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Forms of Popular Narrative in France and England: 1700–1900

The Bibliothèque Bleue *and* Colportage *Literature*

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, printing made possible the circulation of large quantities of images and booklets (*fascicules*) throughout the urban and rural populations of Western Europe. These inexpensive publications, found particularly in Spain, Germany, Italy, and France, were distributed by *colporteurs* or itinerant peddlers—a universal feature, given the methods of travel and transportation in this period. This characteristic allows us to designate conveniently, and as we shall see, reasonably accurately, a particular type of publishing, known in France as *colportage* literature and in England as *chapbooks*.

Indisputably linked to the expansion of the artisan and merchant bourgeoisie in early capitalism, *colportage* literature offered to a public still only very partially literate a product that is interesting to examine as a commercial object. Both in France and England, this kind of literature assured the prosperity of families of printer-publishers. At the beginning of the seventeenth century in Troyes, in the Champagne region, Nicolas Oudot, who was seeking new markets for material that had proved difficult to sell because of its high price, had the idea of using secondhand printing equipment to produce small, inexpensive booklets that would be distributed by peddlers.[1] The success of this enterprise enabled a veritable Oudot "dynasty" to ensure the continuation of their business until 1769, at which time another competing family of printer-publishers, the Garniers, who had set themselves up in the venture of *colportage* literature about a century earlier, bought up the Oudot business, which they, like other smaller printers of Troyes, had shamelessly imitated. The Garnier business was in turn bought by the publisher Baudot, who would continue his business until 1863, the date that marks the end of *colportage* publishing in Troyes.[2] But the success of this literary commerce had spread throughout the northern, and even into nineteenth century—were passed on to new forms of emerging mass literature. Among these traits, we note first and foremost the tendency of this kind of literature to satisfy the irrepressible taste of the reader for *narrative fiction*. As Geneviève Bollème astutely observes, the *Bibliothèque bleue* in each of its constituent parts tries to "present everything as an anecdote, whether it be history, novel, remedy, prayer, rule of conduct, or game . . ." and, she notes, "this process becomes a form of narration."[13] The taste for narration certainly contributes to the privileging of content, of the *story (la fable)*, to the detriment of form, an aspect that explains the ease with which *colportage* booklets could be adapted, transformed, reassembled, or rewritten in multiple versions. As in oral literature, to borrow the apt formulation of Peter Burke, "the same text is different, and different texts are the same."[14] This is literature of escapism, lacking aesthetic preoccupation and ambivalent in its desire to give a realistic appearance to fictions of the extraordinary, spectacular, and exotic. These are also texts whose ideological color is one of conservatism, conformism, and a certain "centrist" moderation (to borrow Robert Mandrou's term) that can be attributed both to the threat of censorship and to the commercial desire to reach a vast public.

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[1] Cf. Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire aux 17e et 18e siècles: La Bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* (Paris: Imago, 1999), ch. 1 a.

[2] Cf. Geneviève Bollème, *La Bible bleue: Anthologie d'une littérature "populaire"* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975). A table showing the great printing dynasties can be found on 397–99.

The "Gothic Romance"

To include the phenomenon of the gothic novel in a study of the forms of popular narrative may seem surprising. In fact this genre of fiction, which originated in England in the second half of the eighteenth century, did not initially belong to the realm of "popular" literature. But its evolution, both in form and theme, is a much more complicated issue. In the following pages I will try to show the porosity of the genres and registers through which the "gothic" was disseminated in the literary domain and claimed a place in European culture. A long list of writers in the nineteenth century and after owe their creativity and inspiration in part to the influence of the gothic. But this influence, stimulated by the enthusiasm of readers, would also reach the most undervalued sector of the cultural domain: narratives for a broad readership. Indeed, it is the narrativity of the gothic, and perhaps, most of all, a certain fantasmic, plastic aesthetic, that give the genre its exceptional quality of "transgenericity," or the potential to circulate freely from one literary register to another, and even more, from one medium to another, as the cinema has revealed. Without falling into the mistaken notion—for lack of a rigorous definition of the gothic—of finding imitators of Walpole and Radcliffe everywhere, one can nevertheless follow Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage and wonder whether this phenomenon, in transcending the limits of a literary genre, should not rather be described as "a broader cultural response."[15]

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[13] Bollème, *La Bible bleue*, 34.

