CHAPTER FIVE
The Reception of the Gothic Novel in the 1790s

The Gothic Reader

If the method of Chicago formalism is able to give us an account of where the Gothic form came from and why it "progressed" as it did, with no major writer able to transcend the incoherence and contradictions entailed by its defining parameters and aesthetic ideology, it has no way of discussing why the vogue of the Gothic came to an end. Institutional forms may be created and used as models, but there is no easy way of discussing why it is that people stop writing them, or reviewing them favorably, or publishing them. For this we have to move to a species of literary historiography that takes account of consumption rather than production, the reception theory of Wolfgang Iser and (particularly) of Hans Robert Jauss, already outlined and discussed in chapter 2.

One of the characteristic problems raised by Jauss's system is identifying the reader whose shifting interests and psychology are the principal causes of historical change. In reading Jauss one must be aware that reader is a potentially ambiguous word. On the one hand there is an ideal reader immanent in each text: the so-called implizierte Leser of Jauss's colleague at Konstanz, Wolfgang Iser. On the other hand, there are actual readers, contemporary with the author or later, whose characteristics may or may not be identical with those the author projected onto his text. In the case of successful popular literature, the distinction between the contemporary audience and the implied reader may be one without a difference. But important books help to mold and shape the audience just as much as the audience shapes the literary canon, and many novelists—such as Flaubert and Joyce—have by this
process of projection helped to bring into being audiences that were largely absent when they lived and wrote.

To complicate the picture slightly further, reading for Jauss occurs not in the mass but in different *strata* of the audience, and he discusses reception on three levels: (1) a *Gipfelsebene* of readers who are also creative writers that contribute directly to production, (2) a *mittelere Ebene* of writers who influence the general public but are not directly involved in creativity (e.g., reviewers), (3) and a *präreflexive Ebene* of general readers who merely consume texts and provide the potential market for their production ("Theses on the Transition" 138–46).

From all this, you would expect that Jauss’s practical criticism would consist of studies of the real audience’s reaction to various texts at various times throughout history. If so, you would be disappointed. Jauss had been vague in “Literary History as Challenge” about whether the prior commitment of the historian of reception was to the ideal reader immanent in the text or to the real reader who spent real money to acquire the book. But it became clear by the late 1970s that for him the fact that “it is easier to grasp the implied rather than the explicit reader’s role” meant that “the role of the implied reader deserves methodological preference.” In fact Jauss’s preference for the implicit over the explicit reader is not merely a hermeneutical priority. A survey of his own practical criticism suggests that he is less than enthusiastic about examining, in the messy and difficult ways such historical research requires, how actual readers have responded to texts. Though he gives plenty of lip service to the need to broaden the notion of reading, Jauss has published no examples of the pragmatic influence of the second and third levels of the audience. Instead he prefers to study the authors on the peak reading each other.

One could apply that method to the Gothic without much difficulty. One could create a reception-study concentrating on how Matthew Lewis excitedly read Radcliffe’s *Udolpho* and produced *The Monk*, or how Radcliffe read *The Monk*, was horrified in both senses of the word, and retorted with *The Italian*. But such a result is not going to differ very much from old-fashioned influence studies. What makes Jauss worth taking up, though, is not any greater precision of terminology that he might lend to influence studies but rather his implicit notion that literature changes at least in part from the bottom up. The study that follows, an investigation of the reception of the Gothic novel in the decade from 1795 to 1805, takes its impulse from Jauss’s “Literary History as Challenge,” but as will become
apparent, my approach is more pragmatical than Jauss's own practical criticism has been thus far.

The Gothic and the French Revolution

One practical use of looking at how actual readers responded to the Gothic is to warn you off theories that are attractive but empty. For example, the Gothic seems not to be connected with politics in some of the facile ways critics have suggested. Any simplistic notion of the Gothic as a metaphor for the French Revolution runs aground on the ways in which critics during the most exciting phases of the revolution fail to make such conscious connections.

