CHAPTER ONE
Toward a Pluralistic Historiography of Literature

The Story

While the origins of most literary genres are lost, either in scholarly controversy or the dark backward and abysm of time, those of the Gothic novel present an admirable clarity. Beneath the papier-mâché machicolations of Strawberry Hill, the antiquarian and aesthete Horace Walpole, inspired by a nightmare involving “a giant hand in armour,” created at white heat the tale published Christmas 1764 as *The Castle of Otranto*. Not one but two genres were thus begun. The one established first was the historical romance, which derived from elements in both *Otranto* and the earlier romance by Thomas Leland, *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury*; this form was pioneered by Clara Reeve (in *The Champion of Virtue*, 1777) and developed by Sophia Lee (in *The Recess*, 1783–85) and reached its culmination in the early nineteenth century with the medieval romances of Walter Scott. The second, the Gothic tale of supernatural terror, was slower to erupt. The *Otranto* seed had time to travel to Germany and bear fruit there in the *Räuber- und Ritter-romane* before being replanted into its native English soil. It was not until the 1790s that the Gothic became a major force in English fiction and tales set in Italian castles and Spanish monasteries began to crowd out—generally to the disgust of contemporary reviewers—those set in London houses and Hampshire mansions. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Ann Radcliffe and *The Monk* (1796) by Matthew G. Lewis spawned numberless imitators in a craze whose original impetus carried it into the 1820s. By far the greatest part of this output was trash, of little interest today save to antiquarians, bibliophiles, and literary historians. A very few were
works of talent and genius, among which were numbered William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794), his daughter Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), and James Hogg’s *Private Confessions and Memoirs of a Justified Sinner* (1824). By then, the original impulse of the Gothic had played itself out, though the tale of terror was to survive both as an influence on mainstream realist fiction through the Victorian era and indeed beyond, and as a minor component of the house of fiction in both high and popular art up to the present.

**Stories and Histories**

Such is the story of the Gothic novel, and a narrative such as this one has been retold numerous times in the critical studies of the genre that began to appear in the 1920s, by Birkhead, Railo, Tompkins, Summers, and Varma. But to make a necessary distinction, it is a story—or rather a chronicle, in Hayden White’s terms—and not a history. It represents the important events and major happenings in the order of their occurrence, but it makes no claim to understand why these events occurred when they did and why others did not occur in their place, nor does it try to understand the context and the backdrop against which they occurred. Moving from chronicle to history is far more difficult.

This is a book about writing the history of the Gothic novel. Writing the literary history of important genres is one of the more common things literary scholars have traditionally done, but for a variety of reasons the Gothic novel has escaped almost scot-free. Perhaps one reason is that the bare story—as opposed to the history—seems so compelling and dramatic.

This is not to say that the Gothic has escaped attention. On the contrary. Around 1978 a number of forces began to converge around the Gothic with the result that a field that was once neglected at best—and at worst a bastion of bibliophilic cranks—very rapidly became a very important area of study attracting many of the best minds of the past fifteen years. (One need only mention the names of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Judith Wilt, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Norman Holland, Claire Kahane, Margaret Doody—the list goes on and on.) Perhaps the most obvious force at work was feminism, which seized on the Gothic novel partly, of course, because many of its important authors (like Radcliffe and Shelley) were women, but primarily because the Gothic had always been considered *female reading* even when it had not been *female writing*. (As Ina Ferris has pointed out *[Achievement]*, at
the turn of the eighteenth century the novel in general was gendered female as reading: we can hear this in Jane Austen's prize coxcomb John Thorpe's insistence to Catherine Morland, "I never read novels; I have something else to do.") Furthermore, the female Gothic has become a significant part of the feminist agenda, less because there was very much hope of unearthing lost masterpieces, as the discoverers of Kate Chopin and Lady Mary Wroth had done, than because the plight of the passive heroines of romance could be read as a convenient metaphor for the plight of all females under the restrictions of patriarchy.

And there were other movements aside from feminism leading to renewed interest in the Gothic. One was the growing sense that popular literature was as deserving of literary analysis as canonical texts. As a valorized category of writing, literature is socially constructed and its definition changes with the times. Until the late Victorian period, "literature" was the Greek and Latin classics, first and foremost, and secondarily the works of the principal vernacular poets from Chaucer through Pope. Not until the 1870s did English and American literature as it is currently understood become a topic of scholarship. Contemporary literature as late as the 1950s was discussed only in popular magazines; starting in the late 1960s it became an academic subject and now has a host of journals as well as books devoted to its analysis. By the 1970s, the turn came of the popular literature of the past. And this too led to a consideration of the Gothic novel.

But there are other factors as well, and I hope it would not be too cynical to suggest that intellectual currents of this sort may reflect not only a change in the ideology attaching to literature but also material professional needs. Here we need to remember that the enormous growth in college teaching in the postwar years generated an equally intense need for new subjects about which academics could write books to achieve tenure and promotion. One result of this was the opening up of the canon to include writers who had formerly been excluded or given a minor place (in particular, to formerly neglected women writers from Christine de Pisane and Lady Mary Wroth to Harriet Beecher Stowe and Kate Chopin). But another was a growing interest in texts that had never been canonical in the usual sense but that had nevertheless formed the consciousness of contemporary culture. These texts included works like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which can today be said to have entered the canon, but also ones like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that will probably never be considered canonical in the usual sense, even though most people, including those who seldom read books, are familiar with their stories.
Dehistoricizing the Gothic

Nevertheless, despite the efflorescence of criticism of Gothic texts from the period of its first vogue and in contemporary popular culture, the great majority of the many books and articles recently published have avoided any serious attempt to write a literary history of the Gothic. This is not the place for a chapter-length review article on the last dozen years of Gothic criticism, but three specimen approaches can represent the variety of ways of evading historiography that modern critical theories encourage.

