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Introduction: The Supernatural between Fact and Fiction, from the Gothic to the *Fin de Siècle*

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1 The Invention of the Gothic and its Ambivalences

When Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was first published on 24 December, 1764, its title-page and preface left the readers bewildered as to its authorship. The book purported to be the English translation of an Italian story composed by "Onuphrio Muralto, Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas at Otranto", a manuscript "found in the library of an ancient catholic family in the north of England", then printed "at Naples, in the black letter, in the year 1529" (Walpole 2014, 1, 5). The *topos* of the 'found manuscript' was one of the best favoured devices among writers of histories, story-mongers and narrators, from Antonius Diogenes' *The Wonders Beyond Thule* (1st cent. CE) to Dicty's *Journal of the Trojan War*, and then Ludovico Ariosto's reference to Turpin's pseudo-chronicles, Cervantes' ironic allusion to Cide Hamete Benengeli. The frequency with which this *topos* was used peaked in the spate of the 'discovered documents' produced between the end of the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century (Maxwell 2003, 248-52). Walpole's presentation of a printed book that looks like the typeset copy of a hand-written document was meant to

entangle the reader in a web of pseudo-evidence that should substantiate its 'real' existence as a historical manufact and testimony. Walpole's 'unknown author' of the first preface suggested that the book has as many as three layers of archival pre-existence: an implicit Italian manuscript, a 1529 printed book in Italian that copied, in its Gothic typeface, that manuscript, and the present book that translates the 'original' printed copy (Maxwell 2003, 256).

On that pseudo-documentary strategy Walpole inflicted a dreadful blow with the preface to the second edition of the novel:

> The favorable manner in which this little piece has been received by the public, calls upon the author to explain the grounds on which he composed it. But before he opens those motives, it is fit that he should ask pardon of his readers for having offered his work to them under the borrowed personage of a translator. As diffidence of his own abilities, and the novelty of the attempt, were the sole inducements to assume that disguise, he flatters himself he shall appear excusable. He resigned his performance to the impartial judgment of the public; determined to let it perish in obscurity, if disapproved; nor meaning to avow such a trifle, unless better judges should pronounce that he might own it without a blush. (Walpole 2014, 9)

Walpole's two prefaces notoriously contradict one another, with that of the second edition revealing the subterfuge of the 'invented manuscript' and asking for the reader's forgiveness for publishing under the fictional "disguise" of "the borrowed personage of a translator" (9). The second preface shows with sufficient emphasis that the antiquarian reconstruction on which his story is built is not only an artifice but also an implicit farce mocking the notion of the truthfulness of the historical search for the true origins of a fact.

With such fictional manoeuvering, Walpole aligned himself with writers so different from him as Laurence Sterne or Henry Mackenzie, who poked fun at the search for the origins of a story, event, conception, idea or belief. In the hands of those writers the fictionality of storytelling became a show imbued with the scepticism at the wonders of story-telling, and brought on stage the consequences of "telling a false story as true by [putting] it into the mouths of others", since "every relater vouches it for truth, though he knows nothing of the matter like family lies handed on from father to son, till what begun in forgery ends in history, and we make our lies be told for truth by all our children that come after us", as Defoe wrote in a parody of Charles Gildon (who, it so happens, had attacked him for creating forged stories; Defoe 2008, 127-8). Although *The Castle of Otranto* does not display any of the highly self-conscious narrative tricks that are flaunted in *Tristram Shandy* and *The Man of Feeling*,

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its erasure of the credibility of the source of its story increases the attention given to a text as an artificial manufact. It also promotes the enjoyment of its fictitious aspects, enhancing the more theatrical qualities of the descriptive *mise-en-scène* and making large use of the "inexpressibility topos" (Hammond, Regan 2006, 159) that should help the readers gulp down all its implausibilities.

Moreover, the treatment of the supernatural in *The Castle of Otranto* points the reader to an allegorical and moral interpretation of the story rather than a realistic-historical one. In fact, Walpole's plot narrates of a usurpation, Manfred's takeover of Otranto from the family that should rule it *de iure*. According to Walpole's second preface, this story presents itself as a fable (*fabula*) that asks the readers to interpret the fictional past "as a repository of the truth, a truth that the present has disregarded, but whose force nonetheless be manifested in the present" (Ellis 2000, 33). The manifest absence of an origin for the historical credibility of the story, and the fact that the events involving Manfred and the other characters is a patent fiction, provide the foundation for the quest for a reliable, truly ethical 'moral', thick with political and contemporary overtones. The novel's reference to historical characters of Medieval Sicily[1] does not make much sense, in fact, and can be understood only as an allegory of English political figures, either historical ones such as the above-mentioned kings of England, or contemporaries of Walpole, such as John Wilkes and Henry Seymour Conway (Samson 1986; Wein 2002, 53-9; Lake 2013).

Walpole's second preface goes on to declare that his story

> was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former, all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life. But if, in the latter species, Nature has cramped imagination, she did but take her revenge, having been totally excluded from old romances. The actions, sentiments, and conversations, of the heroes and heroines of ancient days, were as unnatural as the machines employed to put them in motion. The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds. (Walpole 2014, 9)

With this metafictional justification, Walpole inevitably got entangled in the discussion about novel and romance, between the rise of

1 The name of the usurper, Manfred, probably alludes to Manfred of Sicily, the illegitimate son of Frederick II, who declared himself king in 1258 when he heard rumours of the death of the legitimate grandson of Frederick II, Conrad.

a mode of narration based on "formal realism" (in Ian Watt's famous wording; Watt 1957) and the resisting presence of a mode based on fabulous story-telling, extraordinary characters, and improbable elements, as practiced in ancient times or in seventeenth-century France, which Walpole's contemporaries saw as "restricted by no fetters of reason, or of truth", depending on a "lawless imagination", and transgressing "all bounds of time and place, of nature and possibility" (George Canning, 1787, quoted in Day 1987, 3). Walpole reiterated his intention of blending the two modes in his letter to Monsieur Elie de Beaumont: "To tell you the truth, it was not so much my intention in writing The Castle of Otranto to recall the exploded marvels of ancient romance, as to blend the wonderful of old stories with the natural of modern novels" (18 March 1765; Toynbee 1904, 6: 201).

