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

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PART 1

THEORIES OF THE GOTHIC, ALCHEMY AND ANDROGYNY

CHAPTER 1

TRANSATLANTIC TRANSFORMATIONS: THE STATUS AND CULTURAL WORK OF GOTHIC FICTION IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

The many overview studies of gothic fiction that have appeared in the wake of David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* (1980) have worked to create a gothic canon.[1] All of these critical studies emphasise that the gothic bloomed initially as a mode of popular horror fiction during the late eighteenth century; most of them name Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) as its first flower. This tale about a patriarchal tyrant, lord of a medieval castle, who pursues a white-robed heroine, who in turn is saved from ravishment by a virtuous hero, functioned in many ways as a mould from which much of the later gothic fiction was cast. As a genre, the gothic peaked during the 1790s. It most often discussed publications are still Ann Radcliffe's gothic romances, M.G. Lewis' graphic shocker *The Monk* (1796), William Godwin's political gothic Caleb Williams and Mary Shelley's tale of mad scientists and monsters, *Frankenstein* (1818). According to most general histories of gothic fiction, this initial bloom period came to an end during the 1820s, leaving as its final flower Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth, the Wanderer* (1820). It is widely acknowledged that during the Victorian era the gothic left its traces in fantastic magazine stories and sensation novels by authors such as Edgar Bulwer Lytton, William Harrison Ainsworth, Charles Dickens, Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Wilkie Collins. The late nineteenth century saw the brief resurrection of the gothic with such seminal publications as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). As a form of popular sensation literature, however, the genre never regained the cultural presence it enjoyed during its period of initial flowering at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

In the United States the gothic fiction of the first bloom period, often published in cheap pirate editions, found a vast reading audience. In 1798, Charles Brockden Brown was the first American author to publish a gothic novel. He wrote early enough to influence British contemporaries such as Godwin and Mary Shelley. In American soil, however, gothic fiction did not bloom until the mid-nineteenth century. The major representatives of American gothic fiction are Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne Herman Melville, and the now mostly forgotten George Lippard. Gothic fiction, within British cultural history

[1] See David Punter, *The Literature of Terror* (London: Longman, 1980), expanded to 2 volumes in 1996; Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995); Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996); Markman Ellis, *A History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000); Jerrold E. Hogle, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); David Punter and Glennis Byron, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

has retained its popular roots. It is still mostly approached as a form of popular fiction aimed at a large reading audience. In American cultural history, however, many works of gothic fiction have become literary classics – approached as high-cultural literary productions founded on intellectual aesthetic and social philosophies.

The three sections of this chapter on the transatlantic transformations of the gothic each investigate one specific aspect of the gothic as a popular genre that is significant to the analysis of the figure of the alchemist as a vessel for dissident androgyny in both British and American gothic fiction. Section one will discuss the various forms of cultural work that gothic fiction, on both sides of the Atlantic, has been judged to perform by several of its major critics. From this discussion it will become clear that gothic fiction is never inherently affirmative or subversive of hegemonic ideologies, but always carries the potential for cultural dissidence. Section two shows that it is fruitful to divide gothic fiction into subgenres when addressing the issue of cultural work. This will show that some subgenres of the gothic can be read as affirmative, while others harbour greater potential for dissidence. Section three discusses the critical politics that has defined British and American gothic as popular sensational fare and a form of classic high-cultural literature, respectively. This final section will show that the critical politics that played a role in dividing gothic texts into national genres with distinctly national characteristics has lead to an over-determined focus on their difference. By erasing the national boundaries that keep British and American gothic fiction separate from each other they can be brought aesthetically and thematically closer together. By stressing their similarities instead of their differences, both British and American gothic fictions open themselves up for new interpretations.

The Cultural Work of Gothic Fiction

In their influential book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno argue that popular culture works only to affirm the status quo. Their theory has been for many years and in many intellectual circles the dominant critical angle from which to approach popular genres such as the gothic, horror and science fiction, which have been traditionally disseminated through mass media such as weekly and monthly magazines, cinema and since the 1950s also through TV.[2] As Jane Tompkins points out, however, writing does not merely reflect culture, but helps to create, sustain, or subvert dominant cultural values and customs and so "attempts to redefine the social order."[3] Tompkins argues convincingly that the classification of popular culture as affirmative and high culture as critical of the status quo is too one-sided. Her critical analysis of American fiction dovetails with cultural materialist critical theory by showing that cultural productions perform different kinds of cultural work depending on the context in which they are produced and read, and for what purpose they are produced and read. When a critic

[2] For a brief exposition of Horkheimer and Adorno's ideas see the fragment from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Rivkin and Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 1037-1041.

[3] Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985) xi.

approaches the gothic, it is significant that he or she is aware that the genre can perform affirmative as well as subversive cultural work.

The gothic, Fred Botting argues, is characterised by a plethora of "stock features" which make it recognisable as a popular genre. Such features are "torturous fragmented narratives relating to mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits…spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting heroines and bandits."[4] According to Botting, these imaginary creatures "populate gothic landscapes as suggestive figures of imagined and realistic threats," which can be safely confronted challenged and expelled in fiction (Botting, *Gothic* 2). From this point of view, it is indeed tempting to read the gothic as no more than sensational fare, as opium for the masses.

Often, the gothic has indeed been perceived as a cultural anaesthetic. Readers indulge in such fiction to escape momentarily the dross of everyday life. Like the world of fairytales or space opera, the momentary immersion in the supernatural, terrifying and morbidly sensual world of the gothic can ultimately confirm the brightness of normative reality. Rosemary Jackson argues that "the fantastic," which includes the gothic, "gives utterance to precisely those elements which are known only through their absence within the dominant 'realistic' order."[5] However, instead of stressing the dissident potential this entails, she warns the reader that "it would be naïve to equate fantasy with either anarchic or revolutionary politics" and concludes at the end of her study that fantastic literature in general has an affirmative character because "those elements which have been designated 'fantastic'…have been constantly re-worked, re-written, and re-covered to serve rather than to subvert the dominant ideology." According to Jackson, the original gothic novels "tended to buttress a dominant bourgeois ideology by vicarious wish fulfilment, through fantasies of incest, rape, murder, parricide, social disorder" (Jackson 14, 175). Indulging in tales that incorporate such social evils could be dangerous, was it not that popular genres thrive on a process of recognition, by which the reader is knowingly steered through what Botting has described as "a writing of excess," always finding the moral order safely restored on the last page (Botting, *Gothic* 1). Alan Lloyd Smith agrees with Botting and writes, "the Gothic tends to reinforce, if only in a novel's final pages, culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety."[6]

