'd link in being's endless chain!
 Midway from nothing to the deity!
 A beam ethereal, sullied, and absorpt!
 Tho' sullied, and dishonour'd, still divine!
 Dim miniature of greatness absolute!
 An heir of glory! a frail child of dust!
 Helpless immortal! insect infinite!
 A worm! a god! – I tremble at myself,
 And in myself am lost! at home a stranger,
 Thought wanders up and down, surpris'd, aghast,
 And wond'ring at her own: how reason reels!
 O what a miracle to man is man,
 Triumphantly distress'd! what joy, what dread!
 Alternately transported, and alarm'd!
 What can preserve my life? or what destroy?
 An angel's arm can't snatch me from the grave;
 Legions of angels can't confine me there.

(Works, I, 3–4)

The fact of man's mixed being is to Young a source of grandeur, and the most impressive passages of *Night Thoughts* are those in which the reader soars with the poet into the boundless reaches of the universe, man's natural home, and aspires to divinity. For Young, no knowledge is illicit, and already here we can see the beginnings of the myth of Frankenstein, partly in the figure of Prometheus which he invokes, partly in the relevance of Milton's Satan, of whose rebellion *Night Thoughts* can be read as a sustained vindication.

The revival of interest in antiquity and the emergence of a poetry of defiance and divine aspiration were thus two roots of Gothic fiction; a third which needs to be mentioned is the development in the mid-eighteenth century of the theory of the sublime. The major influence here was the classical critic Longinus, of whose work this is a typical passage:

Now I am well aware that the greatest natures are least immaculate. Perfect precision runs the risk of triviality, whereas in great writing as in great wealth there must needs be something overlooked. Perhaps it is inevitable that the humble, mediocre natures, because they never run any risks, never aim at the heights, should remain to a large extent safe from error, while in great natures their very greatness spells danger.¹²

In place of 'precision', Longinus advocated a literature of sublimity, by which he means that which does not 'persuade' but 'entrances', a literature not of the limited but of the limitless, a kind of writing

which 'masters' its audience with its grandeur and scope and which resists false and imposed constraints:

In dealing, then, with writers of genius, whose grandeur is of a kind that comes within the limits of use and profit, we must at the outset form the conclusion that, while they are far from unerring, yet they are all more than human. Other qualities prove their possessors men, sublimity lifts them near the mighty mind of God. (Fyfe, p. 227)

To the Longinian, all the pettier Augustan virtues were merely ways of attaining to eminence in the second-rate. True grandeur was reserved for those who made the 'rush into the skies', of whom Longinus' favourite example was Demosthenes. He claims that Demosthenes' audacity of conception 'far exceeds the limits of mere persuasion . . . our attention is drawn from the reasoning to the enthralling effect of the imagination, and the technique is concealed in a halo of brilliance' (Fyfe, p. 179). It was true, of course, that Augustan theory had allowed for the cooperation of reason and the imagination, of the suasive and the pleasurable, but what it did not allow for was a situation in which reason is swamped amid the glories and splendours of sublimity. Longinus asserts the superiority of flawed sublimity to flawless mediocrity, and thus encourages the poet to undertake the grand and the extreme rather than concentrating on the trivialities of technical perfection.

Clearly the Longinian influence on *Night Thoughts* is strong, and we can also see in the poem a specific conjunction of Longinian theory and Miltonic practice: the 'Gothic' revival of earlier poetry, poetry unaffected by the rigorous rules of Augustanism, required alternative justification and it was often Longinus who was taken to provide it. Milton was, after all, the example of flawed sublimity; but where the model of Virgil, interpreted according to a theory of the decline of culture, had encouraged Pope and others towards a poetry which, they assumed, could only be inferior to the original, the model of Miltonic striving, interpreted according to the Longinian theory of the paramouncy of genius, encouraged a wholly different attitude, which Young expressed:

What glory to come near, what glory to reach, what glory
(presumptuous thought) to surpass, our predecessors! And is that
then in nature absolutely impossible? Or is it not, rather, contrary to
nature to fail in it? Nature herself sets the ladder, all wanting is our
ambition to climb. For by the bounty of nature we are as strong as
our predecessors; and by the favour of time (which is but another
round in nature's scale) we stand on higher ground.¹³

