CONVENTION AND GENERIC INSTABILITY OF THE ENGLISH GOTHIC NOVEL

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What is commonly called “the gothic novel” reached its maturity in the last decade of the eighteenth century. The birth of this novel-type is usually associated with the publication of the reputed The castle of Otranto which appeared in 1764 and was subtitled “A gothic story”. The emergence of this new type has been accounted for in several ways; however, the argumentation was always obscured by its connections with Romanticism, unavoidable, yet far from being clear. Montague Summers, one of the most outstanding scholars and a pioneer well versed in the Gothic lore, differentiated between two basic types of literature.

The first of these is an immediate effect of the growing human interest in life, and generally in various aspects of human existence. This leads to understanding literature as a Stendhalian mirror in which people see their own situation and problems of life. The second type of literature changes entirely the direction of human creative thought, separates it from life and denies it the right to reflection over the existential situation of man. This type discovers new possibilities, new unexplored lands where one can be transferred thanks to imagination alone:

Charm’d magic casements,
Opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn (Keats).

Such is the nature and meaning of the Romantic spirit which turns a man away and protects him against the essential monotony of life and against routine ways, offering him a more complete and more beautiful picture of the world around him. This picture is based on subjective, individual experiences of inner and outer realities with the emphasis on imagination as the only legitimate source. This type of literature Summers
is most common and has led some scholars either to ignore or to deprecate the value and importance of the phenomenon called the gothic novel. Some have begun to deny it any serious contribution to solving the basic dilemmas of human existence. The gothic novel, as Samuel Chew put it, was closely related to "the subliterary depth of Romanticism... into whose noisome fastnesses we need not descend" (Chew, Altick 1967: 1196).

The gothic novel, that \textit{enfant terrible} of the eighteenth century, was the most dynamic and controversial literary form from every point of view. It appeared on the literary scene later than the sentimental novel and later than the romance of the modern type represented by Leland’s \textit{Longsword} (1782). The first gothic novel is undoubtedly \textit{The Castle of Otranto} by Walpole. The publication of the book met an increasing interest of the writers and the reading public but its author had to face a cold and mostly unfavourable reception of his book by professional literary critics. Yet, in spite of this, it gave rise to an avalanche of followers and imitators, both in England and abroad.

As far as the plot structure is concerned, in the last decade of the eighteenth century, the heyday of its development in England, the gothic novel was conventional to a very high degree. The plot was generally based on three main motifs taken from earlier romances: the motif of revenge, the demonic villain and the persecuted virgin. All these were shared by the pseudohistorical novel and sentimental romances, yet their concerns differed. In addition to this, the typical gothic machinery possessed one more feature which was characteristic of the first stage of its development: the consistency in dressing the plot in historical costume, most often medieval. Walpole places the action of his novel “... between 1066, the era of the first crusade, and 1343, the date of the last, or not long afterwards” (Walpole 1948: Preface I). He forces his readers to take the authenticity of the story for granted by making up a legend. It functions also as a stimulator of the reader’s interest in the story creating this very specific atmosphere of suspense and mystery. In his \textit{Introduction to the first edition} Walpole confesses: "The following work was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England. It was printed in Naples, in black letier, in the year 1329" (Walpole 1948: Preface I). Transferring the action of the gothic novels into remote historical periods is but a technical device. Neither Walpole nor Mrs. Radcliffe, Lewis nor others attempted a faithful recreation of any historical epoch. There was no intention of being historically instructive on the part of the gothic writers. It actually seems as if the writers counted on historical ignorance of their readers. Pseudohistoricism opened the way for the introduction of unusual scenery and atmosphere which stimulated the imagination of the readers as well as removed all the barriers limiting the imaginative play of the writers’ minds. Transferring the imagination of the readers into the long gone days of
the Dark Ages also prepared them to receive and accept a large portion of the mystical and the marvellous. The belief in the supernatural was in accordance with the knowledge of the eighteenth century about the people, customs, beliefs and emotional attitudes of the Middle Ages. The characters of the gothic novels unconditionally accept as a natural fact that man was subjected to the persistent control and intervention of the supernatural forces. On the other hand, the medieval apparitions provided the readers with emotions so different from those stimulated by the sentimental novel, yet introduced in such a way as to avoid abusing the feeling of realism of the eighteenth century reader. The gothic novels do not show any essential interest in the psychological reality or in the moral autonomy of the historical period presented in the novel (Hankiss 1960: 9). The heroes of Mrs Raddiffe, Walpole or "Monk" Lewis are but a projection of late eighteenth century ideals into distant historical epochs. This does not concern the gothic villains as their origins must be sought in the dramatic literature of the Jacobean period. Thus, the third constitutive element of the gothic novel is "Le principal attrait du roman 'noir', c'est le mystere horrripilant..." (Hankiss 1960: 9). The ends to which it was employed were deeply rooted in the aesthetic system of Edmund Burke.