The wide popularity of early gothic fictions such as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) – in which an innocent maiden travels through sublime and picturesque landscapes, is imprisoned in an ancient crumbling castle by a mysterious aristocratic villain, encounters ghosts and corpses and witnesses various mysterious happenings – suggests that much personal enjoyment and cathartic escapism can be gained from indulging in gothic culture. Wish-fulfilment, however, is not the only cultural work the gothic performs. Early critics of the genre such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge believed that it could also reveal the reader's pathological morbidity. Enthusiasm for such fictions, according to Coleridge,

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[4] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996) 2.
[5] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981; London: Routledge, 2003) 25.
[6] Alan Lloyd Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 5.

was a sign that the individual was morally going off the rails.[7] Coleridge was not the only one who suffered from a fit of moral panic after perusing M.G. Lewis's *The Monk*, a novel that spared no detail in portraying lust, rape and the horrors of mob violence. The immediate critical response to this novel shows that the gothic genre's secondary function, as a diagnostic tool for singling out potential social misfits, stood alongside its escapist function from the outset. As such, this function also helped to affirm the status quo.[8] Today, the lushly photographed and often comic-gothic films of director Tim Burton and the morbid stage personality of gothic shock rocker Marilyn Manson perform similar cultural work in Anglo-American culture. Burton's films allow the viewer to momentarily enter a dark fairly-tale reality in which the gothic landscape is always complemented by the comic characterization of its fictional inhabitants. Manson's grotesque rock show has been utilized by the moral majority as a honey pot to catch the delinquent bear cubs that flock to his noisy horror circus.[9]

In opposition to Adorno and Horkheimer's thesis on the affirmative nature of popular culture, Herbert Marcuse, in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), and Theodore Roszak, in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969) argue that in fact popular culture can be subversive of the dominant order when attention is paid to the subcultures which consume certain types of popular culture. For instance, they found behind the escapist façade of 1960s American beat and hippy culture (with its penchant for using hallucinatory drugs to achieve altered states of mind and its preference for communal living and sexual freedom) a drive towards a practical utopianism that could bring about wider socio-political change. This subculture articulated what could not be said within the dominant cultural parameters and therefore expressed dissidence towards dominant order. By showing that alternatives are possible, the various subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as those of today, make these alternatives available for others to adopt.

Glennis Byron and David Punter demonstrate that this potential for articulating dissidence is also present in gothic fiction, due to the genre's engagement with the fantastic, supernatural and abject. Byron and Punter suggest that gothic fiction can be simultaneously "a debased form of tragedy, akin to melodrama" or "an escapist form, in which the reader is encouraged to avoid rather than to confront fear and anxiety" and "an entirely serious attempt to get to grips with difficulties in social organisation, or in the organisation of the psyche."[10] They argue that the gothic has the potential to perform both affirmative and dissident cultural work. Depending on the critical perspective and the specific context in which the fiction is read, a critical analysis can activate either. While stressing its dependence on generic stock features, Botting also points out that "gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values" because "gothic narratives never escaped the concerns of their own times, despite the heavy historical trappings" (Botting, *Gothic* 2-

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[7] See "Anti-Gothic," in *Gothic Documents, A Sourcebook, 1700-1820*, eds. E.J. Clery and Robert Miles (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 173-222.
[8] For an overview of "the *Monk* affair" see Clery and Miles, 185-95.
[9] See Tim Burton (dir.), *Beetlejuice* (1988); *Edward Scissorhands* (1990); *Sleepy Hollow* (1999); and http://www.marilynmanson.com 12 October 2005.
[10] Glennis Byron and David Punter, *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) xix.

3). While the historical settings and fantastic elements in the gothic may privilege a reading of the gothic as escapist, these texts reflect the ideological struggles that take place in the time of their production, whether this is 1790s Britain, or 1850s America. The fact that audiences feel it necessary to read novels that allow them to escape reality, if only momentarily, shows that there is something to escape from. As such, the fantastic, while seemingly allowing the reader an escape from reality, becomes equally a vehicle through which present cultural anxieties can be brought to the surface and confronted.

In her investigation into the cultural work of gothic fiction, E.J. Clery pays specific attention to the significance of economic forces. Clery argues that, within the context of late eighteenth-century British culture, "supernatural fiction figures as the ultimate luxury commodity, produced by the 'unreal need' for unreal representations."[11] Within a growing market economy, in which cultural productions are aimed at consumption, the gothic novel is, on the one hand, an inherently affirmative popular mode of fiction that works to reinforce the economic as well as political ideologies that make its cultural presence as a consumer product possible in the first place. On the other hand (echoing Marcuse and Roszak), Clery argues, even as a consumer product, gothic fiction can perform a subversive role. Because of its apparent seamless incorporation into the emerging capitalist ideology and consumer ethic, "the literary supernatural still had the power to disturb and, by the very force of the prohibitions against it, to voice otherwise unspeakable truths" (Clery 9). Its fantastic nature allows it to break with the accepted parameters of representation and allows it to "speak too loudly" in some instances, to use a phrase coined by Jonathan Lake Crane in his work on the contemporary horror film. Gothic fiction that speaks too loudly causes a stir, private and public debate, and sometimes legal repression. Godwin's *Caleb Williams* was deemed a politically seditious novel, Lewis's *The Monk* a lurid tale that could infect the public with immorality. Such gothic fictions, through their excess, intruded into the masculine public sphere of political debate.[12] The wide dispersal of gothic fiction among many social strands of society ensures it a large and varied reading audience receptive to what it presents and eager to discuss its sensational matter. Jane Austen reflected on this cultural work of the gothic when she describes in *Northanger Abbey* how a reader of gothic fiction, in describing the imminent appearance of a new terror novel, is misunderstood by one of her auditors, and is thought to be describing political riots breaking out in London.[13]

The gothic, through its use of the fantastic and its position within a consumerist culture, has the potential to express dissidence towards the dominant ideology. Its supernatural machinery allows the author to give shape to cultural anxieties and that otherwise are difficult to express, while its proliferation amongst a wide reading public makes it a possible instigator of public debate. However, the gothic has never been a unified body of fiction, always constructed using the same combination of generic building

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[11] E.J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 7.

[12] Jonathan Lake Crane uses this phrase to describe how contemporary horror films can play a part in wider cultural debates. See his book *Terror and Everyday Life: Singular Moments in the History of the Horror Film* (London: Sage, 1994) vii.

[13] For Jane Austen's perspective on the enjoyments and drawbacks of gothic novel reading see *Northanger Abbey* (1818; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995) chapters 6-8.

blocks. Not all gothic fictions are concerned with the same cultural anxieties, expressed through the same literary tropes, stock gothic devices and supernatural machinery. Consequently, not all gothic fiction has equal dissident potential. It is useful then to look briefly at the subgenres of the gothic and to determine to which subgenre the gothic novels analysed in part two of this dissertation belong.

