



**HAL**  
open science

## “In a Glass Grotesquely”: Patrick McGrath’s Quaint Old England

Jocelyn Dupont

► **To cite this version:**

Jocelyn Dupont. “In a Glass Grotesquely”: Patrick McGrath’s Quaint Old England. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d’études anglaises contemporaines*, 2009, 37, pp.87-98. 10.4000/ebc.3685 . hal-02441379

**HAL Id: hal-02441379**

**<https://univ-perp.hal.science/hal-02441379>**

Submitted on 2 Jun 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## ***“In a Glass Grottesquely”: Patrick McGrath’s Quaint Old England***

**Jocelyn Dupont**

### **Abstract**

Patrick McGrath’s new Gothic literature owes a great part of its early success to the singular, often gleefully weird depictions of England it offers, such as the bleak and misty Berkshire landscapes of Ceck Marsh in *The Grottesque* (1989). Although influences such as Evelyn Waugh’s have sometimes been mentioned to characterize McGrath’s satirical approach to his home country, which he recently relinquished to become an American citizen, it appears that his portrayal of Albion is more singular than intertextual, infusing as it does England’s crumbling respectability with a high dose of uncanny grottesqueries. This paper investigates these strategies of distortions designed to make the distant homely incongruously uncanny by looking into a selection of three early, little known short stories – “The Lost Explorer” (1988), “Vigilance” (1989) and “Cleave the Vampire: A Gothic Pastoral” (1991) – in which the satirical vein is at its peak. As the recently published *Trauma* (2008) – McGrath’s first wholly American text – seems to have brought the author’s parodic incursions into familiar English territories to an end, the time seems right to undertake a synthetic delineation and analysis of McGrath’s quaintly Gothic England from *Blood and Water* (1988) to *Port Mungo* (2004).

### **Résumé**

Le succès des premiers écrits néo-gothiques de l’écrivain anglo-américain Patrick McGrath tient en partie à la nature singulière, souvent aussi étrange que délurée de leur décor anglais, à l’image des paysages de marais lugubres et brumeux du Berkshire où se déroule l’action de *The Grottesque*, son premier roman. Bien que des influences comme celle d’Evelyn Waugh aient pu être évoquées par la critique pour caractériser l’approche satirique de McGrath à l’égard de son pays natal, le tableau qu’il dresse d’Albion est tout aussi personnel qu’intertextuel, insufflant à la respectabilité décrépie de l’Angleterre une bonne dose d’étranges grottesqueries. Cet article propose une analyse des stratégies de distorsion qui visent à muer la terre abandonnée en *locus* de l’étrangeté, plus incongrue qu’inquiétante, à travers l’étude de trois nouvelles de jeunesse peu connues, « The Lost Explorer », « Vigilance » et « Cleave The Vampire », dans lesquelles la veine satirique à l’encontre de l’Angleterre est à son comble. La parution récente de *Trauma*, le premier texte entièrement américain de l’auteur, semble signer la fin des retours parodiques vers l’Angleterre des origines, si bien que le moment paraît approprié pour entreprendre une étude des modalités de sa représentation depuis *Blood and Water* (1988) jusqu’à *Port Mungo* (2004).

***“In a Glass Grottesquely”: Patrick McGrath’s Quaint Old England.***

Although the Gothic novel, from Father Walpole to Mother Radcliffe, first flourished under the quill of English writers in the later half of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, none of the stories of terror and transgression these books depict are actually set in the enlightened, Protestant England of the time. This geographical taboo finds a further echo in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Jane Austen’s parodic answer to Gothic novels, when her very sensible narrator famously comments that:

Charming as were all Mrs Radcliffe’s works, charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them, perhaps, that human nature, at least in the midland countries of England, was to be looked for. (Austen 137)

As though especially designed to prove her wrong, the new Gothic writings of English-born novelist Patrick McGrath owe a great deal of their success among readers to the unmistakable Englishness<sup>i</sup> of their settings which, from his early short stories published in the late 1980s to *Martha Peake* (2000), unfold precisely in the aforementioned “midland countries of England”, with a particular taste for the world-famous stunning scenery of Berkshire<sup>ii</sup>.

