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LOVE AND DEATH IN
THE AMERICAN NOVEL



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~~in the direction of tragedy, but traditional verse tragedy was forbidden him; indeed, a chief technical problem for American novelists has been the adaptation of nontragic forms to tragic ends. How could the dark vision of the American—his obsession with violence and his embarrassment before love—be expressed in the sentimental novel of analysis as developed by Samuel Richardson or the historical romance as practiced by Sir Walter Scott? These subgenres of fiction, invented to satisfy the emotional needs of a merchant class in search of dignity or a Tory squirearchy consumed by nostalgia, could only by the most desperate expedients be tailored to fit American necessities. Throughout their writing lives, such writers as Charles Brockden Brown and James Fenimore Cooper devoted (with varying degrees of self-consciousness) all their ingenuity to this task, yet neither Brown nor Cooper finally proved capable of achieving high art; and the literary types invented by both have fallen since into the hands of mere entertainers—that is, novelists able and willing to attempt anything *except* the projection of the dark vision of America we have been describing. The Fielding novel, on the other hand, the pseudo-Shakespearean “comic epic” with its broad canvas, its emphasis upon reversals and recognitions, and its robust masculine sentimentality, turned out, oddly enough, to have no relevance to the American scene; in the United States it has remained an exotic, eternally being discovered by the widest audience and raised to best-sellerdom in its latest imported form, but seldom home-produced for home consumption.~~

It is the gothic form that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers: the gothic symbolically understood, its machinery and décor translated into metaphors for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical. Yet even treated as symbols, the machinery and décor of the gothic have continued to seem vulgar and contrived; symbolic gothicism threatens always to dissolve into its components, abstract morality and shoddy theater. A recurrent problem of our fiction has been the need of our novelists to find a mode of projecting their conflicts which would contain all the dusky horror of gothic romance and yet be palatable to discriminating readers, palatable first of all to themselves.

Such a mode can, of course, not be subsumed among any of those called “realism,” and one of the chief confusions in our under-

standing of our own literature has arisen from our failure to recognize this fact clearly enough. Our fiction is essentially and at its best nonrealistic, even anti-realistic; long before *symbolisme* had been invented in France and exported to America, there was a full-fledged native tradition of symbolism. That tradition was born of the profound contradictions of our national life and sustained by the inheritance from Puritanism of a "typical" (even allegorical) way of regarding the sensible world—not as an ultimate reality but as a system of signs to be deciphered. For too long, historians of American fiction have mistakenly tried to impose on the course of a brief literary history a notion of artistic "progress" imported from France or, more precisely perhaps, from certain French literary critics. Such historians have been pleased to speak of "The Rise of Realism" or "The Triumph of Realism," as if the experiments of Hawthorne or Poe or Melville were half-misguided fumbblings toward the final excellence of William Dean Howells!

But the moment at which Flaubert was dreaming *Madame Bovary* was the moment when Melville was finding *Moby Dick*, and considered as a "realistic" novel the latter is a scandalous botch. To speak of a counter-tradition to the novel, of the tradition of "the romance" as a force in our literature, is merely to repeat the rationalizations of our writers themselves; it is certainly to fail to be *specific* enough for real understanding. Our fiction is not merely in flight from the physical data of the actual world, in search of a (sexless and dim) Ideal; from Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner or Eudora Welty, Paul Bowles or John Hawkes, it is, bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation.

Moreover—and the final paradox is necessary to the full complexity of the case—ours is a literature of horror for boys. Truly shocking, frankly obscene authors we do not possess; Edgar Allan Poe is our closest approximation, a child playing at what Baudelaire was to live. A Baudelaire, a Marquis de Sade, a "Monk" Lewis, even a John Cleland is inconceivable in the United States. Our flowers of evil are culled for the small girl's bouquet, our novels of terror (*Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, the

tales of Poe) are placed on the approved book lists of Parents' Committees who nervously fuss over the latest comic books. If such censors do not flinch at necrophilia or shudder over the book whose secret motto is "I baptise you not in the name of the Father . . . but of the Devil," or fear the juvenile whose hero at his greatest moment cries out, "All right, I'll go to Hell," it is only another irony of life in a land where the writers believe in hell and the official guardians of morality do not. As long as there's no *sex*!

