

Introduction

chaotic proliferation of meaning' whereby the word has come to be applied so variously as to have lost much of its original force: his paper amusingly mourns the decline of the 'glorious epithet', which in its original sense at least, it has to be admitted, we in this conference and this collection have perhaps further exacerbated.

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'Gothic' and the Critical Idiom

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The object of this paper is to mourn the radical evolution, over the last two or three decades, of a word dear to my heart and which I hate to say has been seriously damaged by the blind, ruthless, chaotic proliferation of meaning which accompanies the progress of history. This is a mourning paper.

Is it unavoidable that words in general should progressively deviate or diverge from their 'original' meaning? Is the concept of *origin* an operative one, where semantics are concerned? Is language such a slave to culture, that it must echo the slightest mutations in our modes of life with such disconcerting immediacy? These are questions which I am not equipped or prepared to discuss, which I am not even sure are worth discussing. What I would like to concern myself with, what I am really concerned about, is the recent evolution of the word 'Gothic'.

Its development over the centuries has not, it is true, always been consistent or homogeneous. As we all know, for a long time it served the regrettable purpose of vilifying medieval architecture, medieval literature, medieval manners and medieval superstition. It was only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that the word gradually lost its derogatory connotations, owing to the redeeming pursuits of antiquaries and topographers, whose weighty volumes and delightful drawings enabled the English public to look at the gothic remains scattered all over the country with new eyes. The poets were also instrumental in restoring consideration to a much maligned style: David Mallet, Thomas and Joseph Warton, James Beattie—not to mention the host of anonymous scribblers who invaded the columns of periodicals with their rhymes of doubtful merit—started a new vogue: by the middle of the century, it became fashionable to visit the ruins of Pomfret Castle, Godstowe Nunnery or Netley Abbey, in order to meditate on the 'transient smile of Fate'. The Gothic experience, associated with a measure of awe, became a pleasurable one.

This paved the way for Walpole's eulogistic interest in the Middle Ages. What he had in mind, when he described his *Castle of Otranto* as a 'Gothic Story', is not quite clear. Possibly nothing more than a concern for historical accuracy, and the desire to excuse his recourse to supernatural agents.

Little did he know that his dilettante dabbling at fiction would have such far-reaching consequences: after him, the word 'gothic' served to characterize a specific kind of composition associated with fear, later amplified into female terror—when Ann Radcliffe decided that her heroines should conform to the re-

cently decreed principles concerning the sublime and the beautiful—or transmuted into horror, imported from beyond the Rhine by a juvenile Lewis. The same word denoted the artificial tremors experienced by Emilys and Ellenas while exploring the galleries of forsaken fortresses or the destructive malignity of a Devil borrowed from German folklore:

Hail Germany most favored, who
Seems a romantic rendez-vous,
Thro' out whose large and tumid veins
The unmixed Gothic current reigns!

The anonymous voice of a forgotten poet¹ speaks with diminutive talent of the new orientation of taste introduced by *The Monk*. From 1796 onwards, the two schools developed separately but with almost equal success, until Charles Robert Maturin combined Ann Radcliffe's *supernatural expliqué* with Lewis's cruder inspiration in *The Fatal Revenge; or, The House of Montorio* (1807). 'Gothic' then became, to use Jane Austen's word, the approximate equivalent of 'horrid'. And it was in great demand, as we all know, until the publication of *Melmoth* (1820), in which terror and horror are so cleverly intermixed that Maturin's novel can be considered as the ultimate example of a unified 'Gothic'. I always believed—wrongly, it would seem—that the genre showed enough signs of decline, in *The Albigenes*, to allow for serious doubts as to its survival after 1824. And I would still be tempted to defend the notion that the 'gothic' phenomenon cannot be dissociated from a specific background—cultural, aesthetic, religious and political. 'Gothic' to me, necessarily conjures up images of female innocence engaged in labyrinthine pursuits and threatened by monachal or baronial lubricity—in scenes which only Salvator Rosa could have delineated. 'Gothic' has, to me, that special eighteenth-century flavour, which attaches itself to ruined castles and abbeys, either examined from a distance with Gilpin's *Lorrain glasses*, or fearfully explored with Burke's *Inquiry* in hand. 'Gothic', I believe, was the historically dated response of the English psyche to what was happening on the far side of the Channel. It was, I think, a regression to a safe revolution (safe, because it had already taken place and was a thing of the past) as well as the defence and illustration of the 1688 principles of controlled political power and religious *via media*. The idea that the word 'gothic' could designate anything else never entered my stubborn mind.

