Anarchic alchemists: dissident androgyny in Anglo-American gothic fiction from Godwin to Melville

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INTRODUCTION

NEW ALCHEMY AND GOTHIC FICTION

"I was sitting in San Diego and turned to Nancy and said, 'it's New Alchemy!'"[1] These are the words of environmental scientist John Todd. They illustrate how he found a name for the ecological utopian project which he started together with his wife Nancy Jack Todd and his colleague Bill McLarney in 1969.[2] The purpose of the New Alchemy Institute, which closed its doors in 1992, was to instigate a process of long-term reform aimed at "reintegrating society into a genuine partnership with nature." Todd and his academic colleagues moved away from the university lecture theatre and laboratory because they believed that within the present academic structure there would be no space for this radical enterprise. Unlike many visionary utopias, their project involved more than just a thought experiment. Nancy Jack Todd explains that their desire was to avert "the disastrous course of modern society," a downward spiral that they believed instigated by the rise into dominance of scientific rationalism, capitalism and imperialism in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[3] To realize their vision, the New Alchemists aimed not at reforming laws that underscored dominant ideologies, but at "fundamental change" on a philosophical, practical, individual and social level. These fundamental changes involved a redefinition of the paradigms in which science would be practiced and consequently a restructuring of the way in which individual lives would be lived within a wider socio-political context (Zelov 172).

The name New Alchemy was not a commercial tag attached to the project by the media. Neither was it a satiric jibe articulated by more orthodox scientific colleagues within the academic community. Todd had good reason to adopt this particular name as the moniker for the project.[4] In order to achieve the fundamental socio-political change the New Alchemists wished to bring about with their scientific method and social practice, Todd argues, it was necessary to "go back to first principles," to investigate how the now dominant scientific, economic and political ideologies originated and to find out where

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[1] Chris Zelov, Phil Cousteau and Brian Danitz, eds., *Design Outlaws on the Ecological Frontier*, version 4.0 (Easton: Knossus Publishing, 2000) 175.

[2] For a brief history of the institute and its work see: Nancy Jack Todd and John Todd, *From Eco-Cities to Living Machines: Principles of Ecological Design* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1993) 1-11.

[3] Nancy Jack Todd, ed., *The Book of the New Alchemists* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977) x.

[4] Todd has not been the only scientific pioneer who believed that the word alchemy expressed best the nature of his enterprise. The Spanish ecological cosmetics firm ALQVIMIA, also known as the Alchemy Workshop, chose this name because they believed the legends of the alchemists presented them with an analogue to the ecological nature of their enterprise. One of their flyers even states that by using alchemical purposes they make better products than any of the industrially-based cosmetic firms. There products are labelled with a sticker that says that buying one of their products you are participating in a "new economy." For more details see: <http:/ / www.alqvimia. com>

things had gone astray. Within his own discipline, environmental science, Todd investigated how a return to an earlier pre-rational scientific philosophy could be useful to effect positive change for the future.[5] These investigations took him as far back and east as Taoism. His studies in Taoist science and philosophy, Todd explains, taught him that "science not practiced out of a context of sacredness or responsibility was a devil's bargain," a bargain that has been immortalised in western culture through the Faust legend (Zelov 173). Having found an alternative to scientific rationalism, Todd decided to use the most recognisable western form of this pre-scientific natural philosophy, alchemy, to highlight the utopian nature of his enterprise. Within alchemical thought, as he interpreted it, nature is deemed sacred and stresses mankind's responsibility towards the earth and those beings that inhabit it.

Explanatory literature on the western cultural schema of alchemy has shown that within this mythic-philosophical system mankind is perceived as a microcosm of the earth, the earth itself is a microcosm of the universe, all of which stand in a reciprocal relation to each other. Consequently, the most often quoted motto of western alchemy has been: so above, so below.[6] This metaphysical philosophy perfectly suited Todd and his colleagues back in 1969. They also believed, and still do, that mankind and nature form a symbiotic relationship. From this organic, holistic, or in their eyes alchemical perspective, the New Alchemists, during the 1970s and 1980s, argued that mankind should re-embrace a neglected worldview in which people exist hand-in-hand with nature, working together with it, in order to sustain life on earth rather than seeking to dominate it for the personal benefit of the few and to the detriment of the quality of life for most. "Stewardship" is now a frequently used term to describe this relationship between mankind and nature.[7]

While Todd's project stood at the margins of scientific academia, it did not stand on its own as an academic discipline that embraced a pre-rational scientific philosophy, turning away from dominant western ideologies by openly embracing a visionary utopianism. New Alchemy is part of a wider utopian academic movement that, since the late 1960s, has been looking for alternatives to the dominant mode of thought. Herbert Marcuse, Murray Bookchin and Theodore Roszak are three influential thinkers who have expressed the need for structural change in thought processes that dominate western culture.[8] This included the need to do away with modes of thought that made sense of the world by categorising its constituent parts according to a binary model into polar opposites:

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[5] For a detailed exposition of how Baconian scientific method pushed alchemical natural philosophy into the margins of Western culture and buttressed androcentric ideology see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

[6] The most recent cultural history of alchemy is Peter Marshall's monumental study, *The Philosopher's Stone: A Quest for the Secrets of Alchemy* (London: MacMillan, 2001), which traces the history from its origins in ancient Chinese, Middle Eastern and Egyptian philosophy to its present-day resonance in eco-philosophy.