The association of Young's aspiration with Satan's is underlined by

the word 'ambition', the key motivation of the Gothic hero; and many of the Gothic writers were heavily influenced by the cult of sublimity as represented by Longinus, Young and Edmund Burke's *Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756). No matter how Young chooses to dilute it, the central claim which he makes is the claim of self-divinity, the conviction of being potentially a God:

Therefore dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias and full fort of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the stranger within thee; excite and cherish every spark of intellectual light and heat, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy genius rise (if a genius thou hast) as the sun from chaos; and if I should say then, like an Indian, *Worship it*, (though too bold) yet should I say little more than my second rule enjoins, (viz.)
Reverence thyself. (Conjectures, p. 24)

The importance of Burke's treatise to Gothic writing was equally central, for it was here that the first attempt was made to systematise a connection between sublimity and terror. 'Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible subjects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.'¹⁴ In these celebrated words, Burke announces the development of what had in Longinus been a matter of rhetorical theory, and what was in the graveyard poets becoming a matter of rising taste, into a whole new field of psychological speculation. There were, of course, many faulty areas in his work, in particular his doomed attempt to ground his psychological ideas in the physiological and his insistent production of examples, which tend sometimes towards the ludicrous; nonetheless, an entire new dimension to the relation between literature and fear is outlined in passages like this:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (*Enquiry*, p. 57)

Thus the excitation of fear becomes one of the most significant enterprises a writer can undertake; thus also fear is recognised as

the primary means by which the dictates of reason can be bypassed. Many of the details of Burke's analysis have relevance to the Gothic writers – in particular his emphasis on obscurity, vastness, magnificence as constitutive elements of the sublime – but his most important contribution was to confer on terror a major and worthwhile literary role.

The background against which the emergence of Gothic fiction needs to be seen, then, is a complex one, in which intellectual, technical and commercial developments all play a part. It is a background which includes the appearance and early growth of the novel form itself; the attendant emphasis on realism, and the complicated relationship which that bears to rationalist philosophy; Augustan cultural thinking and the view of human psychology which it entails; the emergence of an emphasis on extreme emotionality which produces sentimental fiction; rival views of the relevance to contemporary writing of immediate and distant history; and the developments in poetic practice and theory in the mid-eighteenth century. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the elements of Gothic fiction first begin to emerge, in a hesitant way, within the mainstream of the realist novel itself. Watt claims that *Tom Jones* contains 'the first Gothic mansion in the history of the novel' (Watt, p. 29), and that the end of Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* should be regarded as graveyard literature (Watt, pp. 225–6); Varma mentions Fielding's description of the Palace of Death in *Journey from this World to the Next* (1741–2) (Varma, p. 11). In these instances, certainly, we see the gathering together of props; but the first important eighteenth-century work to propose terror as a subject for novelistic writing was Smollett's *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753). *Fathom* is, in many ways, conventional enough: it is a satirical novel about the abominable exploits of an international confidence trickster who finds temporary success and eventual failure in duping a wide variety of people in settings spread across Europe; it is a variation of picaresque fiction, although written without the sympathy for the rogue hero which characterises many other examples of the genre, and with a particularly bitter and savage awareness of the hypocrisy and violence of 'elegant' society. Smollett justifies his topic thus:

Almost all the heroes of this kind, who have hitherto succeeded on the English stage, are characters of transcendent worth, conducted through the vicissitudes of fortune, to that goal of happiness, which ever ought to be the repose of extraordinary desert. – Yet the same principle by which we rejoice at the remuneration of merit, will teach

us to relish the disgrace and discomfiture of vice, which is always an example of extensive use and influence, because it leaves a deep impression of terror upon the minds of those who are not confirmed in the pursuit of morality and virtue, and while the balance wavers, enables the right scale to preponderate.¹⁵

This is a remarkably cynical claim, and Smollett was probably aware of that, but it does give him a chance to probe the emotions of fear. Most of the relevant scenes occur in relation to Fathom's treatment of a lady called Monimia (the name crops up again in Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1793)), on whom he preys because of her wealth, and whom he subjects to long imprisonment and the depths of misery and terror. At one point, Monimia reflects poignantly on the fate which has placed her in Fathom's hands:

Common affliction was an agreeable reverie to what she suffered, deprived of her parents, exiled from her friends and country, reduced to the brink of wanting the most indispensable necessaries of life, in a foreign land, where she knew not one person to whose protection she could have recourse, from the inexpressible woes that environed her: she complained to heaven, that her life was protracted for the augmentation of that misery which was already too severe to be endured; for she shuddered at the prospect of being utterly abandoned in the last stage of mortality, without one friend to close her eyes, or do the last offices of humanity to her breathless corse. These were dreadful reflections to a young lady who had been born to affluence and splendor, trained up in all the elegance of education, by nature fraught with that sensibility which refines the sentiment and taste, and so tenderly cherished by her indulgent parents, that 'they suffered not the winds of heaven to visit her face too roughly'.

