Goddu, Teresa A. "Introduction to American Gothic." *The Horror Reader*. Ed. Ken Gelder. London & New York: Routledge, 2000. 265-70. Print.

TERESA A. GODDU

INTRODUCTION TO *AMERICAN GOTHIC* (extract)

Defining the American Gothic

WHEN MODIFIED BY *AMERICAN*, the gothic loses its usual referents. [. . .] *As a critical category, the American gothic lacks the self-evident* validity of its British counterpart.

Several factors contribute to the uncertain status of the American gothic. Unlike the British gothic, which developed during a definable time period (usually marked as beginning with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* [1764] and continuing through the 1820s) and has a recognized coterie of authors (Walpole, Radcliffe, Monk Lewis, Godwin, Hogg, Maturin, Mary Shelley), the American gothic, one of several forms that played a role in the development of the early American novel, is less easily specified in terms of a particular time period or group of authors. There was no founding period of gothic literature in America, and given the critical preference for the term *romance*, few authors were designated as gothicists. Even when authors such as Edgar Allan Poe or periods such as the twentieth-century Southern Renaissance are associated with the gothic, they reveal the difficulty of defining the genre in national terms: the American gothic is most recognizable as a regional form. Identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wants to disassociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot. America's self-mythologization as a nation of hope and harmony directly contradicts the gothic's most basic impulses. The American gothic, as Leslie Fiedler points out, is 'a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation' (Fiedler: 1982, 29).

If the American gothic is difficult to understand due to its seemingly antagonistic relationship to America's national identity, it is equally difficult to

classify in generic terms. Just as *gothic* unsettles the idea of America, the modifier *American* destabilizes understandings of the gothic. Once imported to America, the gothic's key elements were translated into American terms, and its formulas were also unfixed. As Charles Brockden Brown, one of America's first novelists to use the gothic, argues in his preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799), 'the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe' (Brown: 1984, 3). 'Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras' might be the materials usually employed in this genre, Brown continues, but the 'incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology' (ibid., 3). To be sure, some authors, such as Isaac Mitchell in *The Asylum; or, Alonzo and Melissa* (1811), imported castles to America, but most American authors transformed and hence dislocated British models of the gothic. Combined with other literary forms and adapted to native themes, the American gothic consists of a less coherent set of conventions. Its more flexible form challenges the critically unified gothic genre and demands a reassessment of the gothic's parameters. As a result, a definition of the American gothic depends less on the particular set of conventions it establishes than on those it disrupts. Any attempt to define it without showing how the terms 'American' and 'gothic' complicate and critique each other curtails the challenge to both terms.

Even the British gothic, against which the American gothic is defined, has proven oddly elusive. From early works such as Edith Birkhead's *The Tale of Terror: A Study of the Gothic Romance* (1921), to more recent studies such as Eve Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), an effort to demarcate the conventions of this genre has been at the heart of criticism of the gothic. The debate between Robert Hume and Robert Platzner in *PMLA* highlights the critical need to define the 'essence' of the gothic and the difficulty of doing so. While the two disagree on the central traits, they are 'agreed that the "generic character" of the Gothic novel is hard to deal with' (Hume and Platzner: 1971, 268). Despite its formulaic and conventional nature, despite its easily listed elements and effects – haunted houses, evil villains, ghosts, gloomy landscapes, madness, terror, suspense, horror – the gothic's parameters and 'essence' remain unclear. While easy classification seems to imply a definitional stability, the gothic genre is extremely mutable. Cobbled together of many different forms and obsessed with transgressing boundaries, it represents itself not as stable but as generically impure. As Maggie Kilgour writes, 'one of the factors that makes the gothic so shadowy and nebulous a genre, as difficult to define as any gothic ghost, is that it cannot be seen in abstraction from the other literary forms from whose graves it arises. . . . The form is thus itself a Frankenstein's monster, assembled out of the bits and pieces of the past' (Kilgour: 1995, 3–4).

Though the gothic foregrounds its generic instability, critics still insist on categorizing it. The tendency toward 'generic essentializing' (Hart: 1973) in criticism on the gothic has to do with where this genre ranks in the canon's hierarchy. The drive to order and identify the gothic stems less from a critical desire to discover its particular essence than from a need to differentiate it from other, 'higher' literary forms. As Jacques Derrida suggests in his essay 'The Law of Genre,'

the critical desire for generic classification and clarity signals a fear of contagion: the law of genre depends upon the principle of impurity. Categorical generic distinctions aim to ensure the purity of certain individual works or the stature of related genres. Associated with the hackneyed, the feminine, and the popular, the gothic lacks respectability and hence must be quarantined from other literary forms. Elizabeth Napier, for instance, would 'delimit the genre with greater strictness,' arguing that