[7] The alchemical world view has been incorporated into biological theory in the shape of the Gaia hypothesis. For a brief outline of the Gaia Hypothesis see Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Eco-Psychology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) 136-159; or, Peter Marshall, *Nature's Web: An Exploration of Ecological Thinking* (London: Simon &Schuster, 1992) 62-79 and 391-402.

[8] See for instance Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969); Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Doubleday, 1969); Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (San Francisco: Rampart Press, 1971).

public v. private, active v. passive, reason v. emotion, science v. nature, either v. or, male v. female. What is characteristic of the thought of these three American philosophers is that they all argue that a change in the fundamentals of modern scientific theory and practice is necessary to bring about a fundamental change in the structure of society. They all agree that this change should be initiated on the level of the individual in relation to the direct community, rather than through the reform of law and socio-political institutions.[9] This idea of individual thought leading to communitarian action and to wider socio-political change is deemed possible because human society, in their eyes, is not simply a dead structure, produced by legal documents and political interventions. Society is in fact constantly produced and reproduced by individual human and collective thought, action and interaction. Changing the law and abolishing institutions will not change people's mindset, customs and traditions; changing people's mindset, customs and traditions will ultimately change the laws and institutions that govern society.

Significantly, the New Alchemists, like some of their like-minded thinkers – especially the radical feminist Mary Daly – are aware that the dominance of scientific rationalism is buttressed by a *man*-made essentialist gender ideology that socially, legally, and politically recognizes only two rigidly bifurcated gender identities: masculine and feminine. These two genders have been mapped onto the above-mentioned socio-political binaries. To be masculine is to take a public, active, rational, position; to be feminine is to be private, passive and emotional, or so the dominant gender ideology would have people believe. The persistent presence of such a gender ideology in western culture has for centuries ensured the hegemony of androcentric culture.[10]

The New Alchemists, like the radical feminists, realised that such ideological gender polarization has ensured the dominance of self-professed enlightened western men, while it had left western women and all non-western peoples in the dark, metaphorically speaking. They found in the alchemical point of view not just an alternative to modern scientific practice, but also an ethic of partnership in which masculine and feminine principles are not defined through the usual static polarities but through metaphors of eternal activity and fluidity, change and progress, never stable but signifying always a moment in a larger process of eternal development. As such, alchemical philosophy, in refusing to solidify genders expresses an androgynous ideal and undermines the dominant essentialist gender ideology that seeks to rigidify and polarize male and female identity.[11] Nancy Jack Todd points out that the New Alchemists were also conscious of the interrelatedness between androcentric scientific rationalism and an ideology of gender polarization. She writes that the New Alchemists were not merely involved in the development of ecologically friendly technology. Within the context of their communitarian lifestyle, they urged the development of "an androgynous type of mind" (Todd 173). This mental androgyny was informed by Jungian psychology, which is now often rejected by gender theorists as a liberatory psychological gender model. However, the New Alchemists' androgynous ideal goes beyond advocating a merely psychological

[9] All three thinkers found inspiration in the youth subcultures of the 1960s that managed to construct dissident modes of living and embraced the irrational and magical in opposition to the rational and scientific.
[10] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).
[11] In chapter three this idea will be discussed in detail.

acknowledgement of the traditionally polarized masculine and feminine genders within the individual psyche. Through their mode of communal living, they developed an androgynous social order in which the individual is unfettered by essentialist gender categories, a social order that does not conflate a person's gender with a fixed social status and position within the dominant political power spectrum. As such they developed what can be described as a form of dissident androgyny, an androgynous identity performance that is characterised by a refusal to perform the dominant gender roles which people, under pressure from social custom and state legislation, are urged to adopt. At the New Alchemy Institute, which was simultaneously a public didactic and scientific space and a private living space, a laboratory and a home, the social role and practical work was allocated to the individual members according to the personal qualities and intellectual and practical capabilities of each individual participant. Judith Lorber's theory of the relation between gender and power can explain how the New Alchemy Institute, as an androgynous social utopia undermines hegemonic gender ideology. Lorber points out that in mainstream western culture "the social reproduction of gender in individuals reproduces the gendered societal structure"; this means that "as individuals act out gender norms and expectations in face-to-face interaction, they are constructing gender systems of dominance and power."[12] At the New Alchemy Institute, gender is entirely irrelevant in defining a man's and a woman's social status and their role within the community. In such a dissident androgynous social practice, gender is no longer an ideological power tool.