(*Fathom*, pp. 237–8)

The situation and description owe a great deal to Richardson, arch-portrayer of virtue in distress; but the emphasis Smollett lays on the contrast between the elegant treatment which Monimia is accustomed to expect and the brutality which she receives further extends Richardsonian practice in a direction already implicit in it: towards a kind of sadistic pornography. The essential features which Smollett is trying to convey are isolation, deprivation, vulnerability; that 'sensibility which refines the sentiment and taste' may well be necessary equipment for behaviour *in society*, but what happens to 'trained up', indulged young ladies when they find themselves outside social norms? In theory, Smollett is maximising his and the reader's condemnation of Fathom; actually, he is exploiting the threat of rape and violence, although in doing so he is also demonstrating the practical uselessness of sentimentalism when social conventions break down. This uselessness is emphasised even more strongly in

the person of Monimia's ineffectual lover, Melville, who, being informed that she is dead (which is untrue), falls into a state worthy of a man of sentiment: 'he became so enamoured of her tomb [falsely so designated by Fathom], that he could no longer resist the desire which compelled him to make a pilgrimage to the dear hallowed spot, where all his once gay hopes lay buried; that he might nightly visit the silent habitation of his ruined love, embrace the sacred earth with which she was now compounded, moisten it with his tears, and bid the turf lie easy on her breast' (*Fathom*, p. 306). Smollett refers to this practice rather dismissively as a 'gloomy enjoyment', again making much of the psychological reversals caused by Melville's inability to cope with a sudden and disastrous change in his fortunes. And alongside Melville, to point at the contrast between superficial civilisation and deep savagery which primarily concerns him, Smollett introduces a further figure 'enamoured' of death, Don Diego the Castilian, who believes he has murdered his wife and daughter, and thus laments his situation:

Count Melville has reason to grieve; Don Diego to despair: his misfortunes flow from the villainy of mankind; mine are the fruit of my own madness: he laments the loss of a mistress, who fell a sacrifice to the perfidious arts of a crafty traitor . . . nightly he visits the dreary vault where she now lies at rest; her solitary grave is his couch; he converses with darkness and the dead, until each lonely aisle re-echoes his distress. What would be his penance, had he my cause? were he conscious of having murdered a beloved wife and darling daughter! ah wretch! ah cruel homicide! what had those dear victims done to merit such a fate?

(*Fathom*, p. 329)

Diego is a forerunner of the Wandering Jew, Cain, Melmoth – all those Gothic characters doomed to live with the consciousness of extreme guilt in a world from which forgiveness has been banished. 'My heart was bursting', he says, 'while I dismissed them to the shades of death: I was maddened with revenge! . . . O! I am doomed to never-ceasing horror and remorse!' (*Fathom*, pp. 329–30). The roots of this meditation are, plainly, in the Jacobean debate about the value of extreme honour; and as in Jacobean drama and much Gothic fiction, southern European characters and settings are being used to heighten the implications of the concept of honour. And from the same root also springs Smollett's ambiguous attitude towards the homage Melville pays to the dead; in Smollett's hands, this kind of honourable behaviour is dangerously close to necrophilia.

In the end, the terrors which *Fathom* has inflicted on Monimia

and Melville are revisited on him; he is discovered, in a passage which bears comparison with MacKenzie, on a sick-bed and near to death:

The young countess, whose tender heart could not bear the shock of such a spectacle, retired to the coach with madame Clement and the Jew, while Renaldo, accompanied by the rest, entered a dismal apartment, altogether void of furniture and convenience, where they beheld the wretched hero of these memoirs, stretched almost naked upon straw, insensible, convulsed, and seemingly in the grasp of death. He was worn to the bone either by famine or distemper; his face was overshadowed with hair and filth; his eyes were sunk, glazed and distorted; his nostrils dilated; his lips covered with a black slough, and his complexion faded into a pale clay-colour, tending to a yellow hue: in a word, the extremity of indigence, squalor and distress, could not be more feelingly represented.