Yet our authors are as responsible as the P.T.A.'s for the confusion about the true nature of their books; though they may have whispered their secret to friends, or confessed it in private letters, in their actual works they assumed what camouflage prudence dictated. They *wanted* to be misunderstood. *Huckleberry Finn* is only the supreme instance of a subterfuge typical of our classic novelists. To this very day, it is heresy in some quarters to insist that this is not finally the jolliest, the *cleanest* of books; Twain's ironical warning to significance hunters, posted just before the title page, is taken quite literally, and the irreverent critic who explicates the book's levels of terror and evasion is regarded as a busybody and scandal-monger. It is at last hard to say which is more remarkable, the eccentricity of American books or our critics' conspiracy of silence in this regard. (Or is it the critics' *unawareness* of the fact?) Why, one is driven to ask, why the distortion and why the ignorance? But the critics, after all, are children of the same culture as the novelists they discuss; and if we answer one question we will have answered both.

Perhaps the whole odd shape of American fiction arises simply (as simplifying Europeans are always ready to assure us) because there is no real sexuality in American life and therefore there cannot very well be any in American art. What we cannot achieve in our relations with each other it would be vain to ask our writers to portray or even our critics to miss. ~~Certainly many of our novelists have themselves believed, or pretended to believe, this. Through *The Scarlet Letter*, there is a constant mournful undercurrent, a series of asides in which Hawthorne deplores the sexual diminution of American women. Mark Twain in *1601* somewhat similarly contrasts the vigor of Elizabethan Englishwomen with their American~~

rupted by the woman Matilda, who gains access to his cell disguised as a young novice; indeed, by the time she appears Ambrosio has already been inflamed by contemplating her portrait in the guise of the Virgin. Soon after they have become lovers, Ambrosio wearies of her and begins to dream of possessing Antonia, fifteen-year-old daughter of Elvira, a noble lady to whom he is confessor. With the aid of Matilda, who calls up the Devil to further his plans, he gets into the bedroom of Antonia, but is interrupted as he assaults her by Elvira, whom he kills.

He gives a sleeping potion to the terrified girl, who is taken for dead and consigned to a tomb, where he at last successfully rapes her among the rotting dead. When she screams, he murders her, fearing discovery; but he is captured all the same by the soldiers of the Inquisition, from whose prison he manages to escape by selling his soul to the Devil. He is, however, immediately transported by demons to the top of a mountain peak, from which, after being told that Elvira (whom he murdered) was his mother and Antonia (whom he violated, then killed) his sister, he is cast to his terrified death.

By the time Lewis is through with this sadist farrago, the major symbols of the gothic have been established, and the major meanings of the form made clear. In general, those symbols and meanings depend on an awareness of the spiritual isolation of the individual in a society where all communal systems of value have collapsed or have been turned into meaningless clichés. There is a basic ambivalence in the attitude of the gothic writers to the alienation which they perceive. On the one hand, their fiction projects a fear of the solitude which is the price of freedom; and on the other hand, an almost hysterical attack on all institutions which might inhibit that freedom or mitigate the solitude it breeds. Chief of the gothic symbols is, of course, the Maiden in flight—understood in the spirit of *The Monk* as representing the uprooted soul of the artist, the spirit of the man who has lost his moral home. Not the violation or death which sets such a flight in motion, but the flight itself figures forth the essential meaning of the anti-bourgeois gothic, for which the girl on the run and her pursuer become only alternate versions of the same plight. Neither can come to rest before the other—for each is the projection of his opposite—*anima* and *animus*, actors in a drama which depends on both for its significance. Reinforcing the meaning

