The Reversal of the Exemplifying Role of History in Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto"

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In the second half of the eighteenth century, the time of neo-classical ideals of balance, proportion, restraint and correctness, Horace Walpole published his novel *The Castle of Otranto* with the subtitle *A Gothic Story.* The use of the word "Gothic" implied a clear reference to the medieval past, with all its supernatural manifestations, superstitions and irrationality. As Fred Botting writes in his Introduction to *Gothic*, "Gothic [...] was a term invoked in many political debates, signifying [...] revolutionary mobs, enlightened radicals and irrational adherence to tyrannical and superstitious feudal values. In a more specific historical sense, Gothic was associated with the history of the northern, Germanic nations [...who] were popularly believed to have brought down the Roman Empire" (Botting 1996: 5). However, as noted by David Stevens, "in the mid-eighteenth century there had occurred a certain elision of historical epochs, so that gothic seemed to have referred to the medieval rather than to the pre-Norman conquest epoch" (Stevens 2000: 9). The discrepancy between the demands of the literary critics whose tastes were molded by the classical writings of the century and the ambivalence that this new type of the novel offered was evident from the outset. Nevertheless, within the next half century the popularity of this new genre among readers surpassed all expectations. This article examines Walpole's novel as a work that subverts what E. J. Clery calls "exemplary historicism" (Clery 1995: 53).

James Chandler, in his chapter on history included in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, points out that "history had traditionally been understood to teach by example, to supply a host of concrete instances of how or how not to conduct oneself". He provides the examples of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry.* However, in 1790s Britain, due to significant changes, technological development and new political movements, it was no longer possible to apply moral examples from the past to present times. Chandler concludes that "history can no longer be said to teach by providing examples to moral philosophy. Instead, it teaches by indicating changing directions of change and presaging possible futurities" (McCalman 1999: 355). Although *The Castle of Otranto* was written some thirty years before the last decade of the century, it can be taken as a representative example of the reversal of this traditional, exemplifying function of history. Its critical reception in the Age of Reason is also of great importance here.

It is essential to begin with the two prefaces to the first editions of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. It is uncommon for one novel to be published with two completely different prefaces within just a few months. In the first preface the author declares himself to be the translator of a medieval Italian story printed in 1529. He does not know when exactly the story was written, but he makes a supposition that "it must have been between 1095, the era of the first crusade, and 1243, the date of the last, or not long afterwards" (Walpole 1964: 2). This supposition is to some extent historically justified by the writer, as he explains that the Spanish names of the domestics indicate the date of the story's composition to have been after the establishment of the Arragonian kings in Naples, that is in the late twelfth or thirteenth century. The author of the novel was Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto, and the translator of the old Italian was William Marshall, Gent. The story is offered to the eighteenth-century reading public "as a matter of entertainment," and even as such it is further "apologized for": "Miracles, visions, necromancies, dreams, [...] are exploded now even from romances. That was not the case when our author wrote; much less when the story itself is supposed to have happened" (Walpole 1964: 2). A work of the barbaric past can only be considered as a form of entertainment, never serving a moral function, and the translator dutifully claims not to be blind to his author's defects: "I could wish he had grounded his plan on a more useful moral than this; that the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation." The translator is therefore a man of the Age of Reason, he judges the past in the terms of his present and creates a kind of historical distance from it (Botting 1996: 49). In the final paragraph of the first preface the writer makes yet one more reference to the novel's historical authenticity, stating that "the groundwork of the story is founded on truth," the scene being set in a real castle and the author describing its particular parts (Walpole 1964: 3).

The first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* was a huge success. As a production of the superstitious dark ages, with the Gothic script in which it was presumably printed and presentation of feudal customs and supernatural events, it met readers' demands for literary antiquities. It was at the very same time, we should remember, that James Macpherson published his "Ossian" poems (1765) and Thomas Chatterton's "Rowley poems" (1769) appeared. Both of these poets were fakes, and although their forgery was discovered quite quickly, it did not prevent some readers from believing their authenticity even in the nineteenth century. E. J. Clery notes that during the public debate over the authenticity of these poems, Macpherson refused to speak and Chatterton actually died before the publication of his works (Clery 1995: 57). It is interesting, then, that Horace Walpole did not try to stick to the counterfeit story he offered his readers in the first edition. Instead, he wrote a new preface to the second edition in which he revealed his identity.

