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DISRUPTION OF NORMALITY AND THE FRINGE OF THE KNOWABLE: THE AESTHETICS OF THE FIRST –WAVE GOTHIC FICTION

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The emergence of Gothic fiction in England is ascribed by critics such as David Punter, to the Industrial revolution but strangely, like Gothic fiction itself, and paradoxically in the midst of the eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment' the Gothic harked back to an idea of the pre-modern. Over a period of time, the term 'gothic' which originally denoted a medieval style of architecture, came to be associated with a particular style of writingwhich was predicated upon gloominess and located in castles that were '[D]ecaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways ……[and] linked to other medieval edifices – abbeys, churches and graveyardsassociated with barbarity, superstition and fear…' (Botting 1996:2-3).

Horace Walpole's *TheCastle of Otranto* (1764) is usually taken as the first Gothic novel written. It was an extremely popular novel and was one of the most widely read novels of the period not only in England but all over Europe. T J Matthias observed in 1796 in *The Pursuits of Literature:*

> The spirit of enquiry which he [Horace Walpole] introduced was rather frivolous, though pleasing, and his Otranto ghosts have propagated their species with unequalled fecundity. They spawn is in every novel shop. (Qtd in Botting 1996: 45)

The Castle of Otranto, as Matthias notes, introduced all the quintessential Gothic paraphernalia and soon became the blueprint for a new mode of writing. It condensed features from old poetry, drama and romance (Botting 1996: 48). The quintessential ingredients that were to characterize Gothic fiction are found in the novel: the unscrupulous tyrant, the youthful, virtuous hero, the persecuted virgin heroine, the medieval castle with its attendant caves, forests and crags, the doomladen atmosphere, supernatural interventions such as the incident with which the novel opens: the crushing to death of the tyrant's son on his wedding day by a gigantic helmet covered with black feathers appearing from nowhere.

Leslie Fiedler notes that none of the 'trappings' were new. And 'if they [the trappings] appear theatrical it is precisely because they were borrowed from the sensational effects of renaissance melodrama: shipwreck in a tempest, malevolent tyrants, persecuted virgins, talking statues and the like are all to be found in the classical period' (1970: 120). However, what is new is the role assigned to these 'trappings'.

In the traditional Romance narrative the focus of attention is the hero's and heroine's strength and the ability to engage with trying circumstances; the supernatural interventions provide the platform to demonstrate their strength. In Gothic the supernatural eruptions pervade everything. Robert Kiely argues that in *The Castle of Otranto*:

> Believable relationships – sexual or otherwise – are impossible, not because the state is tottering with corruption but because the essence of human identity has been dislodged

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> from its human centres and diffused in an architectural construct which seems to have more life than the characters who inhabit it. If anything gives this novel unity and animation, it is the castle. Walpole does not describe the building in great detail, but its presence – dark, confining, labyrinthe – is felt on nearly every page. (Kiely 1972: 40)

It is clear that Kiely's intention to critique the novel is on aesthetic grounds, but the formula was extremely successful as can be judged from the number of imitations but was invisible to aesthetic criticism. Fiedler's reading of Ann Radcliffe, another celebrated Gothic writer and author of the extremely popular novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1859), is a classic example of this neglect:

> Through a dream landscape, usually called by the name of some actual Italian place, a girl flees in terror and alone amid crumbling castles, antique dungeons, and ghosts who are never really ghosts. She nearly escapes her terrible persecutors, who seek her out of lust and greed, but is caught; escapes again and is caught; escapes once more and is caught (the middle of Mrs. Radcliffe's books seem in their compulsive repetitiveness a self-duplicating nightmare from which it is impossible to wake)…. (Fiedler 1970: 120)

In both the evaluations of Kiely it is clear that the Gothic is predominated by its trappings, ingredients of the traditional romance which have been provided with a new significance.

The paper would like to suggest that this reversal implies a major transition in tonality: 'the goodness of the hero and the heroine, so far from guaranteeing their dignity and – usually – their eventual happiness, is no longer capable of preserving anything' (Palmer 1978:123). This is clearly evident in the French novelist de Sade's *Justine* (1791, the novel very significantly carried the subtitle '*Good Conduct Well Chastised*', (the novel also invoked the wrath of Napoleon who imprisoned de Sade for 13 years) where goodness brings in its wake persecution to the point of destruction. Sade, on the very first page, states that his intention in writing the novel is to 'acquaint [the reader] with the sweetness of the tears Virtue sore beset doth shed and doth cause to flow' (Chapter1). This is illustrated in the ironic turn of events that await Justine, the persecuted heroine of the novel, who is finally rescued after being abused, molested and tortured and taken to a safe place and is struck dead by lightning on the first day of her freedom. Though de Sade may not be considered typical, Manfred, the villain of Walpole's novel, is the very incarnation of pure evil.

