

On Teaching Early Gothic Fiction and Non-Empiricist Aesthetics

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As a professor of eighteenth-century British literature, I spend much of my time in the classroom talking with students about the ways that authors define and represent “the real” in prose or poetry. For most literary authors of the early eighteenth century, reality is a set of ideas derived from the collation and comparison of empirical experience. A “realistic” novel, then, is one that depicts persons, things, and places that the worldly reader recognizes as familiar to her own idea of them.¹ The realist aesthetic empowers the reader to examine the text and compare it either with experience or with received ideas about what is normally experienced by others. In the absence of an available comparison between fictional content and “real life,” the reader may criticize the text as being unrealistic. According to this judgment, unrealistic literature is deemed irrelevant, at best, and possibly even dangerous, especially for impressionable young readers. Willfully unrealistic literature, then, poses a problem for college students who are anxious about the possible consequences of engaging affectively with fictional worlds that do not attempt to replicate an empiricist understanding of reality. By structuring my courses on Gothic fiction as a series of active, purposeful aesthetic responses to empiricist realism, I attempt to offer my students a means of challenging normative assumptions about aesthetic hierarchies and epistemic categories. Across the semester, students begin to argue that the Gothic (and other unrealistic

genres) serve a politically radical role in testing the taken-for-granted boundaries of “the real” as constituted by mainstream literary fiction.

Since the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* 250 years ago (as of this past December), the Gothic novel has elicited this criticism in close correlation with its popularity. As works by Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Gregory Lewis kept readers gasping in terror, realistic authors and critics were scandalized as much by the appeal of the Gothic as by its content. The aesthetic judgment that Gothic fiction fails to adhere to the standards of modern empiricist realism is usually paired with a consequent moral or social anxiety, that reading Gothic fiction will disturb young readers’ sentiments and lead to absurd or morbid behavior.² While teaching courses on Gothic novels, I find my students often feel caught between the demands of realism and the pleasures of terror. While succumbing to the latter may seem to be the anti-intellectual choice, I argue that indulging in a sympathetic reading of Gothic fiction provides students with an alternative to the normative “common sense” of empiricist realism. Students take particular notice of the ways in which the Gothic attempts to provide space for the affective and imaginative experiences of non-normative characters (persons of non-conforming gender and/or sexuality, immigrants, women, people of color, political radicals, religious dissidents, disabled people, young people, etc.) whose experiences have been so often silenced or marginalized in mainstream literary fiction.

Realist Satires of the Gothic

The realist critique of the Gothic is worth exploring in some depth here, as its concerns are often replicated and amplified by students of Gothic fiction. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) is only the best remembered of many parodies of the period in which placing conventional Gothic characters and tropes in modern, familiar, well-lit settings yields laughter at the genre's expense. Some of these parodies, such as *The New Monk* by "R.S., Esq." (1798), mock the unrealistic style and content of Gothic fiction. R.S. attempts to satirize the absurdity of Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) by replacing the titular villain with a Methodist minister in contemporary London; his downfall is caused by gluttony rather than lust. In his preface, R.S. declares, "I have sought, by a ridicule of its worst parts, by only substituting one appetite for another, to display the grossness of the idea, and to call a blush of contrition over the cheeks of those who have dwelt with pleasure on its pages" (2). R.S.'s grotesque descriptions, ludicrous scenarios, clumsy poetic interludes, and overwrought dialogue may be intended to reveal the aesthetic (and moral) flaws of Lewis's style and content, but, to any reader who has enjoyed *The Monk*, R.S. ultimately reinforces its histrionic appeal.³ After perusing *The New Monk*, one returns to the old *Monk* with fresh eyes and a keen appetite for its shocking depravity. As Rictor Norton writes of the failures of attempts to parody Gothic style, "It is hard to fling such mockery against the Gothic novelists, since they have already employed it themselves, whether cynically or sincerely" (260). The early Gothic style is simply too outrageous—and too self-conscious—for parody.