The Gothic as Nexus of Conventions

One way of dehistoricizing the Gothic novel is to treat it as a set of literary conventions. This was the most common approach in the literature on the Gothic between Birkhead and Varma. The organizational plan of Eino Railo's *The Haunted Castle*—which divides the subject into separate chapters on the castle, the monk, and so forth—typifies the benefits and weaknesses of the method. The central dilemma of what R. S. Crane has called the *preconstructional* historian is that once one treats the Gothic as the nexus of a collection of separable conventions, each of which developed in its own way, one arrives at a set of histories that (however adequate in themselves) cannot add up to a history of the Gothic as a whole. For there seems no reason why the history of haunted castles (beginning with Otranto and continuing through Tom-All-Alone's in Dickens's *Bleak House* to Sutpen's Hundred in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* ) should connect in any way with the history of criminal clerics (starting with Matthew Lewis's Ambrosio in *The Monk* and continuing through Sinclair Lewis's eponymous Elmer Gantry and Flannery O'Connor's Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*).

The only way the approach through conventions can lead to a coherent history of the Gothic is if you assume the contrary, that all the conventions are interconnected, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick did in her first book, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Sedgwick believes that the Gothic is not unified in emotional tone, like an Aristotelian genre, and is best defined as a nexus of shared conventions in a variety of categories: mise-en-scène, character types, narrative techniques, and themes. Nevertheless, history goes out the window once more when, in her interesting opening chapter, she tries to explain what these defining conventions have in common. Taking off
from previous work by Miyoshi, Heilman, and Nelson, Sedgwick locates a single common factor linking the numerous Gothic conventions:

When an individual fictional “self” is the subject of one of these conventions, that self is spatialized in the following way. It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. This something can be its own past . . . ; it can be free air . . . ; it can be a lover; it can be just all the circumambient life, when the self is pinned in a death-like sleep. Typically, however, there is both something going on inside the isolation . . . and something intensely relevant going on impossibly out of reach. While the three main elements (what’s inside, what’s outside, and what separates them) take on the most varied guises, the terms of the relationship are immutable. The self and whatever it is that is outside have a proper, natural, necessary connection to each other, but one that the self is suddenly incapable of making. (12-13)

Sedgwick is trying to find a factor sufficiently general to be capable of unifying Gothic conventions that operate in the realm of narrative technique (like the fragmentary manuscript or the story-within-the-story) and ones that operate in the realm of themes or character types (like premature burial or criminal monks). What she finds is broad enough, but it is perhaps too broad, since the triadic relation of the self, its object, and a barrier between them is so general it could be applied to any narrative or any drama whatsoever. The historical uniqueness of the Gothic moment is thus out of the picture.

In fact the more interesting problem with Sedgwick’s explanation is not that it fails to unify the conventions of the Gothic but that it succeeds at too great a cost. A literary convention is like a rule. We know that in general to understand an activity defined in terms of rules, it is not necessary to find a super- or meta-rule that accounts for each and every rule of the activity. Baseball is a rule-governed activity, but it doesn’t seem clear that there needs to be some super-rule that accounts for disparate conventions like the distance between the bases, the number of strikes before one is out, and the fact that games are postponed on account of rain. Neither does there seem to be any meta-rule that contains the essence of the rules of chess.

Games function as an analogue to genres conceived of as loci of conventions because there is a sense in which a game can be described exhaustively in terms of its conventions or rules. (Obviously, rules are not all there is: there is a history of baseball and of chess, and the games could be profitably discussed in other ways as well, but rule books are intended as ways of
successfully codifying games.) Thinking of the Gothic as a "game" with "rules" is an analogy that will eventually break down, but it can save us from making some strange assumptions. For one thing, there is no reason to suppose that every convention of the Gothic will be unique to the Gothic, any more than the board used in chess is used solely in chess. And the history of some conventions supposedly typical of the Gothic, such as the story-within-the-story, will be more accurately assessed if one remembers that nested narratives are used in non-Gothic early narrative from The Arabian Nights to Don Quixote.