The Castle of Otranto recounts the story of Manfred, prince of Otranto by the virtue of his grandfather's usurpation of the rightful owner, and his attempts to secure his lineage. His sickly son is crushed to death by a giant helmet on the day of his wedding to the daughter of another noble, Isabella. Though unable to explain the reason for his son's death, Manfred and his credulous followers hold a peasant boy, Theodore, whose only fault is that he observes that the gigantic helmet resembles that part of the statue of Alfonso the good, the original owner of the castle, responsible for the death:

> During this altercation, some of the vulgar spectators had run to the great church, which stood near the castle and come back open-mouthed, declaring that the helmet was missing from Alfonso's statue. Manfred, at this news, grew perfectly frantic; and as if he sought a subject on which to vent the tempest within him, he rushed again on the young peasant, crying, "Villain! Monster! Sorcerer! 'Tis thou hast done this! 'Tis thou hast slain my son! (Walpole 2001: 30)

Theodore is imprisoned under the very helmet. Curiously, it does not occur to any one that the helmet is too heavy to be carried by a mere boy of twenty and so he could not be responsible.

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Ambitious and unscrupulous as he is, the prince decides that, though already married, he will marry Isabella. As he speaks to the girl, the 'sable plumes' on the helmet begin to tremble'in a tempestuous manner, and unaccompanied with a hollow and rustling sound'. The girl seizes the opportunity to cry 'Heaven itself declares against your impious intentions' but Manfred is unhindered and declares 'Heaven nor Hell shall impede my designs' (Walpole 2001: 34). As the story unfolds, we find that he turns against everyone, in fits of desire and paranoia.

Doubtless, it is not uncommon to find evil and tyranny in the traditional Romance narratives too, but there it is usual for malevolence to stem from ethically neutral values – ambition or desire – which is tainted by the expectation and insistence on reward. In other words, the villain's malevolence is a perversion of character traits which he shares with the hero, and hence his deeds are easy to comprehend, even if unpardonable. In the Gothic, the evil tyrant's actions are incomprehensible – both to the heroine and the reader. Manfred's desire to marry Isabella has no root in love or even in lust; it is a sudden, inexplicable whim, which is there solely to motivate his persecution of her. He is malevolence incarnate, an *avatar* of an evil principle that transcends the civilized human comprehension.

However, it must be admitted that not all central characters of Gothic fiction are malevolent. For instance, Mathew Gregory Lewis' Ambrosio, the central character in the novel *The Monk: A Romance* (1797), is ambivalent. His malevolence appears in the context of a humanity not entirely and *a priori* given over to it – despite the fact that in the event evil dominates. For all this ambivalence, the emphasis is clearly on the power of the satanic. Walpole's originality, as several critics point out, lay in giving the supernatural agencies ' a definite role in enforcing retributive justice'(Verma 1987:54). To be precise, Walpole's originality lies in conferring upon the process of justice a sensation of horror (Verma 1987: 57): in *The Castle of Otranto*, as in gothic in general, the moral function of the inexplicable is subordinate to the aesthetic function of producing a shudder[1]. Irrespective of the moral circumstance the aesthetic is similar: Manfred elicits no sympathy of the reader but the reader 'shudders', in the case of Lewis' Ambrosio the reader sympathizes with him but 'shudders' and in the case of Radcliffe, though the supernatural is explained away, the reader 'shudders' till then.

The potency of the machinery of justice asserts itself even in such novels not intended to be Gothic. Kiely points out that in William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* (1798), overtly a rationalist, radical attack on the corrupting influence of unjust institutions, the didacticism breaks down under the power of Gothic trappings: Tyrell's persecution of Emily acquires the sexual overtones of Gothic persecution in general, and thus escapes from Godwin's intellectual framework; and Caleb's flight from unjust persecution goes far beyond the demands of radical denunciation of injustice and becomes a flight from reality, a retreat into Romantic inwardness. In general, Kiely argues, the didacticism of Gothic – the 'dangers of excess', the 'fate of pride' is false: not in the sense of hypocritical but in the sense of not ringing true when set beside the demonic energy of evil (Kiely 1972: 84-89, 101).

Without a doubt, the Gothic can be summarized as an exploration in stereotypical terms of such ambiguities that were later categorized as 'typically Romantic'. But Gothic can also be characterized by the universal presence of a specific form of disruption of 'normality': malevolent irruption (Scraggs 2005: 16-17). This can be seen as precisely the role of the villain-

[1] Interestingly, it may be noted that the Gothic novel in German was called the *Schauerroman* – the 'shudder novel' (Norton, 106)

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hero in Gothic: to bring disorder to an otherwise ordered world, and to invade so overwhelmingly that the basis of this order is opened up for question. Botting makes this point very clearly:

> In the skeletons that leap from family closets and the erotic and often incestuous tendencies of Gothic villains there emerges the awful spectre of complete social disintegration in which virtue cedes to vice, reason to desire, law to tyranny. (1996: 5)

This, in a manner of speaking, appears to be equally valid whether the writer follows the simple pattern of Manfred, or the more complex version of Ambrosio. In the Gothic the irruption is successful, as has been illustrated, irrespective of whether virtue triumphs or not.

Eighteenth century Europe is characterized by its identification of and insistence on Reason and Nature with the result that unnatural irruption is also irrational and hence always borders on the incomprehensible. The Gothic, influenced as it was by the post Enlightenment thought, has at its core the exploration of the human and human reason trying to grapple with such forces that constantly threaten to disorient and exceed its fringes (Scraggs 2005: 21).