¹ *The Age, a Poem: Moral, Political, and Metaphysical* (London: Vernor, Hood & Sharpe, 1810), p. 209.

This obtuse vision of things, however, has been persistently contradicted by modern criticism—sometimes quite plausibly, more recently in a way which I find infuriatingly damaging to the concept of 'Gothic'. I could understand and sympathise with those who thought it proper to use the glorious epithet when discussing *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's fiction,² or certain novels by Dickens³: after all, Victorian England is not that different from Georgian England, and that certain obsessions should persist is conceivable. That the 'gothic' tradition can be traced in 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'⁴ is equally acceptable, although it is to me obvious that Browning had no need of Aikin's or Nathan Drake's *Fragments* to become acquainted with the medieval theme of the Quest. The reference to Thomas Hardy's 'Gothic'⁵ is much more surprising, even though it remains on the whole acceptable: the English landscape is there, English mansions are there, and the characters are of English stock, immersed in a huge, collective English *familien roman*.

Must one be equally tolerant when this unique epithet is used in relation to the works of Stevenson, Wilde, Conrad, Saki, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham and a few others, whom Elisabeth MacAndrews discusses under the comprehensive title: *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction?*⁶ Possibly—although I would rather use other words myself, like weird, supernatural, uncanny, or even *fantastic*, since Eric Rabkin introduced the word into the English critical idiom.⁷

Where I begin to have serious doubts as to the relevance of the 'gothic' reference, is when I see the eminent epithet used across the Atlantic in association with improbable works. When Oral Coad tells us that *Julia; or, the*

² See Robert B. Heilman, 'Charlotte Brontë's New Gothic', in *Victorian Literature: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Austen Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

³ See Larry Kirkpatrick, 'The Gothic Flame of Charles Dickens', *Victorian Newsletter* n°31 (Spring 1967), pp. 20-24; Ann Ronald, 'Dickens's Gloomiest Gothic Castle', *Dickens Studies Newsletter* n°6 (Sept 1975), pp. 71-75; David Jarrett, 'The Fall of the House of Clennam: Gothic Conventions in *Little Dorrit*', *Dickensian* 73 (Sept. 1977), pp. 155-61.

⁴ See Leslie M. Thompson, "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and the Gothic Tradition in Literature', *The Browning Newsletter* n°9 (Fall 1972), pp. 17-22.

⁵ James F. Scott, 'Thomas Hardy's Use of the Gothic: an Examination of Five Representative Works', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 17 (March 1963), pp. 363-80.

⁶ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

⁷ See Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Illuminated Baron (1800) is a 'gothic' imitation of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*,⁸ I see no reason why one should not express agreement. But when she makes Charles Brockden Brown and Washington Irving into champions of the American 'Gothic' my heart sinks: as I can find nothing in *Wieland*, *Ormond*, or 'Rip Van Winkle' to justify the use of an epithet which in my opinion cannot be dissociated from the manifestations of the first Gothic Revival and the culture of Georgian England: the naturalization of the word in a country with no medieval past and whose fiction owes more to Indian folklore than to European legends does not convince me.