of the haunted victim and the haunted persecutor (each the other's obsession) is the haunted countryside, and especially the haunted castle or abbey which rises in its midst, and in whose dark passages and cavernous apartments the chase reaches its climax. Symbols of authority, secular or ecclesiastic, in ruin—memorials to a decaying past—such crumbling edifices project the world of collapsed ego-ideals through which eighteenth-century man was groping his proud and terrified way. If he permitted himself a certain relish in the contemplation of those ruins, this was because they were safely cast down, and he could indulge in nostalgia without risk. If he was terrified of them, dreamed supernatural enemies lurking in their shadows, it was because he suspected that the past, even dead, *especially* dead, could continue to work harm. Even as late as Henry James, an American writer deeply influenced by gothic modes was able to imagine the *malaria*, the miasma which arises from decaying ruins, striking down Daisy Miller as she romantically stands at midnight in the Coliseum.

One of the most popular middlebrow derivatives of the gothic romance is the ghost story; and, indeed, from the start ghosts arise everywhere in the gothic's pages: pale symbols (parodies of the immortal soul in which men had begun to lose faith) of what persists after death. In the eighteenth century, the experience of rationalism had made it easier to believe that a noxious influence, an after-image which chilled the blood, outlasted physical decay, than that some integrating principle of good eternally survived. Similarly, the Devil lived on in the imagination after the death of God, men who would not have gone to church celebrating black masses or finding in the tale of terror some vestigial religious awe. Children of an age which had killed kings and bishops, cast down the holy places of their fathers, found it hard to convince themselves that specters did not walk with rattling chains, or that ancestral pictures did not bleed.

Beneath the haunted castle lies the dungeon keep: the womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last. Beneath the crumbling shell of paternal authority, lies the maternal blackness, imagined by the gothic writer as a prison, a torture chamber—from which the cries of the kidnaped *anima* cannot even be heard. The upper and the lower levels of the ruined castle or abbey represent the contradictory fears at the heart

of gothic terror: the dread of the super-ego, whose splendid battlements have been battered but not quite cast down—and of the id, whose buried darkness abounds in dark visions no stormer of the castle had even touched.

Most variously developed of all the gothic symbols is the Shadow, the villain who pursues the Maiden and presides over turrets and dungeon keep alike. He is apt to take the shape (in a genre which, like the sentimental novel, is both Protestant and bourgeois) of the devious Inquisitor, the concupiscent priest, the corrupt nobleman—or, with almost equal appropriateness, the depraved abbess or the lascivious lady of the manor. Bad Mama or Bad Papa, it scarcely seems to matter, as long as the shadow is projected as the oppressive parent from whom the Maiden must be delivered. And yet there is a sense in which the evil principle is mythically male, the female at best an accessory; for deep in the middle-class mind persist the equations of the Sentimental Love Religion for which the female equals Christ, the male Satan, and the gothic follows too close upon the sentimental to escape completely its influence.

Certainly, it is the Shadow projected as male which most impresses itself upon the imagination, becomes standard to the form; and the hero-villain of the tale of terror turns out to be a descendant of Lovelace, after all, though of a Lovelace regarded with tenderness rather than contempt. Like his sentimental prototype, the Manfred figure stands for the *animus*, that masculine archetype in which the feminine psyche projects all it has denied. But he is the *animus* regarded as forgivable victim of passion and circumstance, as admirable sufferer. His brow furrowed, his face frozen in the grimace of pain, his eyes burning with repressed fury, his mind tormented with unspeakable blasphemies (ancestor of Byron's Giaour, of Ahab, Heathcliffe, Rochester, and a thousand other "ungodly, god-like" men), he is proposed as another symbol of alienation twinned with the Maiden he pursues, a jailer no less lonely than his prisoner.

