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THE EXPRESSION OF TERROR: ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM AND GOTHIC FICTION

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In 1945, the abstract expressionist painter, Barnett Newman, concluded that after Hiroshima, he knew the terror to expect, because it had become as real as life. Many other American expressionist painters, such as Rothko, Pollock and de Kooning, tried to express this strong and violent emotion in their paintings. This leads us to think that many similarities, between American Gothic fiction and this modern art movement, can certainly be found. Both concentrate on the same kind of human emotion, which artists have a special urgency to express, whenever they feel confronted by the dangers of living in a society and time that have tendencies to create high levels of emotional sterility, which forbids individuals to feel their own humanity. If the origins of the Gothic are connected with the refusal of certain neoclassical ideals based on order, control and reason, which gave rise to a romantic search for freedom, emotion and imagination, we can say that Abstract Expressionism was also concerned with similar states of consciousness in order to penetrate into the complexity of man's inner self through the contact with the most irrational forces and impulses, represented through fractured forms and demonic figures that can become pictorial equivalents for many gothic fictions.

In *The Gothic Flame* (1987), Devendra Varma associated the Gothic to modern art movements, noticing that some gothic fragments, from the 19th century, were able to evoke precisely the same feelings expressed in the paintings by Picasso, Chagall, Chirico, Klee or Max Ernst. Varma concludes that "the Gothic novel is a legitimate art form. It revived our apprehension of life itself by enlarging our sensibility, making readers more conscious of the kinship of terror and beauty" (VARMA 1987: 226). In *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler underlined the modernity of this kind of fiction, considering the Gothic as the forerunner of the modern novel.

According to his opinion, the Gothic is an example of modern art by its innovation and by having become an anti-realist protest and a rebellion of the imagination against the reduction of fiction to the analysis of contemporary habits. He concluded that “despite its early adoption by Mrs. Radcliffe, the gothic is an avant-garde genre, perhaps the first avant-garde art in the modern sense of the term” (Fiedler 1960: 134). The Gothic’s intention of *épater la bourgeoisie* was common to several modernist movements like Dada, Surrealism and Pop art. Moreover, its desire to penetrate into the deep recesses of the irrational connects this literary mode to some aspects of Abstract Expressionism. This connection can be perceived through the contact with some of the most representative works by Pollock, Rothko, de Kooning and others. Common to them all is the importance given to the expressive power of emotions, to an anti-conventional vision of reality and to the desire of exploring the most complex and irrational side of the human mind. In an interview given by Rothko, in 1945, to the *The New York Times*, the artist said: “If previous abstractions paralleled the scientific and objective preoccupations of our times, ours are finding a pictorial equivalent for man’s new knowledge and consciousness of his more complex innerself.”

Gothic fiction is characterized by being a writing of excess that began to be produced in the 18th century, when people had many doubts about the value of reason to explain the Universe. Fear and anxiety provoked by the uncertainty of many historical and social changes created an ambivalence of thinking and feeling, because reality could easily turn into a nightmare. We can say that abstract expressionist artists also experienced a similar atmosphere of uncertainty, because they belonged to a generation that came to maturity at the beginning of a world war, followed by Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the Holocaust and a nuclear apocalypse. That’s why we can find in their paintings the expression of a traumatic spirit of time, through exacerbated drawings and a more brutal aesthetic norm than the spiritual and sometimes utopian abstraction of their predecessors such as Mondrian, Malevich or Kandinsky. The emphasis given to the emotions, particularly to the one of terror, gave birth to a new aesthetics that forced gothic writers and abstract painters to refuse the conventional processes of representation, because it was for them impossible to deal with an intolerable reality using the old established models. This urgency to find a more original and adequate way of expression was particularly felt by Pollock, when he said that “the modern artists have found new ways and new means of making statements. It seems to me that the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past

culture. Each age finds its own technique” (LEWISON 1999: 37). This search for a new aesthetics is also at the origin of gothic fiction, that refused the neo-classical rules and preferred to be centred in the human emotions. As Horace Walpole said in *Anecdotes of Painting*, “One must have taste to be sensible of the beauties of Grecian architecture, one only wants passions to feel Gothic” (VARMA 1987: 16).