Nor am I satisfied that the Nordic epithet can be acclimatized to Yoknapatawpha County. Frazier's article on 'Gothicism in *Sanctuary*'⁹ however brilliant in its general outline, leaves me in a doubting frame of mind. It is true that the Old Frenchman's Place looms upon the southern horizon like a gothic ruin. It is also true that Temple, 'a nymphomaniac with Gothic overtones', behaves very much like a Radcliffean heroine, running away from a much desired persecution. Popeye of course stands for the 'monomaniacal villain' and Gowan Stevens is the 'Gothic hero'. To sum it up,

The dark woods, the ruin, the owl, the statue, the objects of the magical sort, and others have been mentioned. To them could be added the corpses, the blood, the mysterious sounds, the tomb imagery in Temple's hallucinations, the incubus quality of the Cannibal Bridegroom motif in her wild rides with Popeye. These, along with conventionalities of presentational mode, plot, character types, give *Sanctuary* a markedly Gothiquesque quality (p. 123).

The argumentation is clever. But it is based on an analogical process, the legitimacy of which may be questioned. The cultural discontinuity between *Sanctuary* and any original gothic novel is too obvious to require a long discussion. And the emotional significance of a ruined farm in the Mississippi plains, associated as it is in Faulkner's thriller with the Prohibition Era and the naughty Twenties, strikes me as being fundamentally different from that of an authentic medieval castle, in eighteenth-century England. And of course, neither Emmeline, nor Adeline, nor Agnes, nor Antonio, nor Ellena, nor Ulla were, as far as I can as-

⁸ Oral S. Coad, 'The Gothic Element in American Literature before 1835', *JEGP* 24 (First Quarter 1925), pp. 72-93.

⁹ David L. Frazier, 'Gothicism in *Sanctuary*: The Black Pall and the Crap Table', *Modern Fiction Studies* 2 (Autumn 1956), pp. 114-24.

certain, nymphomaniacs. Or were they?

Of course, it was in the nature of things that Hawthorne should be credited with a 'gothic' mind. But whereas Lundblad is satisfied with referring to the 'gothic tradition' as a possible source of inspiration for *The House of the Seven Gables*,¹⁰ Curran, carrying the analysis a few steps further, offers a stimulating, though to me erroneous, suggestion: according to him, the word 'gothic' went through an ideological evolution when it emigrated to America.¹¹ Hawthorne's 'Yankee Gothic', as he calls it, turned democratic, forgetting its feudal, aristocratic English origins:

By 'Yankee Gothic' I mean the American adaptation of characteristic aspects of eighteenth-century European Gothic fiction which changes the ideological import of such aspects from implied support for a substantially monarchical and feudally oriented society to a belief in a more egalitarian social structure (I have in mind the works of Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Charles Robert Maturin and M. G. Lewis). These continental works develop a mythology of class which reinforces and justifies the position of aristocracy in feudal society. The *Castle of Otranto* and *The Old English Baron* would be outstanding examples. The hero is a disenfranchized aristocrat unaware of his birthright and seemingly a pauper who eventually learns his true identity and recaptures his family estate from bogus heirs (...) The American republican novel reverses this pattern, reinforces democracy, and develops a culture hero—in this instance the Yankee who reflects the establishment of the present order and the culture traits—ambition, drive, versatility, adaptability, aggressiveness and vitality (p. 80, note 3).

I shall not harp upon the doubts which invariably assail my mind, whenever I hear or read about the *aristocratic* character of gothic fiction, which I always thought was the perfect expression of middle-class mentality. But even if Curran is right, which he probably is in an indirect way, why should one persist in describing as 'gothic' a type of fiction which is so ideologically remote from its original model? The play of distant analogies makes diversions of meaning not only possible, but acceptable: a constant, but regrettable feature of modern criticism.

There is, it is true, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, an architectural

¹⁰ Jane Lundblad, 'Hawthorne and the Tradition of Gothic Romance', in *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the European Literary Tradition* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1965).

¹¹ Ronald T. Curran, 'Yankee Gothic: Hawthorne's Castle of Pyncheon', *Studies in the Novel*, 8 (Spring 1976), pp. 69-80.

structure which is central to the plot and can therefore justify *part* of the 'gothic' analogy. This, however, cannot be said of *Moby-Dick*, probably the novel which has been the most continuously associated with the gothic tradition.¹² In this case, it was the Faustian theme which, because it was developed in *The Monk* and *Melmoth* (among many other themes, the *conjunction* of which alone makes the Gothic), justified for many critics the use of the sublime word.