The second preface begins with the writer's apology to the readers "for having offered his work to them under the borrowed personage of a translator" (Walpole 1964: 3). He soon passes on to explain that what he did in his novel was "an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance: the ancient and the modern," which can be understood as the mixing of the medieval romance and realistic novel. He stresses the importance of "the rules of probability" in presenting the characters: he wants "to make them think, speak, and act, as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions." Trying to justify his reconciliation of the two kinds of romances, Walpole points to Shakespeare as his model. In all his greatest tragedies Shakespeare introduced elements of humour, which according to Walpole, was not at all inappropriate because without those elements the plays would "lose a considerable share of their spirit and wonderful beauties." In the eighteenth century, however, "generic impurity opposed the canons of neoclassicism and detracted from the function of moral illustration" (Clery 1995: 64). Hence the attacks on Shakespeare coming from Voltaire and Walpole's defense of the great playwright, and at the same time his "rehabilitation of genre hybridism" (Clery 1995: 64). According to Walpole, new ideas about writing should be accepted with more emphasis on imagination and individualism, which obviously goes beyond neoclassical taste. Fred Botting observes that Walpole must have been aware of the fact that at this particular time "novels and romances were far from being completely acceptable pastimes for a member of polite society" and thus, "the preface though acknowledging authorship tries to negotiate a compromise as well as distance the writer from any impropriety that might be detected" (Botting 1996: 49).

The critical receptions of the two editions, with their two different prefaces, are very characteristic for the period of Enlightenment. Whereas the first edition was recommended to readers by the *Monthly Review* as a novel promising "considerable entertainment," the second edition was perceived by the same magazine as a scandal. These two reviews were published between February and May of 1765. The reviewers considered the two editions to be completely different works: the first one was a Gothic novel in the accepted, historical sense, the second was "a modern performance" by a modern author (Clery 1995: 53-54). The old Italian manuscript translated by an eighteenth-century writer may have included supernatural elements and all the Gothic machinery, but the modern book, moreover one written by a Member of Parliament, a respected and influential man, had to be condemned and rejected because of the very same ingredients. In the words of E. J. Clery,

> [R]ationally speaking, ghosts and goblins are not true, but when they appear in the literary artifacts of past ages, they are true to history, accurate representations of an obsolete system of belief: a stance we might call exemplary historicism. For the enlightened reader, ancient romances are at once fictions and historical documents. The same standard that allows for the depiction of irrational impossibilities in works from the distant past must therefore disallow it in modern fictions (Clery 1995: 54).

The dictates of exemplary historicism make if difficult, if not impossible to interpret Walpole's novel in terms of Enlightenment standards. The presence of a gigantic helmet and sword, blood running from the nose of a statue, or the sighing portrait of a grandfather – only to mention a few of the novel's supernatural elements – could not be accepted freely by contemporary critics. The following part of the article will be a short analysis of *The Castle of Otranto* as a narrative that subverts exemplary historicism.

One of the most striking features of *The Castle of Otranto* is the more significant role of things, rather than characters in the novel. The title itself reflects the priority of the haunted castle, which actually becomes the main protagonist, and continues to be in many later works of this kind (Clery 1995: 73). The monstrous helmet, the huge sword, the leg and hand of a mysterious knight, equally gigantic, are eventually brought together in the form of the murdered Prince Alfonso (the original owner of the castle) and appear one by one in the following chapters of the book, alongside some other apparitions that add more suspense to the story. According to

E. J. Clery, "inanimate property takes on independent life; the existence of its inhabitants is subordinate to the unfolding of its fate" (Clery 1995: 73). The human protagonists and the plot itself also deserve similar attention, however.

The villain, Prince Manfred of Otranto, is introduced at the very beginning of the tale. His only son, Conrad, is about to marry Isabella of Vicenza, but just before the wedding ceremony he is crushed to death by the enormous helmet. Manfred, who has always wanted to secure the patrilineal inheritance of land and title, is now determined to divorce his wife, Hippolita, and marry the young Isabella, who can give him another son. Manfred remembers the prophecy "[t]hat the castle and lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family, whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit it" (Walpole 1964: 15-16). His grandfather had originally usurped the title, and he himself will do anything to keep it. Facing the horrifying events Manfred realizes that "the supernatural [...] arrives to announce and correct a lapse in the rightful possession of property" (Clery 1995: 71). The usurper was never punished, thus the punishment falls upon his grandson and great grandchildren.

