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Parody and displacement of the Gothic in Patrick McGrath's work

Introduction

The growing interest in intertextual studies since the 1970s as well as the development of metafictional literature in our so-called postmodern era today seems to have made the second degree of literature at least as essential as the first, if not more. And if "haunting is the form of all textuality"[1], as David Punter suggests, then it will come as no surprise that one of the literary genres most likely to be re-written is the one where ghosts dwelt in the first place, namely in gothic literature. Such could be, in a nutshell, a contextual account of the genesis of the literary movement known as 'The New Gothic', which emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s and includes writers such as Angela Carter, John Hawkes Joyce Carol Oates and Patrick McGrath. Although gothic literature has been an object of highly respectable academic interest for some time, little has been published about its postmodern offspring. It is fairly obvious, however, that there would be no such thing as the 'New Gothic' had there not been an 'old gothic' to start with, the former stemming from a rewriting of certain aspects the latter.

The aim of this paper is to investigate one aspect of neo-gothic rewriting strategies by looking specifically at the treatment of parody in the writings of contemporary Anglo-American and self-proclaimed neo-gothicist Patrick McGrath. Our main line of study will be to evaluate the use of parodied gothic props in his texts, and more importantly, the purpose of their ironic distortion. After a general overview of the occurrence of gothic motifs in Patrick McGrath's work, two specific case studies of parodic "refunctioning"[2] will be discussed. This should lead us to discuss whether the New Gothic restricts itself to being a mere metafictional

[1] David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies. The Text, the Body and the Law* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998) 1.

[2] A term coined by Margaret Rose in her influential book *Parody :Ancient, Modern and Postmodern*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) in which she defines parody as :

"the comic refunctioning of pre-existing linguistic or artistic material" (52)

prank aimed at a scholarly readership, or if the rewriting of gothic elements opens up onto broader literary horizons.

- **Patrick McGrath's 'New Gothic': aspects and evolution**

First and foremost, an important distinction must be made between 'contemporary' gothic on the one hand and 'new' gothic on the other. While the former, which includes the works of writers as famous as Peter Straub, Clive Barker, Stephen King, Anne Rice is still dedicated to eliciting fear in the readers' minds, the latter is generally far less seriously gothic, and much more writerly, reflexive and metafictional than its readerly, bestselling counterpart, with a greater emphasis on the processes of the literature of terror than on its products. That is perhaps the reason why this school of writing has often been labelled 'postmodern gothic', in an academic attempt to differentiate it from the more lowbrow yet no doubt often highly efficient mainstream gothic, the strategies of which are often restricted to transposing terror and horror onto a contemporary setting and a contemporary language. On the other hand, The 'New Gothic' stands as a more critical mode of literary composition involving an ironic rewriting of an established literary code, namely, that of gothic literature. And to do so it relies extensively on parody.

It is common knowledge that gothic texts, due to their excessive nature and conventional structures have from a very early stage been subjected to parody[3], the most famous instance of which being undoubtedly Jane Austen's *Northanger's Abbey* (1818). Yet it is important to differentiate between the earlier parodies of the gothic of an often moralizing or normative nature and those that we are here concerned with. While the former aimed at ridiculing their hypotexts, the latter are free of any didactic intention. Rather, they correspond to what Linda Hutcheon defines as postmodern parody, namely "the ironic playing with multiple conventions, this extended repetition with critical difference"[4]. Such parodic technique, corresponding also to what Margaret Rose refers to as 'serious' parody, i.e., the one likely to refunction the parodied material through metafictional commentary, will prove particularly appropriate for the study of McGrath's parodic rewriting of gothic elements.

[3] In the eyes of some, parody may even be very the essence of the genre. One may here recall Leslie Fiedler's famous remark, quoted by Angela Carter in her epigraph to *Heroes and Villains* (1969):

"The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limit of grotesqueness" (1)

[4] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (London: Methuen 1985) 7.