The only exception my researches turned up was one that needs to be read very carefully. Here R.R., writing in the European Magazine—one of the most chauvinistic periodicals of the day—was willing to condemn Matthew Lewis's Monk as a revolutionary document in the following terms:

Though we readily acknowledge the genius and talents manifested in various parts of this unequal production, yet what good purpose is to be answered by an oblique attack upon venerable establishments, we are at a loss to conjecture. We know that the presses of the Continent teemed with compositions of this character while the Revolution was preparing in France; yet what have the infidels who produced it substituted in the place of the religion they have banished. The question agitated by the philosophic Bayle on the comparative mischiefs of superstition and atheism must now rest for ever; for surely there is no page in the history of bigotry to parallel the enormities that have been perpetrated in the present day by democratic enthusiasts and atheistical devotees. (114–15)

This review is what football fans might call a "late hit"—the February 1797 date is eight months after the publication of the book—and the issue here is clearly religious rather than political. The brief diatribe does not make clear precisely what aspect of The Monk is objectionable, but one plausible reading is that Lewis's representation of hypocrisy and cruelty in his Monk and his Abbess is treated as a general "attack upon venerable establishments"; the implication is that anyone who, like Lewis, would attack the Church established in Spain would attack the Church established in England. And after all, French writing of this infidel sort had caused the
revolution over there, and that same sort of thing might cause a revolution here in England.⁴

To put this review into context, one needs to take a glance at the same *European Magazine* in June 1794, during the Great Terror, when the moder­ates like Danton had already been guillotined and the government was in the hands of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, when France was already at war with England and the German empire. At this stage the magazine's Domestic Intelligence column approvingly mentions the arrest (by an entire company of light dragoons) of three Sheffield men accused of having made “pikes of near seven feet”;⁵ and the London mob's breaking of windows in the town houses of those gentry who were not celebrating with bonfires Admiral Howe’s victory over the French navy on the “Glorious First of June.” But meanwhile that selfsame issue contains a glowingly favor­able review of Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho*, and the second installment of a Gothic tale titled “The Nun” imitative of Diderot. No suggestion is made at that time that the Gothic novel had anything to do with the revolution.

What had happened between June 1794 and February 1797 was a tem­porary accession of political paranoia like the McCarthy era in the United States. After mass meetings in London protesting the war, followed by an at­tempt on the life of George III late in 1796, Pitt’s coalition government passed two bills on Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings that se­verely curtailed personal liberty. No one was ever prosecuted under them, but the government—and those who supported it—were terrified of any threat to “venerable establishments.” One is surprised that R.R.’s review of *The Monk* was a unique event. The *European Magazine* did review Mrs. Radcliffe’s *Italian* unfavorably in their January issue—but that was not quite so unusual.⁶

**The Shift to Aisthesis**

Let us now turn, then, to some results of a baseline study I have been making of the reception of the Gothic novel in the decades bracketing the turn of the nineteenth century. The hypothesis that I am following up, and that seems tentatively warranted by the data I have collected, is that the Gothic novel sits astride a major shift in the response of readers to literature, a shift (in Jauss’s terms) from *catharsis* to *aisthesis*, or in basic English, a shift from reading for information, and for the sake of entry into a verisimilar world
otherwise inaccessible to the reader, toward reading as an escape from the world one inhabits into an inner site of fantasy.

My research thus validates Q. D. Leavis's ideological argument, in *Fiction and the Reading Public*, that the reader of fiction has changed in character and motivation since the days of Fielding and Richardson, with the result that much of the modern public is baffled by Woolf and Joyce (135–50). Leavis assigns various dates to this shift—between 1770, with Charles Jenner's *The Placid Man*, and 1845, with the novels of Bulwer-Lytton—because for her own political point, the exact date doesn't matter. I would date the significant shift in response within these parameters, close to the turn of the nineteenth century. For my purposes, however, Leavis's categories of reader response are too narrowly judgmental and too simplistic. Her distinction is merely between active and passive reading—with the former evaluated as good and the latter as bad; Leavis does not discriminate between one mode of activity or receptivity and another. From Jauss's point of view, however, *aisthesis* is as valid a mode of aesthetic experience as any other. In his framework, the active modes of reading demanded by *Tom Jones* and by *Ulysses* or *Mrs. Dalloway* are not identical (as in Leavis's scheme) but different. Joyce and Woolf demand the reader's engagement in helping to *create* their narratives (Jauss's *poiesis*), whereas the engagement of the implied reader of Fielding has a very different *cathartic* function.