The New Alchemy Institute's communal social structure emphasises the need to begin the radical reform of western society from the microcosmic level outward. Lorber argues that one of the reasons why western culture has been predominantly androcentric is the fact that "structures and practices simultaneously sustain and are legitimised by the micropolitics of everyday life and the macropolitics of state power" (Lorber, *Paradoxes* 8). The New Alchemists do not call for mere legal equality of men and women within the existing macropolitical social structure. Legal equality on paper will leave the unequal social statuses and the unequal power relations intact. Instead, they break through this ideological vicious circle by creating, on a micropolitical level, an entirely new social structure in which mankind is no longer defined through the dualistic gender categories that inform the dominant ideologies, which in turn ensure the empowerment of men. Their scientific practice and philosophy allows the New Alchemists to break with the "patterns of expectation," to use Lorber's phrase, that fix men and women into polarized gender roles that underscore western scientific, capitalist and social ideologies and allot to women an apparently natural inferior social status (Lorber, *Paradoxes* 1).

What is significant about Lorber's revisionist gender theory and the New Alchemists' dissident androgynous utopian thought and practice is that both argue that their radical gender ideology would not erase male and female gender identities in society – a fear often expressed by gender theorists dealing with the concept of androgyny in a utopian context. What it would do, in fact, is erase gender statuses within society (no one has the right to claim superiority over others purely on the basis of their gender). It is their critique of gender status that makes the New Alchemists' androgynous ideal dissident

[12] Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994) 6.

towards the dominant ideology of gender polarization. Within the dominant ideology masculinity is always valued above femininity, giving men the incentive to act out their assigned role and to defend its dominant status by excluding others from the possibility to perform this role. What needs to be eradicated is this incentive to perform ideologically inscribed gender roles. This can be achieved by breaking the link between a successful performance of masculinity and the acquisition of superior social status and power.

Lorber argues that performative practices such as cross-dressing and transvestism through "resistance and rebellion have altered gender norms," but they "have rarely eroded the statuses" (Lorber, *Paradoxes* 32). A man cross-dressed as a woman, no matter how successful the performance, leaves the dominant status of masculinity – rational, active, assertive, and public – in the dominant position. Should this performance be kept up indefinitely, it would simply allot to the cross-dressed man the lower status attributed to the female identity. Similarly, a woman successfully cross-dressing as a man can show up the performative nature of gender identities, but she does not necessarily challenge the dominant status of masculinity. Her successful impersonation of masculinity may give her more power as long as her performance is successful, but it leaves no room for a powerful femininity. Cross-dressing and transvestism are not dissident androgynous gender practices because they rely equally on an ideology of gender polarization for their effectiveness; they offer no third gender or pluriform alternative and do not challenge gender status. Even in such traditionally strong androcentric cultural institutions as the sports club or the military barracks, cross-dressing does not subvert the dominant status of masculinity. In fact they work by contrast to re-enforce gender boundaries. Lorber explains that in western society "the gender boundaries have to hold, or the whole gendered social order will come crashing down" (Lorber, *Paradoxes* 27). By erasing gender boundaries within their utopian thought and practice, the New Alchemists worked from within their microcosmic society to achieve the same effect in the macrocosm of the western world.

As the New Alchemists realised, a truly androgynous gender performance pushes its performer into a marginal space, since the dominant ideology of gender polarization cannot ascribe androgyny any kind of status except that of the abject.[13] By being neither male nor female (and not a complementary union of both the one and the other, as critics of androgyny profess), androgyny cracks the androcentric lens; it reveals the faultline in the dominant gender ideology of polarized male and female identities because it offers a third, fluid gender position outside of the ideological boundaries.[14] An androgynous gender performance from an abject position in which polarized male and female identities dissolve into a third, from the dominant perspective, genderless identity, erases the ideological boundaries and thus destabilises the gendered social order. This "de-gendered" society, which Lorber advocates through her work, "would not be a society of indistinguishable clones" – the dystopian theory of many radical feminists writing about androgyny – but

[13] Abject is used here in the sense in which Julia Kristeva used it. In *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 225, Kelly Oliver explains that "Kristeva suggests that the abject is not what we might ordinarily think, what is grotesque or unclean; rather it is what calls into question borders and threatens identity. The abject is on the borderline, and as such it is both fascinating and threatening."

[14] For an exposition of the theory of the western androcentric lens, see Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 39-79.

would "produce much more variety than two genders" because gender would be free from socio-political status (Lorber, *Paradoxes* 293). Once gender statuses are eroded, androgyny, along with other alternative gender identities, could return from abjection to become a viable alternative to masculinity and femininity, without calling for the traditional gender identities to be erased.

