The Experimental Gothic
Avant-Gardist Interpolations in Gothic Literature

Päivi Mehtonen | ORCID: 0000-0003-1266-7833
Independent Scholar, Tampere, Finland
paivi@mehtonenpost.fi

Sami Sjöberg | ORCID: 0000-0002-3279-4058
University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
sami.sjoberg@helsinki.fi

Abstract

This essay proposes that the crucial movements of the historical avant-garde looked to the first wave of Gothic literature (1760s–1820s) in developing their respective variants of experimental prose. To date, the linguistic and textual characteristics (non-mimesis, ineffability) of the literary mode here called Experimental Gothic have not been comprehensively investigated, neither in Avant-Garde nor Gothic Studies. The proposed poetics of the Experimental Gothic indicates that the early avant-gardes did not straightforwardly recycle Gothic material but rather wove the praxis of contemporary theories of representation into their prosaic exploits, which were immersed in the imaginary, supernatural and irrational. The linguistic features of recognised works of avant-garde prose by luminaries such as Carl Einstein, Hugo Ball and Julien Gracq reveal the Experimental Gothic to be a language project spawned from anarchist backgrounds, which leads readers to reject their naive belief in conventional representation in order to gain a renewed sense of reality.

Keywords

We must make new art—more gothic, children, the impressionists hate it!

Carl Einstein

William Beckford’s novel *Vathek* (1782) is a Gothic classic that, according to the Expressionist and Dada polymath Carl Einstein (1885–1940), “made the play of whims into a technique”.1 He projected onto *Vathek*, which had appeared in German translation in 1907, the literary tastes of his own day, promoting anti-storytelling and a revolt against naturalism. Thus, Beckford became “the father of the present” (*der Vater der Heutigen*), and Einstein’s review essay “Vathek” (1910) grew into a remarkable manifesto and instance of experimental prose, a field that some years earlier Einstein himself had pioneered with his prose work *Bebuquin*.2

We argue that with the essay “Vathek”, Einstein introduced a new telegraphic prose and a poetics of Experimental Gothic drawn from different strands of contemporary thought. The essay both acknowledged its debt to older masters (Aubrey Beardsley, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé and Algernon Charles Swinburne)3 and established new discursive space for protean linguistic experimentation and techniques of “emerging fantasy” (*eine einsteigende Phantastik*).4 Such temporal suspension between the past and present, or antagonism and admiration, is also evident in Einstein’s view of William Beckford as a literary paragon. Features that characterise many repre-

---

1 All translations are by the authors unless otherwise stated.
2 Einstein, 1934b: 41–45, 98–132. The “Vathek” essay was published several times in the mushrooming literary and political magazines of the day, at least in *Hyperion* (Heft 11–12, 1910) and the anarchist *Die Aktion* (3. Jg., 1913 “Über das Buch Vathek”, under the pseudonym Sabine Ree). Verlag die Aktion also published Einstein’s novel *Bebuquin* in book form in 1912. (Penkert, 1969: 59, 150.) William Beckford’s *Vathek* was written in French in 1782 and published in English in 1786.
3 Mallarmé wrote a preface to the 1865 French edition of *Vathek*, but focused on biographical and bibliographical history rather than engaging in linguistic analysis. Mallarmé, 1970.
4 We use the term “linguistic” in the broad sense as it has been applied in Avant-Garde Studies, especially those focusing on the linguistic experimentation of the Russian Futurists and their collaboration with linguists.
sentatives of the so-called first wave of Gothic between the 1760s and 1820s now reappeared in the emerging avant-garde context, somewhere between transnational Expressionism and embryonic Dada, with direct continuities to later Surrealism. Following such traits, we suggest that a theoretically insightful poetics of Experimental Gothic emerged with the avant-gardist involvement with the old Gothic literature during the first half of the twentieth century. We attempt to make visible an idiosyncratic case in the history of Gothic genre literature by focusing on the stylistic and thematic debt of some key texts of the so-called historical avant-garde to the tradition of Gothic novels. Whereas the term “avant-garde” in this essay refers to a historical phenomenon, experimentality is understood as one of its characteristics that guide the reader. This article proposes to fill a gap left by Gothic Studies on the map of the metamorphoses of Gothic writing (to be defined in the next section). Neither has the corpus of Experimental Gothic so far been canonised in Avant-Garde Studies, even though all the early “isms” of the historical avant-garde acknowledged their indebtedness to the first wave of Gothic, with the notable exception of Italian futurism, which categorically rejected the past. We will hazard an account of Experimental Gothic, situating it between the well-studied genealogy of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic and the post-war avant-gardist use of Gothic topoi, together with the even later poetics of twenty-first-century Gothic.

The first part of this article will demonstrate how a canon was transformed, as Gothic modes (re)appeared, before and after the First World War, in the

---

5 In this context, “experimental literature” denotes the use of language as “raw material” that is critically and methodologically investigated. Such experimentation aims at emancipating the reader from conventional thought patterns that function as a prerequisite for the reader’s potential engagement. Cf. Thiers, 2016: 483. Experimental literature tends to foreground the formal, linguistic and poetic aspects of literature. These features are inherently context-related and a text’s experimentality is always linked with its cultural and linguistic circumstances.

6 For previous studies discussing the avant-garde and Gothic, see, e.g., Bloois, 2007; Eburne, 2008; Matheson, 2018; Fiedler, 1984 (orig. 1960, rev. edition 1966), to be discussed later. On the “Gothic avant-garde” (Einstein, Ball, Meyrink), see Mehtonen, 2013.

7 For important early studies on the Gothic novel or Schauerroman as a genre, see, for instance, Killen, 1915; Birkhead, 1921; Railo, 1927; Lovecraft, 1927; Heine, 1933; Summers, 1938. See also the apt and amusing “Verbarium des Schauer(roman)s” by Grizelj (2010b: 43–44), from Spektakel to Zauberin and Femme fatale.