Despite these cavils, Leavis is surely correct that something happened to the British reading public. What happened could be exemplified in the contrast between the review of Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* by the anonymous critic for the *Monthly Review* for 1794 and by Thomas Noon Talfourd in the *New Monthly Review* for 1820. In the former, Radcliffe is praised for her “correctness of sentiment and elegance of style,” for her “admirable ingenuity of contrivance to awaken [the reader's] curiosity, and to bind him in the chains of suspense,” and for “a vigour of conception and a delicacy of feeling which are capable of producing the strongest sympathetic emotions, whether of pity or of terror” (279). These very same criteria of excellence are applied to *Udolpho* by the *Analytical Review* and *British Critic*, which praised the novel, as well as by the *Critical Review*, where the young S. T. Coleridge attacked it for *hyper*-ingenuity of contrivance (361–62).

Contrast Talfourd: “When we read [Mrs. Radcliffe's romances], the world seems shut out, and we breathe only in an enchanted region where . . . the sad voices of the past echo through deep vaults and lonely galleries” (8). With Talfourd stands William Hazlitt, who in 1818 stated that Radcliffe
"makes her readers twice children, and from the dim and shadowy veil which she draws over the objects of her fancy, forces us to believe all that is strange and next to impossible. . . . All the fascination that links the world of passion to the world unknown is hers, and she plays with it at her pleasure; she has all the poetry of romance, all that is obscure, visionary and objectless in the imagination" (195). It is not just the style of writing that is different here: the reviewers of 1794 are standing outside and evaluating a pretty fiction, while the later Talfourd and Hazlitt have entered inwardly into an imagined world.7

Their implicit notion that the object of literary art might be to move the reader to a state of ecstatic transport had been announced considerably earlier than Udolpho, when the Gothic vogue was just getting under way. Anna Laetitia Aikin (later known as Mrs. Barbauld) in "On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror" (1773) explains the effect of the tale of horror in the following terms:

A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced . . . our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers. Passion and fancy, co-operating, elevate the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement. (125)

Years later, in 1810, Mrs. Barbauld makes such claims in favor of reading for the sake of escape and imaginative play, not merely for the Gothic but for novels in general:

The humble novel is always ready to enliven the gloom of solitude, . . . to take man from himself (at many seasons the worst company he can be in,) and, while the moving picture of life passes before him, to make him forget the subject of his own complaints. It is pleasant to the mind to sport in the boundless regions of possibility; to find relief from the sameness of everyday occurrences by expatiating amidst brighter skies and fairer fields; to exhibit love that is always happy, valour that is always successful; to feed the appetite for wonder by a quick succession of marvellous events. ("On the Origin" 58)

This sense of the Gothic as demanding an inward projection, as carrying the reader toward states of transport and escape, appears not only in writers who favor and relish the state but in those who do not.8 A close examination of the periodical literature in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, supplemented by the sources collected in John Tinnan Taylor’s Early Oppo-
sition to the English Novel, has led me to the conclusion that, where those attacking the promiscuous reading of fiction had tended to suggest, in the 1760s and 1770s, that indiscriminate reading was likely to erode the moral principles, especially those of women, by providing poor examples of conduct, in the period after 1795 the antifiction pamphleteer was more likely to attack reading as something whose pernicious tendency acted by sapping strength of mind, wasting precious time, and calling the female reader into a world whose attractions would lead her to neglect the duties and pleasures of mere sublunary existence.