This androgynous gender theory is a form of gender dissidence because it rejects the idea of male-female complementarity. As feminists have shown, gender complementarity petrifies ideologically prescribed gender roles into the very binary categories that give them their unequal social statuses. This gender ideology merely emphasises that what the one lacks the other conveniently has to give and vice versa, making men and women dependent on each other, but leaving their genders polarized and their unequal statuses in tact. The genderless society advocated by Lorber and the mental and social androgyny advocated by the New Alchemists are both forms of dissident androgyny, in which the word androgyny no longer signifies the complementarity of masculine and feminine traits, as the two linguistic components of the word *andros* and *gyne* imply. When its connection to the pre-scientific and utopian schema of alchemy is stressed, the word androgyny performs a very different cultural function, signifying a fluid and active merger of gender traits traditionally deemed masculine or feminine, but now available for merger and positive transmogrification. When using the concept of social androgyny, genders are never defined by essential categories of difference. Because of the very lack of any social status and political power, genders become markers of an individual identity at a certain stage of development, never fixed, always fluid.

The rise of academic disciplines such as eco-philosophy and eco-science over the past three decades and the development of eco-feminism in particular, offer some proof that the New Alchemists' pioneering ideas about the relationship between alchemical philosophy, androgyny, and utopianism have not remained merely isolated speculations. These academic disciplines have played a significant part in creating what is now a vocal oppositional and egalitarian "green" movement that equally wishes to make a positive impact on people's lives and the well-being of the planet. Significantly, eco-philosophers such as Carolyn Merchant, Theodore Roszak, and recently Peter Marshall, have also investigated in what way the cultural schema of alchemy can be used to construct a critical perspective that can function as a fruitful alternative to the still dominant androcentric lens through which both men and women view the world. Their recent work presents evidence of the continual momentum that this pre-rational structure of thought is gaining throughout Anglo-American culture with respect not only to environmental issues, but also to issues of individual identity, including gender.[15]

As the title *Anarchic Alchemists: Dissident Androgyny in Anglo-American Gothic Fiction from Godwin to Melville* suggests, the chapters that follow this introduction do not form a treatise on utopian eco-philosophy, but contain analyses of British and American gothic fictions. The focus in these analyses, however, lies on expressing the dissident potential of

[15] See Marshall, *Nature's Web* and *Riding the Wind: A New Philosophy for a New Era* (London: Cassell, 1998); Roszak, *Voice of the Earth* and *Person/Planet* (New York: Doubleday, 1979); Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Their ideas will be discussed in more detail in chapter two and three.

the stock figure of the alchemist in British and American gothic fiction. Most studies of alchemy and alchemists in literature focus on the early-modern period and place the cultural schema of alchemy, as the object of analysis, in the context of social satire or Christian spiritualism. Stanton J. Linden's *Darke Hierogliphicks* is exemplary of this critical tradition.[16] In his exhaustive study of the presence of alchemical imagery in three-hundred years of British literature (from Chaucer to the Restoration), Linden argues that, while John Donne and George Herbert use alchemical imagery for spiritual purposes, "to a considerable extent, the history of alchemy's literary presence is the history of a satirical tradition."[17] Like most accounts of alchemy in literature, Linden's study ends where the Enlightenment takes off. This suggests that somehow the presence of alchemy in cultural production withered in proportion to the rise into dominance of positivist, rational scientific theories and philosophy as the structures of thought that worked to explain the workings of nature and mankind's role upon the globe.

The New Alchemists and other eco-philosophers, however, have used the cultural schema of alchemy as a source for their utopian vision, often incorporating an egalitarian society in which gender is no longer a marker of social status and power tool. Their interpretation of alchemy is significant to the study of alchemy in literature because it offers cultural critics an interpretation of this vast western myth that stands in contrast to the one which has become culturally dominant: the alchemist as greedy maker of gold and obsessive searcher for the elixir vitae, whose intellectual hubris causes him to neglect the heart, leading to disastrous consequences for mankind in general. Todd and his colleagues never intended to turn lead into gold by hovering over a furnace for years on end. Neither were they out to discover the elixir of life. Todd's reason for calling his ecological enterprise New Alchemy arose from his recognition of the utopian and dissident potential within alchemy, a cultural schema which he recognised has historically been associated with theories of radical reform and opposition to tyranny and that had as one of its primary utopian symbols the androgyne.