Patrick McGrath's early production is bound to strike readers as essentially parodic, playful and nasty, keen on exploiting "the stylized theatricality of the Gothic device, which is always teetering on the edge of self-parody"[5]. In his early short stories as well as in his first novel *The Grotesque* (1989), there is little doubt that McGrath is conjuring up traditional gothic elements in a comic and subversive way. Although he is making great use of gothic props (starting with the main storyline: the Manfred-like housemaster struggling to keep control over his household) he consistently exploits them to elicit laughter rather than fear: the tyrannical master of the house, Sir Hugo Coal, is an exuberant aristocrat as well as an impotent cripple suffering both from megalomania and acute paranoia, while the Usher-like dark mansion where the action unfolds is aptly named Crook. Sir Hugo's deluded first-person narrative brims with gallows humour and sustained reflexivity (he calls himself 'a grotesque', laughs at his own instances of pathetic fallacy) making it impossible to take the gloomy story he tells us too seriously.

In this book, the reader finds himself in the familiar setting of the gothic story yet he observes it through the distorting lens of humour and grotesqueness. The implications of this displaced gothic tale are twofold as *The Grotesque* firmly establishes McGrath as a writer committed to the comic turn of the gothic while making him at least as talented a parodist as a gothicist.

It must be observed, however, that critics were more eager to tag McGrath as a 'master of postmodern gothic' rather than a master parodist. One may surmise that this is due to the enduring misgivings still felt in the publishing industry towards literary forms that are too openly borrowed and not deemed singular enough. Yet in the case of McGrath's writings, it is clear that his originality stemmed from his own idiosyncratic recycling – or rewriting – of gothic elements, which he first approached by way of parody, as he himself openly admits:

> "*The Grotesque* is more a pastiche of the Gothic than anything else, as I found myself drawn to it as I first began writing, because it is such a mature genre, there are so many well-developed and elaborated motifs, tropes and so forth that the pastiche was very simple, very good fun. My first novel was sort of an exhilarated and joyous pastiche from all sort of standards of Gothic fixtures" [6]

[5] Avril Horner and Sue Sloznick, *Gothic and the Comic Turn*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 12

[6] Patrick McGrath , plenary lecture, International Gothic Association conference, Liverpool University, 2003.

The gothic features most easily rewritten are what McGrath once referred to as the "exterior furniture of the genre"[7]. They include recurring diegetic elements such as a gothic setting (preferably an old decaying gloomy manor), a villain (preferably patriarchal), a victim (preferably female), and some form of transgression (cannibalism, murder, necrophilia, incest, take your pick), as well as the narrative trademark of the genre, namely the first-person unreliable narrator. It may here be noted that –with the notable exception of *Spider*— McGrath's new gothic contains very few moments of terror or horror, whereas they are usually the butt of the parodist's satire in traditional, derisive parodies of the gothic. In McGrath's texts, horror and terror are replaced by the unexpected irruption of laughter coming from "comic turns born of gruesome incongruity, of taboos violated" (Horner and Sloznick, 164), a more complex form of laughter which already hints at the specificity of the parodic handling of gothic elements in his work.

In his subsequent texts, it appears that gothic motifs are indeed displaced and exploited for the elaboration of a literary discourse that clearly aims at telling more than a 'spooky' story on the one hand, but also more than an entertaining rewriting of such stories. Although the features listed above may be found in each of McGrath's stories, they are often distorted to suit the parodic intentions of the author and adapt to a specific plot. In *Spider* (1990), for instance, the gothic figure of the aristocratic villain becomes the narrator's father, a London plumber named Horace Cleg (presumably an echo to Horace Walpole, father of the gothic genre, even more so when the owner of the pub he goes to is named Ratcliffe) and the gloomy castle where transgression (adultery and murder) occurs has turned into a garden shed in the East Side.

Overall, McGrath shows remarkable talent in fusing the diegetic with the narrative through the internalisation of gothic motifs, the dank vaults of early gothic texts becoming primarily mental and to be found in the minds of his first-person narrators, following Edgar Allan Poe's paradigm. It could be argued that, to some extent, each of McGrath's narratives (systematically a first-person, unreliable restrospective one) is a rewriting of Poe's most famous tales of psychological terror, yet though some instances of pastiche (imitation, rather than transformation – to use Genette's discriminating criterion between these two intertextual

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[7] In his introduction to *The New Gothic* (New York: Picador, 1991), he writes:

" (...) the new gothicist would take as a starting place the concern with interior entropy – spiritual and emotional breakdown – and address the exterior furniture of the genre from a contemporary vantage."

forms) can be found in some of McGrath's early short stories, it may be doubted whether Poe is an object of parodic rewriting in the later texts, his influence being on the whole too towering to be subjected to ironic repetition.

