

Problems of Comparative Reception Studies: The Case of the Gothic Novel (1790-1825)

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Summary

The paper focuses on the way a popular English narrative genre, i.e. the Gothic Novel, has been received and appreciated/depreciated in various documents at the end of the eighteenth century, covering not only the words themselves, but especially all kinds of so-called metatexts (literary criticism of the time, translations, abridgements, imitations, parodies, etc.). The comparative approach of this "reception history" in France and Germany combines intertextual and institutional aspects.

Opsomming

In deze bijdrage wordt nagegaan hoe een populair verhalend genre, t.w. de Gothic Novel (griazelroman) aan het einde van de achttiende eeuw werd ontvangen en "gewaardeerd" in diverse documenten. Naast de romans zelf werden bij het onderzoek allerlei "meta-teksten" betrokken, gaande van de toenmalige literaire kritiek in de tijdschriften, over vertalingen, bewerkingen, bekorte versies e.dgl. tot heuse parodieën. Deze vorm van comparatieve "receptie-studie" in Frankrijk en Duitsland tracht intertextuele en institutionele aspecten van het fenomeen te combineren.

My paper is part of a broader research project on the study of the Gothic Novel in England, France, Germany and the Netherlands at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It focuses on the way the genre has been received and appreciated/depreciated in various documents, covering not only the texts themselves but especially all sorts of so-called metatexts, by which I understand: literary criticism, translations, adaptations, abridgements, dramatisations, serialisations, imitations, parodies, etc., in one word, all kinds of text processing. As such my project might be considered as belonging to what is called "reception history". One encounters innumerable problems when trying to reconstruct such history. Next to the very difficult demarcation of the genre as such - the corpus and filiation of *émetteurs* and *récepteurs* - the major problem one has to cope with is a hermeneutic one: what is the right status of the various contem-

porary (meta)texts on which we have to rely: the titles of a lot of narrative texts (novels and tales, as well as drama versions) used to be selling labels rather than covering the content, thus close inspection is needed; the fact of borrowing critical passages and even whole articles from other, often foreign periodicals of the time, will probably diminish the representativeness of those texts or documents to the own reading public; and who are those readers: a small group of professionals or a larger public? Moreover, it is hard to find out the real range and significance of the numerous critical commentaries: who or what do the critics and/or the periodicals represent in the literary or cultural system of that time? Was their criticism, as it were, elicited by the editors of the periodical? And what interests were involved? Do we have to believe what authors, translators or editors explicitly say in the many prefaces of the novels concerned? What is cliché, what is mere intention and what is reality? How important was the number of instances of any particular genre in the circulating libraries, reading clubs, etc.? Is there a shift in appreciation during the period in question and/or in the different countries which were influenced (that is, the impact of cultural and ideological factors of assimilation and reaction)? Furthermore, as far as the (re)creative texts themselves are concerned, how far do we have to pursue our research? It seems evident that we have to take into account the "marked" forms of intertextuality such as translations and parodies. But the borders between imitations and adaptations (also for the stage) on the one hand, and "original" creations that came into being without any foreign influence on the other hand, are far from clear. Finally, it is an arduous task to do justice to the institutional, intermediary factors at stake, such as publishing houses, circulating libraries, etc. In my lecture I will go into some of these problems as they occurred at the inception and the growing success of the Gothic Novel in North-western Europe at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

Firstly, I would like to situate very shortly the genre of the Gothic Novel in literary history and then I will explain the theoretical framework from which I am approaching it, focusing on intertextual and institutional aspects. It is here that I want to discuss some Bakhtinian concepts and the so-called systemic approach of literary life. The major part of my paper will be devoted to the presentation (against the background of that cultural context) of some critical remarks, in the periodicals of the time, on the Gothic Novel in general, and on one of the success stories of the genre in particular, that is, the reception and acculturation of Radcliffe's *The Italian* in France, Germany and the Netherlands.

1 The Gothic Novel in Literary History

The Gothic Novel, as a typically English literary genre, can very precisely be pinpointed in the history of West-European literatures. Indeed, it is generally accepted that it started with the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Some "metatexts" seem to support this opinion, especially Walpole's own statements in the preface of the second edition of his novel, where he explicitly refers to "the novelty of the attempt" and "the new route" he has plotted by blending elements of the ancient romance and the modern novel. This statement is confirmed by Clara Reeve who, also in the preface to her novel *The Old English Baron* (1778) refers to the example of Walpole, saying that her novel

is the literary offspring of *The Castle of Otranto*, written upon the same plan, with a design to unite the most attractive and interesting circumstances of the ancient Romance and the modern Novel.