The presence of the cultural schema of alchemy in what is generally considered "canonical" literature indeed wanes considerably from the end of the seventeenth-century onwards. The figure of the alchemist, his science and philosophy, found a new home, however, in gothic fiction, a "popular" form of writing that rose into prominence during the latter decades of the eighteenth century. It is striking how many British and American authors of gothic fiction in the late-eighteenth, early nineteenth century incorporated the cultural schema of alchemy into their literary repertoire. Most of these fictions took shape as gothic fantasies peopled with solitary alchemists (or "mad" scientists in strange laboratories) wandering through gloomy landscapes and/ or standing on the margins of apparently stable idyllic communities as outcasts. Unfortunately, up to the present, these figures have suffered the same stigma endured by their alchemical forefathers of the Renaissance and Restoration, of which Marlowe's figure of Faustus is probably the most

[16] Linden's work will be discussed in more detail in chapter two.
[17] Stanton J. Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks: Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1996) 2.

famous example. Like their literary parents, the gothic alchemists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century have been read mostly as satiric butts and objects of critique.[18]

I will argue, however, that, apart from the gothic alchemist's debt to figures such as Faustus, there exists a more important philosophical link between the stock gothic figure of the alchemist and the utopianism of The New Alchemists and their fellow alchemical utopians. William Godwin's *St Leon* (1799) was the first gothic novel in which the figure of the alchemist and his magical powers played a central role. But Godwin was only secondarily a gothic novelist. Primarily, he was a visionary anarchist philosopher concerned with utopian schemes that involved amongst others the entire dissolution of government, the equal sharing of all property, the eradication of race, class and gender inequality in society, and even the possibility of human immortality. Godwin's daughter, Mary Shelley, immortalised the gothic alchemist in her first novel, *Frankenstein* (1818). The portrait of Victor Frankenstein was inspired by her husband Percy Shelley, who was himself a dabbler in alchemy, a self-styled political radical and the author of an alchemical gothic novel, *St. Irvyne; or, the Rosicrucian* (1811). While her portraits of women show evidence of her engagement with the feminist theories of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley dedicated her gothic tale to Godwin. She would later return to the cultural schema of alchemy in her short story "The Mortal Immortal" (1834), showing a sustained interest in alchemical imagery. Edgar Bulwer Lytton used Godwin's novel of purpose *Caleb Williams* (1794) as a spring board from which to develop a form of openly reformist popular fiction, characterised by its sympathetic sociological analysis of criminal life and critique of t the established legal system and social customs. Later, Bulwer turned to the cultural schema of alchemy in *Zanoni* (1842), a gothic novel recounting the life of an immortal herbalist who is involved with spiritual as well as social reform during the period of the French Revolution. Even the sensational novelist and social reformer William Harrison Ainsworth jumped onto the alchemical-gothic bandwagon when he introduced the alchemist into the fog-fuelled urban world of *Auriol; or, the Elixir of Life* (1845). This summary of British alchemical gothic novels above shows that in the early nineteenth century the cultural schema of alchemy was used by various authors who all, in their own peculiar ways, through their fiction attempted to transform British society for the better. That radical reformism dominated the culture of the era can be seen by the fact that even Samuel Taylor Coleridge, inspired by Godwin's writings and the radical culture of the time, contemplated setting up a utopian community with his Romantic friends in Pennsylvania.[19]

In America, the youthful Godwinian disciple and self-styled visionary Charles Brockden Brown utilized various elements from the schema of alchemy to create his protean figure Carwin in *Wieland* (1798) and its prequel "Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist" (1801-3). The labour activist and radical reformer George Lippard wrote several gothic fictions, most notably *The Ladye Annabel* (1842) and *Paul Ardenheim, the Monk of Wissahickon* (1848), which include a variety of solitary alchemists and Rosicrucian orders seeking to

[18] In chapter two this idea will be further explored.

[19] On Coleridge's interest in Godwinian Utopianism see Rosemary Ashton *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 43-57; Kenneth R. Johnston 'The Political Sciences of Life: From American Pantisocracy to British Romanticism," in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Life Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 47-68.

bring about their own peculiar versions of utopia.[20] Lippard's friend Edgar Allan Poe also produced various tales for popular magazines that involve alchemical imagery, from the early "Morella" (1835) to the late comical hoax "Von Kempelen and his Discovery" (1849). The fact that Poe used both the traditional and the mystical versions of the alchemical myth in his work shows that he had knowledge not only of the popular alchemical legends – the magician who seeks to turn base metals into gold – but also of this cultural schema's hermetic spiritual nature – its utopian potential. Nathaniel Hawthorne's literary career, from "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment" (1837) to the unfinished and posthumously published *Elixir of Life Manuscripts* is characterized by a continual output of tales and romances containing alchemists and elements from the cultural schema of alchemy in all its diverse forms. Even Herman Melville's novel *Pierre* (1852) does not escape the structural as well as thematic presence of alchemical metaphors, while the stock gothic figure of the alchemist functions as the protagonist of his short story "The Bell-Tower" (1855).