2 The (Partial) Domestication of the Supernatural

Although the two terms, romance and novel, were often interchangeable in the eighteenth century (Day 1987, 6-10), the acknowledgment that there are various forms of narration based on a different relationship to facts, reality, truth, historicity, was becoming part of the common theoretical baggage among writers, critics and scholars. In his second preface, Walpole uses the word 'romance' to designate both *novel* and *romance*, but it is clear that he has in mind the very distinction Clara Reeve introduced in her *Progress of Romance* (1785): "[the] Romance in an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. – The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves" (Reeve 1785, 1: 111). Walpole used the word romance as James Beattie would do in his "On Fable and Romance", distinguishing between the ancient, fabulous romance ("Oriental tale", "Fabulous historical allegory", "Moral and religious allegory", "Allegorical prose fable") and the "New romance", serious and comic, by Defoe, Richardson, Le Sage, Smollet, and Fielding. In the latter, critics and readers agreed, there is or should be a "notional representation of reality" to be observed (Day 1987, 63-110 [70]), based on verisimilitude of description, probability of situation, "acute discernment [and] exact discrimination of characters" (*The British Critic*'s review of Frances Burney's *Camilla*, 1796; quoted in Day 1987, 75).

Clara Reeve, while observing the merit of Walpole's story in uniting the ancient romance with the modern novel, and acknowledging that her plan, too, was to blend the characteristics of both modes of narration, noticed "a redundancy" in the Walpole's handling of the

marvellous, which "palls upon the mind [...] the machinery is so violent, that it destroys the effect it is intended to excite". The main problem of *The Castle of Otranto*, according to Reeve, is that it its story is not kept "within the utmost *verge* of probability" (Reeve 1967, 4). Reeve believed that supernatural events such as those found in Walpole's story "must keep within certain limits of credibility". Her own narrative recipe was based on "a sufficient degree of the marvellous, to excite attention; enough of the manners of real life, to give an air of probability to the work" (4). In fact, her own novel, *The Old English Baron* (1778, first published as *The Champion of Virtue, a Gothic Story* in 1777), "domesticates the extravagancies of Walpolian Gothic through a bourgeois-puritan moral discipline" (Duncan 1992, 24). Reeve's plot makes the best of Walpole's moralising on the legitimacy of inheritance and power, and downplays its most supernatural elements in favour of higher probability, which is obtained not so much by way of referential mimesis but, rather, by a more plausible representation of the past: "Reeve puts greater emphasis than Walpole on sociological and legal institutions of the past, less on ghostly visitations and apparitions" (Maxwell 2008, 69).

Walpole and Reeve dealt with the supernatural in a sort of chiastic way: Walpole paid lip service to the emerging realistic mode but believed that its "strict adherence to common life" (Walpole 2003, 9) obstructs fancy and inspiration, which justified his recourse to excess in order to heighten the narrative's capacity to entertain and make believe; Reeve continued in the romance tradition, yet was convinced that credibility should be preferred to sensation. Even if both Walpole and Reeve based the acceptability of their usurpation and restoration plots on the device of the "found manuscript", they had two different approaches to the supernatural. Walpole resorted to an allegorical moral that should absorb the absurdities of the supernatural and make them work to tighten the plot and lead the story to its conclusion: "Everything tends directly to the catastrophe" (Walpole 2014, 6; on Walpole's absurdism, see Watt 2004, 12-41). Reeve purified the Walpolean Gothic from its most implausible elements and cared less about surprising developments of the plot – indeed her plot is highly predictable. The legal resolution of the estate settlement restoring Edmund to his position as rightful heir to Lord Lovel at the end of *The Old English Baron* is rather prosaic, having the protagonists make budgetary calculations concerning the value of the estate, before Edmund's final marriage to the daughter of the 'usurper'. By lessening the supernatural and foregrounding historical details, Reeve paves the way for Walter Scott, who would purify the historical novel from metaphysical events and settings in order to increase its credibility.

However, neither Walpole nor Reeve pointed to a mimetic use of details and characters. Reeve's verisimilitude rested on narrative el-

ements that do not belong to the to the kind of formal realism associated with the "rise of the novel". As Emma Clery observes, Reeve's verisimilitude derives from a Johnsonian notion of the "exemplary function of the novel" that urged her to rewrite the Walpolean model as "*Pamela* in fancy-dress with the spice of the paranormal, an illustrative conduct book for the proper correlation of wealth and virtue" (Clery 1995, 84). Thus, *The Old English Baron* honours the readers' request that the supernatural element be shown in a legitimate way: "[the] supernatural is admitted to representation on condition that it exists *only* in representation, as fiction, myth or superstition, without claims to external reality" (54).[2]

