FORERUNNING THE GOTHIC: HORACE WALPOLE'S *THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO*

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Abstract: *Walpole's The Castle of Otranto is commonly accepted as the first Gothic novel. This paper addresses the novel's complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship with the political and historical juncture in which it emerged, as well as Walpole's eclectic aesthetic vision which would shape to a great extent the Gothic mode in British literature.*

Key words: *gothic, Horace Walpole, Glorious Revolution, horror, terror, nationalism, Gothic Revival.*

It was in 1747 that the thirty-year old Horace Walpole embarked on an eccentric architectural project that occupied him for the following thirty years, and which largely contributed to what would later be known as the British Gothic Revival. Furthermore, and to support Theseus' famous pronouncements on 'the lunatic, the lover and the poet' in Act V, Scene I of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, Walpole's mansion at Strawberry Hill provided a 'local habitation and a name' to the his famous Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*. As Theseus puts it, 'as imagination bodies forth/ The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen/ Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name.' Strawberry Hill displayed a fresh and multifaceted interpretation of the Gothic, inspired by the medieval monastic and military styles, but with the solidity of the designs of carved wood and massive stone and their medieval revolutionary visions replaced by typically 18th century extravaganzas of wood, plaster and papier-mâché.

Horace was the son of Robert Walpole, the longest-serving Prime Minister in British history. As someone who rose from the gentry rather than the high-ranking aristocracy, Robert Walpole was, in compliance with Whig principles after the Glorious Revolution, an advocate of the principles of constitutional monarchy and separation of powers which still shape the British political system.

Unlike the aristocratic Tories, the mostly bourgeois Whigs embodied a historical trend which emphasized the growing power of money over hereditary aristocratic privilege. This development is the context in which the Britain sees a growing interest among in antiquities and historical romance among the middle and upper-middle classes. This antiquarian trend, which Horace Walpole's Gothic sensibility can be linked to, is aptly summed up by Susan Manning when evoking an 1699 British dictionary:

In 1699, *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew* defined an antiquary as a 'curious Critick in old Coins, Stones and Inscriptions, inWorm-eaten Records and ancient Manuscripts; also one that affects and blindly doats, on Relicks, Ruins, old Customs, Phrases and Fashions'[1] Notwithstanding the widening range of antiquarian activities and their increasing cultural authority, it was a reputation hard to shake off; ridicule is in the air almost as often as the subject is mentioned – and it is ubiquitous – throughout eighteenth-century writing (45).

[1] Susan Manning quotes from *A New Dictionary of the Terms Ancient and Modern of the Canting Crew, in its several Tribes, of Gypsies, Beggers, Thieves, Cheats, &c. with An Addition of some Proverbs, Phrases, Figurative Speeches, &c*. By B. E. Gent. London: Hawes, 1699.

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Like his father, Horace Walpole was in an ambivalent position: he both shared and criticized the ambitions of the emerging bourgeoisie, while developing the refined tastes traditionally more associated with the aristocracy. Rosemary Sweet's essay on the development of Gothic antiquarianism in the 18th century, which is clearly intertwined with both Tory and Whig ideological traditions, helps explain this ambivalence:

The study of Gothic antiquities can be traced back to two different ideological traditions: firstly, High Church Toryism and veneration for the outward and physical form of religious buildings, and secondly, the political association between theconcept of Gothic liberties, the ancient constitution and the liberties of freeborn Englishmen, discussed by Silver in this volume (...). Although this is a rhetoric that is often associated with the Whigs and a whiggish view of history, it was also frequently deployed by those of a Tory or country party disposition as a critique of perceived corruption and modern innovation (16).

Walpole's ambivalence goes further: a freethinker who both disliked and was fascinated by superstition; a son of a knighted, illustrious politician, living an aristocratic life (and eventually inheriting a title) while espousing Whig views; fascinated with the Middle Ages (as is evident in Strawberry Hill), yet critical of medieval superstitions and despotism. This ambivalence also raises questions about both his physical castle (Strawberry Hill) and the fictional castle of his novel. Do the novel and the castle make a political statement? Do they have a clearly defined ideological or aesthetic agenda? Do they reflect a fascination with the aristocratic privilege, cruelty and despotism of the premodern past? To what extent is the novel an attempt to establish himself as a legitimate writer? And as it has been noted by J. Paul Hunter, 'By 1750 the novel had become culturally significant enough to influence (and in many cases determine) the careers of anyone, male or female, interested in writing'(28).