Godwin and Bulwer had both directly contributed to British reform culture. In America, both Brown and Lippard perceived themselves as prophets of change. For Godwin, Brown, Bulwer and Lippard, gothic fiction was a useful means for expounding visions of radical reform because the genre's penchant for taking the fantastic and outrageous seriously allowed them to dramatise their initially philosophical radical vision in a more palatable form that reached a much wider audience. The fantastic figure of the alchemist, connected to the utopian tradition of alchemical lore, in this sense, became a potential vehicle for such radical thought. On another level, the figure of the alchemist, as an outcast genius, to some extent offered these authors a fictional analogue to the plight of the radical reformer in a time when the dominant culture looked at such figures askance. While Poe, Hawthorne and Melville were familiar with and sometimes praised the popular gothic fiction by Godwin, Brown, Bulwer and Lippard, they were not so directly involved in reform culture. They are easier to characterise as observers of, or hesitant participants in the radical reform culture of antebellum America. This culture was embodied by figures such as Josiah Warren (the individualist anarchist), Amos Bronson Alcott (the radical educational reformer and mystic), Henry David Thoreau (naturalist and social visionary) and Stephen Pearl Andrews (political utopianist). Apart from these individual intellectuals, scores of utopian communities speckled the map of the United States during the antebellum period. Both these communities as well as the individual radicals form an important cultural backdrop to the alchemical gothic fictions written by Poe, Hawthorne and Melville.

Historically, when radical thought has threatened to lead to radical action reactionary forces quickly moved to the counter attack. Medieval and Renaissance alchemists often suffered from repressive measures by the establishment. At the end of the eighteenth-century, Thomas Paine had to flee Britain to escape state prosecution after the

[20] In *Paul Ardenheim* (1848) George Lippard projected an oncoming mystical revolution that would find the disenfranchised empowered due to the secret machinations of benevolent alchemists. While significant as intertexts, Lippard's novels are not analysed in detail in this study because unlike his contemporaries, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville, his engagement with alchemy and utopianism is focussed entirely on the concept of brotherhood in labour and does not closely engage with the androgynous utopianism that the schema of alchemy harbours.

publication of *Rights of Man* (1791-2).[21] Similarly, the scientist Joseph Priestley sailed across the Atlantic after his house and laboratory were burnt down by an angry mob during the Birmingham riots, a historical event that Godwin would retell in a dramatic scene in *St Leon*. Godwin and Wollstonecraft themselves were ridiculed for their ideas and actions by the Tory press. In the 1840s and 1850s George Lippard outraged the American critics with his highly popular but slanderous fictions about the degeneracy of the American ruling elite. In the period in which gothic fiction enjoyed its widest appeal there seems to have been a connection between the cultural schema of alchemy, theories of radical reform and gothic fiction, a connection fully investigated in the chapters that follow.

The story of the New Alchemists, recounted at the outset of this introduction, works to strengthen this link between radical and often utopian reformism and the use of the cultural schema of alchemy as a metaphorical vehicle through which to express such ideas. Like Victor Frankenstein, John Todd has been something of a mad scientist in the eyes of the orthodox scientific community. Like Godwin, Todd is also a visionary reformer. Todd's utopian project – creating living machines that purify sewage into drinkable water, grow food and function as sources of eco-friendly energy – may have seemed like a mad science-fiction dream at first, which, if successful, would make much of the current science obsolete. Its success, in fact, would undermine the established economic system by making people more self-sufficient as well as aware of the need to conserve rather than consume. This apparently mad dream, actually, has become reality on an international scale. According to the title of an award-winning film and accompanying book that illustrates the eco-scientists' cause, Todd is part of a dissident group of *Design Outlaws*. Todd stands at the margins of the scientific community because his ideas do not correspond to the orthodox scientific practice and theory. Todd's (as well as Roszak's and Merchant's) emphasis on the significance of taking seriously alchemical philosophy, expresses dissidence towards the dominant scientific rationalism and significantly also the ideology of gender polarization that they believe is inextricably intertwined with it in a relationship of mutual support.

The relative success of their ideas proves that progressive results can be achieved by breaking existing customs and protocol, and by questioning accepted scientific facts, practices and lay theories. In this way, Todd's work resembles that of the old alchemists, not in how they really were – for who knows how they really were – but in how their lives have become part of the larger cultural schema of alchemy. The alchemists old and new have become ideologically dissident figures whose projects not merely threaten to undermine orthodox theological and scientific belief and practice, but also the androcentric economic and political ideologies on which the dominant culture is founded. New Alchemy has shown how *mad* science is not always *bad* science, making possible a re-evaluation of the mad scientists of gothic fiction, whose stigma in literary criticism has been that of the evil genius, rather than the radical reformer.[22]

In taking such a perspective of the cultural schema of alchemy and using it as a critical lens through which to analyse late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gothic