Isabella, unwilling to accept Manfred's advances, manages to escape thanks to the sighing portrait of her persecutor's grandfather. Theodore, a young peasant who was originally arrested for causing the death of Conrad (although it was absolutely impossible for him to have done it), but who managed to escape, helps Isabella before he is recaptured. Manfred, jealous and unscrupulous, wants to kill him but the boy is given help by Manfred's daughter, Matilda, to whom he is considerably attracted. Meanwhile, Isabella's father arrives at Otranto and joins the search of his daughter. As he finds her, he is wounded by Theodore, who mistakes him for an enemy. Soon it is revealed that Theodore is not a peasant at all; he is the legitimate heir to Otranto, since his mother was the daughter of Prince Alfonso and his father is the count of Falconara, now disguised as Friar Jerome. Manfred, finding out that Isabella is with Theodore in the churchyard and realizing that the two have fallen in love, goes there and kills the woman, only to discover to his greatest horror that it was Matilda, who too loves Theodore now. As the castle collapses and the giant figure of Alfonso rises to heaven Manfred admits the sins of his grandfather, after which he retires to a convent. This leaves Theodore to take his place as the rightful prince and marry Isabella.

Although Manfred claimed to have adored his son, at the moment of the latter's death he turns out to be utterly insensitive and untouched by the tragic event, and at the same time strangely fascinated with the helmet: "He touched, he examined the fatal casque; nor could even the mangled remains of the young prince divert the eyes of Manfred from the portent before him" (Walpole 1964: 17). The object becomes more important than the human being. The father seeing his son "dashed to pieces" is so attracted by the supernatural phenomenon that he cannot even show appropriate fatherly feelings. Family relationships in *The Castle of Otranto* are actually never very strong (Manfred is ready to divorce his faithful wife instantaneously, and he neglects his virtuous daughter). E. J. Clery states that "the family portrait that opens the novel shows how the laws of inheritance can undermine the ties of kinship and marriage" and that "the personality of Manfred himself, prototype for the Byronic hero, is represented as a casualty of the same laws" (Clery 1995: 75). It is worthwhile to make an examination of these laws as they are presented in the novel.

The story's pretence to historical veracity has already been mentioned. If the assumption is that the story refers to the gloomy medieval past and, moreover, the author's ambition is to preserve all the rules of probability, it is only natural for him to focus on the feudal order and the laws of primogeniture. Defined as "an inheritance practice whereby the whole of the landed estate passed to the eldest son, [...] primogeniture was of particular importance to the landed aristocracy, as the devolution of the estate to the eldest son was complemented by the devolution of the aristocratic title to the eldest son, thereby securing a bond between landed status and titular authority" (McCalman 1999: 661). The interesting point is that primogeniture in the eighteenth century was by no means a relic of the past; quite the contrary: it was then that the issue of aristocratic ownership of land became dominant (primogeniture was only abolished in Britain as late as 1925!). In this respect, Walpole's novel did not only evoke the feudal order but "represented [...] aristocratic ideology as it persisted in modern times" (Clery 1995: 73).

Manfred's claim for Otranto was illegitimate, for his grandfather poisoned Prince Alfonso, the rightful owner, thus taking possession of the property and title. He does not understand the cryptic prophesy hanging over him until it is gradually revealed to him by the monstrous apparitions. Yet, even when he is confronted with the multiple phantoms, Manfred desperately tries to remain in power and secure his lineage. It is the supernatural that comes to restore the natural order, but because of its violence and extremity the restoration cannot be complete. "The most important organizing structure in the narrative is the opposition between subject and object, between the characters with their desires, intentions and affections and the principle of property objectivised as the supernatural phenomena which obstruct their wishes at every turn" (Clery 1995: 74). The surreal forces aim at re-establishing the rightful possession of property on the one hand, and inevitably disrupt all the characters' lives on the other. The true heir, Theodore, is no exception here, either, as his beloved Matilda is killed and he marries Isabella as a compromise. The walls of the castle now belonging to him then crumble down. As Fred Botting put it, "the supernatural manifestations of the restitution of an old order present a law that is at once violent and sublime, disproportionate and just, and founded as much on superstition as on power" (Botting 1996: 51). If we treat the novel as a work that subverts exemplary historicism, then our conclusion is that orders and traditions dependent on superstitious notions can only share the tragic fate of the titular castle: they are destined for destruction. The ideals of the past: patriarchal culture, the code of chivalry, and virtue and honour, do not really belong to the Age of Enlightenment. It is quite clear, however, that the eighteenth century was still fascinated with the old aristocratic ideology. Indeed, Walpole himself was part of it, becoming later in his life the fourth Earl of Orford and showing great interest in cultivating the tradition, especially in his house at Strawberry Hill near Twickenham, which he transformed into a Gothic building. *The Castle of Otranto* leaves its readers with ambiguous feelings, at the same time being "a reinforcement of eighteenth-century values, distinguishing the barbaric past from the enlightened present" and examining "the limitations of reason, virtue and honour in the regulation of the passions, ambitions and violence underlying patriarchal and family orders" (Botting 1996: 52-53).