[14] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), 125.

Paradoxically, this popular cultural tradition, a phenomenon of mass publishing (at least within the context of the norms and possibilities of the period), had its roots in "cultivated" soil. *The Castle of Otranto; A Story,* published December 24, 1764, in London without the name of its author, Horace Walpole, seems a curious literary object, a strange composite. But that is perhaps the reason why the most disparate registers and genres, even the most antithetical, recognize themselves in this work, take inspiration from it, or pay it homage. This small book has certain affinities with the fairy tale. Its characters have the same simplified, even schematic traits, although these sketchy figures lack the firm delineation of Perrault's heroes, or Grimm's. The young hero, the knight Theodore, is barely convincing, and the heroines are almost interchangeable. Only the "villain" Manfred, Prince of Otranto, who dedicates himself with dark passion to retaining an ill-gotten kingdom by all possible means, enlivens the action while occasionally revealing hesitations and doubts that lend a certain interest to his character. The narrative flows swiftly, with little description but with the occasional odd slowing of tempo when the author introduces a few fragments of comic theater that create an impression of textual heterogeneity (e.g., chapter 1, the exchange between Manfred and his servants, Diego and Jacquez). Another reminder of the fairy tale—and also, of course, of the Shakespearian world—is the manner in which Walpole dramatizes the supernatural. The medieval helmet of enormous proportions dear to Paul Eluard, the statue whose nostrils drip blood, the skeleton wrapped in a hermit's robe, the gigantic image of Alphonse rising majestically toward the Heavens: these elements among others, presented in an "objective" manner in the narrative without the least reticence, uncertainty, or respect for the rules of realist verisimilitude, appear to inscribe *The Castle of Otranto* within the realm of the marvelous. Nevertheless, elsewhere in the text the motif of the supernatural is treated differently whenever certain characters, particularly secondary ones, become hesitant and fearful in the face of mysterious events. While the doubt characteristic of the "fantastic" is not found at the center of this textual world, it is, nevertheless, not completely absent from it either, as Ann Radcliffe will remind us.

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[15] Allan Lloyd Smith and Victor Sage, eds., *Gothick Origins and Innovations* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), introduction. Cited by Cassilde Tournebize, "Le gothique et ses métamorphoses," *Caliban* 33 (1996): 4.

The complexity of Walpole's work derives also from its structure, which is almost superimposed on the text or is, at least, highly visible, shaping the relationships between characters—whose schematic psychology has already been noted—into parallelisms and symmetries like those of seventeenth-century Italian or French farce. But this deceptively naive textual geometry baldly dramatizes the limitless desire for power as well as the transgressive libido with its incestuous implications. It is this recurring narrative and thematic economy that contributed to the success of the gothic. In an incongruous, or quietly provocative, manner Walpole's novel reveals the inadmissable, the power of irrational forces.

But the strangest feature of Walpole's work—a novel that was to have such an extraordinary literary destiny—has yet to be described. It relates to the defining kernel of the *gothic* genre, the architectural setting—castle or abbey—that we know Walpole was dreaming of when he furnished his home, Strawberry Hill! In a remarkable essay on the gothic genre in nineteenth-century England and France, Joëlle Prungnaud notes that around 1820, "the word 'gothic' had the value of a code rather than a descriptive function."[16] We might indeed hypothesize that readers allow themselves to be easily charmed by the pleasures of rediscovery, of *repetition* and *intertextual memory*. If earlier readings had offered the reader descriptions of gothic decors that were sufficiently detailed and suggestive, these lingering mental images would reappear at the mere mention of the term *gothic,* functioning as a simple catalyst or stimulus of the imaginary. But where might we find such descriptions? If we retrace the intertextual chain, we arrive at Walpole as the point of departure for the gothic tradition. Yet *The Castle of Otranto* offers scarcely any detailed descriptions of Manfred's home, conforming in this, once again, to the aesthetic of the popular tale. Should we not conclude from this that the Gothic architectural element of the castle, or at least the deepest meanings that appear to be indissolubly attached to it, engages intimately with the psyche of the reader? Here, within the iconographic memory that predates the act of reading, these meanings are activated by the encounter with a text of great connotative force. To penetrate into the gothic castle by an act of reading is, thus, from Horace Walpole on, to undertake an interior journey that is transgressive and dangerous, a journey that, in the words of