(Reeve [1778]1977: 3, Preface)

She, for that matter, adds that at the same time "it is distinguished (from both of them) by the appellation of a Gothic Story, being a picture of Gothic times and manners". Finally, other metatexts, such as some pieces of literary criticism in the periodicals of the time, perhaps influenced by the earlier statements, point to Walpole as the father and model of a new literary genre, that is, the so-called "historical Gothic". The paternity, thus, is not discussed. But the real representatives and propagators of the genre have to be situated in the nineties of the eighteenth century, that is, Ann Radcliffe (so-called "sentimental Gothic") and Matthew Gregory Lewis. Their novels, together with those of Sophia Lee, Charlotte Smith and many others, led in England as well as on the Continent to a unique style which allows us to speak of a genre proper. As a literary "fact" (Tynjanov) and phenomenon the Gothic Novel thus starts about 1790 and gradually disappears about 1825-30. The numerous dramatisations and imitations à la Radcliffe, as well as the many parodies and recipes of Gothic Novel-writing at that time, stress its enormous success. Besides, they contributed to the fact that other novels which showed only a few of the characteristic "features", were received as Gothic ones, since there had arisen on the part of the readers, as well as of the critics, the authors and the publishers/booksellers an intense genre-awareness. As barometers of the success of the genre, these metatexts, moreover, did not remain restricted to English literature. Indeed, via innumerable translations/adaptations in France, in Germany and in the Netherlands the imported genre experienced similar imitations (e.g. the so-

called "Radcliffades") and burlesque reactions, the most notorious being *La Nuit Anglaise* (1799; German translation *Die Englische Nacht*, 1801), by R.P. Spectroruini (pseudonym used by Bélin-Laliborlière).

2 A Systemic, Intertextual and Institutional Approach

The theoretical framework of my paper can be situated in a so-called "system theory". What does that mean? Literary communication is conceived of as part of a broader cultural system, but it is itself a whole of interacting and dialoguing subsystems and genres of discourse, such as national literature versus translated literature, canonised literature versus popular literature (e.g. chapbooks), novels versus drama versions, etc. Studying part of a literary system thus should imply taking into account the subsystems which surround it (diachronical evolution and synchronical co-existence). It is obvious that such an intertextual and "systemic" approach is not easy to realise, but it prevents the scholar from looking for explanations of literary phenomena which are not the most relevant ones, and it brings to his/her attention some phenomena (e.g. the importance of socio-economic and institutional factors such as the bookmarket, editing and translating strategies) which might better explain the literary facts at issue. This seems to be the more obvious in matters of popular literary genres (but not only there) where these factors normally play a more important role. I only mention the growing reading public at the end of the eighteenth century, which caused, so to speak, a higher production of novels adapted to the reading ability of the new public which had at its disposal circulating and other libraries. A phenomenon of this growing reading public is the change in the reading habit itself. German scholars call it a shift from a repeated, intensive reading (e.g. of the Bible or a poetic text) to an extensive, once-only, quick and consuming reading, with its impact, on the part of booksellers, on easy and recognisable reading matter in adapted format (serialisation, compilations, abridgements etc.). Note that William Lane, the notorious editor of the Minerva Press, responsible for more than fifty percent of the total Gothic Novel production, had the original idea to set up a library next to his publishing-house, so that the volumes could pass without any intermediary, from the one to the other! A vast number of translations were required to supplement the production. Why particularly translations? Because they were much cheaper than originals (no royalties were required at that time) and could be turned out, as it were, on the assembly line: so-called sheet translating (*Übersetzungsfabriken*!). No wonder that most of the translations of popular genres were made in a hurry (translators were paid per page or sheet) and adapted (omissions,

comments etc.) to the intended public. Hence the many intermediary, second-hand translations and the interesting shifts according to national sensibilities or social requirements. Apart from that, the label "translated from the English" (rightly or not) sold well. As far as the Gothic Novel proper is concerned, we can further add the uncommonly high participation of female writers and readers. All these contextual phenomena, manifesting themselves especially in various metatexts, may have made clear what I understand by a more systemic, intertextual and institutional approach.

For the intertextual aspect I am indebted to the work of Mikail Bakhtin, and more particularly to his concepts of interacting speech genres, as well as his specific ideas on parody and stylisation.

Interpretation, in Bakhtin's view, is not a matter of passive "decoding", but rather an active and complicated process of orientation of a potential speaker (author/critic) to a previous speaker (a text, a genre etc.). Parody and stylisation, now, are in Bakhtin's view specific documents of such a process of active reception. They might be called "double-voiced utterances". As Gary Saul Morson puts it:

The author of a double-voiced word appropriates the utterance of another as the utterance of another and uses it "for his own purposes by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has - and retains - its own orientation". The audience of a double-voiced word is therefore meant to hear both a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's point of view (or "semantic position") and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view.