8 In the 1950s and 1960s, Anglo-American Surrealists, such as Valentine Penrose, Leonora Carrington and Itchell Colquhoun, were influenced by earlier Experimental Gothic while adherents of Viennese Actionism (e.g. Hans Carl Artmann) recycled Gothic themes and violence in their writings and corporeal “actions”. See Bätzner, 2007; Marwood, 2014.
eerie anti-naturalistic and anti-positivistic fiction of the avant-gardes and the so-called “fantastical revival” in literature. Through such emerging trends and manifestoes concerning “new” prose writing, the second part of this essay then moves on to analyse more closely three works, namely, Carl Einstein’s Bebuquin oder Die Dilettanten des Wunders (Bebuquin, or the Dilettantes of the Miracle, 1908, henceforth Bebuquin), Hugo Ball’s (1886–1927) Tenderenda der Phantast (Tenderenda The Fantast, 1967, written in 1914–1920, henceforth Tenderenda) and Julien Gracq’s (1910–2007) Au château d’Argol (The Castle of Argol, 1938, henceforth Argol). While there are no unequivocally “Experimental Gothic authors”, we attempt to demonstrate both Gothic and experimental characteristics by discussing the three texts in the tradition of writers as varied as Otto Julius Bierbaum (1865–1910), Mynona (1871–1947), André Breton (1896–1966), Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) and Vítězslav Nezval (1900–1958). Such unquestionably avant-garde prosaist either leaned on the Gothic modes and sensibilities in their poetics or wrote what they themselves called “Gothic novels”.

1 Emergent Theory

1.1 Avant-Gardists Rewriting the Canon

The Experimental Gothic mode acknowledges an indebtedness to the well-edged tradition flourishing between the 1760s and 1820s. This period saw the emergence and often sensational popularity of the works of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, M.G. Lewis, Charles Maturin and, of course, William Beckford in the British Isles; Charles Brockden Brown, E.A. Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne in North America; Choderlos de Laclos, Marquis de Sade and the roman noir in France; and Benedikte Naubert, Ludwig Tieck, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Schauerromantik in Germany. The continued influence of Gothic themes during the

---

9 The concept of a “mode” admits the ability of the conventionalised horror elements to remould themselves “into various situation[s], narrative forms, and media”. Piatti-Farnell & Lee Brien, 2015: 1; Redling & Schneider, 2015. Grizelj (2010a: 9–10 et passim) also discusses the paradoxical difficulty of defining Gothic as a genre. While the basic elements, effects and topoi are highly conventional, at the same time the individual (hybrid or nomadic) works make it difficult to define such a genre. Thus, it remains to explore the verstörend und formbildend potential of the genre or Modus.

10 For the Gothic “undercurrent” in nineteenth-century literature, see Praz, 1930; Steinmetz, 1978; Glinoin, 2009. André Breton even included the early works of Victor Hugo (cf. Notre-Dame de Paris, 1831) and Honoré de Balzac (cf. “Mélmoth Réconcilié”, 1835) in this trend (Breton, 1946). The term petits romantiques is used in France to denote those writers whose works were socially or philosophically insubordinate, macabre or frenetic. Indeed, in their
nineteenth century is visible in authors bridging the first wave of Gothic and Experimental Gothic, including romanticism (August Klingemann [Bonaventura], Achim von Arnim, Xavier Forneret), decadence (Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Comte de Lautréamont, Remy de Gourmont, Jiří Karásek, Rachilde, Swinburne and Beardsley) and the later receptions of “Sadean” preferences of transgressive writers (Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Octave Mirbeau, Henri Antoine Jules-Bois). Such receptions, explicitly aware of the first wave of Gothic, transformed the thematic, stylistic and linguistic means of the imaginary, the supernatural and the (ir)rational. It remains to be seen in the following chapters what Experimental Gothic in turn added to the received wisdom.

In addition to direct references to the Gothic classics or even new versions of them (such as Antonin Artaud’s *The Monk*), important theoretical discussions in the beginning of the twentieth century moulded the meanings attached to the term “Gothic” and connected it to the idea of non-mimetic representation. Noteworthy early media of manifestoes were prefaces (to translations, anthologies and so forth) and reviews of publications. Carl Einstein’s programmatic review “Vathek” is performative, defending in intermittently cryptic lines of thought similar effects he found in William Beckford’s *Vathek*. In deciphering Einstein’s condensed concepts, the context of early Expressionism, within which he developed his theory and practice of prose, offers many keys.

---

11 Regarding the terminological continuities, the word “Gothic” was already used in Karásek’s Huysmans-influenced Decadent book in Czech, *Gotická duše* (Gothic Soul, 1900). The subtitle of Vítězslav Nezval’s 1945 Experimental Gothic novel, *černý román*, a direct translation of the French *roman noir*, was meant to guide the reader towards a particular reading.

12 In France, the avant-garde rediscovery of Sade began with Apollinaire’s 1909 *L’œuvre du Marquis de Sade* (The Works of Marquis de Sade) and continued with the republication of Sade’s works, edited by Maurice Heine in the 1920s. Heine (1933: 204–205) presented Sade as a pioneer of the Gothic, a discoverer of psychology and introspection connected to terror respectful of natural laws. Breton (1997: 18) later asserted that Sade was “the most authentic precursor of Freud’s work and of modern psychopathology in general”. The avant-garde interest in Sade is also visible in the trial against Jean-Jacques Pauvert, who reissued Sade’s works; Jean Cocteau and Georges Bataille both gave statements defending Sade’s importance. For a more detailed account, see Matheson, 2018; Mahon, 2020.

13 It should be noted that “horror” topics were also depicted in a realistic and naturalistic vein: consider the Parisian Théâtre du Grand Guignol, which staged popular genre horror plays from the *Jahrhundertwende* up until the 1960s. Hugo Ball also mentions the Grand Guignol in his diaries (Prologue, 1996: 9).

14 Henceforth, both Lewis’ and Artaud’s versions are abbreviated as *Monk*. 

---

When Einstein describes “ornamental imagelike connection” (der ornamentale bildhafte Zusammenhang) or the ways in which the “stylised rationalism” of Beckford’s fantasy-driven prose dissociates itself from “the organic” (das Organische), an enlightened contemporary reader might recognise echoes of the thought of Wilhelm Woringer (1881–1965). His Stilpsychologie, or “style psychology”, which widely influenced not only German Expressionism but European avant-garde in general, also gave the term “Gotik” a new air of topicality. A paradigmatic shift of meaning took place as the term was paralleled with the emerging abstract tendencies and placed on the side of the non-mimetic in the contemporary crisis of representation. It is remarkable language-wise that Woringer identified components of expression that may be attributed to strands of medieval literature, the prose of the ‘first-wave’ Gothic novels and the emerging Experimental Gothic alike. Such components include the artful chaos of interwoven ideas; the alliterated expressive rhythm; and intricate repetition of initial sounds, corresponding to the repetition of motive in ornament.