There is also the question of whether Walpole's architectural project was a self-aggrandizing attempt at showing off his power and wealth, in the same way as his novel attempted to assert his legitimacy as a writer. One counter-argument would be that Strawberry Hill, in addition to being connected to the above-mentioned Gothic antiquarianism of the age, can also be seen more as a result of one highly imaginative individual's eclectic and idiosyncratic re-interpretation of the past, rather than the manifestation of a cultural and artistic trend. Furthermore, the wild aesthetic extravagance of his fantasy castle stands in stark contrast to the neoclassical principles dominant in the 18th century: coherenc, harmony, order, symmetry, as Matthew M. Reeve notes:

Strawberry Hill mirrors the additive, ramshackle building patterns of medieval architecture, with ornament of different periods and dates, seemingly disconnected spatial volumes, and varying floor levels. […] The house has often been considered a random mélange of Gothic ornament from different periods and places used out of its appropriate context, and it has been explained as a product of Walpole's non-classificatory and romantic rather than scholarly vision of the medieval past. To some extent this is based on Walpole's own flippant denigrations of his house as a 'paper fabric' and 'an assemblage of curious trifles'(423).

On the other hand, and again emphasizing these ambivalences, Strawberry Hill may be contextualized and linked to the increasing desire for the recognition of their status of more and more sections of the higher echelons of the British bourgeoisie. Centuries before sociologist Thorstein Veblen coined the concept of conspicuous consumption to describe the ostentatious display of wealth and power in America's Gilded Age, a number of increasingly wealthy and politically powerful British Whigs needed symbols of their respectability comparable to those assumed by the aristocracy. Whether Walpole meant to flaunt his wealth and inherited influence, or Strawberry Hill is mainly a complex expression of his imagination

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and antiquarian hobby is a matter of debate and perspective. Supporting one of these views, Cavallaro, quoting Davenport-Hines, highlights Walpole's irreverent games he plays with the design of his Gothic castle:

Strawberry Hill, Walpole's villa, brings together a bewildering variety of motifs and forms into an extravagant assemblage that irreverently flouts the distinction between reality and illusion. Walpole's construct is intrinsically surreal. Indeed, while legion architectural and decorative details from disparate sources are accurately replicated to make Strawberry Hill quintessentially Gothic, the villa's overall structure is like no Gothic building ever erected or planned. Eclectic juxtaposition is its priority. Walpole himself was well aware of the villa's jocose attributes and keen to enhance their impact through his own conduct. As Richard Davenport-Hines observes, 'His posture in his toy castle, with its towers, galleries and cloisters, were jokes through which he drew visitors into complicity . . .'(29).

Nevertheless, Walpole's statements reflecting his playful relationship with what he calls his 'paper fabric' and 'an assemblage of curious trifles,' as Reeve, Cavallaro, and Davenport-Hines have already noted above, can illuminate his complex attitude to his other 'paper castle,' his well-known Gothic romance. Both can be seen in the context of the 'Gothic constitutionalism' that Duggett explores in his book on the relationship between architecture and politics in the emergence of a complex Gothic – Romantic mode. His points about Gothic architecture, starting from the views of a notable 18th century law theorist as providing a connection between an individual and a national dimension of constitutionalism seen as 'Gothic,' is relevant to the interpretation of Walpole's otherwise eccentric 'two castles' as well:

This imaginative Gothic constitutionalism was extended still further in the writings of William Blackstone, the preeminent commonlaw theorist of the eighteenth century. In his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69), Blackstone conceived England's constitutional and legal history, with its descent from time immemorial and its gradual articulation through the common law, as resembling "an old Gothic castle, erected in the days of chivalry, but fitted up for a modern inhabitant" (Blackstone 1791, III, 268) (33).

