THE THEORY

AND INTERPRETATION

OF NARRATIVE
THE PROGRESS
OF ROMANCE

Literary Historiography
and the Gothic Novel

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This book has gone through many changes since its germination many years ago. I had become interested in the literary-historical aspects of my critical study of endings in didactic novels like *Candide* and *Catch-22*, and after that was published in 1974 I began wondering how much neater it might be to think about generic change in a genre that—unlike the apologue—had a real beginning, middle, and end. My original conception for the book, which I batted around with Sheldon Sacks before his death in 1979, was of a straightforward history of the Gothic novel from the perspective of Chicago neo-Aristotelian critical discourse. But as I began working on that, I saw that, for all its merits, there was a great deal about the history of the Gothic that such a method would necessarily leave out. At first I began to see how reception theory provided a really necessary supplement to any specifically formalist approach, and later, after strongly resisting the claims of Marxist literary historiography, I came to understand in what ways that could enrich any understanding of how the cultural ground was prepared for the Gothic, specifically why the Gothic arose around the time the Bastille fell. Finally I came to the Russian formalists, who had in many respects anticipated by half a century what Ronald S. Crane, Sheldon Sacks, and Ralph Rader had taught me about literary history, but who were better able to express what happens when genres die, how in a strange afterlife they mutate into new forms, blend and merge, and even reemerge in later centuries with different themes and techniques.

In the course of my study I naturally read most of what had been written about the Gothic novel and whatever was currently coming out. The 1980s were a great period of Gothic studies, although for reasons I discuss in chapter 1 the favored mode has been literary criticism and interpretation rather than genuine literary history.

In addition to outlining the ways in which recent critics of the Gothic have with few exceptions evaded the task of providing genuine literary history, chapter 1 discusses the general antipathy to and skepticism about literary historiography that have paradoxically accompanied an age whose
primary watchword has been "Always Historicize!" In particular, I wrestle
with the paradoxes posed by David Perkins in Is Literary History Possible?
(1992), which codifies the contemporary skepticism about the possibility of
writing history that is simultaneously coherent and true. I argue there that
Perkins has set up a high standard that renders not only literary history but
history of any sort impossible, but that his arguments are what British law­
yers call counsels of perfection, dilemmas through the horns of which it is
possible to pass with only a few scratches. Nevertheless I agree with Perkins
that no mode of historiography has a monopoly on truth, and in fact it is
precisely the disparate truths of inconsistent historiographical modes that
provide us with a literary history that can approach a full and rounded expla­
nation of a literary phenomenon such as the Gothic romance.

In chapter 2 I present my sense of three distinct modes of literary histori­
ography, those informed by Althusserian Marxism, formalism (itself subdi­
vided into Russian formalism of the 1920s and the Chicago neo-Aristotelian
formalism of the 1960s through 1980s), and reception theory. In subsequent
chapters I present these theories as they work in practice, in particular as
they bear on the Gothic novel. I discuss their theoretical claims, how each
mode of inquiry operates, how evidence is treated, how the relationship be­
tween the "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" causes of literary development are de­
defined. All this appears in chapter 2, the only exclusively theoretical chapter,
where I argue that, while devotees of each school (Marxists like Pierre
Macherey and John Frow, formalists like Tynyanov and Shklovsky, neo­
Aristotelians like Crane and Rader, reception theorists like Iser and Jauss)
have emphasized their differences from one another in order to attack the
competition, there has been a surprising degree of convergence toward a
cenrist position assigning important roles to both "intrinsic" and "extrin­
sic" causes of literary change and, within the extrinsic area, to changes in
general and literary ideology and in the motives and composition of the li­
terary audience. Nevertheless, the various modes of literary history will "fo­
calize" the story they tell differently—as the chapters of practical criticism
that follow will show.

In chapter 3 ("The Gothic in History") the Gothic is discussed as a social
text, in terms of the contemporary attempts to find in the Gothic novel
coded versions of the history of its own time. There have been several dif­
ferent versions of this cryptohistorical version. One is that of Ronald
Paulson, who reads the Gothic as a coded response to the French Revolu­
tion in a way similar to the "new historicism." Another is the feminist ap­
proach of Kate Ferguson Ellis, for whom the Gothic agon reflects a social,
indeed a domestic "revolution" that produced the Victorian doctrine of "separate spheres" for men and women, men out in the world, women as angels in the house. Each of these readings of the Gothic novel essentially reads the Gothic as an allegory for a corresponding social conflict. But as I once argued about Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, when multiple allegorical significances are claimed it begins to argue that the text is not allegorical at all. Instead, the chapter argues in post-Althusserian fashion that the vogue of the Gothic was less a way of encoding history than of evading it.