Along with the conceptual transformations of “the Gothic”, the newest art returned with new forms to the older, so far non-canonical eras. “Primitive” cultures, the Middle Ages, and the Gothic novel now became a weapon directed at the (passé) era of realism, naturalism and impressionism. These had flourished side by side with man’s scientific mastery of the natural world and mechanised perception of reality. The poetics of Expressionist, Dada and Surrealist prose were often armed with a culture critique directed against such “de-demonised” modernity, which had suppressed the various Gegenrealitäten (counter-realities) and made “thematic” psychologism a leading principle of prose literature. Critiques were not directed against the notion of “reality” as such but against an automatised idea of representing reality through mimesis.

---

15 See, e.g., the contributions in Donahue, 1995; Öhlschläger, 2013. An instance of the enthusiasm with which Woringer’s ideas were received was the 1914 book Der Expressionismus by the German author and critic Paul Fechter. He wrote of the Gothic’s “transcendental-abstract intoxication” while identifying Expressionism as a “new Gothic” (Fechter, 1914: 33, 45).

16 On medieval literature, see Woringer, 1912: 51; Woringer, 1920: 67. In the 1980s, Bayer-Berenbaum (without referring to Woringer’s ideas regarding literature) suggested that the art history of Woringer “is remarkably applicable” to Gothic literature. Elements of such correspondence were supersensuous activity, “restless energy”, a psychological connection between a sense of God and a sense of the grotesque, “the psychological recesses of the repetitive mind”, and “stereotyped plots and characters” (Bayer-Berenbaum, 1982: 51 et passim).

17 For instance, Einstein claimed that Cubism never rejected reality, like the full abstraction
The premodern impulse evident in the transformations of the Gothic was not just nostalgic retrospection or romantic medievalism—the (pseudo)-medieval castles, cloisters, infernos, Arthuriana—but also theoretical by nature, grounding the way to later “theoretical medivalisms” of the twentieth century (Bataille, Lacan, Barthes, Derrida). For the Experimental Gothic, such trends were actualised in creating new projections and nostalgias concerning both “the Gothic” and “the Middle Ages”. The past was imagined and recontextualised by present standards, whereby Experimental Gothic always had a critical cultural topicality.

Such influential ideas by Einstein, Worringer and others fertilised literary interest in the non-mimetic techniques and styles of the fantastic (das Fantastische), imaginary, supernatural and surreal or marvellous. The substantive term “the fantastic” became an important marker for linguistic liminal aspects of Experimental Gothic. It is at once both terrifying and marvellous, material and internal, opening up reality to wonder and affects. The conventional horror themes and spatial concerns of the physical and mental spaces of tormented or tormenting subjects were taken to new fragmentary, repetitive or hyperbolical levels. Einstein in fact claimed that this had already been...
achieved in Beckford’s *Vathek*. It extended “hellish Langweile [ennui] and desperate banality” to a degree that they gained new significance and sublimity (*Erhabenheit*).23

Indicating the critical cultural topicality of Experimental Gothic, the exploration of the fantastic and forms of the supernatural witnessed the blooming of German Expressionism and Dada, which coincided with a more general peak in Gothic trends, known in the history of Austrian-German literature as neo-Romanticism or the German fantastical revival, also in connection with the “narrators of the Grotesque”.24 The French Experimental Gothic emerged some years later in the 1920s. The interwar and *après-guerre* francophone Experimental Gothic coincided with the utilisation of supernatural and Gothic elements in the Belgian fantastic (the motley School of the Strange), while Einstein repurposed some of his earlier theories related to Experimental Gothic in the *Documents*’ “sectarian” Surrealism.25

These parallel trends do not cloud the fundamental properties of the Experimental Gothic, which reveal the avant-gardists’ comprehensive familiarity with the Gothic, their ability to bring to the fore the continued and embedded actuality of revolt-leaning Gothic writing while coupling it with the emerging contemporary theories of representation and poetics. At the same time, however, Experimental Gothic maintained many of the conservative features of the first-wave Gothic and revitalised them in a contemporary context.

1.2  Experimental Gothic’s Generic Configurations

Critics noted Gothic tendencies in contemporary avant-garde literature already in the interwar period.26 In the early 1960s, Leslie Fiedler claimed that (Lewitian) Gothic and “such spectacular bourgeois-baiting movements as Dada, Surrealism, and Pop Art” shared common aims and that they wanted “to shake the philistines out of their self-satisfied torpor. *Épater la bourgeoisie*: this is the

---

25 The early twentieth-century rewriting of the Gothic canon with its medievalist interests also coincided and contrasted with the fantastic-technological imagery of contemporary authors such as Raymond Roussel, Gaston de Pawlowski and Paul Scheerbart.
26 For instance, see Summers (1969/1938) for one of the oddest performances in Gothic criticism. Montague Summers debunked practically everything the Surrealists had said about the Gothic, from André Breton’s celebration of classics—such as Horace Walpole as a stimulus of the Surrealist method—to the representatives of the later roman noir admired by the Surrealists (e.g. *Les Chants de Maldoror* by Lautréamont).
### Table 1: Some Key Features of Experimental Gothic Literature Regarding Its Vanguardism versus Conservativeness, Which Manifest the Heterogeneity of the Mode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRO</th>
<th>CON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Avant-gardist Characteristics</strong></td>
<td><strong>Conventional Characteristics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanguardism (anarchism, revolt)</td>
<td>Conservativeness (authors’ prejudices, use of stereotypes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-rationalism (affects, perception, representation)</td>
<td>Balancing rational efforts (maintaining cultural conventions, exploring moralities)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-realism (characters, depiction of milieus)</td>
<td>Conventional narration (predictable characters, foreseeable endings)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel and unexpected adoption and utilisation of the iconography and formulas of the Gothic</td>
<td>Use of repetitive structures and plots derived from the Gothic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical meta-generic features (ironic relation to the preceding works of the genre)</td>
<td>Uncritical meta-generic features (responding to readers’ expectations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic literature (discursive melanges, text collages, arcaic language used to humorous ends)</td>
<td>Popular romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejected the distinction between high and low cultural forms</td>
<td>Regarded as lowbrow literature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secret slogan of the tale of terror. Moreover, the Gothic novel represented “perhaps the first avant-garde art in the modern sense of the term”. In order to arrive at a more nuanced and complex view of Experimental Gothic as a language project and as a particular mode, let us draw a scheme of the various features, arguments and counterarguments regarding the links of the historical avant-garde with the preceding waves of Gothic literature. The purpose of

---

27 Fiedler, 1984: 129, 135, our emphasis. For discussion see Mehtonen, 2013: 25. After Fiedler, the idea of the somehow inherently revolutionary and anarchistic (“anarchism” not specified) early Gothic was defended by Bayer-Berenbaum (1982: 42–45), with references to André Breton, by Michael Sadleir’s early essay “The Northanger Novels” (1927), and The Gothic Flame (1957) by Devendra Varma, who also translated Sade’s *Idée sur les Romans* into English.
such scrutiny is not to choose either pro or con but rather reflect in a schematic form the variety of the field (see Table 1).