> it is essential to make such distinctions in the case of the Gothic because of its peculiar likeness to many of the more searching works that it in part inspired. The Gothic does, in fact, exhibit many of the procedures of fragmentation and disjunction that the romantics . . . would elevate to art, but they seldom at this early stage lead to the profound realizations about human consciousness that some critics have asserted that they do. It is with this systematic failure that the present study is concerned.
>
> (Napier: 1987, xiii, 7)

Seeing the gothic as a 'systematic failure' and arguing that it is a cruder anticipation of Romanticism and hence easily distinguishable from it, Napier polices the difference between the two forms. Ironically, the likeness between the gothic and the romantic necessitates that the gothic's boundaries be located and limited. Whether establishing a distinction between the romantic and the gothic or between the popular gothic and the more serious works it inspired, the critical aim is a clean canon.

The desire to quarantine the gothic from higher literary forms is especially prevalent in the scholarship devoted to American literature. Given its historical belatedness, critics are particularly anxious to provide the American literary canon with a respectable foundation. American literature might be 'embarrassingly, a gothic fiction,' as Leslie Fiedler argues, but critics have made every effort to hide this fact (Fiedler: 1982, 29). Despite the origins of the American romance in the gothic and historical romance, critics such as Richard Chase in his foundational work *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) have followed Hawthorne's idiosyncratic use of the term in order to define a respectable canon. As Nina Baym has pointed out, before 1860 the term *romance* in America connoted characteristics now associated with the gothic: *romance* designated 'pre-modern types of novels . . . which depended on supernatural and marvelous events to resolve their plots and to achieve their effects,' along with works of sensational fiction or fictions associated with the 'highly wrought, the heavily plotted, the ornately rhetorical, the tremendously exciting and the relentlessly exterior' (Baym: 1984, 437, 438). In American literary criticism, however, the romance has come to be elevated above and separated from its modifier, gothic, rather than recognized as sharing gothic characteristics.

The category of romance dominates the critical discourse within American literature while the term *gothic* is almost fully repressed. For instance, in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Richard Chase subsumes gothic under the heading of melodrama:

> The term has taken on a general meaning beyond the Mrs. Radcliffe kind of thing and is often used rather loosely to suggest violence, mysteries, improbabilities, morbid passions, inflated and complex language of any sort. It is a useful word but since, in its general reference, it becomes confused with 'melodrama,' it seems sensible to use 'melodrama' for the general category and reserve 'Gothic' for its more limited meaning.
>
> (Chase: 1980, 37)

By making the gothic a 'subdivision' of melodrama, Chase limits its application. More recently, in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1988), David Reynolds uses the heading 'Dark Adventure' to describe gothic works. In both cases, *gothic* is replaced by a broader generic term. This displacement also occurs when *dark* is substituted for *gothic* as the modifier of romance. Chase follows Malcolm Cowley in identifying Charles Brockden Brown as the 'originator of that strand of dark romance that runs through the tradition' (ibid., 31); Reynolds argues that the roots of Dark Adventure are in 'European Dark Romanticism' (Reynolds: 1989, 190). Whether the term *gothic* is displaced in favor of another generic category or the broader, less-specific modifier *dark*, it disappears and is securely segregated from the romance. In American literary criticism, then, there is no need to police the boundaries between romantic and gothic, high and low, since the gothic is erased from the equation altogether.

The replacement of *gothic* with *dark* signifies the critical displacement of the category from discussions of American literature. While the adjective *dark* conjures the atmospheric associations of the gothic, it does not carry the same generic baggage. Unlike the term *gothic*, which connotes 'popular,' *dark* has come to signify 'profound' in American literary criticism. Beginning with Herman Melville's famous discourse on Hawthorne's soul, which is 'shrouded in blackness, ten times black,' American literature's 'power of blackness' has been defined as mystical and metaphysical: the 'deep far-away things' in Hawthorne are also the 'flashings-forth of the intuitive Truth in him,' claims Melville (Melville: 1987, 243, 244). In *The Power of Blackness*, Harry Levin also reads American literature's blackness in weighty symbolic terms. The vision of evil it represents is that of the introspective mind, not some staged fright: the 'symbolic character of our greatest fiction,' Levin argues, is linked to the 'dark wisdom of our deeper minds' (Levin: 1958, xii). In distinguishing between the 'palatable' gothic novels that translate gothic decor into a symbol for the 'hidden blackness of the human soul and human society' and those gothic novels that fail to make their 'cheapjack machinery' symbolic, Leslie Fiedler's work exemplifies the way that *blackness* is critically weighted: the gothic's superficial, dark spectacles are transformed into the more meaningful symbolism of psychological and moral blackness (Fiedler: 1982, 28, 27). American literature's *darkness*, then, becomes associated with depth rather than surface, a psychological and metaphysical symbolism rather than cheap tricks.