[21] In chapter two the marginal position of the alchemist in medieval and renaissance time will be outlined.
[22] These ideas will be further investigated and explained in chapter two.

fiction, this study follows cultural materialist critical practice, which, as John Brannigan explains, has been "committed to interpretations and investigations which have overt political ends in the contemporary world."[23] In cultural materialist analysis, literature is not read to reveal its underlying unity, its hidden structures, the author's psychology, or the historical processes that shaped it and which it helped to shape. It is read in order to explore "the past while maintaining a close watch on the relevance such explorations have for the present" (Brannigan 105). Kathleen McCormick and Gary F. Waller have highlighted the importance of recognising that contemporary literary criticism is always conducted from the vantage point of the present. They argue that a text "may try to privilege a particular reading position as 'natural', but because readers are subjects in their own histories, they may not produce that seemingly privileged reading."[24] In approaching a text, they point out, the critic necessarily brings down upon it different cultural repertoires than those that played a part in the creation of the text. Instead of viewing this discrepancy as a hindrance in reading literature from the past centuries – leading to inevitably anachronistic interpretations – they see it as a positive cultural difference:

> the reader may see contemporary significances when they are reading a text, particularly an older one, that they know could not have been part of the author's repertoire, but that are so powerful and relevant to their own culture that they feel these significances need to be articulated (McCormick and Waller 207).

From this theoretical position, the story of the New Alchemists, as well as other discourses involving alchemy such as eco-feminism and the critique of androcentric scientific rationalism can be brought to bear positively on the reading of nineteenth-century gothic fiction, written in an era dominated by an established ideology of gender polarization as well as a radical reform culture in which the figure of the alchemist plays a central role and whose meaning depends on the way in which the cultural schema of alchemy is interpreted.

The corpus of texts analysed in this study is made up of both British and American gothic fictions in which the schema of alchemy and often the figure of the alchemist functions as a thematic as well as structural device. By emphasising the continuity between these British and American fictions, rather than their differences, this study is part of a flourishing mode of Anglo-American literary analysis pioneered by scholars such as Robert Weisbuch, Wil Verhoeven, A. Robert Lee and Paul Giles. In 1986, Weisbuch argued that, although "we have in abundance theoretical considerations of Anglo-American difference…we do not have any book that investigates texts intensively to get at a characterization of Anglo-American influence."[25] Ten years later, in their introduction to *Making America/Making American Literature*, A. Robert Lee and Wil Verhoeven stressed the need to focus on the continuity as well as differences between British and American

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[23] John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: MacMillan, 1998) 98.
[24]Kathleen McCormick and Gary F. Waller, "Text, Reader, Ideology: the Interactive Nature of the Reading Situation" *Poetics* 16/ 1 (1987): 194.
[25]Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) xx.

literature. Within American culture, they argued "transition from one national literary regime to another could hardly have been more a process of borrowing and innovation, England-into-America and America-out-of-England."[26] This transatlantic critical perspective has been most thoroughly developed by Paul Giles. He too approaches early American literature as part of a larger transatlantic Anglo-American culture. A telling aspect of this attitude towards American literature and the shift in cultural point of view is the idea Giles stresses that the War of Independence was not initially a conflict between two nations – occupier and occupied – but a civil war, which "because of its outcome, subsequently became known as the American Revolution."[27] According to Giles, a transatlantic approach to the analysis of American literature, viewing it as initially belonging to a cross-Atlantic British culture, opens it up for re-evaluation. Borrowing a famous critical phrase from the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin, Giles argues:

> the development of American literature appears in a different light when read against the grain of British cultural imperatives, just as British literature itself reveals strange and unfamiliar aspects that are brought into play by the reflecting mirrors of American discourse. (Giles 1)

The motivation of applying such a perspective to classic American gothic texts is that by reading them *in light of*, rather than *in contrast to* the British popular gothic tradition they can be freed from their status within American cultural history as literary classics, examples of nineteenth-century high-culture. Freed from their embedded status as high culture, these texts can be approached as productions that fit equally within the realm of popular gothic fiction, produced in a world dominated by radical reform agendas, in which the stock gothic character of the alchemist could function as a vessel for radical reform ideas.

Wolfgang G. Müller has coined the term interfigurality to refer to the critical approach that focuses on the "interrelations that exist between characters of different texts."[28] Müller prefers the term figure over character because it emphasises "character as a strictly structural and functional textual element" of fiction. I will utilize Müller's concept to investigate how far the stock-gothic figure of the alchemist indeed takes the same radical, potentially utopian form in the gothic fiction, expressing a dissident androgynous ideal, when these fictions are read not as isolated products of British or American literary minds, but as gothic fictions linked by the authors' shared use of the schema of alchemy, and their shared origins in a culture suffused with voices calling out for radical reform, including reform of the level of gender roles.