Describing the Gothic as a new concern that emerged as the darker side to Romantic ideals and to the Enlightenment, Fred Botting considers it a part of a world of anxiety, despair and guilty, a world of individual transgression interrogating the uncertain bounds of imaginative freedom and human knowledge. In his work entitled *Gothic*, he concludes that “the boundless as well as the over-ornamentation of Gothic styles were part of a move away from strictly neo-classical aesthetic rules which insisted on clarity and symmetry, on variety encompassed by unity of purpose and design. Gothic signified a trend towards an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion and associated primarily with the sublime” (BOTTING: 3). It was also on account of this emotional necessity, that many American artists from the 1930s produced paintings with psychologically charged expressions, which centred upon violence, energy and many disturbing subjects such as death and hysteria. Their works showed a very distinctive style full of raw energy, basic force and crude strength. Even the use of colour was violent, with reds and blacks colliding. Pollock’s talent, for example, was called “volcanic”, because he was totally unpredictable and able to paint from inner impulsion. In spite of some negative criticisms, as the one that compared his paintings to a pattern of a tie and to a map of tangled hair, Pollock developed a popular image of the artist *maudit* as a wild, brutish and lonely genius, who lived in a constant state of crisis. Greenberg described him as “gothic, morbid and extreme”. It was also this critic, who gave the title of *Gothic* (1944) to one of his paintings, which the artist produced departing from an idea of a dancer inspired by *Les trois Danseuses* by Picasso. This title was a metaphor for the rough nature Greenberg saw in Pollock’s art. *Gothic* shows us a dense mass of forms and lines. The black functions as a background as an outline that curves itself rhythmically, involving the blue and green areas, sometimes together with a blurred dry-green. Sometimes it seems reasonable to establish associations with hands and feet that, all of a sudden, seem completely arbitrary and without importance. Only the recollection of a dancing figure in a rhythmic movement is constantly present, but under the form of a simultaneous vibration of the entire image, more than a sequence of movements, which may represent an opportunity to remake the process of creation. Pollock’s

Black Paintings (1951) have also strong gothic connotations. By abandoning colour, he gave his art a sense of urgency, where the human figure suddenly returns, with heads, faces and mutilated limbs emerging from black webs. The crudest of these images is a decapitated Roman head, with a bald forehead that bears an unsettling likeness to the artist. In these paintings, Pollock no longer veiled his imagery. Instead he left the human figure exposed ready to reveal or to confess a certain guilt. That's why his *Black Paintings* are often seen as a rebellion against his "drip" paintings and a metaphor for Pollock's violent break with his past. The disturbing quality of these images, the obsession and the fanatic purpose, with which he worked to produce them, show us his "gothic" character, so well represented in his *Self-Portrait* (1930-1933), expressive of his darkest neurosis. This gothic tendency can also be perceived in his famous *Mural* (1943), where we can see obscured totems reduced to black lines of great and frightening intensity. In his paintings, many of these totems were broken down to anatomical fragments, scattered all over the canvas and where we can sometimes notice disembodied eyes that seem to glare from the interior of certain abstract images.

This preference for primitive symbols, in opposition to the established values of civilization, is also an important characteristic of gothic fiction, as David Punter pointed out, when in *The Literature of Terror*, he stated that "the fruits of primitivism and barbarism possessed a fire, a vigour, a sense of grandeur which was sorely needed" (PUNTER 1980: 6). The word "gothic" was initially used with the senses of primitive, barbarous, wild and uncivilized. At the end of the Middle Ages, this designation was used with a negative meaning referring to a wild nature and to everything that was strange or had to do with superstition, ugliness, extravagant fantasies, etc. The so called Goths were considered barbarians and destroyers, something the gothic literature was aware of, whenever it had to represent the human tendency to destruction and chaos, that was completely contrary to the classical notion of order. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode presented the reason why gothic writers felt so attracted to chaos: "It is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers." (KERMODE 1968: 64). His desire for a more spontaneous painting, also led Pollock to confront chaos. He said he wasn't afraid to make changes, to destroy the image, because painting had its own life, and he would try to let it reveal itself. That's why he stopped painting figurative images and turned to abstraction and to what was called "all over painting" that led him to break down all hierarchical distinctions dissolving the pictorial into

sheer texture. This attitude was completely approved by De Kooning, when he said that "Every so often, a painter has to destroy painting. Cézanne did it. Picasso did it with Cubism. Then Pollock did it. He busted our idea of a picture all to hell." (SOLOMON 2000: 17).

