

Book Reviews/ Critiques de livres

Social Reform in Gothic Writing: Fantastic Forms of Change, 1764–1834 by Ellen Malenas Ledoux
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
x+238pp. US\$90. ISBN 978-1-137-30267-0.

Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790–1861 by Siân Silyn Roberts
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.
239pp. US\$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8122-4613-1.

Episodic Poetics: Politics and Literary Form after the Constitution
by Matthew Garret
New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
232pp. US\$65.00. ISBN 978-0-19-934653-0.

Review by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, University of Lausanne

Recent years have seen an explosion in gothic studies, especially in relation to political and social issues. Long mired in psychoanalytical approaches and a reductive focus on its emotional effects, the gothic has become a productive site of investigation into ideology, subjectivity, and political aesthetics. Much of this scholarly work has concentrated on its early period, especially the tumultuous decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, when the gothic became one of the most important literary forms on both sides of the Atlantic. Two recent studies, Ellen Malenas Ledoux's *Social Reform in Gothic Writing: Fantastic Forms of Change, 1764–1834* (2013) and Siân Silyn Roberts's *Gothic Subjects: The Transformation of Individualism in American Fiction, 1790–1861* (2014) explicitly address the relationship of the gothic genre (or mode, as it is increasingly defined) to social and political debates of the period. A third book, Matthew Garret's *Episodic Poetics: Politics and Literary Form after the Constitution* (2014), examines nearly the same corpus but from a slightly different angle, attending to the sub-generic feature of the "episode." Bringing this often overlooked narrative unit to the forefront allows Garrett to examine works from the early American Republic, not only revealing unexpected connections and resonances but also shedding light on formal aspects of Early Republic literature—such as the loose and seemingly rambling plots of Charles Brockden Brown's gothic novels—that have long puzzled readers. Although Roberts focuses on fiction, Ledoux on a variety of genres, and Garrett on the episode, all three studies

deal with, specifically, the interaction between literary form and politics. And all three give Brown a key place in Anglo-American literary culture of this period, since this question was at the heart of Brown's work.

In the background to all three studies we can perceive the recent growth of transatlantic approaches to literary production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though two (Roberts and Garrett) deliberately choose to focus mainly on the literary culture of the United States, and in particular on the decades immediately following the ratification of the Constitution. The reason for this is linked to the heightened interest in subjectivity in recent years—both Roberts and Garrett are interested in the way literary form helps shape political subjects, and both find the early decades of the Young Republic unique in terms of the social and political conditions they represented. Thus, although neither the gothic nor the episode were original forms emerging from the American context—both were imports with important genealogies (one several decades old and one quite ancient)—Roberts and Garrett argue, respectively, that the gothic and the episode were adapted in significant ways to the culture of this charged moment and participated actively in the production of new ways of thinking about community and political union. Garrett's approach proves slightly more intriguing and formalist, arguing that the relationship of the episode to the larger narrative encapsulated the tension of the part to the whole that represented the heart of the political question of the young nation. Through the way they managed to constitute a whole of loosely connected parts, Garrett argues, the episodic plots of many Early Republic texts performed a kind of politics—one of consolidation and compromise. Episodic structure represents both the staging and the containment of a certain kind of threat, of the multiplicity or the fragment overcoming the whole, and positions the audience in relation to this larger social question in strategic ways.

Similarly, Roberts also sees the diversity of the population of the Young Republic as the most challenging and salient feature for the young nation. She argues that the Lockean epistemologies so important to the political thinking of the Young Republic underwent complex transformations on US soil and that the gothic had an important role to play in these transformations (17). Specifically, Roberts sees the Lockean model of the sovereign individual as being severely challenged by the particular conditions of the Young Republic, especially the differences within the population, which strained Locke's model and exposed its limitations. Roberts argues that both Lockean individualism and common sense models of sympathy, also foundational to US political culture, are based on a presumption that individuals share a common culture and epistemological framework. They strain or break down, Roberts argues, when applied to a community of radically different people, such as that

of the early United States, which included immigrants, slaves, and Native Americans, as well as culturally discrete local communities. While the Lockean individual model was never discarded, Roberts proposes, it coexisted with other models imagined specifically in gothic fiction, which proposed related but revised models of subjectivity in fictional texts that one could call political thought experiments.