From among the three discussed elements: the motifs inherited from the earlier romances, historical costume and the intention of shocking the reader, the latter two, according to the majority of scholars, decide whether a particular work may be classed as belonging to one or other type of the gothic genre (Birkemajer 1968: 8). These are also used as criteria in dividing gothic literature into main types. This is a well-known and generally accepted classification of Montague Summers (Summers 1938: 29). The first type within this classification is the gothic-historical romance. It is agreed that one of the most important factors responsible for the birth of this type was the influence of the literary character due to the growing interest in the historical past. The type was very short-lived and was almost totally abandoned, Miss Lee's novel The rector being the last (Birkemajer 1968: 8). Although a number of historical personages do appear in The rector, and the novel is spiced with several typically gothic tricks, the main interest of the author is with the sentimental love plot involving the two daughters of Mary Stuart. However, the above-mentioned gothic tricks must strike the reader as being definitely out of place. Miss Lee's novel must be thus classified as either sentimental or pseudohistorical variety.

The second type of the gothic novel in the classification of Summers is the sentimental gothic. Here the arguments provided by the author are even less convincing. It appears that in the course of its development the gothic novel began to exhibit a growing number of sentimental features. They were taking the place of the supernatural element eliminating it almost entirely.
tions by third and fourth rate writers who, without any original contribution to the gothic genre, copied the existing patterns with the intention of shocking the audience for mere pleasure of providing the shock. This brought about a slow but inevitable decline of the gothic novel and, in spite of the very high tide of the readers' interest in it, the form came to a standstill in its course of development.

Following Summers' discrimination, the third type of the gothic novel was its horror-gothic variation represented by Matthew G. Lewis, Charles Maturin and Charlotte Dacre — the authors of Zadig, or the Moor (1806). Here also belong some novels of Mrs. Radcliffe and a notorious work written by another lady of the same name — Manfred, or the one-handed monk. The similarity of the two names is purely incidental as the two ladies were in no way related (Sinko 1961: 26, 145). Writing Mrs. Radcliffe we refer to the authors of Udolpho and The Italian. A number of other authors should be mentioned here but they have been discussed in the section devoted to the sentimental type. Summers, having done the discrimination, concludes: "So easily, however, do the two kinds, the terror-gothic and the sentimental-gothic, blend in one novel that it is often impossible to assign any particular fiction into one category" (Summers 1935: 30, Sinko 1961: 149). The horror-gothic was born with the notorious The Monk (1797) by M. G. Lewis, a debut of a twenty-year-old youth. Most scholars agree that this unusual product of untamed imagination is the highest achievement of the first stage of the gothic novel. By an original treatment of the gothic motifs, some old and some new, Lewis made The Monk interesting and good literature which continues to be read and admired.

In later appreciation of the talented young man’s book the symptomatic change which occurred in the very structure of the gothic apparatus, in the atmosphere and the manner of description was in most instances overlooked. The sentimental tones of the lady-writers of the preceding years were substituted by an overwhelming, aggressive eroticism reminiscent of the study of sexual psychopathology of Marquis de Sade. The novel abounds in erotic excesses of the characters and the catalogue of sexual aberrations provides enough material for a fascinating study by a Freudian scholar. For the first time the heroes and the readers witnessed black magic, dealings and pact with Satan, who appears in propria persona. The book includes vampires sucking blood, black satans and devilish tricks so far untouched. In spite of some resemblances in accessories and atmosphere, Mrs. Radcliffe and Lewis represent two different varieties of the gothic novel. With Lewis the readers are no longer fed with awesome uncertainty and suspense. Horror and fear paralysing and annihilating the senses accompany the heroes and readers venturing into the realm of the Gothic. This change seems very significant as it is the effect of the serious revision of literary tastes and aesthetic theories brought by the last decade of the eighteenth century.