Edgar Allan Poe’s little known short story ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ (1842) is a perfect illustration of this predilection of the Gothic. The unnamed narrator of the short story is sentenced to death by the Spanish Inquisition, for an offence that is not entirely explained by judges who are mere spectres on the fringe of the narrator’s perception:

> I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white – whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words – and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness – of immoveable resolution – of stern contempt of human torture. I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment. (Poe 2009:239)

He is imprisoned in the dark. The events narrated are designed to elicit a nightmarish experience: his situation is inexplicable, but there is no escape, for it is his situation.

Initially, the narrator is seized with terror and faints, but he recovers sufficiently to explore his cell. He discovers that in the centre of cell is a well with no protective rampart:

> I put forward my arm and shuddered to find that I had fallen at the very brink of a circular pit, whose extent, of course, I had no means of ascertaining at the moment. Groping about the masonry just below the margin, I succeeded in dislodging a small fragment, and let it fall into the abyss. For nearly a minute I hearkened to its reverberations as it dashed against the sides of the chasm in its descent: at length, there was a sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes. (244)

Clearly, the intention is that he should fall down the well (the ‘pit’ of the title) and drown. The narrator remarks:

> Inow saw clearly the doom which had been prepared for me, and congratulated myself upon the timely accident by which I had escaped. A step farther before my fall, and the world had seen me no more. (244)

He notices that his cell is swarming with rats and food arrives for him miraculously. He once again falls asleep. When he wakes he observes that he is bound to a wooden frame, only able to move his head and left arm. He then notices that suspended from the ceiling is an immense pendulum with a sharp edge which is descending very slowly as it oscillates. The intention is to slice him apart. He is served with ‘meat pungently seasoned’; presumably, to keep him alive so that he will live to count the time he has left. When he finds that he has not been served with water he realizes that he has been deliberately served with food that would aggravate his thirst:

> I saw, to my horror, that the pitcher was absent – for I was consumed with intolerable thirst. This thirst it appeared to be the design of my persecutors to stimulate – for the food in the dish was meat pungently seasoned. (246)

When he observes that he is tied by a single continuous band running round his body, he gets the idea of enlisting the assistance of the rats to release him: he smears the band with the remnants ofthe pungent meat and fortunately the rats gnaw through the band and he is freed. As soon as he escapes, the pendulum is withdrawn into the ceiling:

> I had scarcely stepped from my wooden bed of horror upon the stone floor of the prison, when the motion of the hellish machine ceased, and I beheld it drawn up, by some invisible force, through the ceiling. (251)

But his horror is far from over: the iron walls begin to heat and start to move, to close on him, forcing him to move in the direction of the 'pit'. At the last moment, just as he is about to be pushed into the well, he hears voices and the moving walls halt. The cell is opened and he is released: the French Army has entered Toledo and the Inquisition is vanquished:

> There was a discordant hum of human voices!There was a loud blast as of many trumpets! There was a harsh grating as of a thousand thunders! The fiery walls rushed back! An outstretched arm caught my own as I fell, fainting, into the abyss. It was that of General LaSalle. The French army had entered Toledo.The Inquisition was in the hands of its enemies (253)

The conclusion has a derisory effect indicating clearly Poe must have felt that the built up tension must somehow be released and he opted for this outside intervention, probably because it could be narrated in a few sentences. However, Whitley points out that it is also true to the nature of nightmares, where the tension is such that one either wakes up or diverts the dream in another direction.

From the point of view of this study, what is of significance is that the story is about a person trapped in a situation which defies reason. But since the hero is conferred with rationality he succeeds in decoding the absurd world he is pushed into, to discover how it works and act in order to negate it. This is proved time and again in the short story, for instance, when he accurately measures the area of his cell and ascertains its shape or in the calculation of the time it would take for the pendulum to descend. As Norton comments, the strength of the short story is that all events occur in a region 'where the mind is only just capable of comprehending what is happening, just capable of taking appropriate action : the region on the fringe of possible knowledge, teetering always towards the inexplicable and the unknowable' (Norton 2000:110).

'The fringe of the knowable', as has been pointed out by Norton, is the chosen terrain of the Gothic novel, later of the 'horror' novel and the modern science fiction (the 'aliens' invading the Earth). The Gothic villain is always characterized by qualities that Poe invests in the judges of the Inquisition: the villain's actions, like the dungeons of the Inquisition, will have to be 'explored' and 'deciphered' anew. Thus, entering the world of the Gothic villain is similar to entering an institution governed by arbitrary set of rules that are forever changing – often without warning. (Skiredgi1987: 61-68). The Gothic hero's (the knight in the shining armour) task is clearly determined – to decipher and neutralize the villain's malevolent designs.

It may be observed that underpinning the trapping of medieval castles and pursued and persecuted heroines, at the nerve centre of the Gothic novel is its penchant for generation of terror through incomprehension presenting evil as a pathological manifestation. In doing that that it also posits the spectacle of human logic and reason grappling with something that stretches them to the limit.

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