Such geographical idiosyncrasy, however, calls for two observations at this preliminary stage. Firstly, McGrath’s Gothic literature is of course much more internalized than linked to the quest for the awe-inspiring sublime which, in early Gothic fiction, was mostly to be sought for in the description of dramatic landscapes. No need, therefore, as in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* for the ragged peaks of the Apennines to serve as a potential terror catalyst. Cliffs and chasms in McGrath’s fiction are mental ones and may thus find in English landscapes a perfectly adequate setting, all the more so since they are likely to recall the surroundings of Broadmoor hospital – incidentally set in Berkshire – where, as critics and journalists are fond of repeating, young Patrick McGrath spent the first ten years or so of his life while his father worked there as superintendent.

Secondly, it must be pointed out that all of McGrath’s early texts, despite their being systematically set in England, were actually written “at an angle to the world”, from buoyant New York City to be specific, where the author has lived for more than twenty-five years after he decided to leave the English fatherland to settle permanently in the Big Apple to become

member of the rather exclusive New York literary world. And while Patrick McGrath is far from being the first English man of letters to have crossed the Atlantic to seek literary fame, he certainly is the first American Gothic Englishman in the trade, and more symptomatically one who owes part of his fame to his constant reliance on “an off-centred version of England as the location in which [he] focused on the precarious state of mental health of his protagonists” (Wroe 13).

The aim of this paper is to explore the peculiar Englishness of McGrath’s fictional settings by delving into some of his earliest texts which have never been discussed, either by critics or academics. These stories also provide us with the most exacerbated pictures of England to be found in McGrath’s literary production. As such, they seem to stand as the embryos of what, from the gloomy Berkshire decor of Crook manor in *The Grottesque* (1989) to the fever-infested marshes surrounding Drogo Hall in *Martha Peake*, was going to become McGrath’s English recipe for success, at least in the first years of his literary career.

In the chronological order of publication, the stories are “The Lost Explorer”, from the collection *Blood and Water*, McGrath’s first book, published in New York by Poseidon Press in 1988, followed by “Vigilance”, which appeared in the famous New York literary magazine *Conjunctions*<sup>iii</sup> in the fall of 1989, and lastly “Cleave the Vampire”, which features in a collection of second-rate horror tales entitled *I Shudder at Your Touch*, published in 1991. Taking things in a typically Gothic fashion, I would like to invert this order and start with a general browsing of English motifs in “Vigilance” and “Cleave”, before focussing on the strategies of dislocation<sup>iv</sup> at work in “The Lost Explorer”.

One of the strengths of McGrath’s early Gothic stems from the author’s reliance on excessively transgressive plots in a setting which, instead of functioning as the objective correlative of the protagonists’ mental decay, as in traditional Gothic literature, is used as an incongruous backdrop, steeped either in obsolescent respectability (“Cleave the Vampire”) or in a drab suburban atmosphere (“Vigilance”) much unlike the conventional urban Gothic representation of the city as an oppressive, maze-like environment derived notably from Stevenson’s *Strange Case* in the 1880s. In his early fiction, McGrath thus chose to depict an England steeped in its traditions, still wallowing in the remains of the Victorian age, a typical Good Old England not unlike that of Evelyn Waugh, whom McGrath has repeatedly mentioned as one of his favourite writers and whose influence, as we shall see, is sometimes more significant than it seems. The incongruity of highly transgressive stories unfolding in peaceful, respectable backgrounds which rely extensively on long-standing stereotypes of

Englishness also accounts for their grotesque dimension, as the grotesque has always thrived on the uncanny encounter between the gruesome and the comic. In his authoritative study of this concept, Wolfgang Kayser defines the grotesque as a mode essentially resting on contradiction:

Several contradictory feelings are aroused by the grotesque; we smile at the deformations but are appalled by the horrible and monstrous elements as such. The basic feeling, however, (...) is one of surprise and horror, an agonizing fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible. (Kayser 31)

The grotesque is a highly ambiguous mode, eliciting laughter where horror and transgression should supposedly lead the reader to experience fear or disgust. Yet from this essential ambiguity it also derives most of its critical potential. The grotesque is a highly adequate discursive mode to undermine narratives of authority – possibly even more so than the Gothic in the late twentieth century context, dominated by postmodern disorientation. The grotesque’s relentlessly subversive dimension may therefore explain McGrath’s choice to blend his New Gothicism with a touch of incongruous laughter when dealing with the peculiar “Englishness” that inhabits his earlier productions.