More generally, McGrath's talent lies in his ability to combine the gothic with personal themes and concerns such as the relationship to the father and the depiction of 'interior entropy' through the diseased minds of his narrators[8]. More recently, gothic tropes have also been exploited to explore the issue of historical representation, as we will see later on. Finally, McGrath being an avid reader with a wide-ranging taste for literature, his texts brim with many intertextual echoes beside the gothic ones, which, as we shall see in our reading of his short story "The Lost Explorer", makes his New Gothic a more complex literary hybrid than what may be thought at first. It would no doubt be misleading to tag McGrath as a primarily Gothic writer, even though critics seem to have persistently held on to this label each time a new book has come out.

Following these general and introductory remarks, let us now turn more specifically to the parodic exploitation or refunctioning of gothic elements by looking closely at two texts, the first being a short story taken from the collection *Blood and Water* (published 1988), the second *Martha Peake*, McGrath's fifth novel, which came out in 2000. Both provide striking instances of texts in which gothic elements are displaced and eventually refunctioned through parodic manipulation.

- ***Retrieving the intertext in "The Lost Explorer"***

McGrath's first published collection of short stories, perhaps even more so than his first novel discussed earlier, has an extremely wide-ranging parodic scope, endeavouring to cover two centuries of gothic production while keeping an ever-vigilant and amused eye on the processes involved. Throughout the thirteen stories composing the volume, the reader will come across a rotting fallen angel, a ludicrously perverted monk named Ambrose, a young and innocent English girl confronted with the horror of watching a facetious hand grow out of her boyfriend's skull, a cunning serial killer, the diary of some dead uncle –turning out to be an aunt– driven insane by miniature goblin-like versions of famous psychiatrists, and an army of bloodthirsty atavistic English countrymen, among other grotesques. Onomastic puns,

[8] The issues of paternal authority and mental sanity are indeed closely linked in McGrath's personal experience, his father having been a prominent psychiatrist of his time and superintendent of Broadmoor mental hospital for over 25 years.

allusions as well as sustained narrative irony and reflexivity guarantee a consistent parodic tone for the whole collection.

In such a gallery, "The Lost explorer" may at first not stand out as the most gothic tale of them all, yet its parodic system is particularly remarkable as it offers a striking example of the multiple coding of parodic writing, involving gothic elements as well as another, more determining hypotext.

The plot is straightforward. Evelyn Piker-Smith, a twelve-year old London girl finds a lost explorer, affected by malaria, in the garden of her parents' house and subsequently decides to nurse him and hide him away in the garden. Yet he manages to steal up to her room, where he passes away during the night. Evelyn then has to struggle to get his corpse out of the house unnoticed, and eventually buries him in the garden. Though not strictly speaking a tale of horror, there are some gothic elements to be found in this short story. First of all, the looming presence of the supernatural gives it an overall worrying atmosphere. Second, the young innocent heroine, frightened out of her senses on more than one occasion and confronted with the corpse of the dead explorer, may be a paradigmatic feature of the gothic. The story's locale, though homely, is also quite obviously 'gothicized' by McGrath, as the following extract demonstrates:

> "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"[9]

Finally, the whole story, with its occasional moments of suspense, is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty, conferring it an overall uncanny dimension that may be associated with the tale of terror. Yet does this suffice to make 'The Lost Explorer' a parody of a gothic tale? Its gothic components are, it would seem, too few to allow us to say so. However, if one approaches this short story as a dual parodic system including both gothic features coupled

[9] Patrick McGrath, "The Lost Explorer", *Blood and Water and Other Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1988) 17.

with another intertext, it then seems that some light can be shed on McGrath's new gothic rewriting strategies.