Satirists who directed their mockery at readers rather than writers of the Gothic seem to have found a more successful target for criticism. In *The Heroine, or, Adventures of a Fair Romance Reader* (1813), Eaton Stannard Barrett, Esq. anticipates Austen's *Northanger Abbey* by imagining the reader of Gothic novels as a silly girl who misinterprets the words and actions of others because her faculties have been addled by too much exposure to the unrealism of Gothic novels. The titular heroine, whose real name is Cherry, finds it beneath her dignity as a heroine to be named after a fruit, and chooses instead to call herself "Cherubina." In imitation of her favorite Radcliffe heroines, Cherubina apostrophizes in terrible morbid poetry about her feelings. Upon first re-encountering (and rescuing) Stuart, the childhood friend she eventually marries, Cherubina compares the adventure with those depicted in her favorite novels. "Perhaps, if he had saved my life, instead of my having saved his; and if his name had consisted of three syllables ending in i or o; and, in fine, were he not an unprincipled profligate, the man might have made a tolerable hero" (Letter V, I.48-49). Implicit in her criticism of Stuart's failures is her assumption that Gothic conventions supply the standard by which lovers should be judged, and that the modern, merely good, sensible English man cannot live up to that standard. As a comic-realist critique of the Gothic, *The Heroine* seems particularly defensive about the sufficiency of the average man as a romantic partner for even a self-consciously extraordinary woman.

By the end of the novel, Cherubina is humiliated as a direct result of her inability to distinguish between fiction and reality. Before becoming an acceptable wife for Stuart, she must listen to his long lecture about the impropriety of unrealistic fiction for young impressionable ladies. The man whom Cherubina previously judged to be insufficient as a hero has become her teacher and father figure: "Stuart, my counsellor and my companion, sits by my side, directs my

studies, re-assures my timidity, and corrects my mistakes. Indeed he has to correct them often; for I still retain some taints of my former follies and affectations. My postures are sometimes too picturesque, my phrases too flowery, and my sentiments too sublime” (Letter XLVII, III.293). Rather than being allowed to indulge in her creative expression, Cherubina is “cured” through exposure to non-heroic people, common life, and, most importantly, the proper style of realistic fiction. Her cure is through her willingness to judge herself in need of the tutelage of a thoroughly average man, and no longer worthy of extraordinary love.

This criticism of the readers of Gothic romance would not be unfamiliar to readers of Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752), in which the haughty Arabella, taught by French romances that a worthy man cannot bear to look upon the woman he loves, demands that her suitors imitate the long-outdated manners and style of courtly love. Like Cherubina after her, Arabella is eventually terribly humiliated, and submits totally to a stern but caring patriarchal figure who convinces her to read modern realistic fiction instead of romances. Following his advice, Arabella finally accepts her suitor’s proposal with an abject declaration of her unworthiness: “To give you myself, said she with all my remaining Imperfections, is making you but a poor Present in return for the Obligations your generous Affection has laid me under to you” (383). No longer expecting a great sacrifice from her lover, she makes a sacrifice of herself to him.

In this tradition of satirizing teenage girls who have creative responses to unrealistic literature, Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* treats Catherine Morland as similarly in need of humiliation before she can relinquish the unrealistic fantasies she has absorbed from reading “horrid novels.” Playing both suitor and father figure, Henry Tilney berates Catherine for

expressing Gothic suspicions about his family: “What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you—Does our education prepare us for such atrocities?” (II.185-186). His assumption seems to be that English Christians do not commit horrid crimes in secret, as he explains, because everyone knows one another too intimately, and the threat of being written about in newspapers keeps people in check. Catherine runs off, deeply humiliated: “Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry” (II.187). Through her chastened reassessment of the boundaries of reality, Catherine learns to submit to Henry’s understanding of England as a place where horrors cannot be perpetrated by Christians, and thus renders herself eligible for marriage, and the culmination of the comic realist plot.