(*Fathom*, p. 353)

What is most striking here is the overwhelming physicality by means of which Smollett extends and undercuts sentimental conventions by placing them alongside the reality of disease and suffering. *Fathom*'s reward for dehumanising others has been his own dehumanisation, his reduction to a mere object of loathing and disgust.

The Gothic quality of *Fathom* rests on a number of points: the attempt to embody a theory of the social purposes of terror; the portrayal of the misery of separation from civilised norms, and the inadequacy of most of the characters to deal with extreme situations; the interest in the perverse tendencies of sensibility; the insistence on the power of guilt; the physical treatment of loathing and disgust. And it is interesting that these are features which could be grafted on to a literary form which was largely realist in form and socially critical in intention. For although one may doubt that Smollett's purposes were as positive or pure as he claims, nonetheless he *had* purposes, and they were mostly to do with exposing the flimsiness and hypocrisy of civilisation. Summers echoes other opinions of the eighteenth century when he calls it 'the century of systematised licentiousness . . . corrupt to the core' and asserts that 'all social life was concentrated on the elegant accomplishment of the sexual act'¹⁶; this is the vision of Smollett's most vicious novel, a vision of the violence and sexual rapacity which underpins civilised norms and Enlightenment thinking.

Eleven years later, Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto*, which has since been regarded as the originator of Gothic fiction. It is worth pointing out, however, that *Fathom* and *Otranto* have very little in common, representing as they do different ends of the 'Gothic' spectrum, and that the Gothic novels of the 1790s were, in

a sense, facilitated by *Otranto*, but in order to express a set of attitudes which have much more in common with *Fathom*. To put it simply, *Fathom* and the works of Radcliffe and Lewis are dark books, heavy books, where *Otranto* is light and airy, a fairy-tale rather than a nightmare, even when it strives for the horrific. What is vital about *Otranto*, though, is the fact that it was the earliest and most important manifestation of the late eighteenth-century revival of romance, that is, of the older traditions of prose literature which had apparently been supplanted by the rise of the novel. Walpole himself spoke of his book as an attempt to combine features of both:

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if in the latter species Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion¹⁷

But if *Otranto* was really supposed to be a combination of fantasy and realism, it is the former which stands out now and which stood out at the time. *Otranto* is set approximately in the twelfth century, in and around a castle clearly modelled on Walpole's own Strawberry Hill, and the plot is a joyous compilation of absurdities, including a host of romance ingredients: a tyrannical baron and his machinations, complicated revelations about paternity, and most important of all a panoply of supernatural portents and appearances. It was certainly not the only work in which such romance traditions were revived – other important examples were William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) and James White's *Earl Strongbow* (1789) – but it was the earliest, and it was the one which made the most unashamed use of the supernatural.

Otranto was vastly popular; it is said to have gone through more than 115 editions since it first appeared, and in 1781 it was dramatised by Robert Jephson as *The Count of Narbonne*. Critical reaction to Walpole's book was understandably mixed: Tompkins summarises it well in saying that 'the demand for colour and sublimity', which the critics were willing to concede, 'brought with it the demand for the marvellous, and the critical world, which approved the first two qualities in measure, looked askance at the third' (Tompkins, p. 209). And *Otranto*, if nothing else, is 'marvellous': from the outset,

Walpole deliberately sets out to flout realist conventions, not only in terms of the supernatural but also in his depiction of the setting and in the casual slightness of his character portrayal. Beneath the glittering surface there are some parallels, if not similarities, with the sombre world of *Fathom*: Walpole, like Smollett, believes in the power of terror to awaken and sustain interest and, again like Smollett, plans his book as an assault on Enlightenment norms. His characters are neither lifelike nor reasonable in themselves: they are posturing puppets. Walpole himself makes a great deal of the connections between his work and Shakespearean tragedy, but this needs to be taken in part ironically. He appeals to the example of Shakespeare in precisely the area which the Augustans condemned, that is, in his mixing of kinds and genres; in *Otranto* he uses and deliberately exaggerates several devices of which the Augustans could not approve, notably the interspersal of 'low scenes' with scenes of 'high life', and the presentation of buffoon and servant figures in the same continuum as their betters and masters.