To define this aspect of the gothic hero-villain, the Lovelace archetype is blended with that of the Wandering Jew, Ahasuerus or Cartaphilus doomed to stalk the earth in hopeless pain until the Second Coming; but especially he is fused with the image of Faust. There is a clue to the essential significance of the gothic precisely here—in its imposition of the myth of Faust upon the archetype of

Don Juan. Both mythic figures, to be sure, possessed the imagination of Europe at the point when men became for the first time conscious of the unconscious; and both represent the revolutionary reversal of ethical standards which followed. Don Juan and Faust alike are former villains of the orthodox mind made heroes in an age of unorthodoxy, Promethean or Satanic figures; and both come to stand for the lonely individual (the writer himself!) challenging the mores of bourgeois society, making patent to all men the hitherto secret that the codes by which they live are archaic survivals without point or power.

Often the two archetypes are blended in a single literary character, as in the lover-scientist Goethe calls by the name of Faust. But there is a real difference between the rebel whose life style is cued by passion and the one whose life style is compounded out of pride and terror—between the seducer and the black magician. Faust challenges the limitations set upon experience not in the name of pleasure but of knowledge; he seeks not to taste life without restraint but to control it fully; and his essential crime (or glory!) is, therefore, not seduction but the Satanic bargain: to sell one's soul to the Devil. But what does it mean to sell one's soul? The symbol is immensely complex, its significances multiple; they can be summed up, however, in the single phrase to choose to be damned, whatever damnation is. Not to fall into error out of a passionate loss of self-control, not even to choose to sin at a risk of damnation; but to commit oneself to it with absolute certainty for "as long as forever is."

Damnation itself means various things to men of varying belief: a commitment to the vagaries of the unconscious; an abandonment of the comforts of social life—of marriage and the family, wealth and recognition; a rejection of all bonds of love and sympathy, of humanity itself; a deliberate plunge into insanity; and acceptance of eternal torment for the soul. When Huck Finn cries out, "All right, I'll go to Hell," and Ahab, "From hell's heart I stab at thee!"; when Hester Prynne tears off her scarlet letter, they are Faustian heroes; but so, too (in all modesty and moral elegance), is Henry James's Strether when he rejects Mrs. Newsome and Maria Gostrey alike, refuses all rewards from life; and so, too, is Hawthorne when confiding to a friend, after the composition of *The Scarlet Letter*,

that he had written a "hell-fired book." Anyone who, in full consciousness, surrenders the hope of heaven (what everyone says heaven is) for the endurance of hell (what everyone knows hell to be) has entered into a pact with Satan; and the very act, therefore, of writing a gothic novel rather than a sentimental one, of devoting a long fiction to terror rather than love, is itself a Faustian commitment. The gothic novel was not fully itself until it had discovered and made its center the diabolic bargain; this is as essential to its total significance as seduction to the Richardsonian novel.

The primary meaning of the gothic romance, then, lies in its substitution of terror for love as a central theme of fiction. The titillation of sex denied, it offers its readers a vicarious participation in a flirtation with death—approach and retreat, approach and retreat, the fatal orgasm eternally mounting and eternally checked. More than that, however, the gothic is the product of an implicit aesthetic that replaces the classic concept of nothing-in-excess with the revolutionary doctrine that nothing succeeds like excess. Aristotle's guides for achieving the tragic without falling into "the abominable" are stood on their heads, "the abominable" itself being made the touchstone of effective art. Dedicated to producing nausea, to transcending the limits of taste and endurance, the gothic novelist is driven to seek more and more atrocious crimes to satisfy the hunger for "too-much" on which he trades.

It is not enough that his protagonist commit rape; he must commit it upon his mother or sister; and if he himself is a cleric, pledged to celibacy, his victim a nun, dedicated to God, all the better! Similarly, if he commits murder, it must be his father who is his victim; and the crime must take place in darkness, among the decaying bodies of his ancestors, on hallowed ground. It is as if such romancers were pursuing some ideal of absolute atrocity which they cannot quite flog their reluctant imaginations into conceiving; though, to be sure, M. G. Lewis approached that ideal in *The Monk*. Beyond what he achieves, there is possible only the ultimate horror pornography of the Marquis de Sade, the supremely disgusting art of *Juliette* or *The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, which break through the final restraints of convention and decency, embodying fantasies which, though they represent the final abomina-

tion for which the gothic yearns, cannot yet be distributed to the wide reading public which sustains the continuing gothic tradition. For the abominable, to be truly effective, must remain literally unspeakable; and where—as in the case of *The Monk*—it has adapted itself to the censor and the mode, become respectable and chic, it ends by seeming ridiculous. The abominable as an absolute leads to either sickness or silliness, betraying the man who is obsessed by the horror he evokes or the one who plays at it merely to shock and succeed.