In “Cleave the Vampire”, the depiction of the mansion where the psychotic plot unfolds sets the tone at once:

Wallop Hall is situated deep in the rolling farmland of the Berkshire Downs, about five miles from the village of Wallop, a sleepy cluster of ancient, rumbling cottages which honeysuckle and dog rose twining about the doorway, and dampness and mildew within. There’s a shop or two, a church, an inn, – and the village green, a fine stretch of greensward with a wood on a far side and a cricket pavilion. (McGrath 1991, 119)

The mood is undoubtedly a pastoral one, and it hardly comes as a surprise to read that the story should be subtitled “A Gothic Pastoral”, simultaneously calling to mind two literary genres which are respectively the Gothic novel and the English Pastoral, taking us back all the way to the days of Spenserian nymphs<sup>v</sup>. With this tale, McGrath seems to inaugurate a new Gothic subgenre which one of the protagonists of the story refers to on one occasion as “Rustic Gothic” (McGrath 1991, 119), which, to start with, was an architectural offspring of

the Gothic revival in the Victorian era. As the description of the setting goes on, the Englishness of the place is exacerbated even further:

Insects murmured, and over on the far side of the green, by Gibbet's wood, a fat cow stood in a patch of sunlight and flicked at the flies with its tail. All very tranquil, all very pastoral, hearts at peace under an English heaven and so on. (McGrath 1991, 120)

The last sentence is a covert intertextual reference to Rupert Brooke's (1887-1915) poem "A Soldier" (1914). Brooke was one of the most bucolic Georgian poets, and his lyrical voice has become strongly attached to an idealized and nationalist vision of England in the early twentieth century. In the last sentence from the lines quoted above, McGrath recycles the final line of Brooke's poem, yet the addition of the phrase "and so on" at the end of the sentence denotes a clear disparaging intention. The "heavenly" setting thus verges on the ridiculous cliché, not to say the fully caricatural, and so do the characters peopling it, as the family portrait makes clear in the space of a few lines:

I am Lady Hock, of Wallop Hall, and Hilary is my daughter. When we reached the dining room a few minutes later Harry was already deep in the *Times* crossword; It was a bright sunny morning in August, I remember, and I asked Stoker, our butler, a corpulent man, to serve me kidneys. My son Charles was standing at the french windows and gazing out over the croquet lawn. "Perfect day for cricket," he said. "Couldn't have hoped for a better day". (McGrath 1991, 118-119)

As always in caricature, the intention is to inflate a certain number of features the better to deflate them eventually. In this short story, the respectability of the protagonists and their behaviours are deliciously yet also excessively English. Deflation comes from excessive accumulation in setting description, metaleptic interventions such as the one mentioned above and lastly from the association of a seemingly spotless external order with the most devastating interior entropy. As in *The Grotesque* with the criminal and paranoid behaviour of Sir Hugo Coal, what gives "Cleave the Vampire" its particular flavour is the brutal irruption of psychosis in the middle of such a perfect scene. "I felt as though a serpent had wormed its way into our Eden" (McGrath 1991, 122), Lady Hock suspects at one point. Not so bad a guess indeed, with the slight nuance that in that specifically English garden of Eden, Eve is also the viper: it is Lady Hock herself who suffers from acute delirious paranoia and ends up

brutally murdering poor Cleave, a young cricket player, armed with a croquet mallet and a meat skewer after she has become convinced he is a bloodthirsty vampire<sup>vi</sup>. The very best English decorum is thus intertwined with brutal dementia, an incongruous blend which, as we saw, is typical of the grotesque, a poetic and aesthetic mode that McGrath favoured in the first years of his career.

“Vigilance” is a somewhat more subdued tale of madness, taking the reader in “deep psychotic territory”<sup>vii</sup> with a few stops along Earlsfield Road and Wandsworth Common in southwest London. In the story, the narrator is a young student in love with a certain Perkins, her lecturer in penal history. She is obsessed with surveillance, vigilance, cleanliness and safety locks. At the end of the tale the reader discovers that she actually keeps her mother locked up in the house and starves her to death, while her father, holed up in the garden shed, “won’t make it through the winter” (McGrath 1989a, 209). Beside these worrying aspects – “Vigilance” is far less grotesque a tale than “Cleave”, and as such it is much more deranging. The story is once again exquisitely English, not in the pastoral sense but rather in terms of social stereotypes. One feels almost immediately back at home in suburbia against that backdrop of “two-story Edwardian brick villas with bay windows and what had once been a front garden turned into a parking space for two cars, a red Ford and a green Mini” (McGrath 1989a, 200). Yet more so than its setting descriptions, what gives “Vigilance” its peculiar Englishness is its reliance on a vast gallery of names and objects loaded with a metonymic function. First there is a humorous insistence on the mother’s desperate plea for sausage and chips, the staple food – arguably after baked beans – of the average English home:

Mother was in a terrible state? What did she want? Sausage and chips. She’d not been eating for days, and though I tempted her with things I knew she enjoyed, like kelp, or tofu, she’d stubbornly refused to swallow a morsel. Now she wanted sausage and chips! She’d always given my father sausage and chips, she said tearfully, so why shouldn’t she have sausage and chips? (McGrath 1989a, 203-204)

Tokens of Englishness can also be found as consumable and disposable goods throughout the text, and, on one highly symptomatic occasion when the narrator is rummaging at night through the garbage cans of Perkins’ house, as detritus, metaphorically standing for the social remains, the abject part of consumer society, that which cannot be processed nor assimilated by the social organism as a whole, in this case middle-class England:

The whole story was spread there, before me in the beam of the flashlight, the whole story of how these people lived. Plastic packages that had once contained bacon; processed cheese; white bread; the contents of a hundred ashtrays; kitchen towels greasy with god knows what revolting fluids; the scraping of greasy plates, odd scraps of fat and bone, sheets of newspaper wrapped around unmentionable lumps of kitchen detritus – it was nauseating, but there was nothing I could *use*. (McGrath 1989a, 208)

The narrator's insistence on the possible *use* she could make of some of this refuse correlates another aspect of the discursive framework of the story, one that is closely linked to the representation of England as a utilitarian society. Not only is this narrator an obsessive neurotic type – and possibly also a representative of a generation of hard-line vegans that flourished in England, particularly among female students, in the late 1980s – she is also a diehard utilitarian. Her only god is Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), founding father of the utilitarian doctrine, whose name is repeatedly mentioned in the text, as well as his famous *Panopticon* (1780). In a final ironical twist at the end of the tale, she is proud to announce that she has just been accepted as the first female prison guard ever in Wandsworth prison. The Bentham intertext allows McGrath to satirically address an England – Thatcherite at the time – walled up in her rigid and austere political and social framework, from which the writer had to chosen to distance himself, in both physical and ethical terms.

Even though it does not draw up such a cliché image of England as “Cleave” does, “Vigilance” is a darkly comical tale which conveys an overall worrying and negative picture of the English. The recourse to dark humour is twofold. First, it confirms McGrath's positioning as a Gothic writer situated in what Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnick have rightly identified as the comic vein of the Gothic in their recent volume *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005), in which incongruity and grotesqueness serve as a critical metadiscourse within the literature of terror, which is therefore not to be read too literally:

The comic turn in Gothic (...) is intrinsic to a mode of writing that has been hybrid since its very inception. (...) Rather than setting up a binary between ‘serious’ and ‘comic’ Gothic texts, it is perhaps best to think of Gothic writing as a spectrum that, at one end, produces horror writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief, and, at the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to be taken seriously. (Zlosnick and Horner 4)

Secondly, as suggested in the introduction, reliance on the grotesque and dark humour is also a way to undermine authority. In her study on dark humour in British fiction, Lisa Coletta observes that “dark humour, like the carnivalesque, valorizes the subversion of authority, and this of course means political, religious and moral authority as well as even the idea of authority itself” (Coletta 34). By turning England into a locale of grotesqueness, rigidity and atavism, McGrath found the means to laugh down the many forms of authorities imposed on him before his departure to the United States, among which the paternal one certainly was not the least significant. The Englishness in his writings thus reads less as a symptom of nostalgia than a form of caustic revenge. As the textual analysis of these two early narratives has endeavoured to demonstrate, McGrath’s desire to settle accounts with Albion was particularly urgent in the first years of his writing career. What holds true for his short fiction also stands for his first two novels, *The Grotesque* (1989) and *Spider* (1991). Their respective descriptions of rural Berkshire in the late 1950s or the London East End before the Second World War abound in English *topoi* – both in the etymological sense of *topos* as a place, and in the figurative as a commonplace – and derogatory tokens of Englishness aimed at laughing down the “English type”. The following excerpt from *The Grotesque*, taken from a family scene in the Coal household, with its simultaneous mention of the iconic figure of Charles Darwin and some physiological atavism, should suffice to illustrate the point:

I was sorry to see [my grandson] go, I was fond of that little chap. I gave him a ten-shilling note when his parents weren’t looking and told him to forget Freud and read Darwin instead. “Read *The Origin of Species*, my boy,” I said. “Find out where you’re from”. His hair falling over his eyes in a thick fringe, he grinned at me in mock outrage, those good Coal teeth of his protruding far beyond the bottom lip, and ran a plump finger across his throat. “Never!” he said. (McGrath 1989b, 89)

Bearing in mind that these texts were all written by a London-born Englishman who settled in New York in his early thirties, one may thus wonder where exactly home is for Patrick McGrath. This certainly is a central question in “The Lost Explorer”, a story of unhomeliness *par excellence*. The plot is quite simple, and can almost be summed up in the title: one morning, a young girl finds a lost explorer in the garden of her home in London. He is suffering from delirious fever, and believes to be back in his childhood home. Evelyn, the young heroine, decides to hide him in her room, where he eventually passes away. At the end

of the story she buries him at the back of the garden. There are very few Gothic aspects in this tale – perhaps only the depiction of a labyrinthine garden and a gloomy gardening shed:

The Piker-Smiths' was one of those long narrow gardens enclosed by an old wall whose crumbling red bricks were overgrown with ivy. The path ran from the foot of the back-door steps between two flowerbeds and then twisted over a stretch of lawn before arriving at a small round goldfish pond, the surface of which was half-hidden by clusters of green-fronded water-lilies. Beyond the pond a gardening shed, its window misted with dust and cobwebs and its door secured by a huge rusting padlock, clung in ramshackle fashion to the corner formed by the east wall and the end wall. The rest of the garden beyond the pond was a tangled and overgrown mass of rhododendron bushes, into whose labyrinthine depths, since the death of the old gardener, only Evelyn now ventured. (McGrath 1988, 17)

The whole story, with its occasional moments of suspense, is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, conferring it a somewhat uncanny dimension. Yet the *Unheimlichkeit* of this tale brings us back to the very etymology of the term: *Heim* in German, home in English. This surely is a tale of “unhomeliness”, both for Evelyn, but also for the lost explorer, who believes he has returned to his childhood home. And if “home is the place where we repeat the past” (McGrath 2008, 189), as Charlie Weir, the psychiatrist narrator of McGrath's latest novel, suggests after Freud, one may wonder whether one way to interpret this lost explorer is not, to some extent, to see him as a fantastic projection of the writer himself, coming back as a literary explorer to the England of his past.

Another possible way to interpret the presence of such a visitor in Evelyn's Piker-Smith London home is to look at him through an intertextual lens. If, on the one hand, the unexpected presence of a lost explorer in a London home generates a supernatural effect, it may also be seen as a manifestation of “ungrammaticality”<sup>viii</sup>, prompting the reader to look through the text and into the intertext to make sense out of this seemingly nonsensical situation. One is thus guided towards a semiotic decoding of the text in which some elements will act as intertextual signposts or “interpretants”, double-coded terms connecting the text with its intertext. In this particular case, the interpretant is to be found in the most ungrammatical element of the story, namely the incongruous presence of the explorer, linguistically actualized in the lexical items associated with him. In other words, the idiolect

of the text is actually composed of three sociolects: that of an English family story combined with the codes of the Gothic and of a third, more specific intertext, which here may be identified as Evelyn Waugh's masterpiece *A Handful of Dust* (1932).

Indeed, in the last chapters of Waugh's satirical novel, the protagonist Tony Last, turned amateur explorer after having been chased from his English home, ends up lost in the Amazonian jungle, suffering from a delirious fever<sup>ix</sup>. With such intertextual correspondences in mind, the reader is able to decode the nonsensical situation with which the short story opens. Moreover, he is helped onto these intertextual tracks by the protagonist's first name, Evelyn, which here becomes an intertextual signpost, signalling the parodied intertext along with the apparently incongruous lexical field of the explorer. As the story unfolds, reading thus becomes a semiotic decoding prompted by the text's language, driving the reader to perform the intertextual leap to grasp the meaning of the story instead of holding on to an apparently absurd mimetic referentiality.