(Morson 1989: 65)

The terms "audience" and "word", of course, should be interpreted, in our context, as "reader" and "text/novel".

Unfortunately, Morson in his very interesting article on "Parody, History and Metaparody" (1989), did not consider a broader range of intertextual utterances that his model would be well-equipped to describe. So, he allows out of consideration, the free adaptation of another text, plagiarism, as well as other metatextual forms of text processing such as literary criticism and translations/adaptations. All these metatexts might serve, indeed, as "valuable documents for a history of perception and interpretation" (1989: 66). They are, at the same time, interesting parameters of what is taking place in the literary life of the time. And here not only texts, but also intermediary instances can play an important role. This is what I mean by the "institutional" aspect of my approach, that is, the specific practices of writing/-producing and reading/consuming, that cannot be explained by a Bakhtinian chronotopos, (in the case of the Gothic Novel, the so-called "castle-time"),

but only by intermediary, sometimes authoritative instances like publishing houses, editors of periodicals and magazines, translators and circulating libraries.

3

I will illustrate this combined intertextual and institutional approach with some of the most outstanding critical notes and parodies, translations, adaptations, dramatisations and abridgements of the Gothic Novel in general and of Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797) in particular.

3.1 General Criticism of the Gothic Novel

Let us first listen to some critics of the genre. In the periodicals and magazines of the time - I speak of 1795-1820 - we find numerous recipes for Gothic Novel-writing, which stress the enormous success of the genre. I refer especially to a repeatedly used and exported (i.e. translated) example, with the significant title:

"Terrorist Novel Writing":

Take - an old castle, half of it ruinous.
A long gallery, with a great many doors,
Some secret ones.
Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.
As many skeletons, in chest and presses.
An old woman hanging by the neck,
with her throat cut.
Assassins and desperadoes, quant. suff.
Noises, whispers and groans, threescore at least.
Mix them together, in the form of three volumes,
To be taken at any watering places before going to bed.

(*The Spirit of English Journals* 1797)

That the success of the genre was not limited to England was proved by Heinrich von Kleist's comment when he visited a library in Würzburg as late as 1810. He did not find Wieland, Goethe or Schiller on the shelves, but only *Rittergeschichten*, *lauter Rittergeschichten* ... *rechts die Rittergeschichten mit Gespenster*, *links ohne Gespenster*, *nach Belieben* (Martino 1990: 107).

References to the new production strategies and reading habits are legion.

Especially the female reading public is referred to in many critical remarks. Well-known in this respect is Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818), especially chapters 6 and 14, where Catherine Morland, the heroine, and some of her friends are fascinated by the genre. Written a few years after the success of Radcliffe's great novels, at the end of the nineties (but published only in 1818) it is a brilliant, but ambiguous parody of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1797) and the whole genre (see the so-called "Northanger Novels").

Such critical and even burlesque reactions are also found in France and Germany. The most significant example, without any doubt, is *La Nuit Anglaise* (Spectroruini 1799) by Bélin-Laliborlière. It was translated into German in 1801 (*Die Englische Nacht*,¹ Zwey Theile, 184 und 171 S.), ohne Druckort; no mentioning of the author, nor the translator's name and adapted into English in 1817 under the title *The Hero, Adventures of a Night*, as a counterpart to Eaton Barret's successful parody *The Heroine* (1813). Spectroruini's novel is a detailed comment on ten Gothic novels (*romans anglais*), among them the success stories of the time, for example, Lewis's *The Monk* (1794) and Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1797) and *The Italian* (1797). The circumstantial subtitle, for that matter, points ironically at the remarkable translation business at that time:

Les Aventures

jadis un peu extraordinaires, mais aujourd'hui

toutes simples et très communes

de M. Dabaud, Marchand de la rue Saint-Honoré, à Paris

Roman comme il y en a trop

traduit de l'arabe en iroquois, de l'iroquois en

samoyède, du samoyède en hottentot, du

hottentot en lapon, et du lapon en françois [sic]

(Par le R.P. Spectroruini, moine Italien 1799)

And the novel is to get everywhere "*où il y a des revenans, des moines, des ruines, des bandits, des souterrains et une tour de l'ouest!*"² The story itself is a real *parodos*, in that it runs parallel with stereotyped episodes of the novels imitated. The bourgeois protagonist, M. Dabaud, is obsessed with Gothic reading and wants to be a hero himself. During his adventures he constantly compares, as a new Don Quixote, his own experiences with those of his models, not refraining from criticism when he thinks they seem rather unorthodox. An episode in which he meets a suspicious Italian monk (cf. Lewis and Radcliffe) is worth mentioning. M. Dabaud asks him who he is:

Qui êtes-vous, mon père?