Chapter 4 proposes the formalist approach to the history of the Gothic with which I began. It argues that the moral/aesthetic rules of the late eighteenth century led novelists to create the Gothic novel as a reinscription of Richardson's *Pamela*, but one that separated the roles Richardson had combined in Mr. B.—the hero and the villain, the threat and the reward. But the revision had the inevitable effect of making the novels incoherent or episodic in plot. The works were affectively forceful and popularly appealing but were downgraded by contemporary critics whose Georgian aesthetic valorized unity and coherence. (Now, in the heyday of *differance*, the Gothic has again come back into vogue.) The problem of incoherence surfaces as early as Walpole, and the subsequent history of the Gothic novel can be seen as a series of attempts to evade or draw attention away from the incoherence (e.g., by making the villain into the protagonist; or by making the threats to the protagonist severer, more baroque). After the vogue of the Gothic, the Brontës returned to the Richardsonian combination of hero and villain in a single character, as may be seen in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

Chapter 5 treats the same period from a very different angle, from the vantage point of reception theory. Based on a variety of evidence (contemporary reviews, diaries, letters, journalism, parodic and satirical novels), I argue that the vogue of the Gothic sits astride a historic shift in the composition of the literary audience and in that audience's motives for reading. The effect of the Gothic was to accentuate a change already in process, a change from reading for the sake of delight and instruction to reading for the sake of imaginative play and escape. The impact of the Gothic was to pave the way for the more respectable elements of the Romantic movement. Though some men clearly read the Gothic, its primary appeal, then as now, was to women; it was typed as "female reading." While the vogue of the Gothic increased the literary audience among women, nevertheless that appeal spread to men when a form could be found whose external manifestations were acceptable to males, as they were in the historical romances of Scott. The historical "solidity" and "veracity" of Scott licensed males to experience
the imaginative play and escape that had formerly been confined to the "female reading" of the Gothic. Given the dominance of male over female ideology, Scott (and the vogue of the historical novel) effectively killed off the Gothic as a genre; it was moribund by 1820.

Chapter 6 takes up the question of the Gothic aftermath: the various offshoots of the Gothic novel. In one well-chronicled development, various elements of the Gothic novel—character types, situations, symbols, and so forth—begin to invade novels by realists of the "great tradition" like Eliot, James, and Conrad. In another, the Gothic develops literary progeny in the "horror story" beginning with the vogue of the literary ghost story in the fin de siècle in Stevenson, Wilde, James, and Stoker. In a third, the Gothic becomes the parent of other subliterary genres (science fiction, the mystery story, adult fantasy) emphasizing elements that had played a part in the original genre. Here I suggest that the various forms of literary historiography, which had converged on the portrait of the Gothic in its original 1764-1820 vogue, diverge in their capacities to explain the later manifestations. (For example, the causal relationships involved in the splitting off of science fiction from Gothic via Shelley's Frankenstein, or the detective story via the explained supernatural of Radcliffe, work best within a formalist perspective on literary historiography.) This chapter lays the groundwork for a sequel to The Progress of Romance.

The final chapter returns to the theory of literary history and the question of the problems of explanation and history, and the degree to which the various explanations provided by different historical modes have converged and competed. Here I need to underscore the difference between the history of a genre and the history of a mode. The former can be seen as a coherent movement in literary history, a process in which a form emerges, flourishes, and dies—like the vogue of the Gothic—on which the various explanations, whatever their "focal length," can be seen to converge. Any purported "history" of the novel around the turn of the nineteenth century that failed to find a place for some version of the "story" that appears on my first page would be convicted thereby of inadequacy. Modes, on the other hand, may not have coherent histories. The later literary-historical relationships that may obtain between the various offspring of different genres may make sense within one theoretical framework but not within another. Both William Faulkner and Isak Dinesen might be thought of as Gothic writers in the middle third of the twentieth century but surely not Gothic in the same sense. While I try to avoid reifying my notion of literary-historical movements, it seems clear to me that every system of historical thinking is going
to have to cope with the differences between "real" movements that need to be explained regardless of the language we are using for explanation and those more tenuous modal relationships that may be drawn between any text and almost any other via that web of relationships that the literary tradition concatenates.

In the course of rereading and revising these seven chapters, I became well aware that none has fully treated its subject, that each "might be continued," extended profitably into a book on its own. But it would have been at the expense of the one I have actually wanted to write about the relations of theory and practice in the writing of literary history.

For financial help in beginning this project I am indebted for a fellowship to the National Endowment for the Humanities; the book could not have been completed without several summer travel grants from the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, which allowed me leisurely research time in London. Most of the work was done at the New York City Public Library in Manhattan; and in London at the British Library in Great Russell Street, the Senate House Library of the University of London, and a nearby flat at Queen Court, Queen Square, under the watchful eye of the late Henry Carr, veteran, freemason, and raconteur extraordinary.


Literary criticism, like the Gothic novel, has an institutional history with lines of filiation by which we enable each other's work; I myself am shaped even as I help to shape. I have dedicated *The Progress of Romance* to Wayne C. Booth and Laura A. Wadenpfuhl, with whom—along with so many other teachers and students—I form links of love of learning in another history that abides and endures.