In all of these satires of young women who read unrealistic fiction, criticism is leveled at their belief that their thoughts and feelings matter and are worth communicating to others. In all three, the heroines undergo a stark transformation from self-possessed, curious, passionate, headstrong readers and writers to listless objects of humiliation and subjection to patriarchal authority. If these satires intend to show how much better realistic fiction is than romance, then why are their denouements so depressing? In her analysis of this tension in *The Female Quixote*, Laurie Langbauer writes of Lennox, “By locating a women’s form in romance, she is placing it in what her form, the novel, cannot admit and so casts out. This placement recognizes that women have no real place” (90). In this sense, Langbauer argues, Lennox’s satire of romance could be read as mourning for a dead literary form in which young women could be imperious, bold, and decisive. In the 1810s satires of Gothic readers, authors seemed to consider women-

centered eighteenth-century Gothic novels as yet another unrealistic genre of romance that has passed on, for better or for worse, to be replaced by an even more realistic realism than before.

But since the 1810s, although each generation seems to believe the Gothic of the previous generation has been slain, it seems clear that the uncanny immortal undead in modern fiction is unrealism. The Gothic genre has not only survived these repetitive waves of realist critique, but has consistently flourished over the 250 years since *Otranto*, and still provides compelling narrative structures and seemingly timeless aesthetic appeal in current popular fiction and other media, like films and video games. Deliberately ignoring the aesthetic demands of realism, Gothic authors have instead engaged in complex acts of self-parody, self-revision, and dizzying literary one-upmanship. In so doing, the Gothic, so often derided for its failure to reflect the dominant aesthetic models of literary fiction, provides instead an imaginative, affective space for plumbing contemporary anxieties about political, erotic, psychological, and metaphysical possibilities outside the narrow boundaries of "common sense" realism. The Gothic rejection of realist aesthetics marks a departure from empiricist confidence that perception of the world supplies its own legibility.

Origins of Unrealism in Gothic Fiction

The realist critique of Gothic romance seems to suggest that authors of the Gothic have failed, somehow, in their attempts to “combin[e] the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life” (l. 334), as in Horace’s model, with images of plausible, familiar scenes of common life. One may, I hope, be allowed to speculate about Horace Walpole’s intended fidelity

to realism in *The Castle of Otranto*, a story which opens with a helmet, a hundred times the size of a human helmet, falling out of the sky and killing the only son of the prince on his fifteenth birthday, which is also his wedding day. In a letter to his friend, the Reverend William Cole, Walpole describes the reasons why he began to write this strange little book: “Shall I even confess to you what was the origin of this romance? I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream, of which all I could recover was, that I had thought myself in an ancient castle... and that on the upper-most bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate” (9 March 1765; 88). He found himself writing as if without any conscious purpose, following his sensibility rather than a plan for instruction, or the intent to make a monumental work of art. Neither truth nor beauty seems to have particularly compelled his composition. Yet something about the hideous tale of a young woman who escapes a conspiracy against her, accidentally fulfilling a prophecy and setting right various historical wrongs, clearly struck a chord with readers and writers alike—not because the world of Otranto was familiar to their empirical experience, but because it offered the tantalizing possibility of a narrative in which a woman’s affect and impulse are ultimately justified.

While Walpole seems to have been almost proud of his lack of concern with the “real world” of mainstream fiction, Ann Radcliffe often represents protagonists who openly wish that their lives more closely resembled the amiable sociability of comic realism. In Radcliffe’s 1791 novel *The Romance of the Forest*, the reluctant heroine Adeline longs to become something like the protagonist of realistic fiction. Wanting only what she calls “the cheerful intercourse of society...the pleasant view of nature...[and the] light of day” (37), she instead endures isolation,