Gothic Subgenres: The Case of "the Magico-Political Tale"

One of the first major subdivisions of the gothic that informed scholarship on the genre was a binary author/ aesthetics based division between male and female gothic, most concisely defined by the differences between Lewis's graphically shocking *The Monk*, with its penchant for physical horrors and Radcliffe's more sentimental *Mysteries of Udolpho*, which was founded on Burke's aesthetic theories on the sublime and beautiful.[14] Interestingly, this subdivision in some ways reifies traditional male/ female polarization by stressing the aesthetic concerns and predominance of individual feelings in Radcliffe's romances, and an ironically distanced, political and graphic realism to Lewis's novel. Robert Miles argues, however, that it is more fruitful to categorize the initial wave of gothic fictions into various thematic and/ or aesthetic subgenres: historical romances, informed by aesthetic concerns surrounding Burke's treatise on the sublime and beautiful; Jacobin gothic novels, which "turn on a strong sense of the metaphors of imprisonment"; and tales of Illuminati conspiracy, to name a few.[15] Unlike Radcliffe's romances and the gothic potboilers produced by the Minerva Press Some gothic writings did not find a mass consumer audience, while others openly defended the status quo.

Jonathan Lake Crane argues that today, in some cases, "watching a horror film is a reality check" (Crane 8).[16] During the 1790s, a strand of gothic fiction rose to prominence that can be defined as the predecessor of such films. Clery defines this strand of gothic the "magico-political tale," a type of gothic novel that was already recognized by its first critics as no mere product of popular escapism (Clery 156-71). Magico-political tales of the 1790s neither worked to show up the dark desires of the individual reader's psyche, nor had as their purpose the affirmation of the status quo. Instead, according to Clery, this type of gothic fiction has the potential to bring about in the reader "the revelation of a nightmare-like reality" (Clery 141). This genre developed in Britain after the introduction of German stories such as Friedrich von Schiller's *Der Geisterseher* (1789). By the time Schiller's text was translated into English as *The Ghost-Seer* in 1795, this type of gothic writing had already found its first, most popular and enduring British version in Godwin's *Things as they Are*, or *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). Pamela Clemit argues that along with his contemporaries Thomas Holcroft and Elizabeth Inchbald, Godwin "developed an interest in fiction as a means of disseminating the ideas of [his] principal philosophical work, *The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793)," some key ideas of which will be discussed in

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[14] For a concise discussion of male and female gothic see "Female Gothic" in Byron and Punter, 278-281.
[15] See Robert Miles, "The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 41-62.
[16] Good examples of such horror films are George A. Romero (dir.), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); Tobe Hooper (dir.), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1973) and John Carpenter (dir.,) *Halloween* (1978).

chapter four.[17] This visionary philosophical work, which calls for the dissolution of all forms of government and social coercion and projected a utopia in which each individual by improving his own intellect, unfettered by state education, would work to ensure the improvement of society as a whole, is now considered a founding anarchist treatise.[18]

Holcroft had been a pioneer of what would become known as Jacobin fiction, a type of popular novel that preceded Godwin's brand of politico-gothic. Gary Kelly explains that the Jacobin novel is a type of rational fiction in which character and plot are unified through the sociological thesis that individual character is formed entirely by social circumstance. Kelly defines the genre as principally "the imaginative enactments of a philosophical argument," and he includes Godwin's work in his Jacobin canon.[19] In order to articulate a reformist vision, the early Jacobin novels mix popular styles such as sentimentalism and the picaresque, but lack the gothic's morbidity, its tendency to fuse the rational and emotional, the scientific and magic, the academic and folkloric, and its penchant for representing psychologically disturbed protagonists. Godwin's fiction stands apart from the Jacobin fiction because he fuses his brand of visionary anarchism with stock gothic tropes including openly fantastic elements.

By the time Godwin started work on *Caleb Williams*, his fourth novel – the first to be published under his own name – the anarchist philosopher had just become infamous as one of the most outspoken critics of the reactionary policies of William Pitt's government, in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent Reign of Terror. Godwin strongly believed that socio-political reform needed to start at the level of the individual. Popular fiction, therefore, privately consumed and dwelt upon, was the perfect didactic tool with which to reach a vast audience. Godwin's philosophy was not merely a critique of the present British system of government, but a utopian vision based on his belief in the intrinsic equality of mankind and the inherently negative effects of all types of political and mental coercion on the individual. His massive philosophical treatise articulates a utopian reform strategy through which all modes of human oppression, whether based on political tyranny, religion, race, social class, or gender, will be erased. *Political Justice* was an instant success and quickly became available in pirate editions consumed by intellectuals and the working class alike on both sides of the Atlantic.[20] The first edition, however, was an expensive book, so much so, that Pitt deemed it unnecessary to ban what he considered a subversive volume of political theory because hardly anyone could actually afford to purchase a copy.[21]

Caleb Williams, published only a year after *Political Justice*, was an even greater popular success. In 1815 James Mackintosh reviewed *Caleb Williams* and highlighted the popularity of Godwin's gothic tale. He noted that it "has been translated into most languages, and it has appeared in various forms, on the theatres, not only in England, but

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[17] Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 3.
[18] See Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Harper Collins, 1992) 191-219.
[19] Gary Kelly, *The English Jacobin Novel, 1780-1805* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 16.
[20] See Peter Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 118-143.
[21] See Don Locke, *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (London: Routledge, 1980) 60; and Marshall, *Godwin* 121.

of France and Germany. There is scarcely a continental circulating library in which it is not one of the books which most quickly require to be replaced" (*CW* 565). Godwin's fourth novel, then, became one of the first clear examples of a form of dissident popular culture that "spoke too loudly," an imaginative text with broad cross-cultural appeal that finds a long life through a proliferation of itself in other mass media forms, while retaining radical politics. This would also become a defining feature of his daughter's masterpiece *Frankenstein*, some of Poe's work and even such safely canonized American gothics as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