This deconstruction of the Gothic in which each component of the notion becomes in itself a sufficient justification for using the whole concept, is a characteristic feature of the semantic evolution of the word in the U.S.A. Similarly, I do not think I would be greatly mistaken in interpreting some of Malin's remarks¹³ as illustrating the equation: 'gothic' = non-realistic. Here again, one part of the concept is used to designate the whole. Any work of fiction which is not naturalistic, which reads more like Poe than Howells, or pays more attention to the psychological than the sociological, is 'gothic'.

This seems to be the opinion prevailing among even the most distinguished scholars; Leslie Fiedler, in his wonderful *Love and Death in the American Novel*, stretches the meaning of the word to the most extreme limits. Not only are *Moby-Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*—'certainly the three novels granted by consensus to be our greatest works'—'gothic in theme and atmosphere alike', but any story which includes an element of terror, whatever its origin, its form or intensity, can also be so described, like 'the story of slavery and black revolt, of Indian warfare, of urban violence, of quiet despair in the world of the freak and the invert and the maimed.' The whole corpus of American fiction is, according to Fiedler, gothic, as his flamboyant conclusion powerfully emphasises:

From Edgar Poe to Truman Capote, from Brockden Brown through George Lippard to Paul Bowles and Carson McCullers, from *The Monster* of Stephen Crane to *The Cannibal* of John Hawkes, the images of alienation, flight and abysmal fear possess our fiction. Until the Gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as

¹² See Newton Arvin, 'Melville and the Gothic Novel', in *American Pantheon*, ed. Daniel Aaron and Sylvan Schendler (New York: Delacorte, 1962); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), *passim*; Robert Hume, 'Gothic versus Romantic: a Revaluation of the Gothic Novel', *PMLA* 84 (1969), p. 287. [But see also Ben Fisher's article, herein, Eds].

¹³ Irving Malin, *New American Gothic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962).

long as the novel lasts, the Gothic cannot die.¹⁴

No wonder Richard Brautigan thought it proper to subtitle his novel *The Hawkline Monster* (1974): 'A Gothic Western'! Lyrical flights of oratory, hasty generalisations, prophetic attitudes and recuperative manoeuvres have presided over the semantic evolution of a very innocent word, a very specific word, which has eventually become synonymous with almost anything, and is now used to cover all the characteristics of postmodern fiction. Even before Fiedler, or at just about the same time, Hassan described the work of Carson McCullers as 'gothic',¹⁵ and laid stress on certain aspects of the concept which had so far remained unperceived by the most observant critics:

Being Gothic, which is to say Protestant,—for the Gothic may be conceived as a latent reaction to the Catholic hierarchy under God—being both Protestant and Gothic, her imagination derives its peculiar force from a transcendental idea of spiritual loneliness (p. 312).

At this point, the Gothic arrays itself in clerical vesture, puts on a dog collar and preaches transcendence and spiritual values. An interesting turn of fortune, which happily counterbalances the sulphurous connotations of the Faustian theme. But the justification of the seraphic word is based on another partial analogy which, I fear, distorts its global meaning. Especially when the religious metaphor is so bold as to summon the great mystics of the past as witnesses of its validity:

It should not be difficult to see how the mysticism of Suso and Eckhart, the idea of prayer in Luther, the experience of spiritual horror without sensible correlative in Poe, and the Gothic nightmare of alienation in the fiction of Carson McCullers fall into a sombre sequence (*ibid*).

The road that leads from Eckhart to Augustine and Teilhard de Chardin is of course wide and straight. Under Judith Wilt's alert and brilliant pen,¹⁶ the

¹⁴ Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 126.

¹⁵ Ihab H. Hassan, 'Carson McCullers: the Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain', *Modern Fiction Studies* 5, no 4 (Winter 1959-60), pp. 311-26.