Reeve's tendency to naturalise the supernatural, which Walpole in turn criticised,[3] is active in other Gothic novels of the end of the eighteenth century, as in Sophia Lee's highly historical *The Recess, or A Tale of Other Times* (1783-1785), or in Ann Radcliffe's novels, whose "explained supernatural" reconciles the rational needs of an enlightened age and "the taste for primitive superstition" (Clery 1995, 107), by using rational explanation for supernatural phenomena that have been presented earlier in the story, bringing "readers and characters back to eighteenth-century conventions of realism, reason and morality" and "highlighting their excessive credulity" (Botting 1996, 65). The moralising bias that can be found in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Radcliffe's other novels and which was intended to redeem characters and readers from their penchant for excessive sensibility and irrationality is not unambiguous. In fact, Radcliffe sermonises on the Quixotic dangers of indulging in one's imagination and, at the same time, reinforces the fantastic effects she would like to undercut through her representation of preternatural events and effects. Her absorption of the supernatural in its moralising rationalisation is not complete. As Terry Castle notices, "[the] supernatural is not so much explained in *Udolpho* as it is displaced. It is diverted – rerouted, so to speak, in the realm of the everyday" (Castle 1987, 236). Such displacement produces an effect that is analogous to Walpole's early (and later demystified, in the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*) displacement of the supernatural into a different time and culture:

2 This sentence, in Clery's book, refers to the *Monthly Review*'s diverging receptions of the first two editions of *The Castle of Otranto*, which accepted the supernatural elements within the framework of an ancient text but rejected them as absurd in a modern novel.

3 Walpole wrote to William Cole. "I have seen, too, the criticism you mention on *The Castle of Otranto*, in the preface to the *Old English Baron*. It […] directly attacks the visionary part, which, says the author or authoress, makes one laugh. I do assure you, I have had not the smallest inclination to return the attack. It would even be ungrateful, for the work is professed imitation of mine, only stripped of the marvellous; ad so entirely stripped, except in one awkward attempt at a ghost or two, that it is the most insipid dull nothing you ever saw. It certainly does not make me laugh; but what makes one doze, seldom makes one merry" (Toynbee 1904, 10: 302)

The Mysteries of Udolpho projects the explanation of the supernatural to a future time in the story that should free it, and its readers, from the fetters of superstitious delusion.

Radcliffe participated in the enlightened agenda of the disenchantment of the world founded on the procedures of modern, post-Baconian science, and on the secularisation of society. Fred Botting draws attention on a passage from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which, in its satirical self-consciousness, prefigures Jane Austen's debunking of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and calls for a rational dismissal of ghosts and ghost-stories (Botting 1995, 68-9). Yet, as we will see below, there is a significant residual element of *non finito* in the disenchanting project of Radcliffe's stories, which prevents the disenchantment from being complete. Therefore, the displacement of which Castle speaks is in fact never resolved in the here and now of everyday life, because this is the very here and now on which the readers' desire for the terror that Radcliffe offers them is based. Radcliffe's very practice of "terrorist novel writing" impinges itself on the here and now of common life, making it uncanny.[4] This is not the only ambivalence in Radcliffe's writing. Her explained supernaturalism corresponds to a middle-class transformation of society along the ideological lines of a utilitarian project reshaping and obliterating the old aristocratic *régime*. Yet, her distinction between acceptable and superstitious supernaturalism is based on a sharp class distinction: it is the uncultivated lower classes that believe in horror stories, and the aristocratic ones that are able to distinguish acceptable sensitivity from excessive imagination; middle-class (female) readers are warned which perspective they should adopt to read the astonishing events narrated (Botting 1995, 71-5; for a nuanced analysis of the role of servants and lower classes in the Gothic, see Hudson 2019).

Both of the two articles devoted to the Gothic supernatural in the present issue of *English Literature* [5] tackle the issue of the complex relationship between fiction and reality, the verisimilar and the completeness (or incompleteness) of explanation. John Bender's "Foley Effects in the Gothic: Sound in *The Castle of Otranto*" considers an aspect of *The Castle of Otranto* that Clara Reeve seems to have overlooked in her evaluation of that novel when she says that its "machinery" is too violent and "palls upon the mind (*though it does not upon the ear*)" (Reeve 1967, 4; emphasis added). According to Bender, the ear has instead a central role in the novel, both in thematic and for-

4 "The Terrorist Novel Writing" is the title of an essay on supernatural fiction published anonymously in 1798 (Clery, Miles 2000, 182-3).

5 More articles on the topic of the representation of the supernatural will appear in a future issue of this journal.

mal terms: the novel is full of terrorising noises and ghastly silence, its characters are anxious about hearing and interpreting sounds, while the readers confront the great quantity of auditory signs with which the novel is burdened. Bender observes that Walpole was experimenting with "a new written technology of sound description", with which he had become familiar through his acquaintance with stage-effects at David Garrick's Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Those effects were the eighteenth-century equivalent of the present cinematic "Foley" sounds, i.e. the noises produced in a studio with several kinds of props, and dubbed over the film soundtrack in order to produce a more effective impression onto the viewer in cinema theatres. Foley effects are simulations of real sounds that are not real but, like the off-stage sounds, achieve a higher level of realism than live recording. Likewise, Walpole created the literary equivalent of the "audio-visual contract" with the audience that is typical of cinematic aesthetics and, through a narrative synesthesia, was able to open "a whole world of sound to the novel as a form" organising the various ways with which novelists referred to sounds into "techniques for the narration of thought and of thought about thought –consciousness– in prose fiction". Thus, the lack of that representational realism that Walpole excluded from his fiction is counterbalanced by an auditory-psychological realism obtained through narrative tricks that later writers would also use in their realist fiction.