This is not to say that Walpole's affinities with Elizabethan writing are not real: they are real, not in the sense that Walpole was trying to write like them, but in that he wanted to use their example to give himself licence, and this, of course, was particularly necessary in the matter of the supernatural. Here Walpole combines devices from folklore with Elizabethan motifs to produce an armoury of magical helmets, speaking pictures, ghostly giants, but the tone in which they are described is unique: a good example comes when Manfred, tired of his wife, attempts to seduce his daughter-in-law Isabella. He apprises her of his intentions, whereupon she shrieks and runs:

Manfred rose to pursue her; when the moon, which was now up, and gleamed in at the opposite casement, presented to his sight the plumes of the fatal helmet, which rose to the height of the windows, waving backwards and forwards in a tempestuous manner, and accompanied with a hollow and rustling sound. Isabella, who gathered courage from her situation, and who dreaded nothing so much as Manfred's pursuit of his declaration, cried, Look, my lord! see heaven itself declares against your impious intentions! – Heaven nor hell shall impede my designs, said Manfred, advancing again to seize the princess. At that instant the portrait of his grandfather, which hung over the bench where they had been sitting, uttered a deep sigh and heaved its breast. Isabella, whose back was turned to the picture, saw not the motion, nor knew whence the sound came, but started and said, Hark my lord! what sound was that? and at the same time made towards the door. Manfred, distracted between the flight of Isabella, who had now reached the stairs, and his inability to keep his eyes from the picture,

which began to move, had however advanced some steps after her, still looking backwards on the portrait, when he saw it quit its pannel, and descend on the floor with a grave and melancholy air. Do I dream? cried Manfred returning, or are the devils themselves in league against me? Speak, infernal spectre! Or, if thou art my grandsire, why dost thou too conspire against thy wretched descendant, who too dearly pays for – Ere he could finish the sentence the vision sighed again, and made a sign for Manfred to follow him. Lead on! cried Manfred; I will follow thee to the gulph of perdition. The spectre marched sedately, but dejected, to the end of the gallery, and turned into a chamber on the right hand. Manfred accompanied him at a little distance, full of anxiety and horror, but resolved. As he would have entered the chamber, the door was clapped-to with violence by an invisible hand. The prince, collecting courage from this delay, would have forcibly burst open the door with his foot, but found that it resisted his utmost efforts. Since hell will not satisfy my curiosity, said Manfred, I will use the human means in my power for preserving my race; Isabella shall not escape me. (Otranto, pp. 23–4)

This is obviously not a use of the supernatural which is intended to terrify, but an ironic use which is meant to interest and amuse us by its self-conscious quaintness. Manfred's behaviour reminds us of Hamlet's only so that we can smile at its comparative inadequacy and, indeed, the insignificance of the ghost. Whether Walpole's constant descents into the matter-of-fact are equally deliberate is more doubtful: at all events, they too have the effect of distancing us, of making us look upon the book as a virtuoso performance in novelty and the exotic rather than as a serious attempt at psychological probing.

And the same is partly true of the historical content of *Otranto*. Walpole is quite unconcerned with the details of life in the Middle Ages; what he is concerned with is conjuring a general sense of 'past-ness' by the occasional insertion of costume detail or its equivalent. And yet, in another sense, *Otranto* is serious about history. For whatever its shortcomings and infelicities, it does give evidence of an eighteenth-century view of feudalism and the aristocracy, and in doing so originates what was to become perhaps the most prevalent theme in Gothic fiction: the revisiting of the sins of the fathers upon their children. When this is placed in a contemporaneous setting, it is a simple theme; but it becomes altogether more complex when the very location of crime and disorder is thrust back into the past. The figure of Manfred, laden with primal crime, is considerably larger than *Otranto* itself: his violence, his bullying, his impatience with convention and sensibility mark him out not only

as the caricature of a feudal baron, but also as the irrepressible villain who merely mocks at society, who remains unassimilable.

What is interesting is the conjunction in Manfred, and after him in so many other Gothic villains, of the feudal baron and the figure of antisocial power. If, as seems likely, the widespread appearance of these figures signifies a social anxiety, then that anxiety clearly had a historical dimension: threat to convention was seen as coming partly from the past, out of the memory of previous social and psychological orders. In other words, it came from the atrophying aristocracy; and if one thing can be said of all the different kinds of fiction which were popular in the later eighteenth century, it is that they consistently played upon the remarkably clear urge of the middle classes to read about aristocrats. *Otranto's* strength and resonance derive largely from the fact that in it Walpole evolved a primitive symbolic structure in which to represent uncertainties about the past: its attitude to feudalism is a remarkable blend of admiration, fear and curiosity.