Caleb Williams presents in detail the adventures of a domestic servant, Caleb, who flees from his aristocratic master Falkland after gaining secret knowledge of his master's criminal affairs, which undermine his authority. Intent on stifling his servant's possible rebellion, Falkland orders his right-hand man to pursue Caleb to the corners of the British Isles to prevent his escape to the continent. While Caleb takes to writing sensational stories for the popular press in order to earn a living, Falkland, ironically, uses the same popular press to publish a fabricated biography of Caleb as a great criminal preventing him from finding a community in which to hide from his wrath. The story highlights the power that popular fiction can have over the reading masses. While the British government had not feared the heady philosophy of Godwin's earlier book, the literary critics who supported this government recognized that in *Caleb Williams* Godwin presented the British reading public with a powerfully imaginative and rhetorically persuasive anarchist doctrine that could undermine the political stability of the country. Consequently, many reviews denounced the novel as a dangerous piece of fiction. The *Critical Review*, while praising *Caleb Williams'* value as a work of art, despaired over its "political reflections."[22] The *British Critic*, fearful of Godwin's outspoken attack of established religion, government and law, emphasised "the evil use which may be made of considerable talents" (*CW* 555). The *Monthly Review* recognised the author's intentions and wrote that Godwin's object in writing the novel had been "to give an easy passport, and general circulation, to some of his favourite opinions" (*CW* 559). Godwin's subsequent gothic novels *St Leon* (1799), *Fleetwood* (1805) and *Mandeville* (1817) were not intended as mere escapist fare either. They too had as their explicit purpose to unveil to the reader the failings of the dominant social, familial, economic and political ideologies and the necessity of adopting his ever-developing anarchist ideas. However, as Godwin's philosophy became increasingly unpopular in a British society dominated by the reactionary politics that followed the Reign of Terror in France, his fiction also lost its popular appeal. The dissident potential of his novels was pushed into the margins as it was no longer read in the context of the radical anarchism of *Political Justice* and as the political buzz of the 1790s faded.

In *Caleb Williams* Godwin used the fantastic metaphorically, sketching the omnipotent and ever-present nature of state coercion on the individual in supernatural tones. In *St Leon*, Godwin turned to overt supernaturalism in the shape of alchemy. This use of the overtly supernatural made it easier for his critics to de-radicalise his work, since it made it possible for them to place his novel within the popular consumerist category of

[22] William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, eds. Gary Handwerk and A.A. Markely (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000) 554.

supernatural sensationalist fare. The privileged reading of *St Leon* emphasises Godwin's turn away from radical politics and stresses his increasing interest in domestic ideology and the moral value of the family. That this is not the only possible reading of *St Leon* will be made clear in chapter four.

In America, the young Charles Brockden Brown and later George Lippard can be read as fellow magico-political gothic novelists. Brown sent a copy of his first novel, *Wieland; or, the Transformation* (1798), to Thomas Jefferson. Lippard wrote the most commercially successful novel of its day in *The Quaker City* (1845), a novel about the degeneracy of the American merchant aristocracy. Their novels show that the magico-political gothic tradition remained alive after Godwin. David S. Reynolds's work on the influence of popular culture on canonical American authors has been significant in showing how "popular modes and stereotypes were imported into" canonical "literary texts."[23] While he recognises the influence of popular culture, Reynolds does not suggest that novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* or *Pierre* should be classed as magico-political gothic tales. It is one of the objects of this study to show to what extent these and other classic American tales by Hawthorne, Poe and Melville can indeed be classed as part of this popular gothic subgenre. All three authors, some more consistently than others, read and wrote gothic fiction, but none of their texts have been analysed in light of a transatlantic magico-political gothic tradition. Therefore, this chapter will look further into the links between popular British gothic fiction and classic American literature to articulate the grounds for reading American gothic texts as magico-political tales, and to explain why even a scholar such as Reynolds, so attuned to nineteenth-century popular culture, speaks of a process of transformation when elements from this culture enter the realms of what is now considered classic American literature.

The Gothic's Transatlantic Shift from British Popular Fiction to Classic American Romance

From Richard Chase's seminal study *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957) to Allan Lloyd Smith's *American Gothic: An Introduction* (2004), critics have contrasted canonical American literature to British fiction popular in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. Most critics have stressed the differences between the two, emphasising American literature's roots within its own soil and its distinctly national character. Chase argues that American romance is a home-grown tradition of novel writing. His point is understandable when the academic historical context in which he wrote is taken into account. The 1950s was a period in which literature gained a prominent status within academia, and for American literature to be adequately represented in the university curricula it needed a canon to be studied. In 1997, Teresa Goddu still argued that American gothic fiction reflected a specifically national cultural history and American character. Her arguments are equally understandable. Her book is informed by a new-historical perspective through which she reads American gothic fiction as a reflection of the specifically American cultural contexts of slavery and the ideology of domesticity. Both

[23] David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988) 3.

these critics base their criticism on the premise that nineteenth-century American society is intrinsically different from British society and that, as a result, the products of American culture have to be significantly different from those produced in Britain. As the following account of the critical history of classic American fiction and its relation to the British gothic aesthetic will show, it is this critical assumption of intrinsic national difference that has created a national narrative now known as American gothic. This critical narrative has barred the gothic from being read in light of the popular British models that were so popular in American culture at the time.

Richard Chase does not directly contrast classic American literature to popular British gothic fiction in his theory of the American novel. His comparative material is the British realist novel, characterized by the work of Henry Fielding, Jane Austen and George Elliot. Chase argues that the American novel "is obviously a development from the English tradition," but that the poetics of the novel changed when the form moved across the Atlantic.[24] The British novel "follows the tendency of tragic art and Christian art, which characteristically move through contradictions to forms of harmony, reconciliation, catharsis, and transfiguration." Because of its place within such a tradition, Chase believes, the classic British realist novel is intent on "absorbing all extremes, all maladjustments and contradictions into a normative view of life" (Chase 2). This urge to represent "a normative view of life" is what makes a mimetic poetics so suitable to the British novel, which, according to Chase, "renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail." In these novels, he argues,

> character is more important than action and plot, and probably the tragic or comic actions of the narrative will have the primary purpose of enhancing our knowledge of and feeling for an important character, a group of characters, or a way of life (Chase 12).

Chase defines the British realist novel as a form of mimetic fiction reflecting the dominant worldview. In contrast to this British tradition, Chase argues, the poetics that underscores classic American fiction is marked by a "profound poetry of disorder." Unlike the British novel, with its mimetic poetics, he explains, "the American novel has been stirred, rather, by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder," which in nineteenth-century America can be said to be the dominant culture of feeling (Chase 2). The mythical aspect of American history and its immediate revolutionary origins, according to Chase, installed into the American literary character less a sense of order and of "normative reality" and more a sense of the radical imaginative nature of the American enterprise. To describe early America – a nation yet under construction and as a result ever in a state of flux – mimetic aesthetics could not suffice. Instead, the American author needed to tap into myth, symbol, and the imagination; he needed to project an as yet unrealised picture of America, constructed of both its ideals and nightmares. And so, for Chase, a specifically American romance tradition took root in the American soil, marked by an essential difference from the British realist novel. The American romance, according to

[24] Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) 3.

Chase "feels free to render reality in less volume and detail. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering, as it were, less resistance from reality." The characters in American romance are "two-dimensional types" of "abstract or symbolic" function. Because action takes precedence over character, "we may expect" the plot to be "highly colored." The "astonishing events" that may occur "are likely to have a symbolic or ideological, rather than a realistic, plausibility" (Chase 13).