Zack Watson's "The Supernatural Subject of the Sublime in Burke and Radcliffe: A Reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*" offers a reading of the presence of Burke's aesthetics and his psychological sublime in Ann Radcliffe's novel, which explains the strategy of the "explained supernatural" and, at the same time, complicates its interpretation. The sublime experience that Radcliffe's heroine undergoes in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* paves the way for a conclusion of her story that does not draw the psychological adventure of her heroine to complete close, leaving room for further mystery. As Radcliffe learned from Burke, one's physical exposure to terror does not coincide with its mental experience: this gap creates a space for the aesthetic enjoyment of the sublime. However, Watson adds, Radcliffe departs from Burke's analysis in two ways: for her "delight is not the mark of the sublime", and "not all sublime encounters conclude with a fortified sense of self". In Watson's view, the "explained supernatural" can be considered Radcliffe's way of applying the resolution of the passage from pain to delight that marks Burke's sublime. The sublime delight comes from the idea of a danger that does not affect the subject directly, "without being actually in such circumstances" (Burke 1986, 51). The sublime experience is indeed sublime when it goes beyond the mere exposure to terror and pain and opens itself to enjoyment. If the original experience of terror introduces an ambiguous suspense that might lead the stunned subject nowhere (or even to

his/her perdition), a delightful conclusion triumphs over the original fear and astonishment. Yet, Radcliffe does not present Burke's complete trajectory of the sublime that absorbs of the supernatural experience into its psychological explanation. Therefore, Watson contests Walter Scott's famous interpretation of Radcliffe's "natural principles" into which she resolves her supernatural, insofar as her narration does not conform to the binary principle of natural *vs* supernatural that Scott finds in her novels. Mysteries, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, are not explained away by their natural explanations: "Radcliffe all but assures readers that her protagonist never has the most traumatic supernatural element dissolved by explanation by setting so many mysteries in motion that there is no character who can explain them all". If "the explained supernatural implies a meaningful universe in which cause and effect can eventually be explained", in Radcliffe's universe there is always room for uncertainty. Even the novel's conclusion leaves an odd sensation in the readers that their "desire for narrative" has not been fulfilled, and that Burke's sublime enjoyment has not been attained, giving way instead to an "immanent sublime" that can never be brought to an end.

3 The Persistence of the Gothic in the Early Nineteenth Century

Both trends in the Gothic fiction of the late eighteenth century, the irrational (Walpole, Beckford) and the explanatory-historical (Reeve, Lee, Radcliffe), had to balance the interest in the supernatural with the demands of a rational age.[6] The marvellous, the extraordinary, the monstrous had to be confronted with the ordinary, the real, the empirical. Even if polite culture and society had moved from an attitude of general hostility towards the supernatural to its acceptance at the end of the eighteenth century (Clery 1995), the representation of abnormal and uncanny events continued to pose problems and questions to both writers and readers. The supernatural novels obliged their readers to acknowledge and, at the same time, question the mimetic underpinning for the "rise of the novel"; as Deirdre Lynch observes, "these books characteristically arrange for their characters [and we may add, their readers] to pass back and forth between real and aesthetic experience. They arrange for a 'real' experience of the supernatural to be counterpointed by the illusions of immedi-

6 There are other varieties of the Gothic novel, which we cannot take into account here, such as the sentimental Gothic of Charlotte Smith and Catherine Cuthbertson, or the revolutionary Gothic of William Godwin. On the relationship between the historical novel and the Gothic, see Punter 2013, 51-2, 140-64.

acy engendered by works of mimetic art (the statues of saints, portraits of dead relations, and absorbing old romances that litter the dilapidated abbeys and castles that house these characters)" (Lynch 2015, 185-6). Gothic fiction reinforced and subverted realist fiction at the same time.

The Gothic novel did not always domesticate the supernatural: inexplicable and, to some, inexcusable excesses abound in William Beckford's *Vathek* (1782, French version; 1786, English version), which joins the Gothic with the Oriental tale, and particularly in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796). Lewis's extravaganzas were so shocking as to prompt a spate of criticism that considered it "unfit for general circulation" (*The Monthly Review* 1797, 405; on Lewis and censorship, see Ellis 2000, 81-115). Ann Radcliffe wrote an essay, published posthumously in 1826, to distinguish the truly sublime "terror" of her stories from Lewis's "horror", which, in her interpretation, provides no 'expansion' of the soul, either aesthetically or morally (Radcliffe 2017, 403). In his anonymous review of *The Monk* for the *Critical Review*, Coleridge praised some of the "merits" of Lewis's novel but overall condemned it for being too full of "meretricious attractions". In Coleridge's opinion, even the portrayal of the hero of the story, which shows some knowledge of the human heart, then "degenerates into an uglier fiend than the gloomy imagination of Danté [*sic*] would have ventured to picture". One of the novel's main problems, along with its obscenity and profanity, is that the romance-teller, who has "an unlimited power over situations", does not make his characters act in congruity with the situation with that scrupulousness that the mode of narration itself should command. According to Coleridge, not only does Lewis overstep the limits of reason and judgment, confusing the preternatural with that which is "contrary to nature", but he also frequently produces "incongruity of […] style with his subjects", which "is gaudy where it should be have been severely simple; and too often the mind is offended by phrases the most trite and colloquial, where it demands and had expected a sternness and solemnity of diction" (Coleridge 1995, 60). Clearly, Coleridge considered both the immorality and the implausibility of *The Monk* as its damning defects.