A transatlantic circulation of ideas and people forms the backdrop for this scrutiny of the American situation because both forms are imports into American literary culture and interact in complex ways with the conditions specific to the Young Republic. Yet, in focusing on a uniquely American cultural variation on the gothic, Roberts goes against the current tide of scholarship, making a case for a specifically American strand of the gothic, one that anticipates developments in British literature by several decades since it is only well into the nineteenth century that the British gothic embarks on a sustained critique of sympathetic social relations. Her study is also the most engaged with contemporary theory, especially with what has come to be known as biopolitics, a model that stands in tension with traditional liberal ideas about individualism and the civil state, yet one that lends itself well to understanding the dynamics of American society at the end of the eighteenth century. Roberts uses the category of population, as theorized by Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault, to offer fresh readings of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and William Wells Brown's *Clotel; Or, the President's Daughter* (1853). For Hawthorne, Roberts argues that the change in Hester Prynne's relationship to the community over the course of the novel, from antipathy to a "redemptive force," relates to the novel's movement from society as a contractual state to a population. In other words, at the end, Hester is not an individual within the community so much as an abstraction identified with her polysemic token (that is, she signifies different things to different people). According to Roberts, the question that Hawthorne is asking in this novel is: "How do we imagine a government that extends its protection to all those people who fall outside the contractual relation of citizen to community?" (128). Roberts's answer is that Hawthorne's novel reconstitutes the Puritans as part of a population rather than a contractual community and thereby "leaves us with a more mobile and inclusive community" (137). Hester Prynne gradually becomes an abstraction and stands at the centre of this "anonymous, undifferentiated mass body" (139). Roberts's readings are intriguing not only because they breathe new life into Hawthorne's work, but also because they offer startling and counter-intuitive theorizations of community and society.

Ledoux's examination of gothic writing in relation to social reform is the most empirical and conventional of the three studies, setting out to

demonstrate its claims with evidence from a wide array of historical documents, and it succeeds in mounting a convincing argument about the “political activism” of the early gothic (5). This represents an important contribution to the study of the late eighteenth century because the early gothic had long been considered a rather conservative form, probing transgressive situations only to return to some normative status quo. Ledoux demonstrates instead that gothic writing functioned as “an agent of social change” (6) and intervened actively in debates about social reform, especially concerning women, slavery, economics, and even healthcare. She sees Horace Walpole as the originator of this activist impulse in gothic writing, and demonstrates that Walpole’s views about the political agency of imaginative writing—as revealed in his political satire and essays—informed his imaginative work, including *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) but also *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) and other, shorter pieces. Specifically, she shows how important the idea of “fear” was to Walpole’s theory of the power of fiction and writing to shape ideas and beliefs. Ledoux argues that, in the brilliant and powerful but often under-studied *The Mysterious Mother*, Walpole creates a pointed critique of how religious and state institutions manipulate fear for “political gain” and social control (52). Four other chapters examine the emergent feminism of the early gothic, the epistemological and anti-capitalist critique inherent in William Godwin’s *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), Charles Brockden Brown’s depiction of health care during the yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia in 1793, and Matthew Lewis’s complex position in relation to slavery in his life and works. This latter chapter is by far the most original and groundbreaking of the book, and paints a detailed and nuanced portrait of this important early writer. The other three chapters consolidate readings that are not particularly original but are presented in a rigorous and detailed manner. This detail is both the book’s strength and its weakness. Although the chapters leave one with the impression that the evidence mustered in support of each argument is unassailable, the actual reading of the book is at times quite slow as one navigates through extremely detailed textual and plot analyses. The relationship of close readings to more general reflections is sometimes top-heavy, and the book ends abruptly, without a concluding chapter. Apart from these stylistic issues, the study is well written and rigorous, and it joins a recent groundswell of scholarship on the political and cultural work of gothic and horror fiction from the eighteenth century to the present.