In terms of the axis of vanguardism versus conservativeness, experimental Gothic is an avant-garde mode insofar as a political rejection of authority and defence of new theories of representation motivated its revolt. The anarchic character of the historical avant-gardes and Experimental Gothic is indeed a complex field. It was not only connected with contemporaneous politics but also with radical linguistics and “dissident mysticism” while cultivating even the most hackneyed iconography and formulas of the Gothic tradition in unexpected ways. Thus, side by side with its reformative aspirations, Experimental Gothic had its entrenched attitudes that uncovered the rhetorical nature of its rebellion. The seemingly transgressive characteristics of the texts often concealed conventional stereotypes and national, racial and racist Gothic images.

Anti-rationalism and anti-realism emerge against the backdrop of tried and tested conventionalities of the mode. This tendency manifested itself in the ways that Experimental Gothic favoured the marked artificiality and ornamentality of characters and expression. The means of representation and narration hovered between the clichés of tradition (e.g. predictable supernatural denizens, foreseeable endings) and new theories of representation, the latter being evident in the unravelling of “indeterminable” characters into linguistic patterns, as in Einstein’s Bebuquin.

Experimental Gothic tales repurposed the more commonplace stylistic features and narrative devices of earlier Gothic. In order to illustrate the fallibility of mimesis and highlight a confident vanguard position, Experimental

---

28 For instance, while some early works of Gothic had direct connections to political reform and anarchism (William Godwin), in other cases overt and covert claims of radicalism were produced in the later reception of the works. Such a case was Monk Ambrosio’s metamorphosis into “a Spanish Jacobine” in an early French translation Le Jacobin espagnol, ou histoire du Moine Ambrosio et de la belle Antonia sa Soeur (Paris: Favre, 1797).


30 For instance, Experimental Gothic adopted the Gothic’s textual strategies of sexual sublimation in the post-Freudian era of de-sublimation. Transgressions highlighted the rebellious and anti-clerical features of the Gothic modes, especially in their portrayal and exploitation of human somata. Gothic narratives portray physical bodies as initiators and an inspiration of desire as well as objects of violence, defilement and sexuality.

31 For instance, Frank Krause discusses the “birth phantasies” in avant-garde prose (including Einstein’s Bebuquin) and observes the persistent theme of masculine spirit and feminine materia when male authors depict the creative process (Krause, 2012: 31 ff.).
Gothic used archaic and elevated language as both a means of creating a sense of temporal displacement and self-reflective irony. Already the first wave of Gothic was fascinated by the language games and performativity of the oral aspects of mysticism, the hermetic traditions, extravagant theatricality, late eighteenth-century German and French melodrama and aspects of (also spoken) discourse. Such genre conventions were revised in the later receptions of Gothic. An important trait of performativity was a sort of “verbal sorcery”, which involved the intellectual and dreamlike depths of the subject’s existences and activities. Another important aspect of performativity were the traditions of cabaret, burlesque and vaudeville, often laced with self-conscious humour, anti-rationalist playfulness and allaying laughter. German Expressionism and Dada connected literary laughter to Sprachkritik with its connections between fear and laughter, and between the comic, banal and grotesque in the linguistic and spatial dislocations, whereas the theory of l’humour noir, black humour, put forward by André Breton in the 1930s was influenced by Freud’s psychoanalysis in emphasising humour as “the mortal enemy of sentimentality” and a superior revolt of the mind.

As noted, writers recontextualised earlier tropes, themes and linguistic means of Gothic writing while expanding the mode through experimentation with new poetics. For instance, pastiches, borrowing, intertextuality and repetition are common metamodal features of Experimental Gothic writing—“metamodal” in the sense that while utilising the already available literary

32 Performative experimentality is also visible in discursive collages where narration was used as a stylistic device to enhance the sense of nostalgia related to the Gothic mode: for example, in Nezval’s Valerie the characters converse in contemporary Czech, whereas the narrator’s indirect address is archaic and the grammar follows nineteenth-century standard language. The temporal displacement through such outmoded eloquence would have produced a humorous effect, as the intentionally pompous, elevated language seems to borrow from past oral and literary conventions.

33 Antonin Artaud rewrote the text of Lewis’ Monk in 1931 and described that many episodes in the novel have “the same power to summon up a whole host of images in the reader’s mind as the incantations of a magical ritual with regard to the object of those incantations”. Artaud, 2003: 19.

34 Breton, 1997: vi, xix. For further discussion on Hugo Ball’s Tenderenda and Gustav Meyrink’s Golem in the tradition of Gothic comedy and “language-critical laughter”, see Mehtonen, 2013: 35–39. On the idea of das sprachkritisches Lachen, see Mauthner (1910: the entry “Humor”), who claims that laughter does not belong to the ”substantival world” of rational things but rather the ”adjectival world” of unorganised and haphazard primary perception. Regarding the first wave of Gothic, important studies on the alliance of farce, humour and horror are Sage, 1994 and Horner & Zlosnik, 2005. An important influence was Baudelaire’s essay De l’essence du rire (On the Essence of Laughter, 1855), which praises Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer.
means of the mode, the origins of the texts and borrowings were often obscured. A proper methodical repurposing of Gothic writing in the twentieth century could result in a “concretely irrational psychic collage freely borrowing from the genre of the so-called pulp literature everything belonging to the nethermost regions of our unconscious”.