¹⁶ Judith Wilt, *Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence* (Princeton NJ: Princeton

Gothic becomes even more ethereal and clerical. It is mentioned in ecclesiastical and philosophical company ('in the Gothic's rough and ready formulas, as in the treatises of enlightened churchmen and philosophers of the eighteenth century...' p. 13) and finds its ultimate significance in a comparison with the doctrine of the Trinity ('as Gothic fiction shows unmistakably and as Trinitarian theology implies', p. 19). And since Flannery O'Connor implicitly refers to Teilhard in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, she necessarily becomes 'a modern Gothic artist' (p. 15).

Let no one misconstrue these remarks. As a former champion of the Gothic, I rejoice to see it leave the close quarters (1764–1824) to which I at one time thought fit to confine it and I am proud to see it enlist immense authors like Melville and Faulkner for service, or writers who, like John Hawkes and Flannery O'Connor, splendidly convey the tragedy of modernity to their readers. But I still feel a little uneasy when I find that this extension of meaning towards the spiritual is accompanied by rather unexpected side effects. 'To say that Mrs. McCullers has a Gothic penchant is but to note ... her interest in the Grotesque, the freakish, and the incongruous,' Hassan has written.¹⁷ Here we are confronted with a new equation: gothic = grotesque. How this new drift in meaning can be harmonized with the preceding one is not clear. But sure enough, a number of critics have joined Hassan in this new semantic venture. Malin follows suit, with a piece of semantic one-upmanship.¹⁸ Quoting Salinger, 'We know the sound of two hands clapping. But what is the sound of one hand clapping?' he suggests that the Gothic and the Grotesque can both accomplish such an arduous feat, a statement which implies a powerful identity of purpose between the two genres. As to Linda Bayer-Berenbaum,¹⁹ although her argumentation is based on less intriguing data, her conclusions are very much of the same nature: 'The Grotesque aspects of criticism are evident in the caricatures that evolved from fifteenth century ornamentation and in the repulsive and gruesome scenes from Gothic literature' (p. 28). It is true that, if the Grotesque is essentially made of 'demons, vampires, ghosts and the figures of animals as

University Press, 1980).

¹⁷ *Op cit*, p. 312.

¹⁸ Malin, *op cit*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), p. 28.

well as deformed human beings' as McAndrew seems to believe,²⁰ passing from one category to the other would not seem to be too difficult. I for one conceived of the grotesque in a somewhat less ghastly way, probably under the misleading influence of dear, tame, sweet Sherwood Anderson.

Whether one ought to rejoice or despair, the plain fact is there: successive expatriations, improper uses of the word, deliberate transfers and metaphorical distortions have created a situation in which the original meaning of the word is hardly ever to be found. *The Castle of Otranto* was a 'gothic story' because of the part played by medieval architecture, and because of the sense of the marvelous it conveyed, with the alleged goal of emulating medieval romances. In 1946, it was still admissible for Mervyn Peake to subtitle *Titus Groan*: 'A Gothic Novel'.

But today... the Gothic is associated with Science-Fiction, spacewarp, telekinesis, teleportation; also with the specific qualities of LSD, with transcendental meditation, telepathy, extrasensory perception and all that goes in the direction of an 'intensified consciousness'.²¹ During the last two decades, the word has shown a prodigious capacity for adaptation and an uncommon appetite for conquering new semantic space. There is indeed such a thing as cultural imperialism. One of the latest conquests of the word seems to be feminist discourse. Many critics now speak of 'Female Gothic'. Ellen Moers, if I understand rightly what she says in a book which I find in many ways alluring,²² means nothing else but this: there can be no real Gothic but that which has been written by women. Because they alone, like Mary Shelley, are capable of giving birth to monsters, they alone have experienced 'the drama of guilt, dread and flight surrounding birth and its consequences' (p. 91). The Gothic is what expresses the essence of the feminine condition, and the trail of misfortunes and maledictions which female flesh is heir to: 'the self-disgust, the self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction that have been increasingly prominent themes in the writings of women in the twentieth century' (p. 107). This enables her, in passing, to baptize at the gothic fount Djuna Barnes and Diane Arbus. The former, because there is in *Nightwood*, 'macabre fantasy, interlacing lesbians, lunatics, Jews,

²⁰ Elisabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 160.