The reference to Waugh is very significant in the context of this English-set story of dislocation. Waugh is rightly famous for the essential Englishness of his writings, fluctuating between respectability and tradition on the one hand, dysfunction and decadence on the other:

Waugh's great contribution to English writing was to see that England – no longer the preserve of the wistful and elegiac – could also be comic. The tautness and sparkle of his early books leaves no room for nostalgia. (...) When traditional values appear in early Waugh's novels it is usually to be mocked. Everyone wished good riddance to the nineteenth century. (Gervais 159)

For a writer like McGrath, intent, at least until the mid-1990s, on wishing good riddance to England in general, it comes as no surprise that Waugh should have provided an adequate intertext for the imaginary construction of a grotesque, more so than Gothic, version of old England. Although nostalgia has often been singled out as a significant factor for the writing of Englishness among exiled writers, there seems to be very little of it in the backward glance McGrath chose to cast on England from America. On the contrary, at first the author was only too happy to come to terms with the many grudges he bore against Albion. To do so he resorted for some time to caricature and cliché, which turned out to become a successful form of auctorial signature. Thus in a rather ironical twist of fate, McGrath found himself tied to England again, or at least to a singular image of Englishness, hovering between grotesqueness and respectability, yet utterly unable to take the plunge into (post)modernity.

The subtlety of Waugh's intertext in "The Lost Explorer" should however lead us to refine our understanding of McGrath's singular, off-centred Englishness and appreciate its diachronic evolution. In later novels such as *Dr Haggard's Disease* (1993), *Asylum* (1996) and *Martha Peake* (2000), the English setting serves a more complex purpose than that of providing a cliché-ridden décor for the writing of grotesque Rustic Gothic stories. In *Dr Haggard's Disease*, for instance, the depiction of pre-war England – incidentally, that which is most associated with Waugh's writings – from the Munich Agreement to the Battle of Britain, is carried out elaborately, with no blatant caricatural intention. In this novel, one seems to reconnect with England's "finest hour", while the writing of the country's history becomes closely associated with the fate of the protagonists. In *Dr Haggard's Disease* as well as in *Martha Peake*, McGrath seems above all willing to exploit English history as a narrative text, as part of a historiographic metafictional undertaking that transcends the mainly comic and derogatory English motifs of the first stories. Such texts would rank McGrath amongst the "postmodern" writers who were keen to explore this fictional vein, which thrived notably in British Fiction throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, and includes novels such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Antonia S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), or Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Dr Dee* (1993), to name but a few. In all these postmodern texts, the writing of history as a fiction and of fiction as history undoubtedly raises significant issues about the ontological status of the literary text and the historical one, as well as the question of the interrelation between ethics and aesthetics, as Max Duperray observes:

Le postmodernisme est assimilé à une aporie temporelle, une négation soudaine du concept moderniste de temps comme progrès. L'événement s'assimile à la narrativité et se confond avec un anachronisme historique. L'écriture de la postmodernité réécrit l'histoire comme anachronisme et réalise une sorte d'anamorphose. C'est une subversion de tous les métadiscours, un texte ontologique dans la mesure où aucune rencontre avec la réalité d'aucune sorte ne peut avoir lieu. L'incertitude épistémologique est la règle et ramène sur le devant de la scène la question du rapport entre esthétique et éthique. (Duperray 8)

Yet "everything finds its way across the Atlantic in the end" (McGrath 2005, 29). This remark goes for the author in the first place. Since the turn of the millennium, McGrath's texts have left the English soil for good to find a new and possibly definitive anchorage in America.

*Martha Peake* and *Port Mungo* are to be seen as his narratives of transition, as they both depict the fate of characters who, like the author himself, have left England for America. *Ghost Town* and *Trauma*, his two latest books, are, however, firmly American. McGrath seems nowadays to be ambitioning to become one of the leading New York literary voices, a challenger to the likes of Paul Auster or Don De Lillo. Not an easy task, for sure, unless, as his tales of neurotic New York psychiatrists suggest, his aim is to charter the urban unconscious of the Big Apple, a somewhat less-trodden road than the city's busy avenues.

