The German Gothic: Introduction

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Mysterious monks in dark and dusty cloisters, stormy nights in wild nature or in towering castles, long shadows that hide those who are inclined to lurk in them and whose identities are never easily determined, a feeling of sublime horror that excites and intrigues the reader: these common elements of Gothic horror fiction have been present since the first such literary works were written by British and German authors. It is the purpose of this special issue on German Gothic literature to draw attention to the important contributions the German authors Carl Grosse, Friedrich Schiller, Ludwig Tieck, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm made to the development of European Gothic horror literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The contributors to this volume address various aspects of Gothic horror writing, ranging from the influence of Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime to the potential for horror in the fairy tale.

In his essay «The Kantian Analytic of the Sublime in Tieck’s Runenberg,» James Landes explains the significance of Immanuel Kant’s ideas of the sublime for German Gothic horror literature. Rather than locating feelings of the sublime directly in the physical sense of seeing, as Edmund Burke had proposed earlier in the eighteenth century, Kant locates the sublime in the imagination. Landes argues that Der Runenberg can be read as an application of Kant’s theory of the sublime in the context of the German Gothic horror tradition. Heide Crawford’s «Keine Apologie des Grauenhaften: Toward an Aesthetic of Horror in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Vampyrismus» adds another element to our understanding of the aesthetics fueling the German Gothic by looking closely at E.T.A. Hoffmann’s collection of stories Die Serapionsbrüder (1819–1821). She highlights the critical discussions in the collection’s frame by the members of the Serapion brethren who insist that horror and Gothic elements be aesthetically pleasing as well as rooted in reality. Their discussions become, in effect, Hoffmann’s aesthetic of horror.

The British and German Gothic literary horror traditions are thus fueled to a large extent by different theories of the beautiful and the sublime; nevertheless they share a deep interest in «Anthropologie» or «the science of man» as Rainer Godel argues in his essay «Carl Grosse’s Der Genius, or: Contingency
Heide Crawford and Linda Kraus Worley

and the Uncanny in Cultural Transfer.» Godel discusses Grosse’s popular four-volume Gothic novel, Der Genius. Aus den Papieren des Marquis C*, von G*, as an example of the complex processes of Gothic cultural transfer, which include translations, adaptations, and references from the German-speaking countries to England and from England to Germany. By looking closely at these processes, Godel sketches how context as well as views on aesthetics determine what is understood to be «Gothic» in the English and German traditions. Jeffrey High also concentrates on the mechanisms of cultural transfer by providing a detailed examination of the reception of the German Gothic in Britain around the turn of the nineteenth century in «Schiller, Coleridge, and Reception of the «German (Gothic) Tale.» High focuses on the initial enthusiastic reception, then later dismissal, of Friedrich Schiller’s important contribution to German and European Gothic horror Der Geisterseher. In particular, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s varied reactions to Schiller shed new light on the reception history and influence of German Gothic horror in Britain.

A common feature of German Gothic horror literature is that it is not restricted to one literary genre, although the common terms «Gothic novel» or «Schauerroman» suggest the opposite. German Gothic literature encompasses poetry, especially ballads, and a wide range of fiction: short stories, novellas, novels and fairy tales. In «The Horror! Gothic Horror Literature and Fairy Tales: The Case of «Der Räuberbräutigam,» Linda Kraus Worley focuses on «Der Räuberbräutigam» as an example of a tale included by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in their Kinder- und Hausmärchen anthology. The Grimms edited «Der Räuberbräutigam» repeatedly so as to increase the effect of horror, thus essentially creating a subgenre of fairy tale, a «Gothic» fairy tale. One of the more popular German Schauerromane of the nineteenth century, E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Die Elixiere des Teufels, is the subject of Christopher Clason’s essay, «Narrative ‘Teasing’: Withholding Closure in Hoffmann’s Elixiere des Teufels.» Clason compares the consistent popular appeal of the novel with its contemporaneous impact and subsequent critical reception. In addition, Clason addresses the manner in which Hoffmann’s narrative strategy simultaneously frustrates and fascinates the reader by drawing her or him into a suspenseful narrative that repeatedly withholds satisfaction or closure through a variety of narrative strategies and techniques.

This collection of essays is a veritable microcosm of the German Gothic horror tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by dint of the range of its essays, which move from discussions of aesthetic theory and narrative strategy to reception, all the while focusing on different types of texts. German Gothic horror is a sublime horror, a physical perception of seeing
that combines with the subjective imagination and as such is wrought with contingencies, uncertainty, and confused identity as experienced by the characters and by the reader who is drawn into the sublimity of horror through artfully crafted narratives.