This change must be seen as a tendency rather than a revolution: nothing abruptly occurred in 1795. We can find moralists like John Bennett warning in 1789 that a passion for literature “is dangerous to a woman. It . . . inspires such a romantic turn of mind, as is utterly inconsistent with the solid duties and proprieties of life.” Nor was this change permanent. In a generation or two, the pendulum was to swing back, for as Robert Colby has shown, the hostile reaction of the clergy to the sensation novels of the 1860s was a matter of their supposedly unwholesome influence on conduct rather than for sponsoring an evasion of the quotidian world in favor of an imaginary one.9

But it is clearly at the height of the Gothic vogue that “castle-building,” the use of literature as material for fantasy, becomes the moralist’s chief complaint. For example, one “Arietta,” a self-styled castle-builder, writes in to Literary Leisure to confess that she was in her youth “a great reader . . . , so, what between studying Novels and inventing Moral tales for Magazines, my head was stored with marvellous adventures and hair-breadth ’scapes, such as I trusted to become the heroine of myself when time should have matured the grains still folded up in the bud of youth.” Now having wasted that youth, she finds herself “at forty-seven, filling presently the same situation in the same family.” T.H., in Lady’s Monthly Museum, writes about her daughter that she “reads nothing in the world but novels. I am afraid she will read herself into a consumption. . . . These time-killing companions monopolize every hour that is not devoted to dress or sleep. . . . I am afraid,” she concludes, “that the girl will never get a husband,” and she hopes the editor will suggest the name of a man willing to wed a beautiful and well-off young lady with the defect of an addiction to fiction. On a more hysterical note, a “Letter” in the Sylph for 6 October 1795 claims to have “actually seen mothers, in miserable garrets, crying for the imaginary distress of an heroine, while their children were crying for bread.” And one “Rimelli,” writing on “Novels and Romances” for the Monthly Mirror, insists that “Romances . . . serve only to estrange the minds of youth (specially of females) from their
own affairs and transmit them to those of which they read: so that, while totally absorbed with lamenting and condoling with the melancholy situation of . . . a Matilda . . . they neglect both their own interests and the several duties which they owe to parent, friend or brother.”

These are typical complaints from the last five years of the eighteenth century. Before the advent of the Gothic novel, in the 1760s and 1770s, the chief complaint of antinovel preaching concerns fiction that, it was feared, would excite the amorous propensities of the young or provide them with poor examples of moral conduct—in short, the verdict of Johnson’s *Rambler* no. 4, Johnson’s Rule, whose formal consequences we examined in the previous chapter. Such moral objections do not entirely die out in the heyday of the Gothic; indeed the moralists were out in force at the appearance of *The Monk.* But we begin to hear with increasing frequency a new cause of disapproval—distrust of the power of fiction to seduce the reader into an inward world. Around the turn of the nineteenth century this issue begins statistically to supersede those raised by Johnson.

The notion of such seduction by fiction appears, naturally enough, in the fiction of the period as well. The most famous fictional victim of the Gothic novel is Catherine Morland, the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (written in some form by 1803, though revised much later and not published until 1817, after Austen’s death). It is Catherine who, after reading *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* mistakes a laundry list for a fragmentary manuscript and takes General Tilney for a uxoricide, when he is in fact only the average snobbish and mercenary man of the world.

But Catherine is only one of a multitude of such victims of romance, whose pedigree goes back earlier in the eighteenth century to Charlotte Lennox’s Arabella in *The Female Quixote* (1752) and Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s Lydia Languish in *The Rivals* (1775). Among the less well known is Sophia Beauclerc, of Mary Charlton’s novel *Rosella,* or Modern Occurrences, published in 1799 by the same Minerva Press that furnished such Sophias and Catherines with their favorite reading. Sophia “could think and dream only on wild rocks and mountains, tremendous precipices, fringing woods, gushing cataracts, romantic cottages placed on acclivities and declivities, lovely Jacquelines, Clarentinas, Rosinas, Emmelinas, and more humble Joannas, Susannas, Cielies and Annas who inhabited them . . ., gazing at the pale moon which never fails to dart its silver beams through their humble casements with such uncommon brilliancy as to allow them to chuse by its pale light a favored poet from their libraries.” After yielding to this elaborate fantasy—and the sentence I have been quoting in fact goes on
for several pages—Sophia drags herself and her unacknowledged daughter off on a jaunt through Scotland and Wales "to explore the realms of romance." There in the boondocks, they are constantly making mistakes of the sort with which we are familiar, of losing touch with reality because their inner light sees only Gothic romance (1:281–84).