If realistic depiction of everyday life and a rational approach to nature were linked in the novels of the mid-century, Walpole originates a genre in which the attractions of the past and of the supernatural become similarly connected, and, further, in which the supernatural itself becomes a symbol of our past rising against us, whether it be the psychological past – the realm of those primitive desires repressed by the demands of closely organised society – or the historical past, the realm of a social order characterised by absolute power and servitude. But although in this sense *Otranto* originated a genre, it was another thirteen years before a successor appeared, Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777), which in some ways followed Walpole's example in the field of romance, but in others attempted to divert the stream of the revival.

Reeve's book was partly an attempt to combine features of *Otranto* with a rather different but related area of fiction, which included books like Thomas Leland's *Longsword* (1762) and William Hutchinson's *The Hermitage: A British Story* (1772). These were straightforward historical novels, although they suffered greatly from an equally straightforward historical ignorance. Reeve's purpose, essentially, was to use the supernatural devices of Walpole, to a limited extent, and the historical settings of Leland and others to give narrative interest and attractiveness to a tale with a didactic purpose. She objected to *Otranto* on two counts: it did not appear to have such a purpose, but set itself out merely to amuse, and it used the supernatural in such a way as to sacrifice narrative probability. Reeve

thought that there was a way in which the supernatural could be used without entirely sacrificing probability; not surprisingly, this drew down upon her a rebuke from Walpole, who commented that her novel was 'so probable, that any trial for murder at the Old Bailey would make a more interesting story'.¹⁸

The Old English Baron has a very simple plot, in which a young man of uncertain origins but with great talents is taken into a noble household, where he earns the envy and enmity of the sons of the house. They visit various evils upon him, but with the help of highly placed friends he is enabled at length to discover the secret of his birth, which, of course, is as noble as that of his rivals. As a story, it is hardly worthy of attention, and its use of the supernatural is tamer and more incompetent than Walpole's; what is interesting about *The Old English Baron* is the way in which it differs in intention and tone from *Otranto*. Summers, a great admirer of Walpole, is extremely severe on Reeve, and the reasons are not difficult to see: for Summers, Gothic is, as we have said, an 'aristocratic' genre, and it looks to him as though Reeve is deliberately trying to take it outside this category. Her greatest fault in Summers's eyes is revealed by Varma when he says that she was a 'disciple of Richardson, and a friend of his daughter' (Varma, p. 79); the complaint behind this is that the world of *The Old English Baron* is, despite appearances, the world of the eighteenth-century middle class. Walpole, admittedly, found it very difficult to conjure up an alternative world, but at least he tried 'pour épater le bourgeois', if only by producing strangeness and exoticism: Reeve merely takes the conventional behaviour and motivations of her contemporaries and dresses them in knightly costumes. Tompkins comments that 'it is this homely and practical streak that differentiates *The Old English Baron* from any other Gothic story whatever; nowhere else do we find knights regaling on eggs and bacon and suffering from the toothache' (Tompkins, pp. 229-30).

The past is not a source of fear and wonder to Reeve, but a source of comfort; one feels that she is encouraging a constant sense of relief at the comparative normalcy of our ancestors. Far from being dangerous villains with megalomaniac tendencies, our forefathers were susceptible to much the same feelings and reasonings as we are: her text, in her later *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon* (1793) was 'Let us now praise famous men, even our fathers who begat us',¹⁹ which could scarcely be farther from the attitude to the past which Walpole bequeathed to Radcliffe and Lewis. Similarly, the supernatural is not truly terrifying; to be frightened by it is

merely a mark of superstition. At one point the hero, Edmund, is conferring with friends, when 'at the hour of twelve they heard the same groans as the night before in the lower apartment; but, being somewhat familiarised to it, they were not so strongly affected'.²⁰