Beyond the critical features, however, Experimental Gothic occasionally resembled genre fiction more than rebellious avant-garde literature. In the attempt to engage readers, it took the “fandom’s” expectations into account without dismissing it too often. The authors of Experimental Gothic were aware of the inflation and decline of Gothic literature in the early nineteenth century, which resulted from overproduction of titles, recycling of plots and repetitious structures. Thus, by the early twentieth century there was a wealth of clichés to remould and hyperbolise further, from Hugo Ball’s descent to the fumes of the hellish Satanopolis in *Tenderenda* and Mynona’s dismal experimental laboratory with its draconian master in *Der Schöpfer* (The Creator, 1920) to the harassed damsel and somatic transformations in Nezval’s experimental novel [Valerie a týden dívů (Valerie and Her Week of Wonders, 1945)](https://www.britannica.com/art/Valerie-a-týden-dívů) (1935, henceforth *Valerie*). However, such stylistic mischievousness exemplifies a profound doubt regarding the rationalist worldview, which made also Experimental Gothic a sceptic and often playful mission. The characteristics of Experimental Gothic, at once vanguard and conformist, peculiar and repetitive, illustrate the uniqueness of the mode in the twentieth-century metamorphoses of Gothic writing.

## 2 Vanguard Praxis

### 2.1 Early Experimental Gothic

Path-breaking linguistic experiments in the received Gothic tradition were produced by Carl Einstein’s novel *Bebuquin* (1907), which made Einstein famous and became an inspiration to a generation of writers of dark grotesqueries, and Hugo Ball’s *Tenderenda der Phantast* (Tenderenda the Fantast, 1914–1920), a kind of post-apocalyptic war literature. Although different in tone and structure, remarkable shared passions emerge in the novels when viewed in the framework of Gothic writing. Although Einstein’s *Bebuquin* was serialised in left-wing magazines also publishing Expressionist writers, many “orthodox” Expressionists found the novel too strange for the prevailing poetics. It arguably

---

lacked interest in sensation, subjectivity and immediacy. The magazine *Die Opale*, which published the first chapter of Carl Einstein’s *Bebuquin*, and other blossoming literary-political periodicals fostered short prose and serialised horror.

In both *Bebuquin* and *Tenderenda*, interest in the themes of death, torment and the abominable collides with linguistic styles marked with absurd melodrama. These are presented in a plethora of discourses, from the use of disconnecting speeches (in the vein of Walpole and Lewis) to a mixture of pseudo-mythical parlance, war rhetoric and banal advertising slogans. The prose is haunted by *ad hoc* episodes and dead ends, without a centralised spatial or temporal perspective and a happy closure. Such (Dada) efforts have been called nominalist poetics where, according to Philipp, a narrating consciousness loses control over the multitude of things, which are “named” even as their “universal substrate” is dissolved.

Carl Einstein, whose intellectual profile is famously difficult to categorise, also captured elements of his own prosaics when he claimed that William Beckford’s *Vathek* is a *Kunstmärchen* (“art fable”) that borders on the grotesque, presenting spaces and characters as artificial constructions. Likewise, in both *Bebuquin* and *Tenderenda* the surroundings are non-natural constructions. In *Bebuquin* one finds a man-made distorting mirror house, bar, bordel, cloister, the Cheap Horror Museum. The *Tenderenda* of Hugo Ball, who acknowledged in his Dada diaries both Einstein’s novel and the legacies of the “black romanticism” of Charles Maturin, Matthew Lewis, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Edgar Allan Poe, features a structured Dantean inferno. Such spaces are inhabited by eth-
real mystics, (false) prophets, winged creatures sucking blood, budding writers, antichrists and other denizens of traditional horror worlds. The “characters” are indeed artificial and transitory rather than psychological, verisimilar or allegorical.

Death and a perpetual flux of appearances also trouble the namesake protagonist of Einstein’s *Bebuquin*. In the middle of a banal artistic quest and crisis of representation, Bebuquin attempts in vain to apply the good old methods of romanticist *ennui*, existential speculation regarding life and humanity, and even a search for God. He laments that he is unable to start anything with things in general, since “one thing involves all other things. It stays in flux and the infinity of a point is horror [*furchtbar ist die Unendlichkeit eines Punktes*]” (B 4 / W 92). Observing such *Angst* in the face of the multitude of existences and disintegration of one truth, the eerie supervisor of the young man states wryly: “You are a phantasist without sufficient means” (B 17 / W 99).

This mystical mentor and disjointed “character” Nebukadnezar Böhm, a living dead or post-material spirit, combined components of conventional Gothic and unprecedented prose. As a figure or transcendence and “hypothetical action”, he leads Bebuquin to witness his (Böhm’s) own funeral wake, after which the entombed spectre figures in the narration post-mortally and occasionally speaks “with a horror voice” (B 37 / W 109). However, nobody is scared of the childish and grotesque gestures of a ghost, who destroys “all our feeling for form [*Formgefühl*]” and even whose humour is considered “macabre and formless” (B 40, 45 / W 110, 112). Böhm is “imagined” figure and “an ensign for unreality” in a narrative toying with Bebuquin’s artistic and cosmic horror, a twisted (Böhmean-Hegelian) dialectic of the first self-awareness, abysses and the primordial ground (*die Abgründe, der Urgrund*), as well as Böhm’s preaching about the word and *Nichts* as the condition of all Being.\(^42\) In developing new ways of storytelling, there is no need to mention that the writers of the first wave of Gothic, such as Beckford and Maturin, had already toyed with what Mishra describes as fantastic juxtapositions, compulsive patterns of “the self

\(^{42}\) Respectively, B 13 / W 97, B 62 / W 121, B 28–29 / W 104. The figure of Böhm alludes to the Protestant mystic Jacob Böhme, probably via the feverish classic of the romantic Gothic, the *Nachtwachen* of August Klingemann (“Bonaventura”, 1834), which gained currency among the early proponents of Expressionism. One manifestation of this interest was Raimund Steinert’s 1916 edition, based on Rahel Varnhagen’s copy. According to Gillespie (1972: xii), among the early adherents of Expressionism “Bonaventura” became “a prophet of the debacle of Western culture of the need for a new art; he seemed to exemplify their own moral anguish and cry for rebirth”. The prose of *Nachtwachen* influenced later writers interested in compositions marked by effects of turbulence, anxiety and the apparently overwhelming simultaneity of perceptions.
and abyss”, discontinuous montages and a feverishness of prose in seemingly confused narratives.43

Böhm’s existences before and after death connect to Bebuquin’s fight against “the intoxication” where the human symbol systems “annihilated” objects, in other words, fixing objects and events not into themselves as they “are” (materially, sensually, perceptually) but into some metaphysical realms of significance beyond objects. Here the antihero is at the roots of the contemporary Sprachkritik and realisation of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of seeing the world from the blinding effects of language.