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"[10] , prompting the reader to look beyond 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" – to use Riffaterre's terminology, that is double-coded terms connecting the text with its intertext. In this particular case, the interpretant is to be found in the most ungrammatical element, namely the incongruous presence of the explorer, linguistically actualized in the associated lexical items. In other words, the idiolect of the text is actually composed of three sociolects[11]; that of a homely, 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 famous novel *A Handful of Dust* (1932). One may indeed remember that in the last chapters of Waugh's satirical novel, the protagonist Tony Last finds himself lost in the Amazonian jungle, suffering from a delirious fever, thinking of Hetton, his country house he has had to abandon back in England. With this intertextual correspondence in mind, the reader is now able to decode the seemingly nonsensical situation with which the short story opens. Moreover he is led onto these intertextual tracks by the heroin's first name, "Evelyn", which becomes an intertextual signpost, signalling the parodied intertext along with the apparently incongruous lexical field of the explorer in the context of the tale. 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 nonsensical mimetic referentiality.

[10] A hermeneutic concept introduced by Michael Riffaterre and defined in his article, « Parodie et répétition » published in *Le Singe à la porte*. Groupar (ed.) (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), as follows:

« Il y a agrammaticalité lorsque la motivation ou signifiance 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 » (92)

[11] In *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore : John Hopkins University Press, 1990) Riffaterre defines the sociolect as:

"Language both as grammar and repository of the myths, traditions, ideological and esthetic stereotypes, commonplaces and themes harboured by a society, class or social group. Literary texts exploit the sociolect as does any other utterance, shaping their own original usage (*idiolect*) in conformity or in contradiction to the sociolect. Aside from syntactic structures, the sociolect contains ready-made narrative and descriptive models that reflect a group's idea or consensus about reality. Verisimilitude depends on references to such models." (130)

What makes this short story remarkable is that from the standard "bitextual synthesis" (Hutcheon 1985: 33) usually found in parodic rewriting, we are here moving on to three levels of textuality, all combined into one, as gothic elements, though evident, appear not to be the only ones involved in the rewriting process. In this particular instance, they even are subordinated to the third, more determining intertext. Not only is this story a telling illustration of Margaret Rose's metafictional parody, it is also, on a small scale, emblematic of the parodic functioning of McGrath's New Gothic, as in most of his texts, parodying gothic elements is not an end in itself, but only a part in the process of weaving a complex textual fabric.

In *Doctor Haggard's Disease*, McGrath's third novel published in 1993, gothic motifs, very much present in the setting of the story, are linked with romantic poetry in what turns out to be a complex tale of obsession and madness as well as a meditation upon the nature of love. *Asylum* (1996) for its part rests on the gothic matrixes of transgression and decay while questioning the sanity of the psychiatric discourse. *Ghost Town* (2005), McGrath's latest volume, also uses gothic elements to undertake a literary and historical journey through New York City. Yet despite their constant exploitation and subversion of gothic strategies and tropes, these books can neither be reduced to contemporary gothic stories, nor to contemporary parodies of the gothic.

- **History turned Gothic : *Martha Peake***

Let us now turn to another specific occurrence of parodic refunctioning of gothic material within the space of the novel, and to do so look at *Martha Peake* (2000), McGrath's most flamboyantly parodic novel to this day. A true gothic masterclass, *Martha Peake* came out as a somewhat abrupt and unexpected return to the literary origins of the genre. Whereas in the preceding novels gothic motifs gradually seemed to have somewhat faded to become more internalized in the deluded narrators' speeches, *Martha Peake* set them forth again, and taking all the furniture and the skeletons out of the closet – the book is indeed partly about the quest for a skeleton exposed in an ominous museum of anatomy – made conspicuous use of all the tropes of the genre.

First of all, the story is gothic in its spatial setting. It takes place in Drogo Hall, a crumbling and gloomy old mansion with labyrinthine corridors and creaking doors, the

archetypal gothic locale, giving way to many a classic description in a deliberately emphatic and archaic style. It is also the scene of many a Radcliffean moment of suspense, as in the following example, where the narrator concludes one of his errands with a hair-raising encounter:

> "And so I shuffled out of the Museum of Anatomy, and pulled the door behind me, so all could rest in peace within. It creaked and screamed on its ancient hinges as it scraped across the flagstones, it resisted my force, and I paused, the better to seize hold of the iron ring. And then, in the silence, with a last flare in the shivering gloom, one wall sconce in the antechamber gave out with a sputtering sigh – and then, a second later, the other – and in the sudden darkness, *a hand fell on my shoulder*." [12]

Secondly, the novel is extremely gothic in chronological terms, being a historical novel whose action unfolds between the middle of the 18th century and the 1820s, a period which corresponds to the high gothic age as first defined by Maurice Lévy, starting with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and ending with *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Accordingly, McGrath's language – as can be observed in the previous quote - in this novel is deliberately archaic, excessive and emphatic, much more so than in his previous novels.

