Response

Comparative Reception Studies of the Gothic Novel

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When I learnt, only recently, what the nature of Prof van Gorp's paper at this International Conference would be, I was fascinated.

Looking back as a glorified child, I recall that I and those of my very young friends who were also readers, became acquainted with English novels, popularly regarded as "Gothic", such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), by way of the ubiquitous Classic Comic. When, in later years, we read these "novels of horror" or "novels of terror", as Gothic novels are termed in the widely known *Lexicon van literaire termen* (Van Gorp et al. 1991), we discovered that they were in fact skilfully written and bore little resemblance to the downgraded versions churned out by Hollywood in earlier years. From a present-day perspective one notes that it has taken the world of film more or less a century to provide a corrective to prior vulgarizations of such major Gothic narratives by the production, in this decade, of artistic and authentic versions.

And yet, such wild and wonderful stories - so immensely popular at the time they were written - have not been canonized in the course of literary history as texts that belong to the mainstream of serious literature. Regarding the enormously popular writer Ann Radcliffe, identified by Van Gorp as one of the real representatives and propagators of the genre Gothic novel, it comes to mind that we first heard her name when we read Jane Austen as university undergraduates. At that time, it was pointed out to us that Radcliffe was eulogized by an anonymous contemporary admirer with the following quatrain, written soon after the novelist's death:

> Oh Radcliffe! thou once wert the charmer
> Of girls who sat reading all night!
> Thy heroes were striplings in armour,
> *Thy heroines damsels in white.*
>
> (Author anonymous)

And it was also brought home to us that Jane Austen's heroine, Catherine Morland, *in Northanger Abbey* (1968) was such a girl - "who sat reading [Gothic novels] all night" - a character through which Austen pokes fun at the Radcliffe tradition as early as 1817, when this novel was published.

While the genre Gothic novel was satirized by Austen (and very much later dismissed by our teachers in the English Department!), Ann Radcliffe's reputation seems to have had staying power. Browsing through John Drinkwater's remarkable and quaint *Outline of Literature* (*circa* 1930), which commences with a survey of Ancient Egyptian literature and Homer (!), I actually found an entry on Ann Radcliffe:

> Mrs Radcliffe, the author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and other stories, was an ingenious writer, much admired by (Sir Walter) Scott, a good story-teller, unhampered by a sense of humour, whose style has been faithfully copied in the modern novelette. She deals in the night side of life, in the mystery of desolate valleys and tapestried corridors, and in the art of making a reader's blood run cold.
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> (Drinkwater 1930: 420-421)

One is curious as to what prompted Van Gorp's broad research project on an exotic genre such as the Gothic novel. Has new metatextual material on this genre come to light? Or, since so many things literary are at present attributed to or blamed on postmodernism, does this project stem from a postmodern urge to attend to and upgrade marginalized texts?

I would like to raise a further question apropos of Prof van Gorp's interesting paper, which has some bearing on our teaching of Afrikaans literature.

In *Lexicon van literaire termen* (Van Gorp et al. 1991) - well-known to and much consulted by students of Afrikaans literature - the lemmas on terms such as Romanticism, Realism, Decadence, allow for double usage: In the strict sense they are terms denoting a specific literary historical period; in a broader sense they may be used for general characteristics which are manifested in texts that originate outside specific periods. It is obvious that Prof Van Gorp has, in his paper, used the term Gothic novel in the strict sense as a period concept for that distinct slice of literary history: 1790 to 1825, which marks the rise and fall of the Gothic novel. My question is: Would he concede to a broader use of the term Gothic

Novel, or would he favour other terms for modern narratives that display Gothic tendencies?

In the case of the young and flourishing Afrikaans literature, we as teachers are constantly using period terms, such as those mentioned, in the broad sense to indicate general stylistic tendencies manifested by Afrikaans narratives in a brief history of little more than one hundred years. The novels of a young, promising and prizewinning writer such as François Bloemhof pose a pertinent question, namely, as his narratives display certain similarities to the traditional Gothic novel, could he be regarded as a modern-day writer working in the tradition of the Gothic novel, or is it more acceptable to view his texts as thrillers-with-literary-merit?

It is clear that Prof Van Gorp's ambitious research project presents, to comparatists, truly daunting challenges, which seem to arise mainly from the attempt to reconstruct a multifaceted and verifiable horizon of expectations of early Gothic texts.[1]

Note

1. In the brief time allotted for discussion, Prof Van Gorp replied to the questions raised in the response to his paper.

   Many interesting contextual phenomena led to this research project. The enormous success of the Gothic novel, which made it all the rage in England and on the Continent at the end of the eighteenth century, generated a vast quantity and variety of metatexts (dramatizations, imitations, parodies, recipes). Also, the change in the reading habits of the growing reading public at this time generated numerous translations, which display telling adaptations dictated by national or social requirements. Prof Van Gorp pointed out that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819) was not received as a Gothic novel by the contemporary reading public.

   This broad comparative reception study of the Gothic novel is focused strictly on the historical period 1790 to 1825 when the Gothic genre proper was established. Prof van Gorp was not inclined to use the term in a broader sense for modern narratives which exhibit characteristic Gothic features.

References

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