Likewise Hugo Ball’s episodic prosimetrum novel, which combines distorted narrative and nonsensical sound “chants”, describes an immigration of a tormented “fantastic society of poets” at the outset of a great war. The characters descend to Satanopolis, described as a Dantesque spatial cosmos and inferno, where the immaculate birth of an “anti-Christ DADA” takes place (T 121). Eventually the league is destroyed in battle with Satan and the world “turned infernal”.

In Ball’s Tenderenda, death is many things: a spatial preference (Satanopolis as a pseudo-Dantean “upper inferno”), an element of action (from Death as one of the characters to a Puppet Death made out of stucco, T 58) and an atmosphere of “sceneries”, such as the corpses of dead soldiers burning through the night (T 48). Death is also a precondition of writing. The characters in Ball’s novel do not merely use the walk-and-talk technique of Dante the protagonist and his guide Virgil in their peripatetic journey through Hell. On the contrary, the partly auto-fictional albeit fabulous characters in Tenderenda are themselves being constantly pursued and tortured in Satanopolis.44 Under such circumstances, they draft a variety of fragmentary genres: “documents of torment”, “an abysmal searching look”, “the book of confessions”, “the encyclopaedic prayer cylinder”. Eventually in Tenderenda the war ends, “the death dies” and a macabre pseudo-medieval Totentanz (death dance) takes place, praised by a choir of antichrists.

The literary infernalism and Satanism of Hugo Ball was a legacy of Dante, Sade, Baudelaire—whose interest in Gregory Lewis and Maturin (two other revivers of the Faustian theme) was noticed in Hugo Ball’s diary45—and, of

44 Tenderenda is another Gothic Lebensbuch written “confusedly and madly enough” (ver-wirrt und toll genug geschrieben); see August Klingemann, Nachtwachen, 60–61).
course, Carl Einstein. The latter observed a particular tendency in Beckford’s *Vathek* as “satanic mysticism interlaced with grotesque play” and the novel developed a borrowed idea of “a spiritual book” (*die verborgene Idee des spirituelles Buches*), where the narrator jeers at the fairy-tale atmosphere and religious myths, freeing the reader from the boring literality of mimetic sentimentality.\(^{46}\) Indeed, pseudo-religious forms and (Beckford’s) sardonic style, influenced by Voltaire’s satires and “delightful mockery”,\(^{47}\) reappeared in the avant-gardist and supernatural frame of *Bebuquin* and *Tenderenda*.

Tormenting “grotesqueries” also concern language in avant-garde texts which constantly look at their own poetological whereabouts. In *Bebuquin*, Böhm lectures to his “phantasist” charges in a programmatic way: “Too few people have the courage to speak complete rubbish. Frequently repeated nonsense becomes the integrating moment of our thinking” (B 27 / W 104). This lesson did not fall on fertile soil in Böhm’s fictive companions in *Bebuquin*, but in *Tenderenda* the infernal chases saturate a critical moment: “There is nothing more to say. / Perhaps more could be sung” (T 66). The fragmentary mishmash narrative becomes even more nonsensical as the presentation is displaced towards archaic and elevated languages: enchantment, hymns, *Sprachmagie* (language magic). The themes of death and the abominable now assume performative and phonetic realms in three hymns and two “descriptions” or “invocations”, namely, “Jolifanto bamblo ô falli bamblo” and “Baubo sbugi ninga gloffa”.

These “abstract sound strings”\(^{48}\) came to have a life of their own in later avant-garde studies, often separated from the context of *Tenderenda*. In terms of Experimental Gothic, it will suffice to point out two things. First, the “hymns” of *Tenderenda*, which have been considered a Dadaist reflection of the “Litanies de Satan” by Baudelaire (1857),\(^{49}\) evoke dark aspects of the Gothic. In the story world of the *Tenderenda*, the Dada league—Laurentius Tenderenda, Huelsenbeck and others—recite the “gadji beri bimba” as their nightly prayer before they perish during the Revolution of Satan.\(^{50}\) This may be a language apocalyptically emptied of reference. Or, in the anarchistic-mystical-catholic inferno of Ball, these sounds may belong to a discourse community that presupposes the greatest contradiction and diversity as its principle.\(^{51}\)

\(^{46}\) Einstein, 1994b: 43.

\(^{47}\) Birkhead, 1921.

\(^{48}\) Zyklus abstrakter Lautreihen (Ball, 1999: 116; a manuscript variant).

\(^{49}\) Rechner-Zimmermann, 1992: 85.

\(^{50}\) For a commentary on the auto-fictional aspects of this finale (referring to the end of Zürich Dada and the development of Berlin Dada towards revolutionary communism, from which Ball detached himself), see Rechner-Zimmermann, 1992: 90.

\(^{51}\) Cf. Ball on Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who was, claims Ball, probably the first to understand
Secondly, while Hugo Ball’s sound poems are customarily discussed together with his legendary “Magic Bishoff” appearances in Cabaret Voltaire, it is important to emphasise the sonic aspect also in the written tradition of horror. Already the classics of the Gothic mode (Radcliffe, Lewis, Maturin) were masters at using the potential of sound to express menacing threats, affinity and seduction—also in orchestrating “cacophony, blasphemous chants and disembodied voices in treating chaotic force and contagion”.52 Such elements of the tradition were transformed already in peculiar Symbolist works, such as the anthology *Le Latin mystique* (1892) of Remy de Gourmont (dedicated to and prefaced by Joris-Karl Huysmans), which had a continuing influence on later modernisms and avant-garde. Hugo Ball’s *Tenderenda* opens with lines from Saint Bernard, extracted by Ball from *Le Latin mystique*. It appealed to younger generations not only in its interest in medieval Latin liturgical forms, litanies and languages of purgatory, but also as a perspective on le sadisme tortionnaire (torturing sadism) of the lives of saints and martyrs.53 In the atmosphere of the World War, the associations of writers and martyr-saints in *Tenderenda* make the protagonist modern heretics or dissidents, persecuted by mechanised modernity and opportunistic Prussian politics and the Church, often alluded to in the novel.54 The inarticulate syllables and sounds are pursued in the conflict of the *vox humana* “with a world that threatens, ensnares and destroys it”.55 Even during the apocalyptic climax of *Tenderenda*, the text nevertheless continues to remind the reader of the metatextual coordinates of what has been written.