The Gothic as Feminist Charter

It is no accident that, in recent days, the association of the Gothic with femininity has been reflected in the growing interest in the female Gothic, a term applied by Ellen Moers to Frankenstein (in Literary Women, 1976) and now used in any number of ways. It is applied to the works of Ann Radcliffe and her followers, more broadly to any romantic fiction by women, and finally to any fiction descended from the Gothic by its myriad lines of filiation, from the Brontës to Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor to the nearly anonymous authors for Mills and Boon, and even at times to works by males who can be brought within the aegis of femininity. The Female Gothic, edited by Juliann Fleenor (1983), brought together essays from each of these groups, establishing a category that has been mined extensively ever since. The most important of the many studies that take this line is surely The Madwoman in the Attic, by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, which can rightly be said to have instituted a revolution in feminist criticism. The Madwoman in the Attic is not limited to traditional Gothic romance texts—though Gilbert and Gubar discuss at length Frankenstein, Jane Eyre, and The Lifted Veil—but its ideology imposes an essentially Gothic myth upon all female creativity, which Gilbert and Gubar see in terms of "images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles function as surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors, . . . along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia" (xi). If these are the principal effects in which female creativity manifests itself, its causes are rooted in a very special version of the "anxiety of influence" posited by Harold Bloom. Bloom's theory records the results of the struggles that strong sons engage in with their poetic "fathers," but this Oedipal picture cannot be
applied to women authors without serious revision. For women, the patriarchal quality of poetry itself, its status as a largely masculine preserve, creates an even more fundamental "anxiety of authorship," one that takes the form of "a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (49). To write at all, for Gilbert and Gubar, is to be a rebel, for even the most docile woman author, even one who apparently accepts the image of woman imposed by patriarchal literature, has in creating for herself refused to allow men the exclusive right to create her. Docility and self-denial constitute a strategy for coping with this "anxiety of authorship," chronologically the first that female authors adopted. But denial would subsequently give way to anger and anger to escape as strategies for responding to this special female anxiety.

These strategies enable women to say what they need to say indirectly where it cannot be given direct exposition. This accounts for their treatment of the madwomen, monsters, and villainesses that populate nineteenth-century fiction by women. They are in effect the true heroines, for it is through such characters that the authors' rebellion against patriarchy is expressed. Premiere among these looms Bertha Mason Rochester, the titular "madwoman in the attic," who, far from being Jane Eyre's foil, represents instead her secret self, "her own imprisoned 'hunger, rebellion and rage'" (339). Secret heroines need not be so melodramatic: Jane Austen's are the manipulative Mary Crawford and Emma Woodhouse and the class of powerful matriarchs that includes Lady Catherine De Bourgh, Aunt Norris, Mrs. Churchill, and Mrs. Ferrars. Although the narrators of Austen's novels may convey distaste, disgust, or even contemptuous amusement at such figures, this is merely a "cover story," a coding that makes the novels acceptable in patriarchal society. Beneath the surface, it is through these figures that the longing for female autonomy is expressed.

How deep, psychologically speaking, is this "cover story" supposed to go? Were Austen (and Eliot and the rest) conscious that they were expressing "female truth" in disguised form, or was the truth so "repressed" as to be inaccessible even to the authors themselves? If the former, one would expect to find some hint of the authors' true beliefs in their private letters and journals—and unfortunately these documents do not always support Gilbert and Gubar. But if the rebellion was repressed beneath the level of conscious awareness, if literary representations reveal the distorted shape in which the psychic censor released the fantasy material, why limit the investigation to female representations of rage and domination?—for within the unconscious the authorial ego might identify as intensely with a male as a female
character. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar want to have things both ways: to see the rebellion against patriarchy simultaneously as part of the author's awareness and as hidden from it.¹⁰

Most important for my own study, the three strategies would also, in theory, make possible a "history" of the female Gothic: Once upon a time, according to Gilbert and Gubar, there was

a single woman artist . . . a woman whom patriarchal poetics dismembered and whom we have tried to remember. Detached from herself, silenced, subdued, this woman artist tried in the beginning . . . to write like an angel in the house of fiction: with Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, she concealed her own truth behind a decorous and ladylike façade, scattering her real wishes to the winds or translating them into incomprehensible hieroglyphics. But as time passed and her cave-prison became more constricted, more claustrophobic, she "fell" into the gothic/Satanic mode and, with the Brontës and Mary Shelley, she planned mad or monstrous escapes, then dizzyly withdrew—with George Eliot and Emily Dickinson—from those open spaces where the scorching presence of the patriarchal sun . . . emphasized her vulnerability. . . . She took refuge again in the safety of the "dim hypaethric cavern" where she could be alone with herself, with a truth that was hers even in its fragmentation. (101–2)

This "myth" is in fact a plan for the consecutive rhetoric of The Madwoman in the Attic, but it is hard to know how seriously this metaphorical fable is meant as an outline of the history of women's literature. It depends on whether one believes that Gilbert and Gubar would claim (for example) that the decorous denial associated with Austen and Edgeworth ceased to be a viable response to the psychic demands of "anxiety of authorship" by the late nineteenth century (and a fortiori, into the present century). Given Gilbert and Gubar’s sequels to Madwoman, which continue the notions of cover stories and encodings, these strategies cannot be historically sequential; they are rather alternatives, like Harold Bloom’s six "revisionary ratios." In fact, reading carefully, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the strategies of denial, rage, and withdrawal are all simultaneously available to and were used by nineteenth-century women authors, though particular authors may have emphasized particular strategies (or different strategies in different texts). This may not seem historically plausible. David Perkins for one is surprised that "history seems to have entailed so little change. Gilbert and Gubar assume that the social and psychic dilemmas of women writers did not change essentially throughout the nineteenth century and have not altered since. Hence, they freely quote contemporaries, such as Anne Sexton and
Adrienne Rich, to illuminate the states of mind of nineteenth-century women writers” (Perkins 137).

To me the main difficulty with the notion of cover stories and encodings as historical explanations is that, like revisionary ratios, they flatten history out. Just as Bloom’s Yeats is not engaged with the life of his time but with the ghost of Shelley, so Austen is secretly engaged, not with the battles of Wollstonecraft’s time, but with those of Doris Lessing’s. Gilbert and Gubar gave feminism a criticism of its own, and that was immensely liberating at the time, but in so doing they cut women’s literature off from the narrative of its development.