In his focus on the contrast between canonical British realist novels and what he argues is classic American fiction, Chase entirely ignores a British genre the poetics of which in many ways fits his description of the poetics of American romance: the gothic novel. From his New-Critical perspective Chase does not take into account any sociological influences on formation of what he perceived to be the classic American romance. It is now a well-known fact that British gothic fiction was popular in nineteenth-century America. Authors as wide ranging in their popular appeal as Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, William Beckford, William Godwin, Mary Shelley, James Hogg, Walter Scott, and later Edgar Bulwer Lytton and William Harrison Ainsworth were widely read and reviewed, not only by the mass audience to which the American (pirate) editions were aimed, but also by its now classic authors.[25] Indirectly, Chase's poetics of American romance shows the close relationship between classic American fiction and British gothic, which is equally plot-driven and peopled with two-dimensional characters, drawing attention to ideological themes. As Lloyd Smith explains, "because the first substantial American efforts [in writing fiction] coincided with the great period of British and European Gothicism, American fiction began in a Gothic mode" (Smith 28).

Early critics on American fiction, however, felt the need to suppress its intrinsically gothic character. Only a year after the appearance of Chase's influential history of the American novel, Harry Levin published *The Power of Blackness* (1958). In this book he defines "what is unique in American fiction."[26] Like Chase, Levin argues that, in contrast to British literature, American fiction is grounded in the realm of the visionary imagination. Following Charles Feidelson, Jr., who read Poe, Hawthorne and Melville as members of an American symbolist movement, Levin argues that these classic America authors are "visionaries, rather than materialists, rather symbolists than realists" (Levin 39).[27] This transatlantic shift in the nature of authorship has taken place because America, unlike Britain, during the first half of the nineteenth-century, was not yet a reality but still a dream. In a world that was in a continual state of flux, the poetics of the mimetic novel could not satisfactorily represent early nineteenth-century America. From Levin's point of view, classic American literature is characterized not only by its opposition to the tradition of the British realist novel. It shows similarities with a specific strand of British canonical literature: Romantic poetry. Like canonical British Romantics such as Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats, Levin argues,

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[25] For a discussion of the popularity of British gothic fiction in nineteenth-century American culture see Ringe, chapter 2: "Early Gothic Imports."

[26] Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958) 17.

[27] See Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953) 1.

> our most perspective minds have distinguished themselves from our popular spokesmen by concentrating upon the dark other half of the situation, and their distinctive attitude has been introspection, dissent, or irony (Levin 19).

Instead of the American dream, which Levin calls "the obvious American thesis, the cheerfully confident trend of a practical and prosperous culture," American fiction represents the American nightmare. Instead of mirroring ideologically utopian constructions of America as a New Eden, the New Jerusalem, or stressing its Manifest Destiny, "the vision they [the canonical American authors] impart is not rose-coloured but sombre," (Levin 39). Like British Romanticism and analogous to Chase's definition of the American romance, American fiction, according to Levin, is characterised by its obsession with extremes, "stressing the opposite side, expressing themselves in paradoxes, and confronting each standard assumption with its dialectical alternative" (Levin 20). As creators of the American romance and unveilers of the dark underside to the surface optimism of American ideology, authors such as Brown, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville became Romantic cultural outsiders, analysers and critics of a naïve American dream.

Levin does acknowledge the presence of the gothic in American fiction. For Levin, Poe's explanation that his kind of terror did not originate in Germany but in the soul was proof of "a genuine affinity between the American psyche and gothic romance." Levin is dismisses any direct connection between British gothic and American romance, however, because "the revival of the romance, in countries where the novel had matured was bound to seem an artificial contrivance like Horace Walpole's pseudo-gothic castle" (Levin 29). From Levin's viewpoint, British gothic simply cannot be taken seriously, since it is a literary anachronism. What makes classic American fiction so unique for Levin is that it builds on the poetics of British dark-romanticism but represents its major aesthetic theories, themes and philosophies in a completely new literary format: the peculiarly American form of romance. Miles points out, however, that as far as British Romantic poetry is concerned, "*Christabel's* status as a Gothic tale of the supernatural is universally accepted."[28] He adds that "the critical literature has long recognized *The Eve of St Agnes* as a Gothic poem influenced by *Christabel*" and shows that Keats openly borrowed from "'mother Radcliff'" the names that appear in the poem (Miles, *Gothic Writings* 189, 193). Some of the dark-romantic poetry that Levin identifies as significant in shaping American romance, is in fact narrative poetry informed by even older gothic romance models. Stressing the link between American romance and British dark romanticism, therefore, does not necessarily loosen the link between American romance and British gothic fiction. In fact, the recognition of this important transatlantic literary connection strengthens the case that American romance is in part constructed by borrowing elements from the popular British gothic.

Chase's and Levin's critical voices have been dominant voices in the critical debate surrounding the creation of a typically American novelistic form. In reaction to their work, Leslie A. Fiedler boldly states: "certainly no single sub-genre of the novel [sentimental, historical, gothic] was invented in the United States." He argues, however, that "the

[28] Robert Miles, *Gothic Writings, 1750-1820*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 176.

peculiarities of our variants seem more interesting and important than their resemblances to the parent forms."[29] The difference between American fiction and its British parent models, Fiedler highlights (echoing Feidelson), lies in the fact that "our fiction is essentially and at its best non-realistic, even anti-realistic; long before *symbolisme* had been invented in France and exported to America, there was a fully-fledged native tradition of symbolism" (Fiedler 28-9). Unsurprisingly, and in line with the utopian politics of early America, Fiedler described the American novel as "juvenile" fiction, "notoriously at home in the children's section of the library" (Fiedler 24). Juvenile fiction has been known for its fantastic character and symbolic, allegorical nature, and juveniles are traditionally rebellious with respect to their parents.[30] Fiedler's idea that classic American fiction is the story of "a man on the run…anywhere to avoid 'civilization,' which is to say, the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall, to sex, marriage, and responsibility," underscores Chase's and Levin's idea that in American culture between the Revolution and the Civil War a new fictional mode was necessary to represent a new national character and ideology (Fiedler 26).

In Fiedler's account, the American romance becomes a type of psychological fiction, emphasising its difference from the more socially oriented realist novel of Britain. In fact, Chase's and Levin's accounts of the novel are also psychoanalytic. They emphasise that the American novel expresses not the "ordinary world" of the British mimetic tradition, but instead offer a vision of polarized extremities that keep the American dream from becoming a reality. With its preference for the visionary over the realist, the symbolic over the pragmatic, and the allegoric over the mimetic, the American romance, as characterized by Chase's, Levin's and Fiedler's accounts, is the imaginative articulation of an adolescent temper tantrum, a nation fighting for its independence from the home. From his overtly psychoanalytic perspective, Fiedler emphasises the influence of the popular adolescent genre par excellence, the gothic, on authors such as Brown, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. But Fiedler is quick to add that the gothic as it appears in classic American fiction needs to be "symbolically understood, its machinery and décor translated into metaphors for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical," distancing it from the original popular gothic genre (Fiedler 28).