Yet another example, probably read by Jane Austen, since she may be echoing the book at the beginning of *Northanger Abbey*, is *The Heroine, or the Adventures of Cherubina*, by Eaton Stannard Barrett (1813). Here Cherry Wilkinson, unhappily "doomed" as she says "to endure the security of a home, and the dullness of an unimpeached reputation" (1:14–15), rechristens herself Cherubina de Willoughby and elopes to London in quest of the misfortunes and adventures that are the inevitable lot of the heroines of the romances to which she is addicted. Fortunately for this particular female Quixote, a young man who happens to be her father's choice for her husband is willing to play Sancho Panza and he eventually manages to shock her back into sanity again.

These fictions—to which we could also add Mary Brunton's *Self-Controul*—are obviously exaggerated portraits, but equally obviously they have to be based upon something real or the satire could not have been so common or current. I suspect that they were based upon something very real indeed. One reason why, around the turn of the nineteenth century, the female Quixote reappears again and again as a reader of the Gothic novel has to do with the feelings demanded of readers by the Gothic itself. I would claim that the implied reader of the Gothic novel is a somewhat different being than the implied reader of (say) Fielding and Smollett, and that the Gothic demands for its full effects—effects not only of terror but of sublimity—a less skeptical or self-contained mind-set and a more empathetic attitude than does comic realism.

These demands are implicit in the structure of suspense in Gothic novels. The implied reader of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, is expected to retain strong suspense about the secret concealed by the celebrated Black Veil, despite the fact that Emily, after her initial swoon, is not actively threatened by it. The implied reader of *The Monk* is expected to develop strong tension over the fate of Raymond at the hands of the Bleeding Nun—despite the fact that Raymond himself is narrating the story of the Nun and the Wandering Jew in a self-conscious fashion that continually advertises to us that he has lived to tell the tale. These structures of suspense presume an identification between the reader and the focalizing character that goes well beyond what serious narratives earlier in the century
demanded. In a novel like, say, *Tom Jones*, suspense is aroused only by episodes that directly touch the plot’s central instabilities, while digressions off the main narrative line are structured not as suspense stories but as semi-independent apologues.

These demands are also implicit in the verbal texture and point of view typical of the Gothic novel. Coral Ann Howells has finely analyzed a passage from volume 3, chapter 6 of *Udolpho*, showing how the objective narrator, technically always present, disappears from view so that the reader is forced to accept the ultimately vacuous imaginings and suppositions of Emily at face value. And even Radcliffe’s style contributes to the effect: “While the passage is cast in the form of reasoned argument, with one sentence depending on and balancing the other, it has really only the appearance of judiciousness; what we have in effect is the dramatisation of a process very close to obsession, going round and round the same point and finding no escape or release from the central anxiety” (Howells, 54–55).

To be sure, one could claim that an empathic mind-set tightly focused upon the heroine’s obsessions was nothing new. Something of the kind had been demanded of readers since mid-century, by Richardson’s *Clarissa* and by some of the novels of the sentimental school, which were surely in some sense emotional sources of the Gothic. And yet if differences in quantity eventually make for differences in quality, if you would expect there to be a difference between the effects of occasionally watching a soap opera on television and watching soaps as a steady diet, then perhaps the Gothic novel had such an effect on a major segment of the British reading public. That the addiction existed seems clear, not only from cautionary letters to women’s magazines but from documents like receipts from circulating libraries, which show one celebrated bluestocking going through fifty-five volumes of romance in the space of a month.