The above-outlined classification seems unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. It undeemably brings to light different gothic literary phenomena. Elucidating the various ways in which similar plot and thematic patterns were realized by various authors. It fails, however, to discover and expose the basic instability of the gothic novel as a type, its constant tendency to almost unnoticeable transformations and disintegration into further subtypes. Summers seems to ignore the dynamic and rapid development of the gothic novel; it must be remembered that only thirty years divide Walpole’s book from Lewis’ masterpiece. By making it a static form Summers misses one of the most important characteristic features of English literary gothicism. He also neglects its close relation to Romantic literature. It is worth emphasizing that the dynamic development of the gothic novel is responsible for its generic instability. In the process of its development it was incessantly trying to escape from the stifling convention, from creative and philosophical inertia. In contrast to the early gothic novel of Walpole, Reeve, Lee and Radcliffe, whose some writings were still within the frames of the convention as an "intersubjective complex of instructions, rules and habits regulating the specific sphere of artistic expression" (Głowiańska 1967: 37), later gothic writers like Mary Shelley, Maturin, Lewis, placed their novels beyond the convention which, however, was still present in the works of the third and fourth rate English gothicists of the time. This process was inevitable as the philosophical subject-matter revealed in their writings could no longer be pressed into the frames of the old convention. It required new and more appropriate ways of exposing psychological problems of good and evil which became the obsession of the Preromantic and Romantic generations and was immediately taken on by the gothic novel. The definition of the gothic novel as suggested by Summers also requires few comments as it is necessary to assume that the three categories: historical, sentimental and horror do coexist in the gothic genre; each specimen includes and is a sum of these elements, each time realized by means of the convention, yet transcending it. As has been rightly observed: “In the process of the development of the gothic novel the difference between "sentimental gothic" and "terror gothic" was gradually disappearing until their final merger” (Sinko 1961: 149). Thus the above mentioned elements cannot be used as criteria for discriminating the gothic literature into subtypes as these characterize the genre as a whole.

If any division is really needed it is much easier to base it on the aesthetic grounds. The discovery of horror as the most powerful source of experiences of the sublime and beautiful was the basic element of the aesthetic conceptions of the eighteenth century and it was largely responsible for the Romantic theories concerning the dialectics of pain and beautiful (Praz 1970: 70). If we assume
that terror was the dominant feature of the early gothic novel before 1790 then around this date we observe a significant change from terror to horror-gothic. This is, no doubt, connected with a general shift in conceptions of good and evil, which were considered in Middle Ages philosophically and practically distinct. The two notions drew closer and closer throughout the following centuries until the process culminated in their total confusion, as exposed in Blake’s *The marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Nelson, Jr. 1963: 256 - 257). Walpole and Mrs. Radcliffe still maintain the strict distinction between good and evil but with the villains-heroes of the horror-gothic we enter the realm of the moral ambiguity. The black characters of Lewis, Shelley and Maturin are men of unusual merits whom circumstances turn to evil purposes. To put this change in simpler terms, the suspension of external circumstances of the earlier gothicists is de-emphasized in favour of the increasing psychological concern with moral ambiguity. This later gothicism, which suggested, after Goethe, that there was not such a crime that the reader should not imagine himself committing, prepared the way for a fiction which was more overtly horrible and at the same time more serious and more profound. It is with Frankenstein and Melfont that the gothic novel comes to express fully and openly what might be called “the gothic way of thinking”. The distinction into “old” and “new gothic” or, in other terms, into terror and horror gothic, is not only a hairline distinction but is also deeply rooted in the aesthetics of the two last decades of the eighteenth century. As Mrs. Radcliffe herself puts it in a widely quoted passage from a posthumous article: “Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them” - and she goes on saying of the employment of the factors — “... neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one” (Radcliffe 1826: 27). Nowhere else do we observe more clearly this characteristic shift in artistic taste and aesthetic conceptions of the gothic than in *The novel*; it should also be noted that they were shared both by the gothic novel and Romantic literature. Problems of moral confusion of good and evil were also present in Mrs. Radcliffe’s books; however, her methods were entirely different from those of Lewis or Maturin. In most cases Richardson rather than Abbé Prevost or Diderot was the example she followed. To avoid the naturalistic descriptions of the horror she employs a wide range of artistic devices: metaphors, suggestion and, above all, suspense, so characteristic of her writings. Mrs. Radcliffe’s heroines are threatened by violence, terrible death and a slow agony of torture but none of these threatenings, which in themselves are powerful stimulants of reader’s emotions, ever materialize; her writings were based on different artistic and philosophical principles.