Some would say, indeed, that the whole tradition of the gothic is a pathological symptom rather than a proper literary movement, a reversion to the childish game of scaring oneself in the dark, or a plunge into sadist fantasy, masturbatory horror. For Wordsworth, for instance, heir of the genteel sentimentality of the eighteenth century, gothic sensationalism seemed merely a response (compounding the ill to which it responded) to the decay of sensibility in an industrialized and brutalized world—in which men had grown so callous that only shock treatments of increasing intensity could move them to react. Yet there is more than this even to *The Monk*. If Lewis writes in one sense what he must and in another what he hopes will sell, he also writes for a more conscious and respectable end: to shake the philistines out of their self-satisfied torpor. *Epatate la bourgeoisie*: this is the secret slogan of the tale of terror; and it remains into our own time a not-so-secret slogan of much highbrow literature, particularly of such spectacular bourgeois-baiting movements as Dada and Surrealism.

When the Beatniks emerge from their own retreats, bearded and blue-shaded and bagel in hand, to mock the “squares” of San Francisco with the monstrous disorder of life as they imagine and live it, they are playing the latest version of the game invented by “Monk” Lewis. Despite its early adoption by Mrs. Radcliffe, the gothic is an avant-garde genre, perhaps the first avant-garde art in the modern sense of the term. A pursuit, half serious enterprise, half fashionable vice, of the intellectuals of the end of the eighteenth century, it remained highbrow enough to tempt the Shelleys and Byron, for instance, to try their hands at it. The popular success of *Frankenstein*, perpetuated still in movies and known in its essence to children in the street, has obscured the fact that it was launched as an ad-

vanced book; and that it belongs to a kind, one of whose functions was to shock the bourgeoisie into an awareness of what a chamber of horrors its own smugly regarded world really was. If some examples of the early gothic strike us now as comical, this is only in part the result of changing taste; such books were from the beginning intended to be, in part at least, a joke on the middle-class reader who would inevitably find them too funny or not funny enough!

But the gothic represents also an attempt to redeem "the improbable and marvelous," the stuff of the fancy which Richardson had presumably banned from the new novel, and which the domestic realism he sponsored seemed forever to exclude. It was, in short, an anti-realistic protest, a rebellion of the imagination against confining fiction to an analysis of contemporary manners and modes. It is not, on the other hand, a reactionary literary movement; for the fantastic world to which it turns from the parlors of the bourgeoisie and the streets of London is altogether different from the fictional setting of the baroque proto-novel, against whose "pomp and pagantry" Richardson had revolted. The tone of the *Astrée*, for instance, is nostalgic, its fables devised to feed the pastoral reveries of an upper class turned toward the past. The gothic reassertion of "*sortilège et fantasmagorie*," on the other hand, is sinister and disturbing, more like a nightmare than a dream; and its fables represent the hopes and fears of a group of intellectuals turned toward the future at a moment of revolutionary readjustment.

The Marquis de Sade in his essay on the "new novel" (as important for an understanding of the gothic as Diderot's *Éloge de Richardson* for an understanding of the sentimental) points out precisely what is at stake. Such books, he explains, are "the inevitable fruit of the revolutionary shocks felt by all of Europe. . . . For those who knew all the miseries with which scoundrels can oppress men, the novel became as hard to write as it was monotonous to read. . . . It was necessary to call hell to the rescue . . . and to find in the world of nightmare" images adequate to "the history of man in this Iron Age."