Archetypes and Monomyths

Another way, perhaps the best way, to evade writing the history of the Gothic with impunity is to decide that it has no history. Riddle: When has a genre no history? Answer: when it is not a genre but a myth. It has been clear since Plato that what belongs to the world of becoming has a history; what belongs to the world of pure being—ideas, essences, myths—can have none. When the Gothic is approached as the bearer of an essence or the carrier of a myth, the genre becomes timeless: each instance of the Gothic is simply a different manifestation of its eternal form. The temptation to find the eternal essence of the Gothic is almost irresistible, even though this is a way that leads ever downward, toward the torture chamber of literary analysis, the critic as Procrustes.

There have been quite a variety of recent examples of what I will call mythological criticism of the Gothic, each of which has its own virtues; most are filled with accurate information and interesting interpretations of the major Gothic novels, but none of them has even the slightest hint of an idea about the history of the Gothic novel.¹¹

In *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction*, for example, Elizabeth MacAndrew envisions the Gothic as a genre consisting of “literary fantasies embodying, for didactic purposes, ideas about man’s psychology . . . , evil not as a force exterior to man, but as a . . . warping of his mind” (MacAndrew 4–5). Fulfilling her commitment to this idea, MacAndrew reads the novels of Walpole and Radcliffe, Lewis and Maturin, as allegories or even as monodramas, with the various characters and settings seen as the psychological elements of a single individual. Thus even representations of the devil incarnate—characters like Matilda and Lucifer in *The Monk*, the Giaour in William Beckford’s *Vathek*, and the eponymous antihero of *Melmoth the Wanderer*—
become "symbolically, not literally diabolical" (81). Such a reading seems paradoxical if not entirely perverse, since no form of literature has insisted so strongly on portraying evil as an exterior force. And again MacAndrew submerges the traditional and useful distinction between the "explained supernatural," where the source of terror is finally assigned a naturalistic cause, and fantastic tales, whose probability schemes include monsters, ghosts, and demons to which we are asked to accord at least notional assent.

The use of the monomyth not only fudges useful critical distinctions but often forces one into strange readings of the novels, which have to be stretched or forced to fit the preconceived scheme. Because the Gothic novel is about psychopathology, and because Horace Walpole was (as is shown by his play The Mysterious Mother) abnormally concerned about incest, this must also be the central theme of The Castle of Otranto. MacAndrew reiterates this half a dozen times until it is with difficulty that the reader recalls that the only incest involved is of the technical sort: Prince Manfred wishes to marry the former fiancée of his dead son. Again, since the Gothic is a monodrama, supernatural events must stand for psychological realities; thus "the statue of Alfonso," which represents Manfred’s consciousness of sin, "bleeds when Manfred stabs Matilda" (13). Manfred does indeed stab his daughter, but the statue’s demonstration—it is a nosebleed—occurs ten pages before that event in my edition. Similarly, MacAndrew tells us that the portrait of Alfonso "disgustedly slams a door in Manfred's face" as a "gesture of scorn" (13). My own edition of The Castle of Otranto says no more than that the miraculous portrait exits "with a grave and melancholy air" (Walpole 29).

Choosing a better monomyth leads to different texts but ultimately to many of the same difficulties. William Patrick Day’s In the Circles of Fear and Desire, one of the best studies of the Gothic to come out in the 1980s, reads all the central texts of the Gothic novel as different versions of the following story: The protagonist—either a Faustian male or a passive female—undergoes a descent into the "Gothic underworld," a nightmare world beyond Death, a world in which he or she is enthralled, where motion is circular and action futile, a world where the Self dissolves and disintegrates, attacking itself as an Other; from this underworld the protagonist may be released (back to life as in Radcliffe’s happy endings, or to death, as in Shelley’s tragic ones) but he or she cannot escape. The virtue of Day’s scheme is that it successfully accounts for many of the most striking elements in the best Gothic narratives. It combines the notion of vampiric death-in-life with that of the eternal pursuit (as hunter or hunted), while positing that the objects of pur-
suit are stray parts of the disintegrating Self. It allows for fantasies of persecution (in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or, in even purer form, "The Pit and the Pendulum"), and for novels about the doppelgänger (where the Other can be a creation, as in *Frankenstein*; an alter ego, as in *Jekyll and Hyde* and "The Jolly Corner"; or a representation, as in *Dorian Gray*). And it accounts for features of the Gothic novel that had not previously been noted, much less explained, such as the ineffectuality of the protagonists—even heroic males—to transform their world, or the curiously restrained emotional affect of the Gothic denouement, where even formally happy endings conclude, not with positive felicity, but with the sense that the protagonists have surmounted dangers that are still lurking, at least for others.