However, at the same time that the term *blackness* displaces the gothic's unpalatable associations, it is stripped of its racial connotations. By evacuating *darkness* of racial meaning, critics can claim that the blackness that typifies the American romance is, for the most part, symbolic and not societal, a sign of an inner darkness or moral truth. This conjunction between the displacement of the gothic as a critical term and the abstraction of the American romance's blackness is hardly coincidental. [But] the American gothic is haunted by race: resurrecting the term *gothic* reasserts the racial roots of the romance's blackness. Significantly, when race is restored to the *darkness* of American literature, the gothic reappears as a viable category. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Toni Morrison not only insists upon restoring race to the *blackness* of American literature, but also reconstructs the American literary canon in terms of the *gothic* romance. Remarking on 'how troubled, how frightened and haunted our early and founding literature truly is,' Morrison argues that one of the words we have for this haunting is *gothic* (Morrison: 1992, 35, 36). Looking at disturbances within the American romance, Morrison reveals how race haunts American literature. Once specified in historical rather than symbolic terms, *darkness* emblematizes the gothic's disruptive potential instead of replacing the term as a more palatable modifier.

[. . .]

Historicizing the American gothic

When Cathy Davidson poses the question, 'Does America have enough of a history to sustain the Gothic's generic challenge to history, its rewriting and unwriting of history?' she exposes the American gothic's problematic status: it is an historical mode operating in what appears to be an historical vacuum (Davidson: 1986, 231). The gothic's connection to American history is difficult to identify precisely because of the national and critical myths that America and its literature *have* no history. [. . .] Views of the American gothic rely upon the traditional misreading of American literature as representing, in Richard Poirier's term, 'a world elsewhere.' Through critical readings of the romance as otherworldly, American literature's exceptionality came to be located in its ahistoricism. As Nina Baym points out, '[m]ost specialists in American literature have accepted the idea that in the absence of history (or a sense of history) as well as a social field, our literature has consistently taken an ahistorical, mythical shape for which the term "romance" is formally and historically appropriate' (Baym: 1984, 427). Despite the significant body of criticism that situates the British gothic within its cultural context, critics of the American gothic continue to resist historical readings. If the British gothic is read in social terms, the American gothic is viewed within psychological and theological rubrics. Because of America's seeming lack of history and its Puritan heritage, the American gothic, it has been argued, takes a turn inward, away from society and toward the psyche and the hidden blackness of the American soul. As Joseph Bodziock asserts, 'the American gothic replaced the social struggle of the European with a Manichean struggle between the moral forces of personal and communal order and the howling wilderness of chaos and moral depravity' (Bodziock: 1988, 33). Leslie Fiedler, the first critic to discuss the American gothic's peculiarity and to recognize its social impulse, sees the American gothic as 'a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption' (Fiedler: 1982, 160). For Fiedler, as for many others, the American gothic remains first and foremost an expression of psychological states.

Cathy Davidson and Lawrence Buell are two notable exceptions to this rule. Both argue that the American gothic has a social referent: Davidson sees the early American gothic as a critique of individualism and Buell notes in his study of the 'provincial gothic' the 'potential inherent in gothic, from the start, to give this irrationalist vision a social ground' (Buell: 1986, 352). Moreover, Karen Halttunen's work (1993) on how the 'cult of horror' emerged during the late eighteenth century in America and how nineteenth-century gothic literature illuminates redefinitions of pain provides historical frameworks in which to view the development of the American gothic and suggests that it responded to and reinforced certain historical movements. Halttunen's historicizing of the American gothic also reflects a movement toward reading the American gothic in social, not psychological, terms.

Arguing that America does have enough history to sustain the gothic's challenge, the American gothic [can be situated] within specific sites of historical haunting, most notably slavery. American gothic literature criticizes America's national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation's claim to purity and equality. Showing how these contradictions contest and constitute national identity even as they are denied, the gothic tells of the historical horrors that make national identity possible yet must be repressed in order to sustain it.

I [would] use the term 'abject' to signify these historical horrors. The nation's narratives – its foundational fictions and self-mythologizations – are created through a process of displacement: their coherence depends on exclusion. By resurrecting what these narratives repress, the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America's self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity. However, while the gothic reveals what haunts the nation's narratives, it can also work to coalesce those narratives. Like the abject, the gothic serves as the ghost that both helps to run the machine of national identity and disrupts it. The gothic can strengthen as well as critique an idealized national identity.

[. . .] Although the gothic is not the only form that articulates abjection, it serves as a primary means of speaking the unspeakable in American literature.