What is significant about Fiedler's book, within the context of this study, is that he is the first critic to openly acknowledge the significant influence of the popular British gothic novel on what has become defined as classic American fiction. From the perspective of *Love and Death in the American Novel,* it is possible to look back at Chase and Levin and see that, in fact, they are inadvertently making the same point. The contrastive material that Chase uses is the mimetic tradition of the canonical British novel. To this American romance is clearly different. Levin uses canonical British Romanticism as his contrastive material. As a prose genre, American romance is indeed different to Romantic poetry. By using such contrastive materials, both critics are able to suppress the affinity between

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[29] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel,* new rev. ed. (New York: Delta, 1966) 14.

[30] In his essay "The Parricidal Imagination: Schiller, Blake, Fuseli and the Romantic Revolt against the Father," *The Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), Horst Meller explains that the theme of juvenile rebellion against patriarchal authority is one of the major Romantic themes. In *Love and Death*, Fiedler convincingly shows that this theme is equally central to American literature.

American romance and British gothic fiction. But as Fiedler notes, the British gothic tradition from Walpole to the Brontës is characterised by the similar, visionary, non-realistic, symbolic mode of expression that characterises much classic American fiction. However, to early critics of American literature, the danger of noting this marked resemblance was that it could lead to the devaluation of classic American literature into popular fiction. Even Fiedler is continually apologetic about the contamination of American fiction by British gothic aesthetics. He points out the danger to the American literary enterprise of such contamination when he writes, "symbolic gothicism" – the superior kind of gothic he identifies as present in classic American fiction – "threatens always to dissolve into its components, abstract morality and shoddy theater" (Fiedler 28). Fiedler concludes that it is exactly because of such contamination by the gothic that "our classic literature is a literature of horror for boys" (Fiedler 29).

Chase's, Levin's and Fiedler's influential studies in the poetics of the American novel are characterised by a critical point of view, whether new-critical or psychoanalytic, that takes for granted the lowbrow status of British gothic fiction as a fiction only approachable as a mode of escapist sensational fare that through its nature cannot have had a positive effect on the formation of American literature. It is this critical assumption that makes the gothic basis of classic American fiction so dangerous to Fiedler. As authors of "our classic literature," he seems to suggest, Brown, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville should be battling the British canon, from which they clearly deviate – as Chase and Levin argue – seemingly creating a new, typically American type of fiction. Any similarity between classic American fiction and popular British gothic fare, Fiedler believes, should therefore always be approached in terms of transformation and change – from lowbrow sensationalism to highbrow symbolism. Such a transformation ensures that the classic/ canonical status of these fictions is not compromised. In light of this literary national politics, which clearly has as its target the creation and confirmation of an original American canon, it is not surprising that later critics who further investigated classic American fiction's debt to the popular British gothic novel, equally emphasise transformation and change: from sensational to psychological, from social to metaphysical and from frivolous to serious. Three of these critics and their theory of American gothic will be discussed below.

By the early 1980s, the combination of feminist, Marxist and New-Historicist literary theory had created a space within literary studies for the serious study of fantastic literature, including the gothic.[31] In 1982, Donald A. Ringe published *American Gothic*, a study of the gothic nature of the work of Brown, Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. As a consequence of the gothic's rising visibility within literary studies, Ringe does not feel the need to play down the presence of a gothic aesthetic in classic American works of fiction. Ringe still follows the critical tradition set out by Chase, Levin and Fiedler, however, when he emphasises that "a distinctly American mode developed out of the British and German roots."[32] While Ringe mentions German influences, his focus is mostly on British gothic. Fiedler feared that the gothic could be a potential cause for the devaluation of classic

[31] David Punter's landmark study *The Literature of Terror* (London: Longman, 1980) is representative of the Gothic's inclusion into academia.

[32] Donald A, Ringe, *American Gothic: Imagination and Reason in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1982) v.

American fiction. Ringe solves this problem by arguing that the distinction between British and American gothic fiction lies in the American gothic's tendency to improve on its British models. Ringe argues that once the gothic reached the shores of America, it is no longer a vehicle for sensationalism and escape, but "became in the hands of the Americans, a suitable vehicle for the development of serious themes" (Ringe v). This statement implies that Ringe agrees with Chase, Levin and Fiedler that British gothic was lowbrow popular fiction.

Ringe is right that British gothic was popular. The sales figures of novels such as Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Godwin's *Caleb Williams* or Lewis's *The Monk*, on both sides of the Atlantic, outnumber those of the classic American romances he discusses. Judging by the number of reprints and pirate editions of these novels, they clearly are more popular in the sense of reaching a larger audience than the canonical American fictions that Ringe defines as typical examples of American gothic: Brown's early fiction, Poe's tales and Hawthorne's romances (with the exception of *The Scarlet Letter*, which was a transatlantic success of some sort). However, it is not possible to assume, as Ringe does, that good sales figures, mass-distribution and a popular readership make Radcliffe's or Godwin's fictions inherently less serious than the less successful fictions he defines as American gothic. As my brief discussion of the magico-political gothic tale has shown, if there ever was an author of gothic fiction who had serious philosophical intent when he turned to the gothic mode it was Godwin. He described *Caleb Williams* as a book he hoped would reach "persons whom books of philosophy and science are never likely to reach." Through a gothic novel Godwin presented to readers "a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man" (*CW* 55).

Radcliffe's gothic novels, too, can be read as more than mere travelogues that present the reader with picturesque and sublime landscapes and ancient edifices peopled with spectres and scheming villains. Miles explains that her fiction, if not overtly political, at the time threatened to dissolve the boundaries that divided high literature from pulp fiction. According to Miles,

> the recourse to the sublime adopted by Radcliffe and her school was partly a desire to exploit contemporary aesthetic fashions and partly an attempt to pitch their work toward the high end of the literary market, for sublimity and terror were associated with tragedy and epic, the two most prestigious literary forms – a strategy that would later pay off handsomely for William Wordsworth (Miles, *Gothic Writings* 43-4).

As a poetics of the gothic, Radcliffe's theory challenged the contemporary generic distinctions. She intruded with her brand of female-authored popular fiction onto the domain of masculine intellectual high art. In turn, Godwin, as a radical philosopher who turned to the feminine genre of the gothic as the vehicle through which to translate his philosophy for a mass audience, equally destabilised literary gender and genre boundaries. The serious character of gothic fiction, then, is not intrinsic to the texts themselves, but is reliant on its context and readership.