That one must destroy to create was a very famous advice invented by Picasso, and it seems that Pollock's project included the intention to destroy Picasso, because he needed to be free from the subservience to cubist tradition. There is a very high degree of destruction in his paintings that is at the origin of their basic force and vigour. It's the case of the expressive violence of *Troubled Queen* (1945), a large vertical painting that measures about six feet high. It's a violent picture that shows two decapitated heads emerging from a thicket of slashing lines. One of the heads is a triangle pierced by a single eye, the other head is heart-shaped, with two square eyes and a troubled expression that suggests she is the queen of the painting's title. She appears to be suffocating as if choked by the fat, zagging lines and broken arcs that glut the picture surface. This violence has very often a cathartic effect, as the art critic, Sam Hunter, noticed, in an article for *The New York Times*, where he criticized Pollock's art, saying that "it reflects an advance stage of disintegration of modern painting. But it is disintegration with a possibly liberating and cathartic effect and informed by a highly individual rhythm." (SOLOMON 2000: 191). This cathartic disintegration is also an effect produced by gothic fiction, where the characters are very often threatened by the disintegration of their personalities, turning themselves into victims of their own self-destruction. The catharsis, obtained by these destructive acts, shows that gothic fiction tends to purify human emotions, specially the emotion of terror, itself a tragic emotion, according to the definition of Tragedy presented by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. And it's widely known that the best gothic novels and short-stories are the ones that possess a tragic meaning of human existence. In his work *The Haunted Castle* (1927), Eino Railo said that "suffering may have in it something sublime, and when joined to crime, great passion and catastrophes, it leads to what approaches tragedy." (RAILO 1927: 327).

This tragic tension can also be felt in Rothko's paintings, because this artist thought that the tragic experience was the only art source. The spiritual dimension of his work tells us that he tried to transform his paintings into experiences of tragedy and ecstasy, as if they represented basic conditions of existence, because his main purpose was to express the universal human drama. The emotional power of his work comes from a dramatic conflict created through contrasting colours, that seem

to live in a tension of contention or eruption, of fixation and fluctuation, that Rothko described as tragic. The mysterious character of his art became darker in the last two years of his life, when he explored the dark colours in *Black on Grey* (1969-70), and *Brown on Grey* (1969), where the grey zones seem to be agitated in a turbulent action. In an interview, Rothko confessed that he wasn't an abstractionist, he wasn't interested in the relation of colour with form, he was only interested in expressing basic human emotions, such as tragedy, ecstasy and ruin. His interest in Tragedy led him to explore mythological themes that expressed universal questions. Rothko's archetypes represented barbarism and civilization, passions, pain, aggression and violence as something primitive, timeless and tragic. He remarked that those who thought that the world today was less brutal and ungrateful than the one of those myths, didn't perceive reality or didn't want to see it in art. Terror and fear had to be present in his canvas because, as Lovecraft stated in *The Supernatural Horror in Literature*, they were the strongest and the oldest emotions of humanity. Their connection with mythology is inevitable, because, as Edith Birkhead concluded, in *The Tale of Terror* (1921), the gothic story is so old as man, being terror and fear at the origin of many ancient myths. The old legends and epic narratives have always offered motives to confront monsters and hideous figures. As Birkhead said "human nature desires not only to be amused and entertained, but moved to pity and fear." (BIRKHEAD 1921: 3). If Canto XI, in *The Odyssey*, can be compared to a gothic scene, where Ulysses calls the spirits of the dead, the black rectangles, in the Seagram Murals by Rothko, can also contain a certain gothic spirit, because they celebrate the death of civilization, suggesting the entrance in open tombs like the doors that lead to the houses of the dead, in egyptian pyramids, behind which the sculptures maintained the kings living to the eternity. Once Rothko compared these murals to the ones by Michael Angelo in Saint Lorenzo's library in Florence, saying that the room, where they were, gave him the sensation of being walled by doors and windows, an experience that perhaps Edgar Allan Poe would have liked.

Both gothic writers and abstract expressionist painters felt the urgency to express a moral crisis and the feelings of destruction that haunt the contemporary mind. To do this they used an aesthetics that expressed the horrible as something beautiful or sublime. As Barnett Newman said, in a world that was a battle field, reduced to ashes by destruction and rage, it was impossible to go on painting as before – flowers, reclined nudes or musicians playing the cello. To express this ugliness that invaded the world, it was not possible to go on using the past methods of representation, as

de Kooning's "ugly" women show. But as Greenberg said about Pollock: "he is not afraid to look ugly, all profoundly original art looks ugly at first." (SOLOMON 2000: 154).

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