Nevertheless, even if we use the most promising monomyth, not every major text conforms to the stereotyped fantasy, no matter what variations and epicycles the theory permits. As a result the critic must either exclude deviant texts from the genre or else trim, pad, or cram them into the procrustean mold. Day has done both. He eliminated from his study "not only those ephemera that have passed from anybody's consciousness"—including most of the Gothic texts from its 1790–1820 heyday—"but also those canonical works that have strong affinities with the Gothic," including *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* (Day 2). Even with a whole set of problematic exemplars eliminated, though, Day occasionally has to violate his texts to maneuver them into consonance with what his theory suggests they should contain. For example, he exaggerates the passivity of Maud Ruthyn (the heroine of Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*), claiming that she willingly embraces the terms of her father's will despite their danger to her (Day 111); in fact, Maud is a minor and has no legal choice but to submit. But the problem is not the minor details Day gets wrong but the way in which he evades having to cope with the problems of writing literary history. Whatever Day can tell us, it will never explain why the Gothic novel grew up in the latter part of the eighteenth century, nor why it changed as a genre in response to various intrinsic and extrinsic pressures as the nineteenth century progressed.

**The Annihilation of History**

One possible reason that the evasion of literary history has become so nearly universal may have to do with our current skepticism about the possibility of writing literary history worthy of the name. This skepticism has a long and honorable tradition. From R. S. Crane in the 1950s to Hans Robert Jauss in
the 1960s to David Perkins in the 1990s, it has been a common topos of philosophers and literary historians that history, and literary history in particular, have been practiced badly, inadequately, incoherently.\textsuperscript{12}

Crane and Jauss both fulminated against the inadequacy of literary history as it was practiced in their own times, but these caustic rebukes were really intended as the bulldozer's pass over the building site, designed to clear the rubble of the past before constructing a new and more adequate literary historiography. I discuss both of them in my next chapter: they are central to my own vision of a more adequate literary history. But I would like to pause for a moment here to examine David Perkins's monograph on literary historiography, \textit{Is Literary History Possible?} Perkins's project, unlike Crane's or Jauss's, is an exercise in almost pure negativity: a multiplex reductio ad absurdum of literary historiography in general, aimed at showing why it is that no "construction of a literary past can meet our present criteria of plausibility" (Perkins 17). Perkins's is the most recent and the most thoroughgoing attempt to discredit the coherence of literary historiography as a project. He takes up various modes of literary historiography in terms of (1) its plan of organization, (2) its method, or (3) its principles of historical explanation, and finds that, no matter which of several choices is selected under each heading, the literary history created fails either as history or as literary explanation. Perkins's arguments are very plausible and need to be analyzed at some length. If they are accepted at face value, my own reconstruction of literary history, and most others as well, would be entirely chimerical.

1. Under organizations, Perkins discusses two possibilities: literary histories may be presented either as wholes or in fragments, either as narrative history or in postmodern form as encyclopedias. For Perkins, the problem with the postmodern encyclopedia is that it is an evasion, or rather a deconstruction, of history: it represents objects that exist within history without commitment to any consistent view. Recent encyclopedic histories, like the \textit{Columbia Encyclopedia of American Literary History} and Harvard's \textit{New History of French Literature} consist of articles by various hands that may well contradict one another. In the Columbia volume, Cary Nelson claims that Eliot and Pound were racist anti-Semites and that this has been "long suppressed by academic critics," whereas Walton Litz's essay "Pound and Eliot" in the same volume illustrates this suppression by downplaying these ideological factors. The Harvard history of French literature has enormous gaps (e.g., no article mentioning Proust other than in passing) that make it difficult to get a coherent sense of any single period (particularly as different writers engage the periodization of French literature in different ways).
“Encyclopedic form is intellectually deficient. Its explanations of past happenings are piecemeal, may be inconsistent with each other, and are admitted to be inadequate. It precludes a vision of the subject. Because it aspires to reflect the past in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, it does not organize the past, and in this sense, it is not history. There is little excitement in reading it” (Perkins 60).

If encyclopedic history fails to organize the past, narrative history in effect organizes it too well, so well that it is no longer credible. Although Perkins admires some of the classic nineteenth-century narrative literary histories, he finds the crux of the problem in the way in which the formal requirements of narrative dictate what the history will be able to say. Furthermore, histories that are at the same time good stories are more likely to be accepted than ones that don’t fit one of the standard plot patterns. A history must always be a story, must have a plot, with a beginning, middle, and end. For a fictional narrative, this poses little problem, but in reality (as Henry James noted) “relations end nowhere,” and thus a history must always begin and end at some arbitrary point dictated by the historian’s rhetoric. Meanwhile the plottedness required by narrative invariably simplifies the complex set of events that is to be explained. And since literary genres cannot fall in love or go on quests, there is a limit to the kinds of plots literary histories can have. Essentially one can tell only of a rise, a fall, or a rise-and-fall: “Literary history is and perhaps must be written in metaphors of origins, emergence from obscurity, neglect and recognition, conflict, hegemony, succession, displacement, decline, and so forth” (Perkins 33). Once a story has to be told, there is the temptation to oversimplify the story: to find a single hero or villain at the crux of the plot, when the truth is in fact ragged and complex, with many significant actors. Perkins’s objections here follow from the insights of Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse*: as a mode of rhetoric, history inevitably betrays the complexities of historical circumstance by a fall into literary form; even where the distortions caused by plotting are not the problem, writers of history invariably think in terms of master metaphors that guide (and thus help to oversimplify) the construction of the narrative.