So, in addition to the outraged reaction to the scandalous side of *The Monk*, the stylistic criticism of Lewis's novel shows one of the main cruxes of the Gothic: its unstable mixture of fact and fiction. The eighteenth-century novel had progressively emerged as the genre that was able to present a fictional narration masked by claims to truth, and which produced in the readers an ambivalent response "as to whether they were reading something true or false" (Davis 1983, 21). By presenting stories as real, and by assuming that fictionality is based on events *as if* they were real, readers had become able to introject the principle of 'factual fiction' that provided

the justification for an acceptable and commonsensical willing suspension of disbelief. In turn, this suspension of disbelief allowed the writers to develop a conscience of belonging to a larger community sharing interests, views, and demands (Capoferro 2017, 244). *The Monk* stretched the propensity to suspending one's disbelief to its extreme and, as the reactions of reviewers and readers show, broke the unstable but epistemologically and morally profitable bond between fact and fiction. The artificiality of Walpole's, Beckford's and Lewis's novels is so evident that they seem to verge on 'pulp fiction', on counterfeit rather than truth (see Hogle 2012). Yet they never go beyond the limits of some kind of verisimilitude.

Similarly irrational and unnatural aspects can be seen in some extravagant and macabre novels that are variously related to *The Monk*, such as Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya or, the Moor* (1806), Edward Montague's *The Demon of Sicily* (1807), James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), Charles Robert Maturin's *Fatal Revenge, or The Family of Montorio* (1807) and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), "a rather defiant swing back toward the Gothic proper at a time when it was becoming unfashionable, due in part to the all-powerful influence of [Walter] Scott" (Sage 2012, 139). So, even after the Romantic interest in Gothic themes – as in Percy B. Shelley's *Zastrozzi* (1810), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and in Coleridge's, Keats's, Byron's, and Polidori's poetry – had waned, and after Walter Scott had absorbed the Gothic fiction and cleansed it of its implausible and shocking aspects (see Richter 2016, 485-7),[7] supernatural, demonic, ghostly themes continued to run like a subterranean river under the more respectable fields of the realist fiction of the nineteenth century, resurfacing in writers who cannot be considered Gothic *prima facie*. Among the realist writers who absorbed supernatural issues there were Emily Brontë, whose *Wuthering Heights* (1847) partakes of the demonic sensibility of Romantic fiction,[8] Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*, 1847), Charles Dickens (*The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 1870, "The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain", 1843, and other ghost stories), Edward Bulwer-Lytton (*Zanoni*, 1842, "The Haunted and the Haunters", 1852), William Harrison Ainsworth (*The Lancashire Witches*, 1848), G.W.M. Reynolds (*The Mysteries of London*, 1844-1845), Wilkie Collins (*The Woman in White*, 1859-1860; Mil-

7 "It is ironic", observes David Richter, "that the Gothic was displaced by 1820 by the historical romance of Scott, who adopted its plots and themes, but set them in a colder verisimilar world" (2016, 473).

8 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar demonstrate Brontë's dependence on Mary Shelley's technique of "evidentiary narrative technique [...] a Romantic story-telling method that emphasizes the ironic disjunctions between different perspectives on the same events as well as the ironic tensions that inhere in the relationship between surface drama and concealed authorial intention" (Gilbert, Gubar 2000, 249).

bank 1992, 54-79). The Gothic did not disappear, it became, in fact, "ubiquitous" (Killeen 2009, 3).

Both the writers in the realist mode and the supernaturalists were conscious of the bond between fact and fiction: the former would not exclude the supernatural from their works by incorporating it in a domesticated form, the latter would try not to fully subscribe to a contrary principle of 'pulp fiction'. As we have seen in the preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, the Gothic writers considered the necessity of presenting the marvellous, the monstrous, the abnormal within the limits of factual and social acceptability. Some may have extended the limits beyond the given norms, or invented new modes of representation,[9] while others agreed to a compromise between excess and moral and stylistic decorum on the other. The realist writers absorbed the Gothic in the psychology of their characters or in the historical context of their stories. It is possible to extend to most novels what Andrew Smith says of *Jane Eyre*: "the Gothic permeates the novel by turning commonplace phenomena […] into symbolic realities" (Smith 2007, 82).

4 The Supernatural in a Disenchanted World

The nineteenth century saw the transformation of English society and culture towards the "disenchantment of the world", according to Max Weber's famous formula. Science, the Industrial revolution, and the hegemony of the new economic interests were replacing theology with materialist thought, and a religious telos with utilitarian, commercial and budgetary aims. "Facts, facts, facts!" cries Mr. Gradgrind, the Benthamite schoolmaster of Dickens's *Hard Times*, a parody and satire of the advent of a utilitarian and philistine age in which no imagination and even no representation can match the usefulness of utmost factuality:

> "Fact, fact, fact!" said the gentleman. And "Fact, fact, fact!" repeated Thomas Gradgrind. "You are to be in all things regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "by fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force the people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flow-

9 According to George E. Haggerty, Lewis and Maturin found a new way of overcoming the dichotomy between romance and novel by blending the subjective and the objective "in the depths of a perceiving consciousness [and] as a result, the limits of the real can be extended to include detail of a kind that is inadmissible in objective literature" (Haggerty 1985, 391).