Raymond Williams explains that cultures are not monolithic, but always constructed of a combination of dominant, emergent and residual cultures.[29] Whatever

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[26] A. Robert Lee and Wil Verhoeven, eds., *Making America/Making American Literature: From Franklin to Cooper* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 7-8.
[27] Paul Giles, *Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730-1860* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2001) 1.
[28] Wolfgang G. Müller, "Interfigurality: A Study on the Interdependence of Literary Figures," *Intertextuality*, ed., Heinrich F, Plett (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) 101.
[29] For an exposition of the theory of residual, dominant and emergent culture, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977) 121-128.

these authors' intentions were in utilizing the residual schema of alchemy in their gothic fictions, the radical critique of the dominant order and the gender polarization that underscores it is alive within this schema and can be shown to underscore the emerging culture of radical reform that increasingly challenged the dominant order. This theoretical perspective and historical awareness can be used to construct what Alan Sinfield calls dissident readings of these novels. Sinfield argues that it is more useful to use "the term dissident," that subversive when talking about issues of opposition in literature. Using the term "subversion," he explains, "may seem to imply achievement – that something was subverted." However, "since mostly the government did not fall, patriarchy did not crumble" after the appearance of a supposedly subversive text, the critic's conclusion would have to be that "containment must have occurred."[30] Using the term subversion, then, implies the presence of fixed boundaries, which are either upheld or overthrown. Using the term "dissidence" in cultural criticism, in contrast, implies the "refusal of an aspect of the dominant, without prejudging an outcome." As in Williams' theory of the simultaneous existence of residual, dominant and emergent cultures, dissidence focuses on the simultaneous existence of and struggle between dominance and opposition, turning ideology, as Stuart Hall has defined it (here summarised by Graham Turner) into "a site of struggle and a prize to be won, not a permanent possession of dominant groups."[31] Marilyn Butler explains how this vision also rings true for literature: "no form is confined to a single political message. Everything turns on how it is used, and on how the public at a given time is ready to read it."[32]

By using the cultural schema of alchemy, as outlined in the story of the New Alchemists, as a critical lens through which to analyse the gothic fictions in question, the potential that these texts harbour for articulating dissident androgyny can be highlighted. As such these texts do not consciously subvert the hegemonic gender ideology of late-eighteenth, early nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, but can be shown to harbour the potential utopian ideal inherent in the schema of alchemy used by the authors to tell their tales and which was also present in the reform culture that surrounded them.

This dissertation has a basic two-part structure: a theoretical and an analytical section. Part one discusses and defines in detail the major critical concepts that inform the analytical section: "the gothic," "alchemy" and "androgyny." This study transcends the usual critical distinctions made between canonical and popular fiction, as well as the national boundaries that often serve to define literary corpuses. Therefore, chapter one will set out in detail the reasoning behind reading classic American literature *in light of* popular British gothic fiction and the potential for creating *dissident readings* that such a strategy brings about. The figure of the alchemist has been interpreted differently through various critical lenses and now suffers from a bad reputation in cultural theory and literary criticism. Presenting an overview of the legendary figure of the alchemist in history and fiction, chapter two highlights the dissident potential of the alchemist. Because the term

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[30] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 49.

[31] Graham Turner, *British Cultural Studies, an Introduction*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1996) 188.

[32] Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels & Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background*, 1760-1830 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 160.

androgyny has received widely different interpretations over the past decades and has been rejected as a critical concept by many contemporary gender theorists, chapter three outlines the critical history of the concept of androgyny and defines in more detail how androgyny has retained its utopian gender potential within the cultural schema of alchemy.

In part two the theoretical perspective set out in part one will be applied to an analysis of works of Anglo-American gothic fiction. The alchemist, as a figure of legend, has never been a stable entity, however. This is also the case in these various gothic texts, in which the alchemist takes various shapes in various literary contexts, allowing for different types of alchemists to express different modes of dissident androgyny. Therefore, part two is divided into three chapters. Each chapter deals with a specific representation of the figure of the alchemist and his philosophy in Anglo-American gothic texts. Chapter four investigates the role of the alchemist as a vessel for dissident androgyny in Godwin's *St Leon*, Brown's *Wieland* and Poe's "Morella" and "Ligeia" (1838) using the concepts dissident androgynous presence and anarchic voice. Chapter five investigates the alchemist as mad scientist in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Hawthorne's "The Birth-Mark" (1843) and "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844) and Melville's "The Bell-Tower" and the normative culture's tendency to identify the androgynous ideal of such figures as monstrous. Chapter six investigates the alchemist's potential to play the role of radical reformer. In this chapter, which analyses Bulwer's *Zanoni*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Melville's *Pierre*, dissident androgyny becomes a form of gender utopianism.