2.2 Interwar Gothic Rewriting and Reading

Instead of Bebuquin’s opacity and *Tenderenda*’s fragmentariness, the interwar Experimental Gothic focused on how contemporary psychology affected reading texts with Gothic elements, passing on influential concepts of transgression, cruelty and evil derived from earlier Gothic modes. In Surrealist works, such as *Argol*, *Valerie* or Artaud’s *Monk*, the non-mimetic and the marvellous emerged as a feature of *readerly reception* that did not assimilate the incon-

---

52 Achambault, 2016.
54 Rechner-Zimmermann, 1992: 20, 93.
55 Ball, 30 March 1916 (Ball, 1996: 57).
gruous elements of the interior reality (affects) into the exterior one. Interwar Experimental Gothic novels rejected any axiomatic depiction of reality by criticising a reading that regards the novel as mere oneric fancy and empties the text of its subversive potential.  

Graçq guides the reader of _Argol_ away from the comfort of realism, in order to initiate a Surrealist “Grail quest” of sorts while engaging with various mythic constructs, beliefs associated with nature and the night as supernatural potentialities, ideas related to the rationalist self, and the Böhmeian and Hegelian ideas of progress through the myth of the Fall. He adopted apparent and predictable Gothic characteristics, such as the textual “accessories used: ruined castles, ghosts, nocturnal noises—I often dreamed of a book where they would be implemented less naively”, which encouraged him to dub it “surréalisme noir”.  

The book chronicles the loss of innocence through submission to desire, a theme familiar from Lewis and Artaud. _Argol_ centres on a tripartite scenario—the protagonist Albert, his “other” Herminien, and Heide, the objectified female character lacking proper agency. Albert begins as a precocious rationalist possessed by “the demon of knowledge”, having learned from “the masters of the Middle Ages” (A 2), and ends up a delusional violator as his repressed urges emerge. Graçq challenges rational thinking by experimenting with the distressing potential—_Doppelgänger_-induced horror—of someone else thinking your thoughts. In _Argol_, cognition and thought are not the measure of self-same identity and non-mimetic representation challenges the reader’s experience of reality without leaving this reality behind. While the rivalry between the male characters manifests through incommensurate discourses, narration

---

56 Graçq, 1951: 144.
57 In his “Notice to the Reader”, Graçq called _Argol_ a demonic version of Wagner’s _Parsifal_ (A 143). Bauduin (2014: 124) has noted that Surrealism used the terms “myth” and “mythology” in a broad sense and included medieval and early modern legends (Arthurian stories), Grail quests and other topics of _chansons de geste_, as well as folklore and fairy tales, to which she adds the Surrealist embrace of the Gothic.
59 All references to _Argol_ in this chapter are to Graçq, 1951.
60 The characters’ rivalry personifies the Surrealist vision concerning earlier philosophy and literature: Albert has read all the philosophers rejected by the Surrealists (Kant, Leibnitz, Descartes), while Hegel is candidly—but with more than an ounce of sarcasm—dubbed as “the king of the architecture and the science of wholes” (A 5); Herminien knows the German Romantic authors with whom the Surrealists felt affinity. Dettmar-Wrana (2000: 50–51) lists numerous studies on the role of Hegelian thought in _Argol_. On the Surrealist appropriation of Hegel, see Baugh, 2003.
occurs through a single point of view and the book contains only one line of dialogue. Instead of colloquies, Argol is interlaced with liminal and oneiric experiences, which Albert attempts to integrate into the rational (known) by downplaying the fantastic as a reverie or delusion. His precarious predicament is an intentional metatextual reflection epitomising how not to read Experimental Gothic.

The labyrinthine quality of Argol results from two key linguistic features activated in reading, that is, displacement and what Gracq calls “detours of language” (A 44). Not limited to Argol but perfectly illustrated by it, these are features of Experimental Gothic in general. Namely, Nezval recounted that his engagement with Experimental Gothic derived from “a love of the mystique in those ancient tales, superstitions and romances, printed in Gothic script, which used to flit before my eyes and declined to convey to me their content”. In addition to medieval genres, he foregrounded the expressiveness of non-mimetic literary language and referred to modes of displacement and non-disclosure. Textually, Argol revolves around a “glaring disappropriation of all things” (A 79), which underlines language as a figure itself. For instance, Gracq focuses on a “clock ticking for nothing [tournant à vide] outside of time, on which its gears had no more grip than a mill-wheel in a dried-up stream” (A 79). The displacement is marked by the clock relinquishing its sole function—the ability to measure time. Measuring time is rendered meaningless by the perpetual yet evanescent presence of the Grail.

The “detours of language” are based on non-disclosure. Argol’s text is generous with modifiers and depictions of milieus which systematically steer the reader’s attention away from the strategic omission of key narrative elements.

---

61 Surrealist dépaysement (displacement) has been used as a structural and linguistic device, but here the focus is on reading. The dépaysement was not identical with the Freudian Unheimlich, where the “other” is in some manner familiar. Dépaysement was favoured especially by the Surrealists as a means to “recalibrate” the subject’s relations to their surroundings, objects and everyday life with the aim of displacing conventional experiences.

62 Nezval, 2005: 11, emphasis added. Nezval seems to have taken Breton’s fascination with Monk and Artaud’s “copy” in earnest, as he eventually had Lewis’ book translated into Czech for his personal use. Monk’s influence is evident in the spatial structure of his novel Valerie. Dierna, 2005: 215–216.

63 Gracq (1948: 183–185) used italics to highlight words to intensify key points of narration.

64 On the literal level, the conventional French pour rien gives way to vide (empty), which highlights the substantival character of the phrase. By definition, “nothing” cannot be known and it has no duration, whereby it is literally outside time.

65 For a broader discussion of Gracq’s language, focusing on syntactical and spatial elements, see Rodina, 1991.
The reader is made to backtrack, only to realize that the particular element has been excluded from narration. This lack of precision allows the narrative to "slip into the indeterminate and inexact, ill-defined feelings joining with the imprecision of tangential details". These elements, which are often transgressive (such as rape), seem to be suppressed by the narrator. In a rare prolepsis, *Argol*’s narrator implies "a natural ambush [that] seemed the scene of an unfathomable crime" (A70). The narrator describes an event yet to happen, which the reader will only later recognize as premeditation on the narrator’s (or protagonist’s) part—it is unclear who narrates the story. The later subjugation and abuse of Heide is evoked through the presence of blood, but the opulent phrases distract from the brutality of the act:

Blood, like the petals of a living flower, stained and bespattered her belly and open thighs, darker than the rivers of the night, more fascinating than its stars, and around her wrists, tied together behind her back, a thin rope had penetrated the flesh and disappeared completely under a tiny red line from which a drop of blood oozed[.]