It has been said of the Gothic that 'no self-respecting ghost ever troubles the middle classes' (Birkhead, p. 78), although the reasons for this are much more contradictory than they appear, but Reeve does set out to bring the supernatural within the fold of bourgeois feelings and responses. Indeed, although Walpole may not in fact have achieved the reconciliation of romance and novel which he claimed to be attempting, Reeve comes much closer, and in doing so brings out a considerable problem. For to treat ghosts in a matter-of-fact way is in itself to demystify them; even to make them 'appear' on the page requires a certain development of narrative techniques, as Radcliffe was to realise. Walpole and Reeve share an inability to get round this problem: they try to tackle it head-on rather than obliquely. The results, however, are very different: Walpole's sheer bravado, and his comparative freedom from moral purpose, enable him to create something which is strange even in its failures, whereas Reeve's commonsensicality, her acquiescence in a fundamentally rationalist ideology, mean that her ghosts do nothing to differentiate her book from the mainstream of eighteenth-century literature. Already in these two texts a curiously paradoxical situation is emerging about the social relations and emphases of Gothic.

The technical problem in Gothic fiction remained substantially unchanged until the advent of Radcliffe: but there is a specific continuity between Walpole and Reeve which we need to note. Both *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Old English Baron* are 'framed' narratives; that is to say, both writers present their texts as manuscripts which they have discovered, and of which they are, so to speak, the 'editors'. The most obvious reason for this is defensiveness; it was not until the second edition of *Otranto* that Walpole dared admit to his authorship, and Reeve was similarly and conventionally modest about her efforts. Again, the manuscript device helps with verisimilitude: if archaism of setting is difficult to achieve, it is not difficult to describe gaps and hiatuses in a manuscript, and it may indeed be very useful, in order to pass over tedious parts of the narrative. The increasing complexity of the concept of the discovered manuscript is a significant part of the history of the Gothic novel; and one of the most interesting books in this respect is *The Recess* (1783-5) by Sophia Lee, which is very much more sophisticated than its

predecessors. In form it derives from the epistolary novel, and intersperses letters and portions of manuscript with considerable abandon. Sometimes Lee is able to retain character cogency within this format, sometimes not, but at least she clearly shows that she is aware of the difficulty of designing an inserted letter which will both reflect the persona of its supposed author and carry out the actual author's narrative purposes. *The Recess* is a remarkably rich and complex book, set in the reign of Elizabeth, and recounting the adventures of two imaginary sisters, illegitimate daughters of Mary Queen of Scots; in the course of the book, Lee brings in almost every major event and personage of Elizabeth's reign, connecting them in with her narrative with great ingenuity and confidence. The sheer range of the book, in terms of setting and character, and the dense texture of the story place it much closer to Radcliffe than to Walpole or Reeve; however, what is remarkable about it formally is that Lee is able to use her modified epistolary technique to give us conflicting viewpoints on events. This, of course, had always been the strength of the novel in letters: but in, say, Richardson, the reader is left in little doubt, except perhaps temporarily, about the standpoint he or she is supposed to take about various characters' protestations. In *The Recess*, the case is different: the central portion of the book is taken up by two long letters, one by each sister, recounting their different perspectives on substantially the same events. One sister is enamoured of the Earl of Leicester, the other of the Earl of Essex, and their versions of the machinations of Elizabeth and her favourites are quite different. Lee makes no attempt to resolve this conflict, and we are left with a text embodying attitudinal contradictions and allowing the reader more freedom of realisation, it is fair to say, than any other novel of the period.

Essentially, *The Recess* allows us to make up our own minds about history, and to help us with this task it supplies a wealth of historical detail quite foreign to anything in Walpole or Reeve. In respect of this historical realism, as with her narrative techniques, Lee owed a great deal to the French historical romance, and particularly to the abbé Prévost and Baculard d'Arnaud, but her development of a specific period of British history has few contemporary rivals. Furthermore, the particular historical themes on which she concentrates prefigure those which were to claim the special attention of the majority of Gothic writers; unlike contemporary German authors, the English writers of the 1790s and after were not on the whole to follow Walpole's lead and concern themselves with things

medieval; they were primarily interested in a different period, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and certain themes within that period recur: the problem of Catholicism, the meaning of Jacobitism and, often centrally, the reign of Elizabeth herself. Lee originates a trend in treating Elizabeth as a persecutor, for despite the fundamental anti-Catholicism of most Gothic fiction she is rarely treated well; in *The Recess*, it seems that she figures principally as 'unnatural'. Clearly the notion of the Virgin Queen was not an easy one for Lee and her contemporaries to assimilate.