According to Ringe, another reason for the transatlantic shift in the nature of the gothic genre is the pervasive influence in early American society of Scottish common sense philosophy.[33] He argues that this rationalist and utilitarian school of thought played a great part in the construction of the American character in the decades following the revolution. It was especially influential in forming an inherent distrust within the American mind about the powers of the imagination. Through the influence of such common sense philosophy, Ringe argues, Americans shared

> a common belief in the primary value of reason, the absurdity of mythology, and the dangers of superstition. They dismissed ghosts, goblins, and witches as the relics of a more credulous age and were proud of the fact that American society had been formed when such phenomena were no longer credited and tales of superstition had been relegated to the nursery (Ringe 2).

The conclusion he draws from such a picture of post-Revolutionary American society echoes Fiedler's contention that the gothic suits the American author's mind only when it takes an inward turn and becomes symbolic of the dark psychology of the American character. According to Ringe, "American writers did not find it easy to write gothic fiction" because this form is characterised by an uncritical use of the kind of supernatural fare Ringe believes inherently absent from the dominant American literary repertoire (Ringe 8). From Ringe's viewpoint, this lack of overt grotesquery and sensationalism for its own sake within the American gothic explains the American authors' relative lack of commercial success.[34] Holding fast to the same lowbrow/ highbrow definition of fiction that Levin and Fiedler utilize to make their distinction between American romance and British gothic, Ringe argues that the gothic mode survived in America only through a metamorphosis into a form of high culture that deals with serious issues such as the dark unconscious workings of the adolescent American mind (Fiedler), or as expressions of the power of blackness (Levin).

This move toward a focus on the dark side of the otherwise enlightened American character is now generally regarded as the fundamental difference between American gothic and the earlier British counterpart. However, what Ringe ignores is that the Scottish common sense philosophy was just as prominent within the culture of its country of origin: Great Britain. Gothic authors across the Atlantic, while embracing the imagination as potential means of liberation, were also distrustful of the workings of the human imagination when run a-mock. Writers as diverse as Radcliffe, Godwin, and James Hogg all worked within the gothic genre, albeit with different intentions and using different aesthetic tools. What they have in common, however, is that they all fuse rational enlightenment philosophy with irrational cultural elements such as ghosts, superstitions and folklore. Sometimes their fictions read as critiques, and sometimes as examples of what would

[33] For an overview of the ideas expressed by this eighteenth-century strand of rational thought see: A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960).

[34] Ringe apparently has not read any of Lippard's highly successful gothic fictions riddled with supernatural machinery and grotesque characterisation.

happen in a society that has no recourse to enlightenment rationality, or in which reason is taken to irrational extremes. Godwin himself was an unorthodox exponent of the type of rationalist philosophy Ringe believes so significant in the creation of a serious American gothic fiction. *Political Justice* was widely read. Some of its major tenets were discussed by American intellectuals. It is possible to argue that Godwin's ideas were not insignificant in the formation of the type of American national character Ringe outlines in his study.[35] While Ringe is right to argue that American gothic portrays the imagination "often as a delusive faculty that could lead the mind astray," this cannot be perceived as a peculiarly American gothic quality (Ringe 9). By shortly discussing two concrete examples from Ringe's book, the arbitrariness of this generic distinction can be made more evident.

Firstly, with regard to Charles Brockden Brown's fiction, Ringe argues that the young Philadelphian "greatly improved on his sources" (Ringe 41). He could do this because he could "create the effect of Gothic horror without resorting to the more conventional literary devices," the list of irrational/ supernatural elements mentioned in the citation at the bottom of page twenty seven (Ringe 44). Such a position is only valid, however, when Brown's work is juxtaposed to exactly that type of marvellous gothic fiction Ringe outlines as typical of the British or German mode. In this case, Ringe takes the German Schauerroman tradition as his contrastive material. According to Ringe, Brown, "unlike the German Romancers…avoids any suggestion of deliberate magical delusion" (Ringe 40). Brown's turn toward the naturally explained, Ringe argues, allows him not only to move inward towards the American mind. It also allows him, in contrast to the frivolous models he uses as springboards, to "use these Gothic materials for a serious social purpose" (Ringe 44). However, Smith points out that "Brown's novels exploited Ann Radcliffe's vein of 'explained supernaturalism'" (Smith 29). While Ringe's argument holds up with respect to the German gothic tradition, it would have been impossible for him to make the same argument using Radcliffe's novels as contrastive material. *Caleb Williams*, many Brown scholars since have shown, functioned as the blueprint for much of Brown's early fiction. Brown's method of utilizing gothic devices in service of serious social commentary, therefore, cannot be identified in terms of the American gothic improving on popular and frivolous British sources. *Caleb Williams* was one of the most popular and sensational novels of the 1790s and was widely read, admired and criticized by all strands of society. Godwin's novel was certainly sensational, popular, and rooted in the gothic genre. The brief discussion of the book above, however, has shown that it was also very serious, deemed politically dangerous even. Interestingly, during the early nineteenth century John Neal described Brown as "the Godwin of America," while Margaret Fuller believed that the two authors were "congenial natures" (quoted in Clemit 105-6).

Ringe argues that Poe improves on European gothic models because he "freed the gothic tale from the constricting limits imposed on it by the naïve rationalists who felt compelled to explain away their most telling gothic effects." Using British gothic fiction as his contrastive material, in this case, Ringe criticizes these works for oscillating too widely

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[35] For a discussion of Godwin's influence on post-revolutionary American culture, see Peter Kafer, *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic*, "Chapter 3: Revolutionary Reverberations, 1793-1798" (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania UP, 2004) 66-104.

between supernaturalism and rationalism. According to Ringe, Poe does not, "like Godwin, Maturin, or Scott, vacillate…between the rationally explained and frankly supernatural gothic" (Ringe 151). Ringe is right that Poe's ambivalent attitude towards the supernatural imbues his stories with an ambiguity of purpose that allows them a large interpretive scope. Ringe is too hasty, however, in pigeonholing the British gothic texts into explained and marvellous categories. While Radcliffe has become famous for her explained supernatural, Miles points out that, through the conscious technique of "blurring the boundaries between subject and object, dream and the rational…Radcliffe helped make the irrational available" (Miles, *Gothic Writings* 115-6). In his discussion of Radcliffe's romances, Miles quotes Terry Castle to underscore this idea. Castle argues that in Radcliffe "'the archaic language of the supernatural contaminates the new language of mental experience"' – something Ringe finds only in American gothic – "'ghosts and spectres retain their ambiguous grip on the human imagination; they simply migrate into the space of the mind"' (quoted in Miles, *Gothic Writings* 118-9). The shift that takes place in her novels from the material to the mental with regards to the gothic *other* makes her heroines forerunners of Poe's delusive first-person narrators, in the grip of, and under attack from, their own mental projections.