Together, the three books comprise a fascinating triptych of different ways to decode the marriage of form and ideology. Ledoux examines the rhetorical impact of gothic texts at their time of publication and uses reviews, contemporary essays, and reactions as evidence. Roberts’s and

Garrett's work is more philosophical and speculative, less concerned with actual reception dynamics, instead offering interpretations of how certain texts may have subtly engaged with or attempted to shape contemporary political ideas. Both Roberts and Garrett see this cultural work being performed on the level of the form of the texts they examine, though Roberts also looks at the plots and their implications. In this respect, Garrett is the most radical and innovative of the three authors, and his look at the episode as narrative unit is both fresh and productive. It allows him to bring together texts as divergent as *The Federalist*, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1791), Brown's *Ormond; Or, the Secret Witness* (1799), and Washington Irving's relatively little-studied *Salmagundi* (1807–8). Garrett's argument that the formal feature linking these texts is a loosely plotted and episodic structure that has at times baffled critics—especially for Brown and Irving—is original and intriguing. Interestingly, he claims that this episode constitutes the *ideologeme* of the Early Republic—its cultural work of the part gesturing towards the whole as constitutive of emergent “bourgeois culture.” Another strength of this study is Garrett's attention to questions of capitalism, consumption, and the marketplace. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Georg Lukács, Slavoj Žižek, and others, Garrett investigates the pressures of capitalist ideology on the constitutional debates as well as on the consolidation of political theory in the decades after the ratification of the Constitution. This allows him to explore the uneasy relationship between commodity culture and class politics, and the complex forms of compromise that the episodic novel and sketch and other forms of “literary ephemera” offered in such a context.

Finally, Roberts's *Gothic Subjects* represents a middle ground between these two approaches, that is, Ledoux's empiricism and Garrett's historical formalism. Roberts sees the gothic as a genre that engages with the debates around political philosophy of its time on both a formal and a thematic level. The content of these debates focuses on the classical founders of liberalism—Locke, Hume, and Smith—and Roberts's argument is that these thinkers are all revised and recalibrated in the context of the American political experiment. Instead of “individuated, property-owning” subjects assumed by the British philosophical and sentimental traditions, American gothic fiction proposes subjects that Roberts describes as “porous, fluid singularities that circulate through larger networks of information and feeling” (19). Unlike British literature of this period, Roberts argues, American gothic literature attempts to imagine new kinds of subjects and new forms of community, and it succeeded. If the strength of Roberts's work is the depth of her knowledge of political theory, both contemporary and eighteenth-century, one of the weaknesses is a tendency to occasionally lapse into political allegory, reading gothic fictions in the symptomatic way that

she explicitly expresses reservations about, where textual features signify political meanings in a fairly simple correspondence. On the other hand, all political readings risk the danger of allegorization from time to time, and this is not necessarily a serious shortcoming. Texts signify in a variety of ways, and allegory is a legitimate reading tool in the literary scholar's toolbox.

Eighteenth-century fiction studies are increasingly attentive both to questions of genre and to questions of cultural politics. In addition to renewed interest in the gothic, scholars are looking at forms and narrative units that have received relatively little attention up to now. These three recent works attest to the vitality and continued interest in the political and ideological context of the late eighteenth century, a time when the modern nation-state was being established and legitimated (often through fiction, directly or indirectly) and contemporary notions of community and democracy were emerging. All three books add valuable perspectives and readings to our understanding of the relationship between political philosophy and fictional narrative during this period.

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Nikolai Karamzin en France: L'image de la France dans les "Lettres d'un voyageur russe," éd. Rodolphe Baudin
Paris: Institute d'études slaves, 2014.
226pp. €20. ISBN 978-2-7204-0523-5.

The First Epoch: The Eighteenth Century and the Russian Cultural Imagination by Luba Golburt
Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014.
xi+387pp. US\$29.95. ISBN 978-0299298142.

Review by Valeria Sobol, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

In order for scholars outside the field of Russian literature to appreciate the true importance of these two books, they need to be aware of a rather marginal place that eighteenth-century Russian literature occupies in North American academia. Both as a research field and a subject in academic curricula (where it appears primarily as a graduate course, if at all), this period is neglected, especially when compared to the attention given to the "Great Russian Novel" of the nineteenth century, as well as to Russian modernism, the avant-garde, and even to Soviet and post-