²¹ 'Terms like space-warp, telekinesis, teleportation give to that last avatar of the Gothic, Science-Fiction, the most respectable of cachets.' Fiedler, *op cit*, p. 121.

²² Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic', in *Literary Women* (London: W.H. Allen), 1977.

spoiled priests, artists, noblemen, transvestites, and other masqueraders' (p. 108); the latter because her pictures of freaks are such an adequate illustration of Carson McCullers' fiction.

'Yankee Gothic', 'Southern Gothic', 'Female Gothic': the very fact that modern criticism finds it necessary to specify what kind of Gothic is under discussion, proves the semantic vacuousness of a word which has become a meaningless *cheville*.

And yet, the most serious critics agree that the Gothic is indeed meaningful. For Hume, it is an atmosphere, a mood, a mode of expression focused on Evil.²³ When examined from such a viewpoint, it is easier to understand its protean nature and why it has survived its original form with so much spirit. Ahab's Promethean figure, Popeye's miserable fate and Hazel Motes's delirious postures illustrate different aspects of the same *gothic* predicament: the abysmal depths of human suffering. Under such circumstances, it would even be legitimate to add an indefinite number of names to the gothic scroll and include with Keech those of Conrad, Wells and Orwell.²⁴ In fact, equally deserving to be enlisted under the gothic banner are all the writers who have tried to give a name to what Wilt describes as 'the featureless not-nothing, the unarticulated sound that is at the bottom of things', or to what the author of *Middlemarch*—whom Wilt quotes—called 'the roar on the other side of silence'.²⁵ If the Gothic is, as Keech would have it, 'that surrealistically horrible recognition of a world of moral chaos where only power has meaning',²⁶ then indeed the word still has a long and brilliant career ahead of it.

It is interesting to note that Keech insists on the necessity of dissociating what he calls 'the gothic response' from the traditional paraphernalia which normally accompanies it, like 'ruined castles, graveyards, skeletons, ghosts and imperiled maidens'. In order to avoid misconceptions, it would be helpful to specify, each time the word is used, what sort of Gothic one has in mind:

²³ Robert Hume, 'Gothic versus Romantic: a Revaluation of the Gothic Novel', *PMLA* 84 (1969) pp. 282-90, p. 287.

²⁴ James M. Keech, 'The Survival of the Gothic Response', *Studies in the Novel* 6 (1974), pp. 130-31.

²⁵ Wilt, *op cit*, p. 6.

²⁶ Keech, *op cit*, p. 136.

Perhaps the modifier 'traditional' should be used in conjunction with 'Gothic' to imply, with some pejorative associations of the imitative and hackneyed, the stock devices, and the term 'Gothic' alone used to imply the response (p. 134).

Here comes one more modifier! On one side, stands *traditional* Gothic and on the other *pure* Gothic! Or, to be more precise,

If the concept of the Gothic can be divorced from the traditional reliance upon definition by stock devices, the word 'Gothic' becomes liberated and timeless. It can be applied to identify minor effects or the essence of whole works, from the eighteenth century to the present (pp. 136-37).

In other words, Keech justifies in the abstract and theorizes upon what common usage has already sanctioned. If it makes the discussion of the Gothic clearer, it does not make the word much more operational, because such a 'liberated' and 'timeless' Gothic can apply to works of any kind at any period.

Of course, psychoanalysis was bound to have its say. Norman Holland and Leona Sherman have given us a wonderful fugue in two voices on the subject,²⁷ all the more fascinating as their argumentation is based on a very tempting theory of literature. According to them, the important thing is not what is to be found in the text, but what each reader—rather pompously baptized *literent* for the occasion—projects onto it: 'We shape and change the text until to the degree we need that certainty, it is the kind of setting in which we can gratify our wishes and defeat our fear' (p. 280). This explains the extraordinary popularity and longevity of a rather minor genre: for the gothic mansion becomes a potential space which any reader can make alive with his own anguish and people with his own desires. As an image of the maternal body, it is associated with the ultimate mysteries of life and becomes a place where the reader's fantasies can be made actual:

The castle has an immense structure of possibility. It is not an old-fashioned 'Freudian symbol'. Rather the novel makes it possible for each of us to relate to the castle in our own style, using and not using various items of the plot, character and language. This way, projection is one 'possibility' of gothic, and indeed of all fiction and all reality (p. 289).