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[16] Joëlle Prungnaud, *Gothique et décadence: Recherches sur la continuité d'un mythe et d'un genre au XIXème siècle en Grande-Bretagne et en France* (Paris: Champion, 1997), 133.

Jean Roudaut, "however much it is presented to me as real, is for me simply the echo, in the domain of the real, of the journey which my own character undertakes within me. I become my own dream: my inner self no longer separates itself from the world where I act."[17] An eminently cultural object, that is to say a complex and crossbred one, *The Castle of Otranto* can serve both as the point of intersection for various intertextualities and as the place of origin for a genre of fiction, a sensibility, an aesthetic, that would disseminate their features through the different registers of the nineteenth-century cultural domain.

The novelist Ann Radcliffe (1764–1823) is most often credited with having given to the gothic novel the generic features that assured its success. Most notably in *The Mysteries of Udolpho, a Romance* (London, 1794) and *The Italian; or the Confessional of the Black Penitents, a Romance* (id., 1797), the novelist established a collection of *reproducible and adaptable* traits likely to please a wide public—increasingly including women—that preferred "long stories to short ones."[18] In fact, Radcliffe and her imitators adapted the formula of *The Castle of Otranto,* moving from a relatively brief and extremely pared-down narrative to novels in two, even three or four volumes. The "romance"—despite the appearance of this word at the end of the titles cited above—comes closer to the "novel," and ends up as a hybrid genre whose literary formula would enjoy a great future. From the "novel," the gothic novel borrowed the realist style—concrete, descriptive, detailed—already adopted by eighteenth-century picaresque English novelists. Unlike Walpole, Ann Radcliffe knew how to enter the psychology of her characters, notably that of her persecuted heroines, whose reactions of anxiety, anguish, terror, or hope are sympathetically described. Extended through time, the narrative could play to the maximum with the resources of a dramaturgy in which the effects of the sensational and the suspenseful captured the emotions of the reader. At the same time, in a manner that brings us gradually back again to the "romance," the curiosity of the reader is engaged in elucidating the meaning of the signs—or lures—that the novelist has strewn along the path of the mystery, leading up to the solution or denouement. And the mystery, in the Radcliffian model of the gothic novel, emanates from strange events attributable, at least in the disturbed mind of the desperate heroine, to supernatural origins, before the novelist proposes to the reader, *in fine*, a rational, if improbable, explanation.

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[17] Jean Roudaut, "Les demeures du roman noir," in *Ce qui nous revient: Autobiographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 159.

[18] Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 169 (see also ch. 3, sec. 5, "Theoretical Interlude: V. Center and Periphery"). Original edition: *Atlante del romanzo europeo 1800–1900* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997).

The literary—and/or paraliterary—possibilities of the works of Ann Radcliffe should now be evident. The thematics of the virtuous, persecuted heroine, which has its most notable source in Richardson, will assume other forms in the sentimental novel. The theatrical virtuosity of the narrative, its recourse to pathos and its manipulation of the reader's nerves, are all elements that resemble those of melodrama. The rhetoric of the enigma prepares the way for the detective novel. Finally, the dramatization of an imagination brought to a paroxysm of terror by events supposedly supernatural in origin looks ahead to the literature of the fantastic.