Dugget points to similarities between the type of language in this 'imaginative Gothic constitutionalism' and Walpole's novel written precisely at the same time, whose 'exploration of labyrinthine architecture dramatizes and stands in for the explicit articulation of historical knowledge' (Ibid.).

The Castle of Otranto can be viewed through the lens of the oppositions in which Gothic in Britain had come to be the privileged term in the 18th century, as D. Punter and G. Byron note:

Gothic stood for the old-fashioned as opposed to the modern; the barbaric as opposed to the civilized; crudity as opposed to elegance; old English barons as opposed to the cosmopolitan gentry; often for the English and provincial as opposed to the European or Frenchified, for the vernacular as opposed to an 'imposed' culture. Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society. And various writers, starting from this point, began to make out a case for the importance of these Gothic qualities and to claim, specifically, that the fruits of primitivism and barbarism possessed a vigour, a sense of grandeur that was sorely needed in English culture (8).

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Punter and Byron view this from the perspective of the 21st century, while Horace Walpole had obviously did not have the same vantage point. The first preface (the first edition of Walpole's novel was printed on December 24th), toys with the conventions of the 18th century realist novel, emphasizing the authenticity of the manuscript that the real-author-as-translator found …in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England. It was printed at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529. How much sooner it was written does not appear. The principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that savours of barbarism. The style is the purest Italian (4)[2]

Thus, medieval barbarism is contrasted here with the painstaking care to record the fact explaning the circumstances of the text's discovery and publication, and of the historical period it is supposed to reflect. Therefore, it is easy to notice the ambivalent dialogue between extravagant romance and the conventions of realism that were more typical of 'serious' novels. We can identify in Walpole's text what E.W. Pitcher terms 'the paradigm of violation and repair' in 18th century Gothic.[3] Pitcher borrows the 'violation and repair' phrase from Steven Cohan's study of the relationship between romance and realism in the 18th century novel:

In Steven Cohan's insightful study of Violation and Repair in the English Novel (1986), we find astute theorizing about the dialectical interrelatedness, or dialogic engagement, of romance and realism within the novel. A structure of violation and repair underlies the self's reluctant emergence out of innocence into experience, Cohan argues, and this paradigm of experience is centered in a complex 'narrative tension,' a dialectic interplay of the 'regressive drive to regain innocence and the progressive drive to complete maturation'(224). The 'regressive drive to regain innocence' is associated with Romance, and the 'progressive drive to complete maturation' with narratives of psychological realism (35).

Walpole, and then Radcliffe and Lewis, will be faced with the task of putting together in the same fictional design the more realistic concerns of the novel of the early 18th century novel and the features of the less realistic ancient romance. The endeavour to accommodate the power of realistic verisimilitude and nightmarish episodes will be considerable. George E. Haggerty approaches this task in terms of the difficulty of the proper combination of fact and fancy by means of metonymic and metaphoric discourse. He considers that, in order to be convincing, the Gothic cannot bring together in an easy compromise between metaphoric and metonymic language functioning exclusivel in a work of fiction:

Rather, only the most persuasive metonymic structure can satisfy one's demand for verisimilitude in such works, while at the same time only a complex sophisticated metaphorical system could evoke the depth of meaning Gothic writers sought. Mere visionary moments are not enough in a novel unless they can transform the novelistic texture around them, but in a Gothic novel that texture must be substantial enough to be fully and irrevocably convincing. Gothic fiction demanded instead a means of resolving the metaphorical richness of the moment of Gothic intensity and the metonymic demands of time, space, character, and setting essential to the novel form (382).

The special presence in this metaphoric-metonymic game turns out to be the one who has lived as peasant and who behaves and speaks nobly and gallantly: Theodore. He helping or rescues any damsel in distress, as is fit for any standard nobleman to be encountered in the romances of the Middle Ages. It will be finally revealed that he *is* a member of the nobility,

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[2]References to Walpole's text will be provided by the edition of the 2009 Floating Press volume in the bibliography.