gloom, hallucinations, jealousy, seduction, kidnapping, and, most importantly, the denial of access to information, especially information about herself. She is emphatically not defined by a synthesis of accumulated experiences, of which she has had too little; Adeline is more like Immanuel Kant's transcendental subject, which, as he writes in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), is the Thing which thinks, "known only through the thoughts which are its predicates, and of it, apart from them, we cannot have any concept whatsoever" (CPR A 346). Unlike the protagonists of the realistic fiction she seems to wish herself into, Adeline does not experience life in common with companionate others with whom she may collate perceptions into proper cognition. Instead, she seeks self-knowledge by expressing her desires through the involuntary creative act of waking dreams and nightmares, and later through the conscious creation of poems and songs. Adeline eventually transcends her traumatic circumstances—especially the repeated attempts at sexual violence and coercion by powerful men—by asserting herself boldly in their midst.

As Eve Sedgwick has argued in "The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface of the Gothic Novel," Gothic conventions—the trapdoors, illegible manuscripts, and veils—serve as affective representations of the mystery of subjectivity in a libidinally repressive society. She describes Sigmund Freud's image of the self as it relates to experiences of trauma and repression.

In this map of the self, a vesicle of life substance, is separated from the surrounding reality by a thin membrane that, while formed from the life substance, has for protective reasons differentiated itself in several respects. To guard its contents against dissolution as a result of inner drives, it has developed mechanisms of defense, signally repression, by which the inner drives, signally

sexuality, are denied expression and returned to the interior “unconscious.”

Trauma, or the rupture from without of the protective membrane, threatens dissolution through an uncontrolled influx of excitation; and its content is too often notoriously sexual. (255)

Sedgwick’s description of trauma, as drawn from Freud, produces a physicalized image of trauma as that which threatens to pierce the membrane, or veil, of subjectivity. Sedgwick locates this image of sexual trauma in the veils so often found in early Gothic fiction. The conventional Gothic veil at once obscures and indicates the presence of sexual trauma, and in so doing, takes on the affective intensity of the trauma itself, which cannot be directly addressed or described. Early Gothic fiction offers readers a means of experiencing the repressed affect by providing a conventional framework onto which they are invited to project pain, fear, and desire, all at a safely unrealistic distance.

If readers—especially young women readers—were addicted to Gothic fiction (and, as the media concern with *Twilight* fandom and the Slender Man stabbings suggests, they still are), it may be because the anxiety, self-doubt, trauma, and unfulfillable longing of repressed female youth required the literary fantasy of self-exploration, and safe emotional practice with experiences of fear and desire. Gothic fiction models scenarios in which extreme unrepressed affective engagement with trauma is required for survival. The heroine, and the reader with her, are justified in feeling fears and desires that are, outside the Gothic structure, forbidden by the disciplinary mechanisms of patriarchy.

For the professor of the early Gothic, though, there is an inclination to apologize for the unrealism of the genre—its self-indulgent excesses of description and emotion. When students

have been tempted to mock Radcliffe's heroines for fainting or weeping, I have to remind them that the young lady has, for example, just been violently kidnapped by agents of a nefarious nobleman who intends to rape her. The unrealism of the Gothic is not in the extreme affective responses of characters, but in the intricate, byzantine architectural or psychosexual traps in which they find themselves. In the early Gothic, libidinal expression is allowed because the heroine is not merely hysterical or paranoid; everything she fears is real.

The justification of women's fears remains crucial even in later, more realistic Gothic fiction, like the novels of Philadelphia-born Charles Brockden Brown. In Brown's 1798 novel *Wieland; or, the Transformation*, the heroine-narrator Clara is an obsessively logical, well-behaved, self-repressed celibate woman living alone in the woods outside of Philadelphia. She begins to experience what seem to be auditory hallucinations of voices threatening to rape and murder her coming from her closet, and she finds herself drawing the face of a man over and over without knowing what she is doing. She wonders if these experiences might be related to the mysterious death, years before, of her cult-leader father, who spontaneously combusted while praying. Although *Wieland* has no banditti, ancient ruins, Mediterranean landscapes, princes incognito, or lusty aristocrat in hot pursuit, the psychological terror of *Wieland* is recognizably that of the Gothic. Clara cannot know whether she is losing her mind from her valiant efforts to repress her desire for her friend Pleyel or if there really are evil, possibly supernatural agents at work. Pleyel, the ruthlessly commonsensical man she secretly loves, ridicules her fears, spies on her incessantly, and berates her cruelly upon suspicion that she is unchaste. Unlike in Gothic parodies, in which the heroine must learn to submit to patriarchal realist authority, humiliate herself for her baseless fears, and finally deserve love, Clara's anxieties presage a devastatingly

