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Notes on the Gothic Mode

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the clearing to worry the clothing of the corpse with her teeth. But soon she grew bored and bounded away.

Then only the flies crawling on his body were alive and he was far from home.

Liede

It is a conversation between a woman and a piano, a
conversation about silence

—that is, about the inter-
stices in a conversation conducted in a language
neither participant understands in which, nevertheless,
an integration has been effected

—an integration which
permits the development of a new language to express
both voices of the speaking yet uncomprehending locu-
tors and the tension imposed upon them by the silence
preceding and succeeding their twinned trajectory

through

the interstices of the silence

they discuss.

Notes on the Gothic Mode

For some reason, possibly because my first novel (*Shadow Dance* in England, *Honeybuzzard* in the United States) had a lot of clap and sweat and pustules and necrophily in it, the British reviewers likened it to Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote, and labeled it “Gothic,” because of Southern Gothic and the steamy atmosphere we were supposed to generate (I was twenty-five when I wrote it and most of the characters were based on my friends and I myself had genuinely thought of it as a naturalistic novel). Then I wrote a baleful fairytale called *The Magic Toyshop*, and from then on there was no holding them: I could be conveniently categorized as “Gothic” and thus outside the mainstream, which at that time in Britain seemed to concern itself entirely with the marital adventures of television producers.

So I thought that I would indeed write a Gothic novel, a truly Gothic novel, full of dread and glamour and passion. About this time I began to read the surrealists and felt an increasing sense of justification, and what I wrote was a kind of pastiche Gothic novel called *Heroes and Villains*

(after a current Beach Boys number), in which I used the framework to examine some intellectual problems about politics which were beginning to exercise me. Using an absolutely non-naturalistic formula gave me a wonderful sense of freedom. I liked the pictorial, expository nature of Gothic imagery, its ambivalence, and the rhetorical, non-naturalistic use of language.

The Gothic mode of course is not a high literary one and existed before the bourgeois novel, surviving the high period of the naturalistic novel in the underground of sub-literary form, pulp fiction, confession magazines, and pornography, although always likely to surface unexpectedly in writers with a tendency to hysteria (Dickens, Dostoevsky). With its holocausts, its stereotyped characterization, its ghosts, its concentration on inner life, its rhetorical and conventionalized prose style, it can scarcely pretend to be an imitation of nature; so it cannot disseminate false knowledge of the world. Naturalism in fiction, and in all other art as well, is usually a method of affirming the status quo. The condemnation of abstract art in the U.S.S.R. and the apotheosis of social realism coincide with the betrayal of the Russian revolution and are even part of it. Naturalism need not affirm the status quo, but when it doesn't, as in Zola, when it becomes a form of heightened realism, it's amazing how Gothic it gets.

All art, of any kind, is part of politics—it either expresses or criticizes an ideology.

I'm interested, then, in a fiction that takes full cognizance of its status as non-being—that is, a fiction that remains aware that it is of its own nature, which is a different nature than human, tactile immediacy. I really do believe that a fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is, not a logbook of events) can help to transform reality itself. D. A. F. de Sade: "Art is the perpetual immoral subversion of the established order."

But I'm not talking about a metaphysical idea of a supra-reality of imaginative forms. I like all paradoxes except Valery's infernal one (that there is nothing more beautiful than that which does not exist) because if something does not exist, it cannot possess any qualities at all. The imagined thing has a perfectly concrete existence as a verbal structure. I'm interested in verbal structures as things-in-themselves, as well as transmitters of meaning, though for me it is meaning that always tends to dominate structure.

Formal abstraction in writing—I suppose Lewis Carroll is the nearest to it. Perhaps writers can only approach formal abstraction via logic. And this leads directly to the absurd—the assertion of the absolutely true, which is to say, the absolutely meaningless. (I wonder if this is what Malevich the suprematist painter meant when he said: "To reproduce the hallowed objects . . . of nature is to revivify a shackled thief. Only stupid and uncrea-

tive artists protect their art with sincerity. In art, truth is needed, not sincerity." I like this very very much indeed.) Lewis Carroll was a logician and utilized a number of the formulae of symbolic logic in stories so bleak in their implications we have decided only children are tough enough to take them.

But all excess tends toward abstraction, and the Gothic mode tends to make abstractions from romanticism. It deals directly with the imagery of the unconscious—mirrors, the externalized self, the world under the moon, automata, haunted forests, forbidden sexual objects. Character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style tends to be ornate, unnatural—and thus operates against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. And like psychoanalysis—which projects the Gothic idea of the Primal Crime, parricide and mother-incest (which, curiously enough, always seem to be the *same thing*) as the model of all human experience—it does not draw any moral lessons from the imagery. The moral lessons, perhaps, are implicit in the imagery. But it retains a singular moral function: that of provoking unease.

I think that it is immoral to read simply for pleasure.

And that the greatest crime against the human spirit is to be boring. Though it's true that being boring is a characteristic of some of the very greatest art, Milton and Michelangelo, for example (who, like parricide and mother-incest, are also somehow the *same thing*, anyway). But, she says, with a delicate display of the most arrogant modesty, I do not aspire to the boring-sublime; the "perpetual immoral subversion of the established order" is more like it. This is a statement of intent of all romantic art, I think, and it was made by the last great figure of the Enlightenment, one of the most rational men who ever lived. I am writing a book about Sade at the moment, and the furious paradoxes of his life move me very much; freed from prison by the Revolution, he became a judge under the Terror, then was again imprisoned for refusing to administer the death penalty.

Contradictions are the only things that make any sense.

The Lady of the House of Love

"... dans le ciel du pays hanté par Nosferatu, le mot amour est inscrit en immense lettres incandescentes."

Amour-Erotisme et Cinéma: Ado Kyrou

Just as they staked him out, the fatal Count cried: "Nosferatu dies; long live Nosferatu!"

At last the revenants became so troublesome the peasants abandoned the village and it fell solely to the possession of subtle and vindictive in-