[3]To give due respect to the author's essay's title while paraphrasing it, its complete form is 'Eighteenth-Century Gothic Fragments and the Paradigm of Violation and Repair'

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entitled to inherit the estate and castle of Otranto. He is told by Friar Jerome the full story of who he is at the end of the narrative.The friar, in his turn, turns out to be the former peasant's long lost father, the Count of Falconara. So, one does not become, but one is born a nobleman, one is simply born with a silver spoon or without it.

The Castle of Otranto, although one might find its combination of fact and fancy quite naive today, is the first acknowledged specimen of the typical narrative of the Gothic genre/mode, containing as Christine Berthin claims, more than the usual recipe of terror and horror: 'Most ghost stories are centered on the theme of family inheritance and dynasty, with the ghost, a vestige from another time, haunting the castle, either in the role of claimant or protector of the title'(9).

In this gothic romance, the central ghost does not content itself to occasionally haunting at night; it, in the shape of various parts of the ancestor's stone statue, makes its appearance from the beginning, with the huge falling helmet as the first in a succession of ghostly apparitions. A prophecy that everybody knows but nobody can understand at the beginning of the novel, mysteriously proclaims that the castle of Otranto should pass from the present family when its real master has got too big to inhabit it.' After the different pieces of the enormous stone statue of the 'real owner' start appearing, the riddle is beginning to make sense, for the readers, in the first place. The initial professed attempt by the author to mix the old and the new kind of romance proves to be a narrative haunted by illicit desire. Cavallaro notes that the castle's labyrinthine architecture becomes the book's major presence:

[…] the novel teems with sexual yearnings taboo on either ethical or economic grounds: incestuous drives, adultery and attraction between socially incompatible people. Moreover, the castle's ability to introject such desires and project them back in visible form is so intense that the building itself acquires autonomous life, an energy more vibrant and tantalizing than that evinced by any of the animate beings enclosed within its walls. One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Castle of Otranto* is precisely the fact that the castle's architecture, with its battlements, closets, vaults and trapdoors, is so alive as to suggest that the dwelling is Walpole's actual protagonist and controlling force (29).

The narrative will consecrate the Gothic rendition of the transmission of the castle of Otranto from its original, lawful owner to Theodore, the real inheritor. This undertaking is, mainly owing to the horrifying and terrible conventions that the novella displays, and succeeding others will preserve and reinforce, much more problematic than it appears at first sight. In addition, its promotion of modernity against the brutality of the Middle Ages is far from unproblematic. The real inheritor, Theodore, painfully hesitates between Matilda, Manfred's beautiful daughter, whom he is in love with, and the equally attractive Isabella. The latter will become his wife, after Manfred kills his daughter in a fit of blind rage. Paradoxically, by his irrational, murderous act, Manfred restores the normality of lawful inheritance. Smith draws attention to a number of anxieties the novel displays in its anti-Enlightenment thematic framework featuring an argument about the strange link between the modern and the medieval:

The medieval, associated with castles and malign aristocrats, becomes recast as symbolically representing some highly politicized issues of the 1760s. Anti-Enlightenment ruins and irrationality can ultimately be decoded to reveal some historically specific political, social, and economic anxieties (18).

Some of the rude and villainous medieval aristocrats are finally somewhat brightened (Manfred himself does not appear to be that monstrous; as a matter of fact, he *only* accidentally murders his daughte, his design having been to liquidate somebody else's offspring, one might cynically observe) in order to provide a narrative design where the frontier separating good and evil, the modern and the medieval is getting fuzzier. This would turn out to be a common Gothic formula, either/neither revolutionary or/nor reactionary, in

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line with the reasonable gradualist approach of British developments at the time Walpole was writing, in dramatic contrast to the bloody events that would soon happen in revolutionary France. Helene Moglen is in favour of a reactionary rather than a revolutionary interpretation of the Gothic romance's political fiction, believing that the design of the reinstatement of an older order is what it is all about belongs (119).