horrific multiple homicide that only she has the emotional preparation to bear, as she must now identify the bludgeoned bodies of her beloved family and prevent further violence.

Charles Brockden Brown's purposeful relationship to realism exposes the mechanism at the heart of Gothic terror. Rather than disavowing fidelity to realism in the manner of Walpole, Brown often claims in correspondence that his shocking and bizarre novels constitute a new, more expansive style of realism, which engages not merely with the common and ordinary, but with the less common (but no less real) phenomena of obsession, perversity, and violence. In a bold letter to Thomas Jefferson, Brown challenged the then-Vice-President to look beyond scientific and theoretical discourse for worthwhile contemplation. He added that he was "obliged to hope that an artful display of incidents, the powerful delineation of characters & the train of eloquent & judicious reasoning which may be combined in a fictitious work will be regarded by Thomas Jefferson with as much respect as they are regarded by me" (445). This description of Brown's own work sounds more like that used to praise literary realistic fiction, rather than a narrative involving spontaneous combustion during a cult ritual, prophecy-inspired multiple filicide, and a sinister bilquist. He drew his story from a newspaper article about a multiple homicide committed by a man who claimed to be sacrificing his family to God.⁴ He drew the religious context from the rising fervor of the Second Great Awakening and the many new revelations and prophets it produced. And the character of Carwin, the ventriloquist able to imitate any voice, is plausibly rendered as a man whose gift becomes an addiction to manipulation and deceit. Set not far from Philadelphia, *Wieland* shows that realism is not the enemy of the Gothic, because the real world can be just as terrifying as ghosts, skeletons, and satanic rituals. In the real world, people do go mad, lose their ability to collate perception into

coherent commonsensical ideas, and suffer unimaginable fates. Imitating the down-home realism of William Godwin's marvelous 1794 anarchist Gothic novel *Caleb Williams*, Brockden Brown creates a heroine whose mere survival serves as a challenge to the charge that "The Heroine" must be a silly and hysterical teenage girl.

Reflections on Gothic Pedagogy

When I have taught seminars specifically on the Gothic novel—at Yeshiva's Stern College for Women, Franklin & Marshall College, and Grinnell College—I cannot say I ever met students who resisted very hard against the temptation to indulge in the pleasures of the Gothic. Presumably, this is partially the result of teaching a clearly labeled elective course to excitable young readers. But Gothic novels find their way into all my survey courses, women writers courses, and most topics and seminars on eighteenth and nineteenth-century British and American literature. In that context, I have certainly seen rolling eyes and heard mockery by readers whose aesthetic judgment is guided by realist values. "Why doesn't she just go to the police?" they say of Charles Brockden Brown's *Clara Wieland*. To Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*: "I bet there are some nice cute boys in Gimmerton, Isabella." Realists enjoy having a laugh.

But it isn't a laughter that readers of the Gothic cannot join. As I tell my students, Gothic fiction is not a failed attempt to represent the normal, taken-for-granted everyday logic of the common sense world. It is a model for the mysteries of desire, perversion, masochism, death, fear, and non-empirical perception. Rather than focusing on the ways that the Gothic fails to

respond to realist critique, my classes focus on the ways that the Gothic novel provided (and continues to provide) mainstream literary authors with models for representing the inaccessibility of subjectivity. These methods of analysis are taken for granted, it seems, in academic study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Gothic fiction. Psychoanalytic, queer, and postcolonial approaches to *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have provided fascinating insight into the ways the Gothic novel has structured modern conceptions of the self in relation to the Other. And certainly, Henry James's 1898 novel *The Turn of the Screw* is so deeply rooted in the contemporary theories of psychology and sexuality that to laugh at its unrealism would be to ignore its contribution to our understanding of hysteria at the turn of the century.