The answer is revealing to the Gothic Novel reader:

Je suis Italien, comme vous avez dû vous en douter ... Mon nom n'est point Montoné, ni Schedoni, ni Rasoni, mais je m'appelle Falconi.

And Dabaud instantly replies:

Mon Père ... je suis fâché d'être obligé de vous le dire, mais quand on est Italien, qu'on est moine et qu'on a un nom en -oni, on est inévitablement un coquin

3.2 Radcliffe's *The Italian*

So far I have cited some examples of general criticism of the Gothic Novel genre, while already hinting at the exemplary novels by Anne Radcliffe. In a last section I would like to go into some forms of intertextuality that refer explicitly to Radcliffe's *The Italian*. It concerns some translations/adaptations, abridgements, and drama versions. This study will bear witness to the fact that "intertextuality", as exemplified in the parodying forms, is not at all confined to a specific language area.

Let us first look at some French translations. The French reading public was immediately informed about the newly published novel by the Bibliothèque Britannique of 1797. It contained some circumstantial abstracts in a French version. These *extraits*, as many others in French periodicals, functioned as a mixture of summary, commentary, and translation (cf. Van Gorp 1996: 298). As far as *The Italian* (1797) is concerned, a full translation was announced. As a matter of fact, two different translations of Radcliffe's novel appeared in a space of some months, i.e. *Eléonore de Rosaiba ou le confessional des pénitens noirs*, by Mary Gay, and *L'Italien ou le confessional des pénitens noirs, par Anne Radcliffe, auteur de la Forêt et des Mystères d'Udolphé* by André Morellet. We learn something more about the translators' rivalry in the latter translation. Morellet, who, because of the French Revolution, had to translate English Gothic success stories for a living, volunteered the following information in the preface of the first volume:

La traduction qu'on donne ici, est, à ce qu'on croit, plus fidelle, mais à coup sûr plus complete, parce qu'on ne s'y est permis aucun des retranchemens qu'a faits l'auteur de la traduction en 7 volumes.

(Morellet 1798: An VI-Preface)

Indeed, the Frenchified translation by Mary Gay - a real "belle infidèle" with the significant change of the heroine's name Ellena to Eléonore, for that matter put on the title page - left out a number of episodes that were not "essential" for understanding the intrigue of the story. This *modus operandi* was typical for the French reception of the *roman anglais*. M. Moulin, the translator of Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), which novel appeared in French under the title *Julia, ou les Souterrains du château de Mazzini* (1797) noted in the preface to the reader, that all Radcliffe's novels, among them *The Italian*, had been "naturalised", meaning adapted to the French taste (Prungraud 1994: 23).

In Germany, the translation activity concerning Radcliffe's *The Italian* is even more diverse. It came into action even before the novel had been issued in England. As in France, two translations of the novel were announced in the leading periodicals of January/March 1797. It is interesting to note that in one of the advertisements the competition aspect is explicitly referred to. The publisher Nicolovius wrote (I translate): "I am not afraid of whatever competition, since my translation has been made by someone who has translated already with great success all the former novels by Mrs. Radcliffe" (*Intelligenzblatt der Allgemeinen Literaturzeitung*, 15 April 1797). The publisher and the journal system of the time seemed to plot against the intruder, and they worked against time to publish the first volume of *Der Italiener*. The other translation didn't appear before 1802 under the somewhat changed title *Ellena die Italienerin, oder die Warnungen in den Ruinen von Paluzzi*. Nach (!) dem Englischen der Miss Anna Radclif It was a version adapted to a large reading public: much had been omitted, and even the characters had undergone notable alterations. The protagonist Schedoni, was not a monk anymore, but a malicious nobleman, and as a consequence of this transposition, the items related to monasteries and the inquisition vanished, so that the novel became an adventure story about love and hate.

Meanwhile, in 1799, a novel was announced that, at first sight, had nothing to do with Radcliffe's *The Italian: Liebe, Krieg und Dummheit. Ein Roman von Gregor*. The preface was more than a cliché: "The present work is a child of my fantasy begotten with the beloved English novelist Miss A. Radcliffe" (my translation). Although the real source was not grasped by the critic of the *Neue Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* (1801, vol. 64: 375), the summary of the content revealed it was an adaptation of *The Italian*. But now the monk Schedoni had become a cardinal, Eleonore (the name points to a second-hand translation of the French one) was forced to choose between the convent and a stuck-up French cavalier-emigrant, and at the end of the first volume the French troops were marching into Naples, which was

an actualisation of the political context. Gregor's version, thus, was a mixture of plagiarism and distortion. Most of the substantial changes showed, for that matter, an ideological character.