Since it is arguably a political fiction requiring the reinstatement of a past state of affairs, the author appears to have become unaware of his personal political agenda. As it is known, the rise of his famous family had more to do with the Whig Glorious Revolution than with an aristocratic, Catholic Restoration. Despite the fact that Walpole is not keen on restoring an ancient state of affairs, he is attracted by the supernatural. As author, however, he professes to dismiss it.

Discussing the use of the word 'Gothic' in the wake of Walpole's Gothic fiction, Alfred Longueil sees the significant shift from its original meaning of 'designating medieval settings, characters, atmosphere' to that designating the establishment of a generic literary term, not necessarily associated with the remote past, but evoking supernatural incidents, in keeping with a growing readership favouring such a recipe, thus becoming a literary term indicating a genre more and more (459).

Walpole's ambivalent politics makes him look like a forerunner than as the founder of the Gothic romance, with his fascination with the medieval world and its mysteries sometimes held in check. However, the assumed distance with which he speaks from the vantage point of a more enlightened Age of Reason is not very convincing. This uncertain positioning is not that of an isolated eccentric erecting an extravagant Gothic castle in Spain or Italy, thus stressing a defining characteristic of what Botting views in terms of the genre's ambivalent, hesitating position, both fascinated and appalled by the barbarity and mystery of a bygone age (4).

The same scholar then adds that the Gothic texts which will enjoy success, and this particularly applies to the writers following in the wake of Horace Walpole's original Gothic sin as 'aristocratic fantasy,' will appeal to the sentimentalism bequeathed by the fiction of Richardson and his imitators. This is in keeping with some distinct attitudes and behaviour that are favoured by an ever growing readership representing ever larger segments of the British population, the middle classes and those more or less dependent on them in an increasingly expanding British Empire.

Walpole's initial design in what would turn into a popular cultural movement and literary genre is to be taken into account. This particularly applies to his ambivalent game with the roles played by, and the importance of, reason and superstition in an age driven, or at least seriously affected, by the ideas of the Enlightenment. Even if the servants' exaggerated superstitions will be derided, after they were first instrumental in the creation of the Gothic atmosphere, the Gothic romance appears to end with the irrational delivery of law and order supplied by the huge ghastly and ghostly creature that has haunted the castle and the text, and not by some realistic course of events within a recognizable social framework. Walpole seems to be trapped or kept hostage in the terrible Gothic fictional world, haunted by the ghosts of otherness coming from a vengeful past, but set right by the law and order coming from the same realm. This will amount to a consolidation of the medieval *status quo*, and not of the modern world that the author physically inhabits. This only confirms Botting's view concerning the Gothic romance's ideological uncertainty, this time with specific reference to Walpole and his novel/ romance, with the focus, this time, on its conservative, aristocratic bias.

Even as it associates virtue and character with breeding (Theodore is never anything but a knight in peasant's clothes) and seems to naturalise patriarchal and aristocratic values within a wider metaphysical order governed by supernatural manifestations of an eternal law, its mode

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of representation undercuts these links. For the supernatural manifestations of the restitution of an old order present a law that is at once violent and sublime, disproportionate and just, and founded as much on superstition as on power (33).

The manner in which The Castle of Otranto promotes the thematic frameworks and defining features of subsequent texts in ambivalent ways that in turn confirm and challenge the dangers caused by the impact on the present of past histories and ideologies will offer the design and the points of reference in terms of which the ghosts of following Gothic fiction will be embodied. This will be achieved in an interplay of sameness and difference which will give vitality to the … returning ghosts and the terrible and horrible accounts by the haunted which accompany them. The promotion and artistic exploitation for the awed delight of a large literate and semi-literate readership of the supernatural featuring horror and terror will display two apparently divergent paths, the Gothic's fictional recipe being subjected to the sinister subtleties of the psychological terror of such writers as Ann Radcliffe and to the excesses of such masters of horror as Matthew Lewis. Ironically, although 20th and 21st century developments in the fictional genre mainly follow in Radcliffe's footsteps, exploiting psychological terror effects, the name under which they have been accommodates is borrowed from Lewis's rather visceral artistic path: horror.

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