> ers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find that foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon your crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use,' said the gentleman, 'for all these purposes, combinations and modifications (in primary colours) of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste". (Dickens 1989, 12)

In a secularised world in which only facts count and you are not permitted to imagine, project or paint things with your mind, in which taste is equated with statistics, life can no longer be regulated by "mysterious, unpredictable forces, […] on the contrary, we can in principle *control everything by means of calculation*"; in the brave new world of engineers, medical doctors, economists, planners, etc., technology has replaced magic: "we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead technology and calculation achieve our ends" (Weber 2008, 35; emphasis in original).[10] Weber's disenchantment thesis has been discussed, contested and rephrased, and Charles Taylor's reformulation of a dialectics between disenchantment and re-enchantment in his monumental *A Secular Age* seems closer to what happened in the literary field too (Taylor 2007; for an application of Taylor's thesis to Victorian aesthetics see, for instance, Lyons 2015).

The nineteenth century is, by general (though not undisputed) critical consent, the age of realism and the realistic novel. This has been accepted as a truism possibly ever since Virginia Woolf launched her famous attack on the novelists of the previous generation in *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (1924), in which she denounced the methods of realistic fiction to describe people, events and settings in the minutest physical detail, as opposed to the Modernist fictionalisation of characters' minds and the inner meanders of the self. Woolf's essay has thus been considered a turning point for the critical recognition,

10 Dickens's exaggeration of course is a satire of some tendencies of his times. According to Northrop Frye, "*Hard Times* […] comes nearest to being what in our day is sometimes called the dystopia, the book which, like *Brave New World* or *1984*, shows us the nightmare world that results from certain perverse tendencies inherent in a society getting free play". Frye clarifies that Dickens defends realism from the more uncanny aspects of the utilitarian – we can add, disenchanted – trends in nineteenth-century society. Paradoxically, an extreme factualism is a form of imaginary delusion, to which a just proportion of imaginative powers is the right antidote: "Dickens sees in the cult of facts and statistics a threat, not to the realistic novelist, but to the unfettered imagination, the mind that can respond to fairy tales and fantasy and understand their relevance to reality" (Frye 1974, 549).

and at the same time the modern demise, of the domain of realism. It certainly helped to mark the beginning of a new theoretical and technical awareness that was to change the course of fiction.

Although Woolf exposed the tendency of Victorian and Edwardian fiction to overemphasise realistic features, she apparently failed to recognise the less patent, but vital and indeed ubiquitous presence of a series of modes related to the fantastic – the preternatural, the marvellous, the wonderful, the abnormal, the monstrous, etc. – that equally pertained to nineteenth-century literature and often underlay the hegemonic realistic mode, as has already been suggested (see also Willis 2012). Moreover there can be little doubt that such literary undercurrents diverting from the realistic norm impacted on Modernist literature itself, and even on later twentieth-century works, with a culmination in the postmodern era.

William Wordsworth's "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1801), the manifesto of Romanticism, referred to a generic supernatural as a necessary mode in the new literature his and Coleridge's collection proposed. This supernatural most often took the form of the Gothic in the fiction of the period, ranging from James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* to the later short stories by E.A. Poe, or it became the object of a parodic re-reading, as in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*[11] and Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). The presence of the supernatural and of annexed expressions of the improbable or implausible in the poetics of Romanticism was first evidenced by Meyer H. Abrams in his two ground-breaking studies *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971).

The interest in the fantastic and its ramifications that traversed Romantic literature was substantially subdued in the high Victorian age, when literature became aligned with the prevailing ethos of efficiency, pragmatism, and earnestness, and was consistent with burgeoning positivism. Nevertheless, even though this epistemological approach was predominant throughout the period, the presence of eccentric, non-normative, anti-realistic literary modes was never seriously challenged. Sometimes these were marginal, underdeveloped manifestations within traditional portrayals of reality, such as in the above-mentioned novels by Dickens or by Emily and Charlotte Brontë; very occasionally, on the other hand, the deviations from the realistic norm surfaced more clearly in texts that can well be considered as belonging to the fantastic, the preter- or super-natural, the grotesque, etc. This is the case of George Eliot's "The Lifted Veil" (1859), "a tale of the supernatural [a] strange and disturbing occult novella"

11 Accordng to Robert Miles, it is a "carnivalesque" parody that sets a dialogue with the GOthic without rejecting it entirely (Miles 1993, 136).

(Pickett 2000, 193), which stands out as a generic *hapax legomenon* not only within the author's macrotext, but also in contemporary literature. The tendency increased as the century drew to a close and the epistemological framework moved towards the non-representational precepts of the Aesthetic Movement recommended by Walter Pater in his aspiration "To burn always with [a] hard gemlike flame" (Pater 1873, 210), uncorrupted by the world's ugliness, in both art and life. Among Pater's disciples, Vernon Lee was the one who most conspicuously scrutinised the anti-realistic implications of his poetics. In her collection *Hauntings. Fantastic Stories* (1890), she rejected Victorian codes of representation to bring forth issues related to Aestheticism, Symbolism, and Decadence. The "Preface" to that volume offers a unique theoretical contribution on the *fin-de-siècle* conception of the supernatural, which is described as "terrible to our ancestors and terrible but delicious to ourselves, sceptical posterity" (Lee 1890, vii), thus signalling a clear-cut rupture with the mode's past production and reception practices. Lee's definition of the ghost story elevates such practices to the mere psychological level:

> [Ghosts] are things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters, and faded herbs and flowers, whence arises that odour (we all know it), musty and damp, but penetratingly sweet and intoxicatingly heady, which hangs in the air when the ghost has swept through the unopened door, and the flickering flames of candle and fire start up once more after waning.
>
> The genuine ghost? And is not this he, or she, this one born of ourselves, of the weird places we have seen, the strange stories we have heard? (xi-x)