The whole question of the emergence of the 'historical novel' and its relation to Gothic is a vexed one. As Summers points out, there had been plenty of historical romances in England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Leland's *Longsword*, often hailed as the first historical novel, is hardly really distinct from these romances, and certainly Reeve added little in terms of historical information to the tradition. Against this background, *The Recess* does stand out as innovative, although it is a matter of degree rather than of kind. Partly it is that Lee simply *knows* more; but more importantly, it is a question of breadth. Most of her predecessors had tended to treat history as an excuse for biography, and individual biography at that: Lee's interest goes two ways. Tompkins points out quite rightly that in *The Recess* 'private loves and vengeance replace political motives, and love . . . accounts in Miss Lee's eyes for Essex' behaviour in Ireland and Sidney's death at Zutphen' (Tompkins, pp. 227-8), and of course this results in historical distortion, but Lee's project was not to use events to demonstrate the greatness of great men but rather the other way round, to use personalisation of motive as a way of coming to understand history itself. This is most aptly described as a process of ideological naturalisation, by which the distant is familiarised, and in this respect Lee follows Reeve and not Walpole. Where Walpole inflates, makes strange, creates a structure of symbols, Reeve and Lee deflate, bring history within the purview and understanding of contemporary norms. Yet where Reeve's interest is moral and didactic, Lee's is historical and interpretative: she does not set out to create her own truth, but to mould a cogent set of truths out of the elements history has left her. The result is unwieldy, with that distinctive unwieldiness which is to become characteristic of so much long Gothic fiction: but this is because Lee does not shirk the intractable nature of much of her material, and is content to allow mystery and contradiction to stand.

Thus far, it might be said that *The Recess* is, after all, not a Gothic

but a historical novel, in so far as such a line can be drawn; but within the frame of history, the themes which attract Lee's attention are those which are going to become peculiarly the property of the Gothics. The whole plot is based on persecution, on the danger which the existence of Mary's daughters presents to the state and on the various attempts made to suppress that danger. The nature and extent of this persecution remains ambiguous, for the simple reason that *The Recess* is a first-person narrative. The fears of the narrator are, presumably, partly justified; but they are also partly irrational fears. The world of *The Recess*, even more explicitly than the world of Radcliffe's novels, is one in which women are in constant danger, almost regardless of their rank and historical importance, a world in which men as protectors pass almost naturally from kindness to rape. The heroines themselves are equally sources of danger to others: 'I was born the fate of all I ever loved',²¹ says one of the sisters, prefiguring doom-laden protagonists from Coleridge to Oscar Wilde. The end-point of these interlocking dangers is madness, and one of the sisters eventually passes over the line, broken and deranged by the strains of the world of violence to which she is exposed. Much is made of the emotional power of gloomy surroundings; passages detailing the effects of exposure to the insignia of death show clear traces of the influence of Parnell and the other graveyard writers. And, above all, *The Recess* is Gothic in being a novel of suspense, a suspense sustained through four volumes at an intensity which would have been inconceivable a mere ten years earlier.

But the crucial feature of these first Gothic novels is to do with their relation to history; it is only later, in the 1790s, that Smollett's preoccupation with terror as such returns and becomes substantially connected with historical interest. And the reason why it is so difficult to draw a line between Gothic fiction and historical fiction is that Gothic itself seems to have *been* a mode of history, a way of perceiving an obscure past and interpreting it. In the 1770s and 1780s, several different kinds of new fiction arose to challenge the realist tradition, but what they all had in common was a drive to come to terms with the barbaric, with those realms excluded from the Augustan synthesis, and the primary focus of that drive was the past itself.

Notes and references

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4. Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago, 1957), p. 49.
5. See, for instance, 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (New York, 1965), p. 34. All subsequent Blake references are to 'Erdman'.
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16. See Varma, p. 224.
17. Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto; A Gothic Story*, ed. W. S. Lewis (London, 1969), p. 7.
18. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (34 vols, New Haven and London, 1937-71), XXVIII, 381-2.
19. On this point, see Tompkins, p. 231.
20. Clara Reeve, *The Old English Baron; A Gothic Story*, ed. James Trainer (London, 1967), p. 69.
21. Sophia Lee, *The Recess, or, A Tale of Other Times* (3 vols, London, 1785), II, 70.