The shifts in reading patterns I have marked here have been noted by other scholars, but they have not always been interpreted in the same way. For example, Robert D. Mayo, in his immensely learned volume *The English Novel in the Magazines*, concluded that

the criticism of prose fiction in the miscellanies, . . . appears to be based not on compromise, but on contradiction. Motivated by an obvious desire to please the greatest number of potential readers, editors, directly or by implication, embraced all opinions on the English novel without worrying too much about consistency. The new fiction . . . was a serious threat to an ordered society . . . ; it was also a
delightful and profitable companion in idle hours, a useful guide to the social virtues, and part of the necessary equipment of every person of parts. (271–72)

Mayo has closely observed the chaos and contradiction of opinions, but he seems to feel that the chaos is without any more significance than the editors’ understandable desire to pander to their readership. I think to the contrary that the split in the readership of magazines indicates something very significant, a shift in motives and in response. The grinding of moral and aesthetic gears that Mayo views as a meaningless noise signals to me—as gear grinding sometimes does—the uncomfortable transition between two stable states.

We can explain Mayo’s contradictions by positing that in the 1790s there were two very different readers for whom writers wrote: the first, whom clergymen and journalists of the age personified as older and male, who read primarily for factual information, for the reinforcement of ethical values, and for the pleasure of recognizing the persons and things of his world; a second, personified as younger and female, receptive rather than critical, and eager to indulge in what Akenside had lauded as “the pleasures of the imagination.”

What I am suggesting is that the Gothic novel came in simultaneously with a new wave in reader response. In answer to the inevitable question—What caused what?—I would reply that the vogue of the Gothic probably functioned as both cause and effect. That is, the Gothic was able to develop as a genre owing to the ready-made presence of an audience segment already partially prepared, by Richardson, Prévost, and the sentimental novelists, to read for imaginative play and escape. But the demands of the Gothic text upon the reader, not merely for suspension of disbelief but for an empathic participation in the perils and plight of the protagonists, reinforced the already growing shift in response. Furthermore, the Gothic vogue was partly self-generating, in that its popularity began to draw in new classes of reader that had not formerly been a significant part of the market for literature.

One major result was to pave the way for the reception of Romanticism in poetry as well as fiction, with the result that English bards—Wordsworth, Byron, and Scott, at least—despite a bit of rough handling from Scottish reviewers, were able to stir without conspicuous resistance a public that already looked to literature for the play of fantasy, dream, and desire. The second result was in the Gothic itself, which after 1810 tended to abandon the historical themes of Radcliffe and the German Schauerromantik in favor
of the more explicitly fantastic imaginative worlds of Mary Shelley and Charles Robert Maturin. By then the Gothic wave itself had already begun to recede, leaving in its ebb two masterpieces, *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). By 1830, certainly, the genre had been temporarily exhausted from oversupply by professionals and amateurs alike. But the sensibility that it had created would carry over into the new historical romances of Scott and Bulwer-Lytton, Ainsworth and Reynolds, as well as the more contemporary romantic novels of Dickens and the Brontës. When the Gothic resurfaced once more in late Victorian times, it would be against a very different literary and social backdrop.

**Methodological Issues**

By now we must all have a number of questions about both the facts I have been using and the theoretical superstructure that would turn those facts into data. Some of these questions have satisfactory answers, but others unfortunately do not.

At the lowest level of theoretical interest are questions about the facts: what they mean and whether they mean anything. We need to ask how many facts it takes to make a proof, whether we should allow ourselves to be convinced by circumstantial evidence about how people read two hundred years ago, and how we can make a couple of trends add up to a cause-and-effect relationship.

The first issue turns on what the social scientists would call statistical significance. I have presented what amounts to a series of impressions suggesting a shift in the motives for reading in the late eighteenth century. But how does one measure such a trend? How much evidence is enough? I have here presented quotations from perhaps a dozen eighteenth-century sources and in the notes from a couple of dozen more; I have examined in New York and London perhaps a few hundred additional sources. This is a fair sample size, but I would have no idea when these impressions would acquire statistical significance. The sampling of sources I have located may also have been subtly skewed in ways I cannot allow for. The reader responses I have cited are certainly unusual in at least one respect: all of them managed to find their way into writing, and most into print, as most receptions surely do not.