The key words are "nightmare" and "hell," revealing how consciously, on the one hand, some gothic writers turned to the night side of life, the irrational world of sleep, for themes and symbols appropriate to the terrors bred by the Age of Reason; and how, on

the other hand, they saw their own role as Satanic, their kind of literature as a kind of half-playful black mass, an evocation of the Evil One, in whom, of course they were no longer prepared to confess believing. Gothicism is the Satanism of those to whom (officially at least) Satan has become a figure of speech, hell a figment invented by the timid to scare the more timid, and thus to keep all men from enjoying the limitless freedom just opening before them. And yet the gothic writers insist upon using the traditional terminology for the diabolic, betraying a certain vestigial doubt (even perhaps hope) that there may be in the old legends a kind of truth.

Beside the good old word "hell," however, is placed the newer word "history," equally important to an understanding of the form; for behind the gothic lies a theory of history, a particular sense of the past. The tale of terror is a kind of historical novel which existed before the historical novel (the invention of Walter Scott) came into being. The Richardsonian novel of contemporary life had discovered the present for fiction, made time a condition of action, a medium in which characters moved. The social meanings of the Lovelace-Clarissa story (the encoded cry of the bourgeoisie: *we will be seduced no more!*) assume some notion of historical change, a clear-cut conception of a differing Then and Now. Richardson claimed for his own province the Now, in which a servant could marry her employer's son; but by implication he has already defined a Then, in which that son would have taken such a girl whenever he desired her and on whatever terms his own whim prompted. This Then, the gothic novel (with its encoded cry: *we will be terrified no more!*) claimed for its province, making of the past an essential subject of fiction for the first time. Shakespeare had, to be sure, written historical plays; but how ahistorical they, in fact, were: assuming a past indistinguishable from the present in all things (in costume, in speech, in moral attitudes) except for certain recorded events which happened to have happened then instead of now.

The gothic felt for the first time the profound difference, the *pastness* of the past; and though it did not, like the later novel of Manzoni and Scott, attempt with scholarly accuracy to document that difference, it tried to give some sense of it: the sense of something lapsed or outlived or irremediably changed. It is no accident that Horace Walpole was an "antiquary," a researcher into ancient

modes and styles, who lived in a reconstructed "gothic" villa. The very adjective, which gave to both the home he designed and the fictional tradition he founded a name, implies a certain attitude toward the past. Originally "gothic" was a thoroughly pejorative word (rather like "Victorian" in more recent popular usage), applied not only to whatever belonged in fact to rude "medieval" times, i.e., any period before the sixteenth century, but also to any surviving mode of speech or behavior considered unworthy of enlightened modernity. Dueling, for instance, is referred to by one eighteenth-century critic as a "gothic custom," while another makes a fictional character condemn "husband" as a "gothic word." Rousseau, on the other hand, modestly describes his own novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as "gothic," meaning presumably that it possesses a certain antique simplicity and an unsophisticated style.

By and large, however, the writers of gothic novels looked on the "gothic" times with which they dealt (and by which, despite themselves, they were fascinated) as corrupt and detestable. Their vision of that past was bitterly critical, and they evoked the olden days not to sentimentalize but to condemn them. Most gothicists were not only avant-garde in their literary aspirations, but radical in their politics; they were, that is to say, anti-aristocratic, anti-Catholic, anti-nostalgic. They liked to think that if their work abounded in ghosts, omens, portents and signs, this was not because they themselves were superstitious, but because they were engaged in exposing an age of superstition and the benighted religion which sustained it. If their stories were superficially misleading in this regard, there were their own direct statements to set the reader straight by assuring him of the author's intent to expose "that superstition which debilitates the mind, that ignorance which propagates error, and that dread of invisible agency which makes inquiry criminal." Beneath the spectacular events of the tale of terror, the melodramatic psychology and theatrical horror, rings the cry, "*Écrasez l'infâme!*" The spirit of Voltaire broods over the haunted castle; and ghosts squeak eerily that they do not exist.