2. Perkins’s second set of arguments concern the distortions imposed by periodization and classification. Literary histories that are not histories of a single text or texts by a single author or related group of authors must inevitably be histories that classify texts by genre or period or both—a process within which lie many pitfalls.¹³ For Perkins the sorting of texts takes place variously by classes (works with features in common), by types (works approximating a conceptual model), and by groups (works connected by the
personal relations of linked authors). None of these multiplicities—classes, types, or groups—have their metaphysical significance graven in stone, and as I myself once argued in "Pandora's Box Revisited," such disparate criteria have been invoked to underlie the various generic groupings as to make genre theory itself in need of some sorting out. Periods too are seen as "necessary fictions" (Perkins 65), not natural chronological groupings but rather eras constructed by the historian for his or her own rhetorical purpose. On the other hand, classifications and periodizations are often utilized without regard for their utility (as in the case of classical Greek lyric poetry, for which the scheme of the third-century Alexandrian grammarians has been followed blindly to this day).

3. Finally, Perkins takes up the thorniest matter of history, the problem of causal explanation. Again there is a dilemma dependent on two disparate possibilities. On the one hand, the causal principle of literary history may be contextual, exterior in some sense to the text or its tradition. The particular qualities of a specific text or set of texts are ascribed to some feature or features of the environment in which it was brought into existence: the structure of the society, the social roles of men and women, the economic system, its manifestations of power, or ideological concomitants of these material things—ideas, values, trends, attitudes, roles, and so on. On the other hand, the causal nexus may be immanent to the literary system itself. A literary vogue (like that of the Gothic novel) draws progressively more and more writers into the trend, evolving and varying elements for the sake of novelty until at last the genre is exhausted, mined out, upon which another trend takes its place.

One difficulty with contextual literary history is that context is endless. As Derrida, among others, has reminded us, there can never be enough context to explain fully any particular work of art.\textsuperscript{14} If we discuss a text in terms of its society's gender roles, we will probably underestimate the importance of social class; if we focus on the language of a text, we may miss its mythic overtones. (John Livingston Lowes's attempt in \textit{The Road to Xanadu} to find the source of every image in Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is a wonderful example of this: by the end the reader knows as much as can be known about how the images came to be in the poet's head, but finds himself as far as ever from understanding how it was that those images and those only, of the many thousands stored in Coleridge's memory, were selected and arranged into the poem.)

Another is that, since quite disparate texts are written at the same time, one must appeal to the same context as the cause of very different works of
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Austen's *Persuasion*, Scott's *The Antiquary*, and Shelley's *Frankenstein were written within a year of one another.* A third problem is the fact that (as R. S. Crane insisted) few contextual explanations give us more than the necessary causes of a literary text; they seldom give us sufficient causes. To know that Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities* could not have been written in the absence of the French Revolution (or of Carlyle's *French Revolution*) tells us very little about the form or content of Dickens's novel.

Immanent literary history has many of the same problems. Texts written within any literary system must either conserve that system (by continuing its trends) or act to counter and change that system (by moving against the trends). But how can we account for the fact that a given text is conservative or subversive? To find an answer one must go into the individual psychology of authors—which (since it is not immanent to the texts) is not a subject of immanent history.

If Perkins's objections are entirely well founded, the entire enterprise of literary history (and most of the kindred enterprises of intellectual and social history as well) must be completely without merit. I would argue, however, that there is considerably less to Perkins's destructive arguments than meets the eye.

1. Perkins's objections to narrative (plotted) histories ultimately come down to his sense that the pre- and postverbal actions and situations of the past are invariably betrayed or distorted by the tropical nature of the language in which they must be encoded to become "history" as such. This argument would of course hold not only for literary history but for any form of history, and indeed (if one were to pursue the issue deeply enough) for any factual exposition, including the rhetorical presentation of any scientific experiment or mathematical proof. Hayden White's master here is Jacques Derrida, who offers (in *Of Grammatology* and elsewhere) to show that no discourse can be purified of the sediments of metaphor that lend richness but also ambiguity, paradox, and even self-contradiction to any text. Inevitably all historical narrative will be fraught with the problematic of language. But it is one thing to say that we need to be on our guard against the ways in which language writes historical texts, the ways in which the development of plotted narratives tempts us to oversimplify the messy contingencies of historical concatenations, and another to completely dismiss the explanatory power of such narratives. Though "telling stories" is a euphemism for "lying," telling stories is nevertheless the best way humans have found for explaining what happens in the world.

About the unsatisfying quality of encyclopedic literary history as historical
narrative, Perkins is no doubt perfectly right. The encyclopedic form is if anything hostile to continuous narrative. But his barrage of objections to it is not of a piece: they have different levels of force. The failure of the encyclopedic form to provide any coherent vision of the past is very serious: without this we have information but not history. But I am not quite so deeply impressed by the fact that, within the encyclopedic form, different articles "may be inconsistent with each other" because they adopt different principles of explanation. Inconsistency is by no means the same as self-contradiction, and—the world being the complicated thing it is—Emerson was surely right to declare "a foolish consistency" to be "the hobgoblin of little minds."

Consistency of explanation so hampers one's perspective that most of us would be unable to get through an average day without shifting our principles of explanation many times. It is not just that scientific, moral, and economic explanations compete with one another: they also compete with themselves. Scientists view the earth as composed of solid rock and (at the same time) as elastically deformed and pulled at by the tides, or as consisting (as a collection of atoms) principally of empty space. Morally, we alternately consider our friends' behavior as motivated by conscious moral choice and by unconscious psychological drives. In the marketplace, we may deplore our labor union's strategic mistakes in dealing with management, while remaining aware of larger economic forces that make all unions extraordinarily vulnerable. Nevertheless the human mind for all its limitations is capable of entertaining all these notions simultaneously. How the mind can organize this potential chaos—as it must do—is not perfectly understood. However it may be, we are in fact continually besieged by competing forms of causal explanation and have evolved ways of making more than inexplicable contradictions out of this competition. Nevertheless, I shall have much more to say in chapter 7 about how we organize our response to complementary explanations of phenomena.