Along with its diegetic and linguistic components, *Martha Peake* can be said to revisit the gothic as it is peopled by the ghosts of many gothic texts through a game of intertextual hints, echoes and allusions. To identify but a few, Lord Drogo, the ambitious anatomist, is a crossbreed between Victor Frankenstein and the archetypal aristocratic villain in the wake of Manfred or Montoni. There is also in the book a character referred to as 'Uncle Silas', as well as a myriad of passing allusions to *Dracula*, *Melmoth the Wanderer* and *The Murders in the rue Morgue*. Let us note too that the name Peake may well echo the English writer Mervyn Peake (1911-1968), famous for his gothic novel *Titus Groan*. Together with the setting and the language, these many intertextual signals contribute to making *Martha Peake* a sustained and dazzling exercise in pastiche and parody of the gothic, and McGrath's most metafictional text so far.

Yet however brilliant the parodic handling of gothic elements in this text, they do not constitute the main purpose of the book. McGrath's prime intention was indeed to write a historical novel about the American Revolution, and though told from the gloomy and characteristically gothic setting of Drogo Hall, much of Martha Peake's story also unfolds

[12] Patrick McGrath, *Martha Peake* (New York: Viking Press, 2000) 286.

across the Atlantic, both in Boston and the imaginary New England town of Cape Morrock. Significantly, the chapters set in America are devoid of gothic echoes and even the language appears more tame than in the English chapters. The novel therefore sets up a dialectics between its English and its American parts, thus questioning the part of fiction – storytelling – involved in the making of history – historytelling. This also confers the protagonists an allegorical dimension, the monstrous father Harry Peake standing for old England while young Martha, for her part, comes to symbolize the new America as the novel sets out to explore the relationship between England and its colony as a destructive father-daughter relationship.

Consequently this gothic tale of incest makes little secret of its historiographic ambitions, which tends to suggest that in *Martha Peake*, the gothic is used as a mode of historical representation, or rather as a *mood* to conjugate England in within the grammar of the novel. Yet so sustained and excessive is the gothic that it eventually ends up pointing to its own parodic quality, its 'ungrammaticality', that is to say its nature as a 'double-coded' sign prompting the reader to move beyond the gothic artifices. The process is therefore not unlike that observed previously in "The Lost Explorer", yet it occurs here on a much larger structural level. Thus articulated with the question of historical representation, the parodic refunctioning of the gothic in *Martha Peake* becomes a perfect illustration of Hutcheon's thesis on parody's ideological function in historiographic metafiction, a most appropriate way to refer to McGrath's complex fifth novel in which, far from remaining at the level of a pointless game of mirrors, parody operates as a critical tool, refunctioning the gothic to turn it into an element of historical representation. As a consequence, it becomes clear that in Patrick McGrath's work, parodying the gothic, far from being an end in itself, constitutes a committed discursive act aiming at questioning our modes of representation, as indeed, to quote Hutcheon once again:

> "Parody works to foreground the *politics* of representation. Needless to say, this is not an accepted view of postmodernist parody. The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own which is oversaturated with images. Instead, I would argue that postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations." [13]

[13] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 92

CONCLUSION

What this discussion endeavours to show is precisely that rewriting strategies at work in McGrath's new gothic literature, far from being mere metafictional stunts are definitely 'value-problematizing'. It would even seem that the refunctioning of the gothic through parody eventually makes the resurgence of the genre's motifs and props but a secondary aspect of the author's discourse. This is hardly surprising if one remembers that one of the main features of postmodern parody is to place the hypotext under erasure before reconstructing a new discursive form. In the case of Patrick McGrath, it appears that his parodic approach is not limited to some playful manipulation of literary conventions. Rather, parodied elements become a tool to problematize wider theses, whether it be the relationship between sanity and insanity, the representation of history through literature or the relationship of the teller to his tale, all three being among the most prominent features of his work, making his New Gothic not so much gothic as new, and thus well worth exploring further.

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