The ambivalent critical reception of the novel in the 1760s was also reflective of the public debate over historicism and authenticity taking place at that time. Doctor Samuel Johnson's essay on the nature and function of the modern novel was, according to E. J. Clery, "probably the most important and influential statement of exemplary historicism with regard to fiction" (Clery 1995: 58). In compliance with the standards of the epoch, works of fiction should "exhibit life in its true state" and "keep up curiosity without the help of wonders" (Johnson 1969: 19). Novels should depict reality as it is, and refrain from the use of "the machines and expedients of the heroic romance," which can be especially dangerous for inexperienced young readers. In an age that advocated the necessity of properly educating the younger generations, and put emphasis on instruction and appropriateness, theses remarks seem only natural. Readers had to be given the opportunity to identify with the characters presented in novels, and this is why those characters should be credible and veracious. Likewise, they should serve as models to imitate. Above all, moral education was of absolute priority, so works of fiction had to teach by example (Clery 1995: 59).

How do these rules refer to *The Castle of Otranto*? In the May 1765 *Monthly Review*, an indignant critic writes of the second edition of the novel: "...when [...] it is declared to be a modern performance, that indulgence we offered to the foibles of a supposed antiquity, we can by no means extend to the singularity of a false tale in a cultivated period of learning. It is, indeed, more than strange that an Author, of a refined and polished genius, should be an advocate for re-establishing the barbarous superstitions of Gothic devilism!" (Clery 1995: 53). Obviously, such a novel could not serve as a didactic example, as it did not offer anything that was demanded by contemporary "trendsetters." There was no rational understanding, no harmony, no civilized behaviour, and many of the things and situations described were out of proportion. The novel immersed its readers in extravagant fancies and superstitious ignorance, which were so much detested by the guardians of classical rules. Bearing in mind the author's ambitions to present historical truth ("Though the machinery is invention, and the names of the actors imaginary, I cannot but believe that the groundwork of the story is founded on truth." Walpole 1964: 2), we can understand the critics' objections. The existence of the supernatural in a literary work can only be allowed for as long as it is clearly stated to be fiction; hence the first edition offered as a translation of some medieval text could be accepted, whereas the second being the product of the Enlightenment, could not be accounted for. In other words, "a nation guided by reason, in an age of reason, will not produce modern literary works which could be mistaken for the products of the age of superstition; if such a work does appear, it must not be countenanced" (Clery 1995: 55).

Despite the disqualification of the novel from the Johnsonian exemplary role, it was also praised by some critics of the same period for its "accurate and elegant language," "highly finished characters" and "the most perfect knowledge of mankind." This proves that "the combination in a modern work of improbability and convincing realism was a possibility unforeseen by Johnson" (Clery 1995: 59-60). With the onset of Romanticism proper Gothic novels became more and more popular, and their critical reception was gradually more favourable. Yet, even at a time of almost overall critical condemnation, readers were delighted with *The Castle of Otranto* because it provided them with entertainment and a certain aesthetic pleasure. As Fred Botting notes in *Gothic*, the many changes occurring throughout the eighteenth century – urbanization, industrialization, revolution – loosened the bonds between individuals and an ordered social world. Gothic novels can be seen as "attempts to deal with the uncertainty of these shifts, as well as attempts to explain what the Enlightenment left unexplained, efforts [...] to recuperate pasts and histories that offered a permanence and unity in excess of the limits of rational and moral order" (Botting 1996: 23).