What still has to be answered is the question of why we put together names like Radcliffe, Beckford, Lewis, Shelley, Maturin on the one hand and Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu, Bulwer-Lytton and Ainsworth on the other. What common features do we find in those apparently different works? Answering it we should trace the evolution of the form, emphasizing those elements which bring the artistic and philosophical unity and consistency to it; by finding in those works the artistic techniques, interests, obsessions and problems based on the same principles we arrive at the generic consistency of the gothic novel as a literary form. The writings of Walpole, Mrs. Radcliffe and Lewis, Maturin should not be treated as two different subtypes of the gothic novel but as two consecutive stages of its development. Differences in realization of the specific assumptions of the form point not only to the individual treatment of the established conventions. They, above all, reveal the paradigm of changes to which the artistic sensitivity and aesthetic opinions of the English of those times were subjected. Those times, it must be remembered, were crucial for their artistic consciousness as they were the very onset of the Romantic movement (Wagenknecht 1943: 119). Those differences account for the dynamic character of the transformation of the gothic novel from the relatively crude and primitive, black and white, attempt of Walpole, whose aim was mainly entertainment, to the book of Mary Shelley which exhibits the growing awareness of the complicated nature of psychological processes and total involvement of an individual in the eternal struggle of good and evil. Frankenstein reveals how much Mary Shelley was fascinated with the problem of ambivalence of human nature as manifested in a later gothic motif of split personality. One of the scholars who has noticed this, remarks: “Those two figures (Victor Frankenstein and his monster) are essentially two correlatives of the same character which is the new trick of the gothic writers heralding later fascination with the motif of divided self as presented by R. L. Stevenson” (Birkenmajer 1968: 14). Closer look at those differences enables us to perceive the processes in operation in the minds of the English at the turn of the century. They ranged from simple fascination with crime and evil as an effect of the growing awareness of a crisis in their prevailing moral standards and the end of understanding a man as an unchangeable structure — to the crisis of consciousness which was due to the dramatic process of separation of man’s spiritual nature from his outward reality (Miyoshi 1969: 3). It seems that in its best developed form the gothic novel reflects the same ontological crisis which troubled the minds of the Romantic writers of both generations. Such was the price that the Romantics had to pay for the philosophical self-consciousness. The fact that man immersed into his own self and explored it with feverish intensity helped to reveal and expose that troublesome divergence between his self and the reality of the physical world.

The Pleromantic generation in England witnessed a rapid process of dis-
integration of human nature divided into the outward reality and the human symbolic world as the product of culture. People trying to face the reality found the growing gap dividing them from it. Man so much enveloped himself in language forms, in artistic pictures, mythological symbols and religious rites that he cannot understand anything or perceive anything but through this artificial medium. He lives among imaginary emotions, hopes and fears, among illusions and disillusionments, dreams and desires. As was noticed by one of the famous Greeks, "man is apprehensive and scared not of the things themselves but of his own images of them" (Cassrner 1971 : 69). This is how the Romantics understood the curse of human deformity caused by man's spiritual illiteracy, inability to read in the Book of Nature which lies open before us. "The times are gone" — wrote Novalis — "when the spirit of God was cognizable. The idea of this world is lost. We face the letters" (Waikowska 1972 : 139). Art as one of the basic spheres of human activities reflecting man's spiritual needs and longings ceased to serve life and its necessities. Slowly, with the individualization of creative act, literature found itself on the best way to suicide (Sandauer 1968 : 144).

The evil embodied by the gothic villains is but the effect of the destruction or a mere violation of the harmonious relations between man and Nature. Their super-human dignity, determination and moral ambivalence of their deeds must be interpreted as an attempt at overcoming their own, self-imposed limitations. The gothic hero discovers the transcendent character of evil which exists not only in the objective world but is also deeply rooted in the human soul coexisting there with potential good.