Only a few authors' names and titles of gothic novels have passed into posterity. Besides Walpole and Radcliffe, I should mention Clara Reeve (1729–1824) and *The Old English Baron* (1777), M. G. Lewis (1775–1818) and *The Monk* (1796), and Charles Robert Maturin (1782–1824) and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). However, from 1790 onward, the works inspired by *The Castle of Otranto* multiplied, giving rise to a process that resembled—keeping in mind the technical limits of the period and the small number of literate[19]—a phenomenon of mass publishing and reading, accompanied by the inevitable overabundance of artifice and clichés. The repetitive suggestibility of the titles bears witness to this, and it can also be illustrated from the repertoire of several hundred gothic works indexed by Maurice Lévy.[20] The most frequent model of title falls into two parts linked by *or* in the eighteenth-century style, followed by a subtitle that indicates the genre. Thus, among many others, there is "*Correlia; or the Mystic Tomb, a romance*, by the Author of Humbert Castle, London (Lane and Newman, Minerve Press), 1802." The eponymous title (the heroine, in this case, or the "villain") is accompanied by a reference to places of action that are "gothic" in the broad sense and catalysts for recurring connotations of mystery, the supernatural, and death. The subtitle has, therefore, the function of confirming what the reader had probably already decoded: the work's affiliation to the "gothic" genre.[21] Thus the titular strategies are already set in place that, in popular literature, are sufficiently explicit to seduce readers and confirm the sense that they are about to purchase a novel of the theme and genre they are seeking, but without destroying prematurely the readerly pleasure of discovery.

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[19] In his study of the "reading revolution" that occurred in Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, Reinhard Wittmann reviews the estimated number of readers and illiterate in this period (estimates always subject to caution). In England, the number of readers rose in 1790 to 1.5 percent of the population; in France, in 1789, at least 60 percent of the population were illiterate. In the German linguistic and cultural sphere around 1770, 15 percent of those over six years old were "potential" readers. Cf. ch. 11, "Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?" in Cavallo and Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West*, 284–312.

[20] Maurice Lévy, "Bibliographie chronologique du roman 'gothique,'" 684–708, in M. Lévy, *Le roman "gothique" anglais (1764–1824)* (Toulouse: Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse, 1968).

The burgeoning of the gothic novel also had a significant impact on the central feature and defining criterion of the genre: the architectural setting. We have already noted the minimal textual presence of the castle in Walpole's founding work and emphasized instead its evocative power and resonance in the reader's sensibility. Perhaps, if we are to believe readers and the conclusions of Maurice Lévy, the mere presence in the titles—and only in the titles—of terms belonging to the lexical field of Gothic architecture might have served as advertisement to incite readers to buy works that in fact did not belong to the literary category they desired. For the success of gothic novels had aroused envy among certain publishers and authors, who had sensed a windfall but had not taken care to ensure that the adjective *gothic* "always corresponded to the use of medieval architecture, the presence—more or less 'real'—of the supernatural, and an atmosphere of unease and mystery."[22] Of particular interest here is the way in which certain terms used in mass communication serve as catalysts for the oneiric and the imaginary.

The success of the gothic novel stems also from the repetition—and amplification—of the Radcliffian aesthetic formula, which combines realism and dream. The (moderately) realistic writing allows the reader easy access to the novelistic world. The referential illusion is similarly indispensable in creating the impression of familiarity against which, in contrast, the intrusion of the supernatural, real or supposed, will make the reader react. Indeed, it is certainly dream, the irrational, or escape in the broadest sense that the consumer of gothic novels seeks.

More precisely, the success of this genre is linked to its ability to offer the reader a temporary, libertarian, transgressive adventure. Once again, this type of fiction is perpetuating a long tradition of mass literature. The gothic setting constitutes a fantasmic place outside the law in which external order and morality are constantly threatened by the forces of Evil (or Desire): that is the essence of the "escape" offered to the reader by this kind of literature.

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[21] Cf. Prungnaud, *Gothique et décadence*, 106ff.

[22] The three criteria of gothic fiction that Lévy adopts in selecting the works in his book, *Le roman "gothique,"* 388.

But whether in the middle of the narrative or at the moment of denouement, Order always ends up imposing its rule and in the most hypocritically conventional, or artificial and flamboyant manner (in *The Monk,* for example, the spectacular and edifying end of Ambrosio, who is expiating his sins when the devil, bearing him off on the wind, hurls him to his death on the jagged rocks). In the gothic novel, as in the literature of *colportage*, the commercial laws that gratify the "inadmissable" dreams of the reader must still pay the wages of morality and censorship in order to survive.