In *Gothic America* (1997), Teresa A. Goddu argues, "when modified by *American*, the gothic loses its usual referent."[36] From her New-Historical perspective, Goddu explains, "American authors transformed and hence dislocated British models of the gothic" because "once imported to America, the gothic's key elements were translated into American terms, and its formulas were also unfixed." While writing from a different critical perspective, Goddu still follows the established critical school in making the contention that British gothic cannot survive the American climate and must adapt to its new environment. Like her critical predecessors, Goddu views the British gothic as an easily identifiable and seemingly unified and stable genre to which the American gothic can only be contrasted because "combined with other literary forms and adapted to native themes [it] consists of a less coherent set of conventions" (Goddu 4). She does not acknowledge that the gothic novel in Britain was from the outset a hybrid literature comprising of various sub-genres, which fused romance, novel, poetry even theatre, and which was written by members of parliament (Walpole), eccentric aristocrats (Beckford), radical philosophers (Godwin and Wollstonecraft), middle-class women (Radcliffe), ordained ministers (Maturin) and even rural sheep farmers (Hogg).

Goddu identifies Brown's short address "to the public" in *Edgar Huntly* as the first clear theoretical statement about the cross-Atlantic transformation process of the gothic. In this often quoted piece, Brown articulates his idea of the American novel "growing out of the condition of our country," in which "the incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable" tools with which to tackle his subject than the "gothic castles and chimeras" he found in the European fictions.[37] Brown was competing in a popular fictional market dominated by British gothic fiction. Is his address "to the public" not merely an advertising ploy to sell his book in showing that he is

[36] Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 3.
[37] Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics) 3-4.

offering something new to read? Brown's novels indeed exchange crumbling castles and historical European settings for a more contemporary American backdrop – on the surface that is. But does this really unfix and translate the key elements of the gothic, or merely dress them in different attire? Are all British gothic novels characterised by such stock devices? Hogg's gothic tales of rural Scottish life and Godwin's novels depicting a terrifying reality already suggest that this is not the case. Significant questions that need to be asked in this context are: how different is the patriarchal domain of Mettingen just outside the mercantile metropolis of Philadelphia in *Wieland* from Falkland's rural mansion in England? How different is the crumbling gloomy House of Usher, with its medieval interior and aristocratic occupiers from Montoni's isolated castle in Radcliffe's *Udolpho*? Poe's tales, written by an American but set in vaguely historical European settings always destabilize the geographical generic boundaries Brown seemed to have erected with his public address. Brown's *Wieland* and *Ormond* are characterised by transatlantic shifts in topography, highlighting continuing links between Europe and the inhabitants of the New World. While the preface to Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* may point out that the gothic finds its most genuine home in ancient European settings, his romance *The House of the Seven Gables* had already showed how stock gothic devices such as old family mansions, sins of the fathers, ghosts and the appearance of strange pseudo-scientists could be used to tell gothic tales of American daily life.

Even though Goddu retains in her theory of American gothic the politics of national and literary difference, her book makes a significant contribution to the theory of American gothic because she drops the high-brow/ low-brow cultural distinction to which the earlier critics held fast. From the New-Historicist method she adopts, all culture becomes a significant object of study and the American romance is no longer in danger of becoming devalued by its affiliation with the gothic. Even though Goddu utilizes terms such as "translated," "transformed" and "unfixed" to define the relationship between British and American gothic, her work opens up the possibility of establishing a closer link between them because it reads the classic American texts as "infiltrated by the popular, the disturbing, and the hauntings of history," which can lead to new insight into the genre (Goddu 8). Unlike Chase, whose New-Critical method limits him to the study of the American novel's poetics, Goddu focuses on "the interconnections of gender, genre, and economics" and pays specific attention to how issues of race and slavery inform classic American literature (Goddu 96). This shift in focus allows Goddu to redefine Levin's concept of the power of blackness. Instead of denoting a dark vision of the American dream, it now denotes a critical engagement with the historical context of slavery and a repressive ideology of domesticity. Thus, in contrast to Fiedler, her book shows that American gothic literature is not merely the reflection of a dark individual psyche, but is historically grounded in and certainly reflects an often dark, always unstable and sometimes frightening American social reality.

Smith's *American Gothic: An Introduction* (2004) gets closest to developing a transatlantic perspective of the genre. Echoing Goddu in stressing that American cultural contexts such as the frontier experience and the issues surrounding slavery gave American gothic its distinct character, he also acknowledges the significance of British popular gothic

novels for the formation of American literature. The time-line that informs his reading is characteristic of his transatlantic approach. It marks out not only American cultural experiences and productions such as the Salem Witch trials, the American Revolution and the publication of major American gothic texts, but also, the publication of Burke's treatise on the sublime and beautiful, the French Revolution, the publication of all major British gothic novels, as well as the abolition of slavery in Britain (Smith 11-23).

This chapter has highlighted that it is impossible to attribute to a specific fictional genre, whether popular of elitist, a singular mode of cultural work. It has also shown that viewing literature as primarily the product of a national culture unnecessarily limits its interpretative scope by ignoring trans-national intertextual factors. In the course of this study it will become clear that specific works of classic American gothic fiction are informed by the same cultural schemata and literary repertoires, narrative and thematic strategies, as well as political viewpoints that went into the construction of British specific works of British gothic fiction. Most notably, these are the gothic fictions by William Godwin, Mary Shelley and Edgar Bulwer Lytton, all of whose work widely circulated in American culture between the Revolution and the Civil War. In his preface to *Mandeville* (1817) Godwin even openly acknowledged that Brown's *Wieland* had been a powerful influence. In *The Last Man* (1826), Mary Shelley acknowledged her debt to Brown's *Arthur Mervyn* (1800). Brown's gothic novels had clearly not altered the gothic poetics so much so as to make it unrecognisable or unusable to his British contemporaries. Poe also praised Godwin's and Bulwer's technique, Hawthorne devoured British gothic fiction as an adolescent and even Melville could not escape its influence. David Punter's point that "American gothic cannot be considered wholly as a native growth, for this leads to critical distortion" is a valid point, as the flowering of the gothic as a genre seems better characterised by the metaphor of cross-Atlantic fertilization.[38] One of the ubiquitous gothic figures in Anglo-American gothic fiction that has undergone cross-Atlantic fertilization is figure of the alchemist. By focusing on this stock figure's transatlantic continuity in structural function and thematic role, in the British and American gothic fictions he or she inhabits, it is possible to define a trans-national genre of magico-political gothic tales.

[38] David Punter, *The Literature of Terror, Volume 1: The Gothic Tradition* (London: Longman, 1996) 173.