2. Perkins is right that there always seems something slightly arbitrary about any classification system. And it would not be a theoretical defense that, pragmatically, any history other than a limitless set of annals—and not just literary history either: the subject could equally be intellectual, social, political, or military—must somehow be bounded. For the sake of dialectical completeness and rhetorical closure, if no other reason, texts must be classified by some principle or other and some more-or-less arbitrary period set as limits to the inquiry. Nevertheless, it seems unfair of Perkins to object simultaneously that some literary historians adopt a particular periodization
or genre definition with malice aforethought—so as to conveniently limit their subject and to help prove their point about it—and that others (like the historians of the Greek lyric) adopt periodizations and classifications purely in accord with tradition without any further motivation whatever. By Perkins's logic, one is damned whichever way one plays (and one cannot refuse to play, either).

If Perkins is looking for a single clear and simple way out of this dilemma, there isn't one. Tradition is not always trustworthy. Tradition may identify a particular text with a genre even when there are relatively few formal features in common, as Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been identified with the Gothic novel. When this happens, there may turn out to be very good literary-historical reasons for viewing the text outside its contemporary context and for reclassifying it with different groups of works. In the case of *Frankenstein* there are two alternative models that help us understand its genesis, one common during the eighteenth century (the apologue) and another that doesn't appear to coalesce as a genre until much later (science fiction). But if traditions aren't always trustworthy, neither are innovative critics. Any critic whose definition of a genre excludes a very large number of traditional exemplars (as with William Patrick Day's definition of the Gothic novel, which excludes *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights*, and most of the novels of the 1790–1820 vogue) should rightly be suspected of special pleading on behalf of an arbitrary and inadequate rule. But although traditions sometimes violate logical coherence, and although critics' logic sometimes does violence to the tradition, within these broad limits there are usually a number of ways of construing generic limits. As we shall see in the following chapters, the Gothic novel—while retaining its overall coherence and broad limits as a genre—takes on different aspects when viewed from the vantage points of neo-Marxism, of formalism, and of reception theory.16

3. Common to Perkins's attacks on both contextualist and immanent literary history is the charge that neither alone is adequate to the task of explaining the qualities and succession of literary works, and that, in particular, contexts come in a host of disparate sizes and shapes, any of which may be necessary but not sufficient conditions for the creation of particular literary texts.

One difficulty stems from the atomistic nature of literary history relative to other historical subjects. The smallest unit of literary history, the individual text, emerges from the pen of a single writer at a given moment in time; and a text's relations with other texts (filiation, likeness and difference, participation in a literary equivalent of dialectical conflict) are seldom strong
enough to generate the sorts of strong explanatory narratives that political histories do. On the other hand, literary schools and genres, whose operation is more closely analogous to social and political history, are susceptible to different modes of definition, in which a text (like *Frankenstein*) may be variously historicized relative to the Gothic novel, science fiction, and literature by women.

If literary history is by its very nature hard to write, its theorists have not made it easier to agree on first principles. R. S. Crane, for example, contrasted "constructional" literary history, the only type he favored, with "preconstructional" history, which focused on parts of texts (character types, themes, plot elements) at the expense of wholes, and with "postconstructional" history, whose focus was on general matters above and beyond literature (social structures, history of ideas, the construction of gender), in which changes are analogical to literary change. Jauss argues that reception history combines the best of what is valuable about formalist literary history and Marxist literary history. In each case the privileged theory is an Aaron's rod that swallows up the rest, and the theorist is content to dismiss as either unhistorical or unliterary the version of causality rival views can give. But while it is understandable that the theorists themselves can hardly resist feeling that their own views are unchallengeable, the practical historian may find a syncretic (or, better, a pluralistic) view of literary history better at describing causal sequences of events.

In this respect, literary history is different, I think, from literary criticism. While a Marxist and a Freudian critical analysis of an individual text like *Frankenstein* might operate so differently as to suggest that the two critics were reading quite different texts, literary historians cannot so easily evade explaining the same facts. In the case of criticism, the "data" to be explained—the words of the text—would be exactly the same, but what Stephen Pepper calls the "danda" (facts as shaped by interpretations) would be so different as to be entirely irreconcilable. A syncretic literary criticism, such as Paul Hemadi has proposed, would be a farrago of untranslatable languages. But with literary history, both data and danda would be the same or at least very similar. What differentiates the varieties of literary historiography is primarily the principle of explanation to which the historian appeals. And it isn't at all clear that the simultaneous appeal to a number of different explanatory principles weakens our sense of historical understanding.