It is worth noting that very seldom do the scholars and historians of literature raise the problem of the gothicists' interest in psychology although it seems to be of paramount importance. Beginning with Walpole we observe writers' growing preoccupation with psychic processes which must be connected with the increasing importance of imaginative act in creation as well as in reception. "English fiction of the XVIIIth century shows a gradually deepening understanding of the often turbulent emotional life of the characters" — rightly remarks one of the critics (Miyoshi 1969 : 3). In his psychological swerve the gothic novel undoubtedly drew heavily on the achievements of the great sentimental novel of Richardson. The gothicists, however, were neither so subtle nor so precise in the psychological sketches of the characters but, it is important to stress, they were interested in entirely different aspects of human psyche. The gothic villains were more complicated in their emotional life showing and exposing the struggle between conflicting impulses. Their reactions reflecting the play of psychological stimuli enable us to look deeper into the human soul. With the exception of Walpole and his third and fourth rate followers, the gothic writers drew their heroes as people succumbing to these conflicting, and often uncontrolled, impulses of their ambivalent nature. It is true that the moral judgement of their deeds leaves no alternative but it should not be confused with the moral judgement of the characters themselves. Ambrosio, Melmoth and Schudoni are the ministers of evil but they are not shown as if dominated by this single feature, as is the case with the characters of the sentimental English fiction of those days. Evil-doing is not responsible for the psychological and moral attractiveness of the gothic heroes. What really made them exceptionally attractive to the reader was the extraordinary and typical mixture of demonic evil and strong potentiality for good. The gothicists themselves did not admit any possibility of ambiguous moral interpretation; it is in the sphere of emotional reactions in reception that this ambiguity may and does appear. The gothic villains fascinate and paralyse with their demonic power, with their determination and unbridling will-power. Their pictures are never restricted to their outward activities alone because, irrespective of their moral value, they direct the reader to the complicated moral and psychological background.

Another important feature of the gothic novel is continuous attempt on the part of the writers at the emotional involvement of the reader in the world of fiction. If in the first stage the terror gothic plays on the reader's response to suspense, the horror gothic, being the gothic novel's higher stage of development, tries to involve the reader with the villain-hero protagonists exposing the dialectic opposition of repulsive and attractive features of their characters.

Summing up the above discussion, it seems necessary to emphasize those components of the gothic genre which determine its serious character which should offset the generally accepted notion that the gothic novels have nothing but amusement value. One of these is the presence of the villain-hero whose complicated character, as is the case of Montoni's, Ambrosio's and Frankenstein's, are made impressive by compounding the dark aspirations with great force of character and potentiality for good. The next significant component is a setting in time and space sufficiently removed from the then reader so that there could be no intrusion of moral standards or factual probability. Thus, most novels are set in France or Spain or Italy in times that are largely irrelevant as long as they may be vaguely called Middle Ages. The story should simply suggest remoteness in both time and space.

The gothic apparatus of the mysterious and the marvellous, most often ridiculed component of the gothic novels, in the course of the development of the form takes on more and more symbolic resonance. Manfred, Schudoni and Montoni are deeply rooted in Enlightenment ideology; they were too proud to admit that evil which they found in themselves was a part of their own personality. They accusingly point to someone who is always by their side tempting and forcing them to commit most terrible crimes for which they can be only partly responsible. They point to the apparitions, spirits and the
devil which people the gothic world of Walpole and Radcliffe. This may be
called the exterior treatment of the problem of evil. Already with Lewis and
especially with Mary Shelley the gothic apparatus of the earlier gothicists
began to disappear as the dividing line between good and evil was interiorized
and placed inside the psyche of the heroes. They noticed, with a great deal of
dismay and abomination, that evil was a part of their own self inextricably
intertwined with good, inseparable from it. The interiorization of the op-
position of good and evil brought about a radical change in the gothic ap-
paratus. Instead of the supernatural world of spirits and apparitions, later
gothic novel in England discovered and exposed the problems of the divided
self, so popular a motif in the writings of E. T. A. Hoffmann, Tieck and
Novalis. This motif of double or split personality seems to be one of the most
characteristic features of the gothic novel of all times. Instead of creating a
distinct world of the supernatural, the English gothic writers of the nineteenth
century discover phantoms peopling the subconsciousness and dreams of
the heroes. Undoubtedly, it was the gothic novel that introduced the motif of
“doppelganger” into English fiction of the last century. Its development
may be traced throughout the century in the gothic endeavours of such
writers as Bulwer-Lytton, Ainsworth but also in The mystery of Edwin Drood
by Dickens, culminating in R. L. Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

A feature which characterizes the whole genre in most general sense is the
confusion of good and evil reflected in the psychology of the gothic villains.
This results in moral ambiguity and lack of any final statement of right and
wrong. This happens in The monk, Frankenstein, Melmoth, Zanoni, and
many others. Unquestionably, it is an obvious result of their authors’ under-
standing of the relations of good and bad impulses tearing human soul. This
puts the gothic novel in very sharp opposition to the English Romantic
literature, as the writings of Shelley, Byron and Keats show their deep
faith in final arriving at what may be called “the ultimate answer”.

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