Gregor was no exception at all in this respect. One of his colleagues, the prolific writer H.A. Kerndörffer, had even to answer for two "adaptations" in which the source had not been mentioned: *Die Ruinen der Geisterburg oder die warnende Stimme um Mitternacht* (1805-06) and, on the other hand, *Der Mitternächtlche Meuchelmörder*, a drastically shortened version of the same novel for the *Magazin schrecklicher Ereignisse und fürchterlicher Geschichten* (1803: 1-112). The latter was a "translation" of an analogous English abridgement (*The Midnight Assassin*) in a similar magazine (*The Marvellous Magazine and Compendium of Prodigies*). As for *Die Ruinen der Geisterburg*, Kerndörffer intentionally changed all the characters' names! It must have been a daunting task, not to make any mistake; anyhow, he managed extremely well, but not so well that the reviewer of the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* didn't notice it. He commented:

Abermals eine Plünderung des Englischen Schauerromans: Die Italiänerinn ... (!) von Miss Radclif, mit des Nachpfuschers eigen armseligen Erfindungen noch mehr verschrecklicht und verabentheuert Dies zur Warnung für die Liebhaber von Geisterspuk und Wundergeschichten, wenn sie nicht eine schon dreymal aufgetischte Waare zum Viertenmal herunterwürgen wollen.

(1805, vol 96, p. 322)

And he concluded by warning the readers that it was an *unverschämte Beeinträchtigung ihrer Zeit und ihrer Börse* (1805: 322). That had been, of course, the proper goal of Kerndörffer and/or his publisher.

In the Netherlands, drama versions and translations/adaptations of Radcliffe's Gothic novels were not absent from the list either. But I haven't the time to go into it here (see Van Gorp 1993: 149-152). Anyhow, I hope to have given, with this case study of Radcliffe's *The Italian*, an illustration of what I called a combined intertextual and institutional approach in comparative genre studies. Since the various "metatexts" (critical notes, parodies, translations, adaptations, dramatisations, abridgements, etc.) reveal a lot of the literary discourse in a given period, in our case 1795-1820, and also of its relation with other cultural and even "ideological" facts (that is the French Revolution and its aftermath), it is my firm conviction that such an approach, whatever the problems may be, does more justice to a popular genre like the Gothic Novel than a present day aesthetic interpretation, based on so-called "essential" genre characteristics. In other words, I plead that those having an interest in literary history, should try to reconstruct the

horizon of expectations of earlier texts, by looking at them not only with their own eyes, but also through the eyes of the authors, readers, and critics of the time, not forgetting other important intermediary "actors" and "institutions" in the field of literary and cultural life, such as translators, publishers, literary societies, circulating libraries, etc. This does not mean, however, that we have to take them all at their word!

Notes

1. *Die Englische Nacht, oder die zwar vor einigen Jahren etwas ausserordentlichen, heut zu Tage aber ganz einfachen und sehr gewöhnlichen Begebenheiten des Hn Dabaud, Kaufmanns in der Strasse St. Honoré zu Paris. Ein Roman wie es viele giebt. Aus dem Arabischen ins Irokesische, aus dem Irokesischen ins Samojedische, aus dem Samojedischen ins Hottentotische, aus dem Hottentotischen ins Läppische, aus dem Läppischen ins Französische, und endlich jetzt ins Deutsche übersetzt, durch den P. Spectroruini, einen Italiänischen Mönch. Zu finden in den Ruinen von Paluzzi, in den Begräbnisgewölben des Claren-Klosters, in den Schlössern Udolpho, Lindenberg u.s.w., kurz allenthalben, wo es Gespenster, Mönche, Ruinen, und vor allem einen westlichen Thurm giebt. Zwey Theile.* (From the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, Oct. 1801, p. 208).
2. The adventures, in former times a bit extraordinary, but nowadays quite simple and very common, of Mr. Dabaud, merchant of St. Honoré street in Paris. A novel of which kind there are too many, translated from the Arab into the Iroquian, from the Iroquian into the Samoyedian, from the Samoyedian into the Hottentotic, from the Hottentotic into the Lapponian, and from the Lapponian into the French, By the Rev. Spectroruini, Italian monk (...) (in all places) where there are spectres, monks, ruins, banditti, dungeons, and a Western tower.

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