~~One line of development of the original gothic eventuates in such didactic novels of social reform as Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), which without surrendering the titillation of terror strives to indoctrinate its readers with advanced political notions. It is an egregious,~~

Certainly, the three novels granted by general consensus to be our greatest works are gothic in theme and atmosphere alike. It is not merely a question of certain trappings of terror: the delirious visions of Huck's father, the body dragged at midnight from the grave, the signs and portents of impending disaster discovered in howling dogs and slaughtered snakes, the ghostly visions through the fog of *Huckleberry Finn*; or the Spirit-Spout, the silent rising from the deep of the Great White Squid, the Saint Elmo's fire, the eerie Parsee who appears out of no place with his "tiger-like" crew, the baptism in pagan blood of *Moby Dick*; the Indian warlocks and Puritan witches, the yellow ruff and the memories of Anne Turner, the Black Man and his book, the letter A written in the heavens of *The Scarlet Letter*. Even more importantly, in each book, the Faustian bargain stands at the focus of action: Hester and Dimmesdale alike symbolically inscribe themselves as the Black Man's followers; Ahab, having entered into some unspeakable pact with Fedallah, strikes from hell's heart at the whale; Huck resolves to go to hell rather than restore a slave to his rightful owner. The Yankee skipper, the seduced woman, the motherless boy all play the role of Faust in our fiction, sometimes openly and in terror, sometimes secretly and as if it were a joke.

Not only in their major books, but elsewhere, too, our greatest writers sought out gothic themes: Melville most notably in *Pierre*, Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun*, Twain in *Tom Sawyer Detective* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*; while the tale of terror in a thousand forms, as the story of slavery and black revolt, of Indian warfare, of urban violence, of quiet despair in the world of the freak and the invert and the maimed persists as a reigning genre among minor novelists, too. From Edgar Poe to Truman Capote, from Brockden Brown through George Lippard to Paul Bowles and Carson McCullers, from *The Monster* of Stephen Crane to *The Cannibal* of John Hawkes, the images of alienation, flight, and abysmal fear possess our fiction. Until the gothic had been discovered, the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as that novel lasts, the gothic cannot die.

But why, one is driven to ask, *why* has the tale of terror so special an appeal to Americans? Surely its success must be derived in part from the failure of love in our fiction; the death of love left

a vacuum at the affective heart of the American novel into which there rushed the love of death. The triumph of the genteel sentimental incapacitated even our most talented writers, left them incapable of dealing with the relations of men and women as subtly and convincingly as the prose writers in the great novelistic tradition of France. Our novelists, deprived of the subject that sustained Stendhal or Constant, Flaubert or Proust, that seemed indeed to them *the* subject of the novel, turned to fables of loneliness and terror.

Moreover, in the United States, certain special guilts awaited projection in the gothic form. A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a new society immune to the compounded evil of the past from which no one in Europe could ever feel himself free. But the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia, and the abominations of the slave trade, in which the black man, rum, and money were inextricably entwined in a knot of guilt, provided new evidence that evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind—but stayed alive in the human heart, which had come the long way to America only to confront the horrifying image of itself. Finally, there was the myth of Faust and of the diabolic bargain, which, though not yet isolated from gothic themes of lesser importance (that isolation was to be the work of American writers!), came quite soon to seem identical with the American myth itself.

How could one tell where the American dream ended and the Faustian nightmare began; they held in common the hope of breaking through all limits and restraints, of reaching a place of total freedom where one could with impunity deny the Fall, live as if innocence rather than guilt were the birthright of all men. In Huck's blithe assertion, "All right, I'll go to Hell," is betrayed a significant undermeaning of the Faustian *amor fati*, at least in its "boyish" American form: the secret belief that damnation is not all it is cracked up to be. In a strange way, the naturalized Faust legend becomes in the United States a way of denying hell in the act of seeming to accept it, of suggesting that it is merely a scary word, a bugaboo, a forbidding description of freedom itself! At any rate, Americans from the beginning responded passionately to the myth itself; even in the 1680's, before the invention of the main tradition of the

novel, one Boston bookseller sold in the Colonies sixty-six copies of *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*. It was, needless to say, a record unapproached in those times by any other "light literature."