Unsurprisingly, the intellectual milieu of which Lee was part produced a hitherto unknown abundance and variety of fantastic fiction. Hybrid typologies, such as the sci-fi and detective story supernatural, the vampire story, the *femme fatale* ghost fiction, the mythological supernatural, the feminist utopia/dystopia, were all encompassed within the overdetermined label 'fantastic', as explored by some of the articles in the present issue. The re-discussion of aesthetic, social-political, gender, scientific, or racial categories that was emerging and growing more radical at the time found frequent literary expression in a questioning of the nature and statute of mimesis. The most significant text in this sense is Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" (1891), in which mimetic practices are refuted through paradox and witticism coupled with unprecedented iconoclasm. Wilde's argumentations are not restricted to literature but include the figurative

arts, as when he declares that the *fin de siècle* is no longer an age for taking nature as a paragon, since art is so far superior to both nature and life that, in the writer's programmatic aphorism, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life (Wilde 1905, 32). The controversial repercussions of Wilde's thesis were still echoing ten years later, when George Bernard Shaw appropriated them as evidence of the necessity for a thorough reform of drama. Shaw put the blame for the contemporary theatrical "misrepresentation of humanity" – an unforgivable fault in his opinion – on the unexpected mythopoeic power of popular, and lower in his eyes, forms of art. Not only did he notice that "when a certain type of feature appears in painting and is admired as beautiful, it presently becomes common in nature", but also that the conventions of the worst sentimental literature are often bound to become "the laws of personal honour" (Shaw 1906, xix), thus hinting at moral biases behind Wilde's "reverse mimesis" (Burwick 2001, 161). Despite Shaw's resistance, and though being disregarded by the following pre- and post-war generations, the *fin-de-siècle* tenets codified by Wilde paved the way for anti-mimetic Modernist poetics.

Theoretical recognition of the fantastic in its broadest sense, that is to say as a possible representational model of reality, however transformed and distorted, only came much later, in the seventies and eighties. Structuralism, with its formalist interest in genres and modes, produced Tzvetan Todorov's landmark study *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), which was soon countered by Irène Bessière's *Le récit fantastique: la poétique de l'incertain* (1973), a wide-ranging historical overview of fantastic fiction from the perspective of what would nowadays be called world literature. Postmodernism, with its re-evaluation of the eccentric, deviant, non-normative and with the challenges it posited to representation, gave full-fledged importance to non-realistic modes of expression which were at the centre of Rosemary Jackson's *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Remo Ceserani's later *Il fantastico* (1996) is not only a fine example of such criticism, but possibly the first study to identify a variety of characteristic fictional forms that pertained to nineteenth-century non-realistic literature: the archeological fantastic, erotic fantastic, aesthetic fantastic, decadent fantastic, etc. Only in the last twenty years or so have critical contributions concentrated more and more on the fantastic in the nineteenth century, often discussing single forms stemming from that overarching category and selecting precise historical intervals within the broader periodisation. Specialists have hence fostered the debate around certain aspects or manifestations of the fantastic in the Victorian age (see Wolfreys 2002; Brown, Burdett, Thurschwell 2004; Harris 2008), and late-Victorian times (Smith 2004; Ruddick 2007; Grimes 2011; Beran, Grubica 2016).

The articles on the nineteenth century supernatural contained in this issue of *English Literature* deal with a variety of issues hinging

upon the complex relationship between realism and the marvellous or the abnormal. The vampire story, for instance, a genre that often lay at the intersection of different types of the nineteenth-century fantastic, is central to the first article here devoted to *fin-de-siècle* literature: Laura Giovannelli's "'Things that make one doubt if they be mad or sane': Coping with the Monstrous in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*". Giovannelli examines the interaction between the phenomenology of the monstrous and an array of historical and socio-cultural discourses in Stoker's novel. She analyses Stoker's transcultural and transhistorical sources, as well as his reliance on contemporary (pseudo)scientific notions ranging from criminal anthropology to biomedical research, sexology, degeneration theory, and atavistic regression. Stoker is shown to appropriate contentious political topics of debate of the time, such as ethnic allegiances and the fear of attacks by marginal subjects of the British Empire that would produce reverse-colonisation processes, also bringing with them the threat of viral contaminations. The commingling of the monstrous and abnormal with these elements from everyday reality shows how *Dracula* provides crucial insights into the oxymoronic 'mimetic wonders' of its age.

The theme of vampirism is also central to Angelo Riccioni's "Robert Louis Stevenson and the *fin-de-siècle* vampire: 'Olalla' (1885) as 'Aesthetic Fantastic'". The article provides unusual critical perspectives in discussing Stevenson's vampire short story, set in Spain, in which the preternatural overlaps with the exotic and aesthetic. The composition of "Olalla" was concomitant with that of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, whose publication it shortly preceded, and hence the short story has often been overshadowed by that greater achievement. On the whole, "Olalla" has been seen as a derivative work whose interest mainly lies in its concoction of different sources. Riccioni resists such traditional interpretations and contends that Stevenson's inspiration for the text came from the most typical verbal-visual imagery of prominent aesthetic artists, in particular Walter Pater and Edward Burne-Jones.

Julie Gay's "Monstrous Islands and Literary Hybrids at the Fin de siècle in Conan Doyle's, R.L. Stevenson's, and H.G. Wells's fiction" explores those authors' choice of marginal islands as fictional settings and views it as both a literal escape from the contemporary world and an artistic one from the constraints of realism, thus following Suzanne Keen's definition of the "narrative annexe" (see Keen 1998). Their ultimate aim was an aesthetic aspiration to more imaginative forms of writing whose origins lay in the interaction between geographical spaces and literary aesthetics. Specifically, islands became the ideal locus to challenge realism and develop discourses around the fantastic, the marvellous, and even the monstrous that led to the creation of distinctively hybrid literary texts.