²⁷ Norman Holland & Leona Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', *New Literary History* 8 (Winter 1977), pp. 279-94.

This last sentence comes as a relief: the demonstration was so brilliantly conducted and so persistently alluring, that I had almost fallen for it. I was quite prepared to accept the notion that there are as many kinds of 'Gothic' as there are *literents*, and that each reader builds up his own fantasmic castle; but what I find more difficult to assent to, is the dissolution of the genre, by analogy or proximity, into universal fiction. If the Gothic has any significance at all, it must be its own significance, as distinct from main stream literature.

Speaking of which leads me to comment briefly on what I consider as the most intriguing and frustrating metamorphosis of the Gothic during the last two or three decades. It is very saddening indeed to see this highly-reputed epithet shamelessly appropriated by a host of popular writers whom the media have classified under the (to me) offensive heading of *Drugstore Gothic*. A detailed analysis of this 'neo-gothic' literature would be here quite out of place. But it ought to be mentioned that the novels I have in mind—by Victoria Holt, Mary Stewart, Dorothy Eden, Phyllis Whitney, Norah Lofts, and others—are so numerous that even the most complete bibliographies²⁸ cannot claim to have recorded them all; and that although they name Walpole as their 'founding father' their stories bear only the remotest resemblance—if any at all—to either *The Castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or *The Monk*. The reviewers are quite willing to admit this fact:

If you look inside the covers you will find that the stories bear no resemblance to the literary definition of 'Gothic'. They are not related to the works of Monk Lewis or Mrs Radcliffe, whose real descendants are known today as Horror Stories. The Modern Gothics resemble, instead, a crossbreed of *Jane Eyre* and Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*.²⁹

And yet they all accept without protest the usurped reference. It is true that there can be found, in these crude chronicles of contemporary manners, at least two elements which they share—however obliquely, partially and imperfectly—with traditional Gothic: the mansion, and the heroine. These modern 'penny dreadfuls' can even be identified—so we are told—by the stylised illus-

²⁸ See Elsa J. Radcliffe, *Gothic Novels of the Twentieth Century: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen N.J., & London: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), and *Twentieth Century Romance and Gothic Writers* ed. James Vinson, 1983.

²⁹ Joanna Russ, 'Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic', *Journal of Popular Culture* 6, n°4 (Spring 1973), pp. 666-91.

trations on the covers, which are always identical: 'Jacket after jacket shows a fleeing girl in a flowing gown and a background structure—a castle, banded hut, Chas. Addams house, igloo—with a single light in the window.'³⁰ As we can see, the medieval style has been defeated and replaced by a variety of exotic buildings. As to the heroine, she has of course adopted the fashion of the day: if she has become a business woman, she is a member of the liberal profession; if she may be divorced. She remains, however, very fragile and vulnerable in her relations with men and, if Russ is to be trusted, 'any connexion the Heroine has with the situation must be that of Victim'.³¹ For the new gothic heroine is 'invariably described as strong, arrogant, gaunt, careless, elegant, sensual, intelligent and cruel'.³² On the other hand, the elements of the plot faithfully reflect the preoccupations, interests and appetites of the modern world:

In addition to hurricanes, madness, attempted murder, skeletons falling out of cupboards, diamond smuggling, theft, drug addiction, impersonation and voodoo, the modern Gothics make extensive use of what I would like to call Over-Subtle emotions.³³

I shall not even try to demonstrate how the conditions of production and distribution of this new literature—which from the early sixties onwards has invaded the shelves of bookshops in railway stations and airports, and has reached drugstores in the most unheard of places in the States, or the supermarkets in big cities where whole sections are reserved for them,³⁴ differ from those of the eighteenth century. Whereas five hundred copies of the first edition of *Castle of Otranto* were printed in 1765, this new mass product is poured by millions of copies on the market.³⁵ As a kind of fiction written mainly by women for female readers, with the chief purpose of illustrating women's ques-

³⁰ Emma Mai Ewing, 'Gothic Mania', *New York Times Book Review* May 11, 1975, p. 11.