When the gothic novel appeared, then, it was greeted with great enthusiasm by Americans, who passed quite quickly from importing and reading its prototypes to attempting to emulate them. In this case, only ten years elapsed between the publication of the novels of Mrs. Radcliffe and Lewis and the first American gothic romances. Yet the gothic mode—though appealing enough for various reasons—proved difficult to adapt to the demands of the American audience and the deeper meanings of American experience. By the time our own first attempts were being made, there was everywhere in the United States (aware of itself as a product of the Enlightenment) an uneasiness with darkness of all kinds, a feeling that the obsession with evil was an outgrown vice of Calvinism. Certainly the generation of Jefferson was pledged to be done with ghosts and shadows, committed to live a life of yea-saying in a sunlit, neo-classical world. From the bourgeois ladies to the Deist intellectuals, the country was united in a disavowal of the "morbid" and the "nasty." No wonder the American pioneer in gothic fiction, despite the acclaim he won abroad, was driven first to abandon the gothic for the sentimental, then to give up novel writing completely.

If it had been only a matter of finding a reading public for the gothic, the situation would not have been really critical—only unprofitable; but there were other problems. The gothic, after all, had been invented to deal with the past and with history from a typically Protestant and enlightened point of view; but what could one do with the form in a country which, however Protestant and enlightened, had (certainly at the turn of the eighteenth century!) neither a proper past nor a history? It was easy enough for the American writer to borrow certain elements, both of cast and setting, from the tale of terror; the Maiden in flight, for instance, was readily adaptable, and the hero-villain viable at least as a visual image—his burning eyes and furrowed brow transplanted themselves without difficulty. But what was to be done about the social status of such hero-villains? With what native classes or groups could they be identified? Traditionally aristocrats, monks, servants

of the Inquisition, members of secret societies like the Illuminati, how could they be convincingly introduced on the American scene?

Similarly, it was not hard to provide the American equivalents of the moors, hills, and forests through which the bedeviled maidens of the gothic romances were accustomed to flee. But what of the haunted castle, the ruined abbey, the dungeons of the Inquisition? In America, such crumbling piles, architecturally and symbolically so satisfying to the eighteenth-century reader and writer, are more than a little improbable. Yet on them, not only the atmosphere, but an important part of the meaning of the tale of terror depended; what political or social implications the form possessed were inextricably bound up with such images. An early American gothicist like the I. Mitchell who published in 1811 *The Asylum; or, Alonzo and Melissa* was able to imagine a gothic country house on Long Island; but such a structure in such a place remains not merely unconvincing but meaningless. The haunted castle of the European gothic is an apt symbol for a particular body of attitudes toward the past which was a chief concern of the genre. The counterpart of such a castle fifty miles from New York City has lost all point.

The problem of the gothic romance in this regard is analogous to that of the sentimental novel. Both had arisen out of a need of the bourgeoisie, fighting for cultural autonomy in a class society, to find archetypal characters and situations to embody their conflict with the older ruling classes. Just as the sentimental archetype had projected the struggle of the middle classes with established secular power, portrayed as a menace to their purity, so the gothic projected the struggle of those classes with ecclesiastical authority, portrayed as a threat to their freedom. In America, which possesses neither inherited aristocratic privilege nor an established Church, the anti-aristocratic impulse of the seduction theme is, as we have said, translated into feminism and anti-intellectualism; while the impatience with the past implicit in the gothic fable undergoes an even more complex metamorphosis. Charles Brockden Brown, single-handed and almost unsustainable, solved the key problems of adaptation, and though by no means a popular success, determined, through his influence on Poe and Hawthorne, the future of the gothic novel in America.