### List of Works Cited

- Austen, Jane, *Northanger Abbey*. 1818. Ed. Susan Freiman. New York: Norton, 1994.
- Coletta, Lisa, *Dark Humour and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.
- Duperray, Max, "Préface". *Historicité et métafiction dans le roman contemporain des îles britanniques*, ed. Max Duperray, Aix-en-Provence: PU de Provence, 1994.
- Gervais, David, *Literary Englands. Versions of Englishness in Modern Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Falco, Magali, *La Poétique néo-gothique de Patrick McGrath. Discours de la folie sur l'écriture postmoderne*. Paris: Publibook, 2007.
- , and Jocelyn Dupont, "Patrick McGrath's American 'New Gothic'". *Gothic N.E.W.S.*, ed. Max Duperray. Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2009. 272-282.
- Horner, Avril and Sue Zlosnick, *Gothic and the Comic Turn*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Kayser, Wolfgang, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1963.
- Langford, Paul, *Englishness Identified. Manners and Character. 1650-1850*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- McGrath, Patrick, "The Lost Explorer". *Blood and Water and Other Tales*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988. 17-31.
- . "Vigilance" *Conjunctions 14* (Fall 1989). *The New Gothic*. Eds Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath: 198-209.
- . "Cleave the Vampire". *I Shudder at Your Touch*, ed. Michele Slung. London: Book Club Associates, 1991, 117-130.

---. *The Grotesque*. New York: Poseidon, 1989b.

---. *Ghost Town*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2005.

---. *Trauma*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2008.

Riffaterre, Michael, « Parodie et répétition ». *Le singe à la porte. Vers une théorie de la parodie*. Ed. Groupar. New York : Peter Lang, 1984, 87-92.

Waugh, Evelyn, *A Handful of Dust* (1932), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

Wroe, Nicholas, “All in the Mind”. Review of *Trauma*. *The Guardian Review*, 12 July 2008: 13-15.

---

<sup>i</sup> Englishness being too vast and too fluctuating a concept to be defined exhaustively in this article, I would like to follow Paul Langford’s approach of this complex notion and focus on “the things identified rather than the process of identification. By Englishness I mean those distinctive aspects of national life that struck either outsiders or insiders or both as characteristic” (Langford 2). Patrick McGrath being himself both an outsider and insider, this definition seems rather adequate for the purposes of this paper, where Englishness will mostly be found through metonymic representations of a national identity or culture in texts not necessarily intent on waging a war against cliché.

<sup>ii</sup> Though not properly speaking part of the English Midlands, Berkshire still epitomizes “middle England”.

<sup>iii</sup> Interestingly, this issue, entitled *The New Gothic*, co-edited by Patrick McGrath and Bradford Morrow (the regular editor) was to serve as the blueprint for what was going to become the famous *Picador Anthology of the New Gothic* in 1991, with the notable difference that McGrath’s short story was to be replaced with “The Smell”, a fully-fledged pastiche of Poe. “Vigilance” has never been republished since.

<sup>iv</sup> For a discussion on McGrath’s singular geographical “dislocation” between the two sides of the Atlantic, see Magali Falco and Jocelyn Dupont’s “Patrick McGrath’s American ‘New Gothic’” in *Gothic N.E.W.S.*, ed. Max Duperray (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2009), particularly pages 273 to 275.

<sup>v</sup> And even a little further, as the specific spelling of pastorale with a final e corresponds, according to the *Webster’s Dictionary’s* definition, to “an opera or cantata with a pastoral subject”.

<sup>vi</sup> Despite its title and Lady Hock’s delusive beliefs, it is difficult to say that “Cleave the Vampire” is a proper vampire story. Yet McGrath’s onomastic playfulness allows him to connect it with the most famous vampire story of the English canon, namely *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. In the quotation, the perceptive reader will not fail to notice that Stoker happens to be the name of the Hocks’ butler. For a detailed study of McGrath’s onomastics, see Magali Falco’s *La Poétique néo-gothique de Patrick McGrath. Discours de la folie sur l’écriture postmoderne* (Paris: Publibook, 2007), pages 180 to 185.

<sup>vii</sup> This expression is borrowed from another short story by McGrath, “Blood and Water”, in the eponymous collection, in which the protagonist, an English aristocrat named Sir Norman Percy, is driven insane after he discovers his wife in a hermaphrodite (McGrath 1988, 182).

<sup>viii</sup> A hermeneutic concept introduced by Michael Riffaterre for which he provided the following definition :

Il y a agrammaticalité lorsque la motivation ou signifiante d’un mot ne dépend ni de la syntaxe, ni du contexte, et qu’elle a ses sources plus loin, hors texte, dans l’intertexte. C’est l’agrammaticalité qui fixe l’attention du lecteur sur les facteurs parodiques. (Riffaterre 92)

<sup>ix</sup> Before being rescued and ultimately condemned to read Dickens’ *Little Dorrit* in the middle of the jungle.