Exactly what the relationship is, or ought to be, between rival modes of literary historiography is a question that I think we can afford to leave for the last chapter, after we have seen in practice what kinds of explanation each
mode affords. It is possible to conceive of the various modes of literary historiography as mutually exclusive, each speaking a language that is incommensurable with any of the others and untranslatable into any other. Another alternative to solipsism is hegemony: where a single voice by virtue of its greater power predominates over the others by including them in its broader scope and wider focus. A third alternative would be something like a pluralistic view of literary historiography. In such a view various theoretical modes of writing literary history—modes such as cultural materialism informed by post-Althusserian Marxism or the formalist historicism that one can find in both late neo-Aristotelians like Ralph Rader and late Russian formalists like Yuri Tynyanov or the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser—provide differently focused but essentially complementary explanations of the rise and fall of the Gothic novel. None is an exclusive source of the truth. Instead, looked at in practice, these modes of historical explanation reinforce one another (overlap) in places and contradict one another (compete) in others; in addition there are topics on which one speaks and the rest are silent—issues that lie in the blind spots of the others' assumptions. Because of the difference of focus, no single mode of literary history provides the whole truth about the past. Because the explanations are complementary, however, they can, once set into dialogue, provide more complete explanations than any one provides alone.

The history of the Gothic that I am going to be presenting in chapters 3, 4, and 5 can be sketched only very roughly and reductively here as a syncretism of Marxist, formalist, and reception historiography, which provide respectively a sense of the origins, course, and end of the Gothic movement. I am going to be arguing that the groundwork was set for the Gothic novel by broad and deep changes in the social structure of England that had been accelerating since the Restoration, changes that created new attitudes toward history, toward human suffering, toward political power. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the tyrannical but lucid power structure of the patriarchal family was being eroded by what Lawrence Stone calls “affective individualism,” the sense of the universal right to the pursuit of happiness. Yet if everyone has the right to pursue his or her desires, who has the authority to reconcile conflicting claims? The alternative to tyranny seemed to be anarchy. A world in the grip of change has two nightmares: the past and the future. And the Gothic novel was a way of embodying in fantasy both the nightmare of control by the principles of hierarchy and order and the nightmare of uncontrolled individual desire, nightmares from which one can escape only by waking up.
And the literary form taken by these representations of nightmare was taken from the text that, more than any other, had embodied the tenuousness of social authority and hierarchy in England, Richardson's *Pamela*. But in accordance with the aesthetic ideology of Radcliffe's age, which abhorred mixed characters, the melodramatic structure of *Pamela* was revised so as to split Richardson's predatory male into his two aspects, the villain and the hero, the heroine's threat and her reward. But the revision had the inevitable effect of making the novels incoherent or episodic in plot. The threats are not merely irrational but, given eighteenth-century belief in distributive justice, cannot be carried out; whatever the intensity of the heroine's sufferings, they must be temporary, and the hero will receive her intact in mind and body. Furthermore, the suffering experienced by the protagonists does not harden or deepen or change them in any way. This combination of incoherence and inconsequence gave the Gothic plot a dreamlike quality. The history of the Gothic novel from Radcliffe until the end of the vogue in the 1820s can be written as a series of attempts to evade or draw attention away from the incoherence by making the villain into the protagonist or by making the threats to the protagonist severer, more baroque, from Radcliffe's imagined spooks and spirits to the genuine ghosts, golems, and doppelgängers of the early-nineteenth-century Gothic.

Whatever contemporary critics thought of the Gothic—and most of them despised it—while it was in vogue the Gothic helped to produce 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. But it was "undead": its later avatars persisted throughout the nineteenth century and, in popular literature, are again dominant today.
Do these three explanations constitute a braided strand that defines the single master narrative providing something like the whole truth about the Gothic novel? In an age when new master narratives are announced each week by every branch of cultural studies, my own claim is somewhat more modest. While the historical narratives using Chicago formalism, phenomenological reception theory, and Marxist cultural materialism seem to fit together well—each taking up the story where the other leaves off—I would never suggest that these are the only critical systems that could be set into a mutually reinforcing dialogue with one another. I am also too aware of the personal choices and diverse accidents that sparked my interest in each of these sets of literary ideas to think this ménage-à-trois a marriage blessed by special heavenly decree. There are reasons, though, that these theories happen to be able to see one another’s blind spots. I discuss these reasons, some notions about the discourse of historical causality and its application to literary texts, and some claims for historical pluralism as an antidote to its *mise en abîme* in the course of chapter 7, and the reader who can’t wait will have to skip ahead.

It is hardly surprising that doubts should be common about literary history when both literature and history are currently under attack. Literature itself, for a number of reasons I have discussed elsewhere, is on the defensive in departments of English and other modern languages by a younger generation of scholars who want to direct the profession’s attention away from literature and toward cultural studies. History itself, for a variety of reasons, has become a concept more frequently appealed to rhetorically—as a force that brings favored ideologies into phase or that makes it unimportant to bother answering embarrassingly hard questions—than an area of knowledge capable of holding surprises for us, one that needs to be studied in detail as well as in the aggregate. What has seemed almost dreamlike about the contemporary criticism of the Gothic are its evasions of history, its inability to frame historical hypotheses, to locate or find or even invent facts to fit them.

“History”—as Stephen Dedalus articulated—“is a nightmare from which I am struggling to awaken.” For his alter ego James Joyce nearly a century ago, a reader of both Vico and Spengler, history was archetypal, repetitious, a gyre ever seeking to spin itself out yet once more. Such cyclical theories no longer have us in thrall. For me history is a new morning—and whether it is sunny or clouded cannot be known by looking within; it can only be discovered by looking out the window. It is a new morning *into* which I am struggling to awaken.