Nicholas Freeman's "Realism and the Supernatural in Ghost Stories of the *Fin de Siècle*" examines preternatural-themed short fictions by Vernon Lee, Ella D'Arcy, Rudyard Kipling, and Gertrude Atherton, ultimately finding that forms of realistic practices typical of the late-Victorian period are central to these texts and contribute to their complexity and sophistication. An example of such imbrications between realism and the fantastic is given by Henry James's psychological realism, which Freeman finds influential for *fin-de-siècle* fantasy and horror stories. However, Freeman's analysis is not restricted to late-Victorianism. He draws significant connections between turn-of-the-century short fictions (from the 1880s to 1905) and Modernist novels, identifying continuities in both realistic practices and the treatment of the supernatural, thus implicitly finding fault with the revisionist attitudes of Modernists, who underestimated Victorian and late-Victorian fictions as sites for literary experimentation. It follows that the rigid dismissal of realism by Modernists, as exemplified by Woolf's aforementioned essay, underestimated its importance and adaptability for the following generation. Woolf and her contemporaries called for a shift in authorial perspectives in order to bring human psyche to the fore of narrative attention, without realising that those perspectives were often already present in nineteenth-century narratives associated to the fantastic mode, as was the case with Vernon Lee.

5 Coda: Disenchantment and Re-Enchantment through Fact *and* Fiction

In one of the most interesting monographs published in recent years on the wonderful in English literature, Sarah Tindal Kareem's *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (2014), the question of the disenchantment and the re-enchantment of the world is raised in terms that converge with the dialectics of fact and fiction that is visible in the formation of modern narrative. Kareem finds that the current (we might add, post-Enlightenment) condition of inhabiting a world that believes and does not believe at the same time, that is divided between credence and scepticism, reflects the condition of disenchantment and re-enchantment we experience at the same time. This was the condition experienced by the writers of the supernatural, the marvellous and the abnormal, but also by the realist writers too who aligned themselves with a disenchanted thought (based on empirical epistemology, roughly stated) but then discovered and proclaimed the enchantment of ordinary life. Elaborating on Michael McKeon's dialectics of naive empiricism and extreme scepticism (McKeon 1987), Kareem thinks that a new category emerged in the interplay between a naturalistic and a wonderful approach to

narration, the discursive category of 'fiction' as distinct from fact, which however does not erase fact but incorporates it in the representation of "the marvellous in life". "In a delicate negotiation", adds Kareem, "fiction accommodates readers' skepticism while also asking that readers allow the possibility of the strange and surprising to infiltrate everyday life" (Kareem 2014, 3). The disenchanted attitude typical of sceptical philosophy (for instance, of Hume's refusal to confound *post hoc* with *propter hoc*) and the emergence of common sense that frees man from the fetters of superstition do not oppose the wonder promoted by fiction, which does indeed succeed in re-enchanting ordinary experience and in tempering the extraordinary through the ordinary:

> Instead of arguing […] that early eighteenth-century fiction produces enchantment by shielding the reader from reality's randomness, I suggest that eighteenth-century fiction produces wonder by plunging its reader into the radical indeterminacy that Hume's epistemology reveals […] I attend to the period's embrace not of irrationality, but of more equivocal feelings: doubt and diffidence, feelings that are at once destabilizing and exhilarating, and that foster a pleasure in the sensation of not knowing – of wondering – itself. In arguing this, I show how eighteenth-century fiction enchants not despite but because of its skeptical impulses. (Kareem 2014, 15-16)

The pleasure of the wonderful delight produced by both the ordinary and the supernatural, in their respective and different forms, reformulates the re-enchantment of the world in a way that goes beyond the disenchantment-enchantment opposition. Both realist novels and supernatural stories invoke a willing suspension of disbelief: in the former, the fictional trick works precisely because we marvel at the capacity of a convincing representation of ordinary life to involve the readers in what Edgar Allan Poe called "the potent magic of verisimilitude" (13); in the latter, the suspension of disbelief is brought to its extreme and produces a sceptical awareness of the philistine way in which society may consider the commonsensical. The result, according to Kareem, is that fiction exposes "self-proclaimed arbiters of truth […] as promoters of false realism that conceals its artifice" (188), produces a "self-awareness" that combines reflection and engrossment in the act of reading, and continuously shapes and reshapes wonder, estranging it from uncritical admiration and reconfiguring it as "open, critical wonder" (216-20). The dialectic of the verisimilar and the marvellous does not result in an erasure of both of them, but in their reconfiguration, so that disenchantment and re-enchantment produce a higher form of new (disenchanted) enchant-

ment.[12] In fiction, doubt and marvel do not necessarily oppose one another: they may also converge and even coincide. The fiction of the supernatural helps us to marvel at both the wonders of nature and our capacity to reason on them, even in the most commonsensical ways, without ever letting us fall into the trap of making a fetish of facts and truth.[13] In the end, as Walpole believed, it may be possible "to reconcile the two kinds" of fiction, the natural and the supernatural.

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12 In Diderot's view, "[c]ombining the ordinary with the marvelous is the goal of art. The purpose of verisimilitude is not to eliminate but to attenuate the marvelous, to render it plausible, to make it seem possible" (Cuillé 2021, 137).

13 On the modern fetishism of the factual and of the rational (of an instrumental reason) see Latour 1999.

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