³¹ Russ, *op cit*, p. 666.

³² Janice Radnay, 'The Utopian Impulse in Popular Literature: Gothic Romances and "Feminist Protest"', *American Quarterly* 33, n°2 (Summer 1981), pp. 140-62, p. 149.

³³ Russ, *op cit*, p. 681.

³⁴ 'I recently noticed that in the book department, beside the sections marked "Cooking" and "Non-Fiction" an entire aisle was labelled "Gothics" and contained over a hundred select titles', Bayer-Berenbaum, *op cit*, p. 11.

³⁵ 'Last year (1974), five paperback publishers ran off approximately 23 million copies of almost 175 gothic titles by more than 100 authors', Mai Ewing, *op cit*, p. 11.

identity in the modern world, these novels essentially deal with 'the details of women's personal lives, of mate selection and family formation, of problems between lovers, and the impact of events upon domestic affairs'. Of a surprisingly conformist nature in the field of sexual relations,³⁶ modern Gothic—which I have been warned must not be mistaken for Kathleen Woodiwiss's or Rosemary Rogers's 'bodice-rippers'—is as remote from the perversities of *The Monk* as it can possibly be. Essentially centered on the Family, its problems, its mysteries and its conflicts, it is much more similar to the great modern sagas which grace our television screens, than to the most complicated situations ever imagined by Maturin in *Fatal Revenge; or, the Farnily of Montorio*.

And yet... in spite of those huge differences, reviewers still persist in describing these productions as 'gothic'. Some, it is true, willingly acknowledge that 'the term Gothic is flung loosely over anything',³⁷ while others are satisfied with blandly stating that 'the Gothic novel has moved from ghostly horrors to love fantasies'.³⁸ To-day, the word 'Gothic' seems chiefly to apply to fables which have been composed in conformity with the conclusions of carefully conducted market surveys, and address the central problem which 'women who marry guys and then begin to discover that their husbands are strangers' must confront.³⁹

What therefore can I do when faced with a situation which one part of myself stubbornly considers as a monstrous aberration and departure from historical truth? Should I parade my indignation and display my hurt feelings at conventions and in journals? But in the name of what sacred texts should I chain the Gothic to my personal hermeneutics? The realisation that the word Gothic—formerly pregnant with so many specific connotations—has today lost all substance, indeed comes as a painful experience. When in my darker moods, I am almost tempted to consider that it has been buried in the communal grave of meaning together with all the critical terms which are daily used in papers and dissertations, at the end of a long process of semantic tinkering.

³⁶ Kay J. Mussel, 'Beautiful and Damned: the Sexual Woman in Gothic Fiction', *Journal of Popular Culture* 9, n° 1 (Summer 1975), p. 84.

³⁷ Helen Rogan, 'How to Write a Gothic Novel', *Harper's Magazine* vol. 250 (May 1975), pp. 45-47, p. 45.

³⁸ Caesarea Abartis, 'The Ugly-Pretty, Dull-Bright, Weak-Strong Girl in the Gothic Mansion', *Journal of Popular Culture* 13, n°2 (Fall 1979), pp. 257-63, p. 257.

³⁹ Russ, *op cit*, p. 667.

But another voice in me speaks in a different pitch. It whispers into my reluctant ears that life after all is movement, that words belong to no one, that each generation has a right to project onto them the cultural or fantasmal images of its own choice.

Is it fair to affix the gothic stamp to every single production of contemporary popular culture? Or should the august epithet be reserved to describe the fiction of bygone days? In our time which takes pride in its complexity and insists on plural answers to the major problems of life, all I can offer, as a poor conclusion to this perplexed paper, is the suggestion that everyone make his own choice.