In England, as in France, the gothic and postgothic novel contributed widely to the development of the industrial publishing business. In England, the story of William Lane's Minerva Press is inseparable from the story of the gothic novel.[23] Between 1801 and 1805, this publishing house would print half of all gothic literary production, and between 1816 and 1820, three-quarters of it. William Lane promoted the diffusion of this narrative flood, in large part anonymous—Maurice Lévy speaks aptly of "collective writing"(442)—with a series of very skillful initiatives intended to revitalize the market. Not content with printing novels and selling them to booksellers, he took out newspaper advertisements to seek out new writers, then himself supplied his own network of "circulating libraries," making possible the direct loan of new books to those readers of modest social means unable to acquire the bound and costly "three-deckers" (novels in three volumes) on the regular circuit. The publishing adaptability of the gothic narrative and the success it acquired can also be measured by the fact that expensive editions and cheap popular editions existed side by side, reaching a vast public of different social levels. Some gothic texts were published as chapbooks. In France, the translators of Ann Radcliffe adapted her works in abbreviated form: long descriptions thus disappeared, foregrounding the narrative aspect of the novels and helping to accelerate their transformation into "paraliterature."[24] Later, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the gothic novel would be published in installments at twenty centimes each, a particularly economical publishing formula.

Thus the gothic phenomenon would spread—with the possible dissolution of its original content—throughout the literary domain, from the English "penny dreadfuls" (inexpensive chapbooks, *feuilletons* in popular periodicals, or novels published in installments, between 1830 and 1860) to French *romans noirs* of the Restoration (1815–30) and Victorian novels (Wilkie Collins, Stevenson, Bram Stoker, Henry James) that adopted the settings and dramatic effects of the "sinister house." In the twentieth century, works as original or challenging as those of Mervyn Peake (1911–68) and his *Titus Groan* (1946) or of Julien Gracq and *Castle of Argol* (1938), also enter the realm of gothic intertextuality.

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[23] Information drawn from Lévy, "Le marché de l'horreur," ch. 7, 468–71, in *Le roman "gothique."*

[24] Cf. Prungnaud, *Gothique et décadence*, 14.

Finally, besides the fecundity of image and theme in the gothic novel, another essential characteristic is its irresistible tendency to provoke parody and pastiche. The genre's archetypal images or situations and its aesthetic of excess doubtless account for this phenomenon. The proliferation of gothic novels raises a question about the parodic character of some of them. In fact, several novels are open to a double reading: one on a first and "serious" level, the other at the meta- and ironic level. This is certainly the case with *Han d'Islande* (1823) by the young Victor Hugo.

Thus, many elements contributed to make of this genre an early sign of the industry of mass narrative that would lead to a golden age of popular reading in the second half of the nineteenth century. Among these elements were the extreme adaptability of the gothic novel, its position at the midpoint of the literary domain between literature for the educated and literature of *colportage* (at a time when the latter was progressively declining), the development of publishing into what was practically an industry, and the readerly enthusiasm this industry provoked.

The Roman-Feuilleton *from 1836 to 1900*

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, *colportage* literature remained the principal, if not the only, cultural vector to reach rural Western Europe and France in particular. In the same period, the gothic novel had exceptional publishing success thanks to the perfecting of preindustrial duplicating formulas. But with the phenomenon of the *roman-feuilleton*, mass culture would undergo an incredible evolution throughout the nineteenth century, toward the end of which the long written narrative—the novel—would arrive at a sort of golden age.

The development of mass literature and culture is directly linked to the industrial revolution, to massive displacements of rural populations to urban centers, rapid technical developments in transport and print reproduction, and to the progress of literacy. These social, economic, cultural, and technical transformations made possible the establishing of the first elements of a mass culture by means of a publishing process—the division of narrative into segments—whose history I will review. This process benefited from the support of various media and gave rise, quite rapidly, to the generic

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EDITED BY

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Princeton University Press
PRINCETON AND OXFORD

2006