My pedagogical approach for teaching early British and American Gothic fiction to undergraduate students is an attempt to take these works seriously as contributions to public discourse on conceptions of the self in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In my class, we begin with an analysis of the genre's conventions, reading *The Castle of Otranto* first and then *The Romance of the Forest*. We list all of the ways that Radcliffe imitates, intensifies, and improves upon Walpole's characters, plot points, and structure. Moving forward, students write an analytical paper in which they must find a moment of obvious imitation by one Gothic author of another, and demonstrate how the second text attempts to improve upon the original while paying homage to its innovation. As one student pointed out, Radcliffe recreates Walpole's mysterious good young Theodore, who is revealed to be the lost son of a benevolent older man who has helped the heroine. Another posited that Godwin's *Caleb Williams* imitates Radcliffe's scene of a young woman waiting in a dark scary place to be rescued by someone on horseback

who turns out to be working for the aristocrat who has been trying to rape her. The more specific the comparison is, the more the student seems to find in the aesthetic development of the later text. The assignment encourages students to recognize generic similarities as a means of rendering more visible the stylistic contributions of each author.

I also ask students to consider the ways in which the Gothic, a genre so explicitly obsessed with the sins of the past, expresses anxiety about the future. In a historicist exercise, students are challenged to find a contemporary primary source that addresses a phenomenon that is also important for a novel we are reading. For Radcliffe, it might relate to debates on the education of women. For Brockden Brown, it may be religious enthusiasm in the early Republic. These exercises often lead to extended research projects on the Gothic as it relates to particular historical conditions and discourses. Former students of mine have gone on to write thesis projects on the contributions of Gothic fiction to contemporary discourses of race, sexuality, national identity, religion, and subjectivity.

I feel that my primary job in teaching the Gothic is to encourage my students to learn to read in a profoundly different way from what they are used to. Rather than waiting for the text to address issues that already interest them in their familiarity, students learn to engage with emotional and intellectual purpose in works that may at first seem silly or self-indulgent. The impulse to mock the aesthetic excesses of the Gothic may be related to the repressive injunction against works that challenge the hegemonic platitudes of common sense, which serve to obfuscate misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and political repression. As in the act of psychoanalysis, reading the Gothic allows the reader to purposefully give license to thoughts and feelings forbidden by the tyrannical injunctions of so-called realism.

Notes

¹ One may recall the oft-quoted lines from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711): "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Express*" (ll. 297-298). In *Rambler* 4, Samuel Johnson writes in praise of authors of realistic fiction that "They are engaged in portraits of which every one knows the original, and can detect any deviation from exactness of resemblance" (Yale *Works* 3:22). For both Pope and Johnson, literature is excellent when it dares to address experiences and ideas that the implied reader (a person of common experience) is qualified to criticize.

² This anxiety calls to mind the 2014 incidents of stabbing and arson allegedly committed by teenage and pre-teen girls attempting to impress "Slender Man," a fictional horror villain created by Erik Knudson and developed by the neo-Gothic writers community at Creepypasta.com. Articles and opinion pieces follow each of these crimes wondering if unrealistic fiction has become so aesthetically sophisticated that it can be held responsible for turning vulnerable young readers into murderers.

³ R.S. even explicitly directs readers back to Lewis; where passages of Lewis are too offensive for parody, R.S. helpfully offers the page numbers to seek the originals in *The Monk*.

⁴ The account of the Yates family murders appeared in the *New-York Weekly Magazine* of July 20 and 27, 1796, and is reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Wieland*, edited by Bryan Waterman.

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