A novel of such popularity among readers had to encourage imitators, and it did, although not immediately. Of the several successors to *The Castle of Otranto* the most interesting one was Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*, originally published in 1777 (in the following year a revised edition appeared). To a large extent it was an imitation of Walpole's book, with a declaration of authorship coming only in the second edition, the first one being an alleged translation of an old manuscript. For the purpose of this article it is only necessary to take a look at the preface to the second edition of 1778, in which Reeve presents her criticism of *The Castle of Otranto*. The criticism is in compliance with Doctor Johnson's theories discussed earlier. For Reeve, Walpole's novel is a novel of excess, in which "the machinery is so violent, that it destroys the effect it is intended to excite". The appearance of a ghost can be accepted, but when it comes to the enormous sword or helmet, and the walking portrait, it is simply too much for the rationally thinking reader: "When your expectation is wound up to the highest pitch, these circumstances take it down with a witness, destroy the work of the imagination, and, instead of attention, excite laughter" (Reeve 1967: 5). She advocates probability, credibility and historical accuracy. As a result, in her novel "ghostly machinations are kept to a minimum and, though the customs and settings of feudal times are invoked, they are contained by eighteenth-century sentiments" (Botting 1996: 54). One might ask whether it is still a Gothic novel.

Horace Walpole himself was rather repulsed by *The Old English Baron*, finding it quite difficult to describe the work as Gothic. Reeve had somehow explained the supernatural and domesticated it. As J. M. S. Tompkins writes: "nowhere else do we find knights regaling on eggs and bacon and suffering from the toothache" (Tompkins 1932: 229-230). This slightly sarcastic comment is not groundless. In her preface Reeve writes: "history represents human nature as it is in real life" (Reeve 1967: 3), and her rendition of history in the novel is actually equal to the presentation of eighteenth-century life, which means that it is deprived of Walpole's extravagance and wildness. Instead, it is polished, moderate and moralizing. At the same time, however, we may wonder whether a novel set during the reign of Henry VI, describing the medieval past in a neo-classical manner with emphasis on virtue, morality and harmony, is indeed realistic. Perhaps it is only the apotheosis of contemporary principles of writing. According to Fred Botting, "disturbing the boundaries between past and present [...] became an inevitable feature of Gothic fiction, even though the manner in which the two were articulated differed from writer to writer. History [...] became a contradictory site for both imaginative speculation and moral imposition" (Botting 1996: 56).

In Romanticism everything was seen afresh. Classicism and reason were now considered to be limited, conservative morality and moderation were highly criticized. The Gothic novel, so fiercely attacked in the previous epoch, was now more frequently praised by critics and, naturally, more desired by readers than ever before. Their characteristics of extravagance and fancy, earlier considered in negative terms, became synonymous with current modes of writing. The romantic perception of the role of history in literature also changed, especially when taking under consideration Gothic novels, in which "the complex and often contradictory attempts either to make the past barbaric in contrast to an enlightened present or to find in it a continuity that gave English culture a stable history had the effect of bringing to the fore and transforming the way in which both past and present depended on modes of representation" (Botting 1996: 23). *The Castle of Otranto*, being a combination of medieval romance and modern domestic novel, can be seen as a perfect starter of this new species of writing. As fiction gradually loses its role of moral guide and becomes more and more seen as a supplier of aesthetic pleasure, a novel like this inevitably finds its rightful place in the literary cannon.

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The Reversal of the Exemplifying Role

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The Reversal of the Exemplifying Role of History in Horace Walpole's The Castle Of Otranto

According to the traditional understanding, the role of history in literary works was teaching by example. History was expected to provide readers with ready formulae for appropriate behaviour, to introduce models to follow and to identify with, as well as to explain the difficulties of life. In the second half of the eighteenth century such an approach to history turned out to be inadequate. This article presents Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* – the first Gothic novel in English literature – as a work that subverts exemplary historicism by reversing the traditional exemplifying role of history. Published in 1764, when neoclassical ideals were still being promoted by such important writers as Doctor Samuel Johnson, Walpole's novel commenced a new trend in literature that fully developed in Romanticism proper. It is not really intended to teach by example or to render medieval history in terms of modern Enlightenment standards. Instead of rational explanations and balanced opinions its readers get an abundance of supernatural phenomena and extravagant events. With its emphasis on entertainment rather than education, the story is a *signum temporis*, a significant step on the way towards the priority of aesthetic values in literary works. The article focuses on the novel in the context of its publication in the Age of Reason. The two different prefaces are briefly analysed, and the changing critical reception is presented. Some attention is also given to Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* as an immediate successor of Walpole's book, and simultaneously a strong criticism of his innovative perception of the role of literature. Despite the multitude of unfavourable comments by eighteenth-century writers and critics, the conclusion reached in this article is that such Gothic novels opened up a new perspective in the literary world. Walpole's role as the forerunner in this field remains unquestionable.

Keywords: *Gothic novel, exemplary historicism, neoclassical ideals, the Gothic machinery, the supernatural, primogeniture, authenticity, the barbaric past versus the enlightened present.*