A second issue, or set of issues, turns on what counts as a source. The Murphy's law of reception theory is that the most naïve readers are the least likely to leave evidence of their response to texts. In many weeks of search-
ing at the British Museum I was able to turn up only a handful of diaries and letters in which the real-life counterparts of Catherine Morland gave some sense of the motivation and experiential value of their reading. Most diarists and correspondents never mentioned their reading; a few listed it; even fewer expressed the feelings that their reading inspired in them or the desires that inspired them to pick up a volume in the first place. But circumstantial evidence is still acceptable even in a court of law, and I feel reasonably confident that when we find a trend among moralists to attack novel reading as an activity that unfits young ladies and gentlemen for real life rather than as a mirror of depraved manners, it suggests a real change in the way real people read novels. But one has to be cautious about drawing conclusions, for we could account for this trend in a number of other plausible ways—such as an upward valuation of sloth relative to lust as a deadly sin.

If we prefer to look for a direct expression of response to fiction, the most obvious source would be the book reviews, especially the *Analytical, Critical, and European Reviews*, as well as the *British Critic* and the *Anti-Jacobin*. All these publications reviewed Gothic fiction at least from time to time, and I have read and collected most of these notices. As it happens, however, the sensibility that I hypothesize grew in the 1790s finds virtually no expression in these publications. The reviewers differ considerably in their taste and tolerance for Gothic fiction, but all of them alike tend to discuss the novel in neoclassical or Johnsonian terms, with an emphasis on the probability, generality, and ethical probity of the narrative. This is a blow to my hypothesis, and it may be that the trend toward *aisthesis* that I have discussed was a wholly factitious artifact of my data-collecting methods. But there are two alternative explanations.

One is that the trend toward *aisthesis* was unevenly spread among Jauss's levels of the audience—that it was visible on the top level of authors and the bottom level of common readers but not on the intermediate level of reviewers. It may sound implausible that such a revolution should have bypassed this quasi-elite group of *Kulturträger*, but there are two good reasons why it might appear that way. One has to do generally with the stance of the reviewer from that time to this. Briefly, the requirement that one evaluate for a mass publication with rapid-fire deadlines a heavy pile of fiction is not likely to encourage a stance of revery and escape. The reviewer is not escaping the workaday world in reading: reading *is* the reviewer's workaday world.

The second reason has to do very specifically with the structure and function of book reviews in magazines in the late eighteenth century. Anyone
who peruses these reviews will be struck by how much space is devoted to lengthy summaries of the plot and even lengthier quotations from the books in question and how little to serious analysis of the works' attractions and deficiencies. The cause is spelled out by Robert Mayo: owing to a peculiarity of the copyright law of 1710, magazines "claimed, and were more or less accorded, the right to abridge, or print extracts from, any literary work irrespective of copyright. For more than a hundred years, consequently, British miscellanies enjoyed a kind of legalized piracy" ("Gothic Romance" 766-67). The implication is that reviewers of Gothic fiction understood their critiques as valuable less in themselves than as they constituted a license for the lengthy semipiratical extracts that constituted most of the article. Such reviewers would be more likely to do the fast-and-dirty hack job that their editors would be satisfied with, evaluating the novel in terms of traditional but irrelevant issues like probability (even the historical and topographical accuracy of the novels), rather than exploring with difficulty, and without much prior basis in critical theory, any shifts that may have occurred in their own sensibilities.

An alternative explanation, and the one I lean toward, is that the trend may have been limited, in the 1790s, to the middle-class women who made up much of the market for the Gothic novel, though it later spread across the gender gap to men, as my examples from Talfourd and Hazlitt suggest. Ina Ferris has given good reason to believe that one primary agent of the contagion—though by no means the only one—was the publication of Scott's Waverley in 1814.

Ferris argues that the rhetoric of the reception of Waverley, including (among others) the highly influential notices in the Edinburgh Review by T. H. Lister and Francis Jeffrey, stressed the manliness of Scott, his accuracy and truth to life (connecting his novels with the genre of history, which was gendered as male reading), and in so doing legitimized for men the play of fancy in reading fiction.

For these first male readers, Waverley reading offered a compelling alternative both to female reading and to feminine writing. In particular, in this period of conservative reaction, evangelical revival, and the domestic–didactic novel, Waverley and its successors licensed a nostalgic male-inflected romance of history that offered the satisfaction of emancipation from the necessary restraints of civil society even as it effectually absorbed male subjectivity into those restraints. . . . With their outdoor adventures, their battles, and their political intrigues, the Waverley Novels swerve outside the "flat realities" of genteel daily life. At the
same time, they work within those realities, and the masculinity that these narratives helped to construct absorbs the purity that marked femininity. (Achievement of Literary Authority 91–92)

It is Ferris's boldest claim that the vogue of Waverley in significant ways redrew the boundaries between masculine and feminine behavior in the early nineteenth century. The claim is consistent with Jauss's thesis that the general ideology of an era would affect its aesthetic productions—and vice versa.¹⁷

To return to the Gothic as such, its inscription in what were perceived as female modes of reading might also account for the reviewers' inability to respond to the Gothic with a sensibility appropriate to romantic fiction. We cannot be sure why women should have been especially sensitive to this mode of aesthetic experience, though we might guess that increased leisure time without opportunities for useful work might conduce toward ennui, lassitude, and desires for escape.¹⁸

In addition to the quantity and quality of the evidence, there is a question about which way the causal arrow points, if it points at all. To me it seemed most reasonable to suppose that it pointed both ways, that the eighteenth-century reading public had been to an extent prepared for Radcliffe by Richardson, but that the Gothic novel itself had largely induced the trend toward aisthesis that we find everywhere by 1815. It might be argued—though with difficulty—that the emphasis should be reversed: that the Gothic was more the effect of a change in sensibility than its cause. But a skeptic might claim that no causal relation has been demonstrated at all, that I have merely made a post hoc argument about two trends, neither of which can even be placed in time with precision.¹⁹

Reassessing the Probabilities

After my theses about the reception of the Gothic in the 1790s—and its impact on the course of the Gothic novel and on Romanticism in general—have been qualified by the methodological questions I have just raised, the results may seem disappointingly tentative. One of the obvious difficulties about this method of establishing historical relationships is that, like most other sorts of historical research, it leads to a reassessment of probabilities and connections rather than to absolute certainties. That is because reception theory is not based upon an a priori theory, an ideology that is
guaranteed to reconstitute the facts of the world according to its dictates. It is instead a pragmatic method attempting to relate circumstances and actualities within the world—the world that consists of "everything that is the case"—and what is the case is never a matter of mere logic.

Nevertheless, the suggestive probabilities that reception theory can provide are weakened somewhat by the undeveloped state of that method. It is true that the theorists have had their say over the last twenty years, as Jauss's theory has been attacked by Marxists and formalists, and it has emerged refined and tempered from the fire of philosophical analysis. After twenty years, in fact, "Literary History as Challenge" no longer seems a revolutionary document; it has become a paradigm of the humanities. But it is just beginning to generate research analogous to what Thomas Kuhn called "normal science."

Because this is just beginning, each individual researcher, working through piles of printed and manuscript evidence of literary reception, is forced to grope in the dark, inventing methodology along the way. And while it is salutary for researchers to be forced to give some thought to what their findings mean, this stage in the growth of a research paradigm is necessarily slow and painful. Only as more studies of reception reach the stage of publication will the fragments begin to connect with one another and to build up a coherent diachronic portrait of the reading public. At times (as with Q. D. Leavis's study and my own), we should expect scholars to disagree on principles of explanation, which will need to be debated and clarified before a consensus will emerge. At other times—as with my work and that of Ina Ferris cited above—two researchers will uncover complementary materials, where each holds part of the key to the other's problem.

Given the wide range of obscure sources that need to be consulted, it will be hard for any individual scholar to complete a broad and general study of reception. Each researcher will be able to comprehend only a carefully delimited area of audience response. Thus, in the long run, the most difficult problem may be that of synthesizing fragmentary studies of reception into a picture large enough to be informative on a scale that we would call literary history—that is, not just a history of the Gothic novel but a history of the literature of a single nation—or, better still, of a continent of nations that have mutually influenced one another. But though a familiarity with literary theory will be required for such a task, this is work, not for professional theorists as such, but for practical critics who will solve these massive problems in the course of trying to say something true about the imaginative life of the past.