A92

This gruesome transgression derails Albert’s psyche, which is implied by Heide’s surreal assimilation with nature. Due to its oneiric or fantastic quality, this assimilation is distinct from the Gothic’s subjugation of female characters, as seen in the works of Walpole, Lewis or Sade. Such non-disclosures draw out the structural principles of *Argol*: it is unknown what the narrator is withholding. The lavish style poeticises horror without framing the transgression as shocking or harrowing.

In addition to intentional omissions, Gracq espouses Gothic spatiality, experiments with Hegelian opposites and imports Christian mythology in order to engage in a play with these elements. Throughout the book, horizontal and vertical lines cross. This is most conspicuous in “Chapel of the Abyss”, a chapter that describes a place of worship accessible only through a chasm, suggesting Burkeian awe. The omnipresent verticality of the “high verdant walls” (A70) is equalled by the psychologically calming horizontality of a river, whereas in the ravine the “grey walls of a chapel overhanging the abyss” (A75) create a “submarine grotto” (A77) where the water jets. These spatial elements form a cross: the chapel is situated in the origo (zero point) of the

67 See Mahon, 2020: 56, 60.
orthogonal horizontal (river) and vertical (ravine) lines, serving appropriately as a node for action.  

The node is a metatextual locus revealing the text’s building blocks, as the chapel designates “the very geometric locus of the Enigma” (78). As a textual strategy, an enigma hides a latent meaning or known thing by means of obscure words or forms. Therefore, the text limits (via a metatextual *mise en abyme*) its own construction through non-disclosures. The ultimate non-disclosure, however, is a reversal of style. The Grail mythos is actualised with unusual lexical clarity and by explicit references to the Fisher King, the keeper of the supernatural Grail. While words like “imply” and “enchanted” keep with *Argol’s* diction, the adverbs “precisely”, “exactly” and “in reality” are unusual in their rhetorical accuracy. The unexpected association with medieval Arthurian legends via the Fisher King is the reason behind the sudden intensification of clarity. Gracq’s use of the medieval Grail topos in *Argol* became a marker for Experimental Gothic’s anti-clericalism and reflections on violence and power as cataclysmic elements.  

Affects like fear, awe and desire arise equally from the Grail as the protagonist’s experience of *Argol’s* environment. The centrality of nature—the forest, in particular—provides a space for the reincarnation of myths. Where Einstein and Ball championed artificial and constructed spaces, Gracq evoked the spatiality of Surrealist mythicised nature. Indeed, *Argol’s* environment is not tied to any given temporality but rather connotes the perseverance of nature (“deep time”) against the limited duration of human life. The eldritch forest invokes the mythical, followed by the flood of primeval affects in the protagonist. Albert’s *Naturerlebnis* undermines his rationalist bias through an inner impression of a “gloomy forest” that is forebodingly identified as a “green abyss”, which eventually transmutes into an organic presence with “green tentacles”—

---

68 The key significance of the origo is suggested also by Gracq’s preoccupation with the form O throughout the novel, which is in this chapter connoted by objects (e.g. a ring, a globe, a clock[face]) and by forms and acts (“forest encircled”, “a perfect circle”, “effacious centre”). Herta Rodina (1991: 660) has identified Gracq’s use of the O as a symbol for openness (with a sexually figurative value), which is linked with transgressions.


70 *Argol* is not only a satanic Grail quest, because the book engages with nineteenth-century philosophy (Hegel), contemporary psychology (Freud) and theories of representation (Surrealism). Gracq arguably used the Grail myth to criticise and trivialise the Freudian concept of desire as a lack (of some particular thing), because the elusive object (the Grail) is *textual* and metaphysical (a symbol of supernatual spiritual powers). In *Argol* the Grail is conceived of as a textual formation or a linguistic pattern recurring in mythical medieval lore, the Gothic and Surrealist writings alike.
the forest becomes the “other” in Albert’s mind, mirroring his instinctual urges. Argol’s woodland evokes an ominous, personified Naturerlebnis, arousing “the curious feeling that this forest must be alive, and that, like a forest in a fairy tale or in a dream, it had not yet said its first word” (16). The marvellous of Argol enabled the awakening of repressed urges that portray humans as intrinsically chaotic beings. The Surrealists indeed laid bare the dystopian potential of civilisation, which they saw as capable of uprooting the rationalist status quo. Through the use of Gothic elements, the Surrealists passed on influential concepts of transgression, cruelty and evil derived from earlier Gothic modes.

3 The Experimental Gothic Mode

Experimental Gothic was a moment in early twentieth-century literary history when vanguard prose poetics met well-tried literary devices and themes of the first wave of Gothic writing. Even though the early Gothic was a distinctly British phenomenon, Experimental Gothic was a transnational endeavour in various West and Central European literatures, which followed the spread of avant-garde currents in Europe. Experimental Gothic writers were either avant-garde authors themselves or, at the very least, close to the various movements of new art. Indeed, before and after the First World War, the anti-naturalistic and anti-positivistic Experimental Gothic fiction revolted against the established modes of rationalist thinking on the Continent.

While there undoubtedly was an Experimental Gothic “tradition”, now more forgotten than it ever was hidden, the mode eludes definition. While many effects, elements and topoi were conventional, the cases of Gracq, Ball and Einstein showed the versatility of their modern manifestations. Their returns to medieval gothicisms and the first-wave Gothic novel did not necessarily align but rather complemented each other in their approaches to language and representation. The hybridisation of avant-garde methods produced highly particular works that, on the one hand, manifested the contemporary crises of representation and society and, on the other, reached for a past that can only emerge in the present as an idealised version. As an avant-gardist and non-mimetic language project, Experimental Gothic showed language’s ideological engagement in world-making. Yet it also sought to overcome this engagement through subversive use of language and a predilection for the supernatural, which unveil a profound sense of language’s artificiality.

With such “fathers of the present” as Lewis, Maturin, Beckford and fin-de-siècle prosaists, who had taken furthest the stylistic and narrative consequences of conventional horror plots, Gothic was refashioned in the early
twentieth-century avant-garde novels. As a mode, Experimental Gothic has proven its ability to adjust to heterogeneous historical and cultural circumstances, as demonstrated by Dorothea Tanning’s (1910–2012) thematically topical book *Chasm: A Weekend* (2001) that reworked her 1949 text “Abyss”. The grotesque and banal rather than the truly horrible, the existentialist rather than the romantic, and “linguistic literature” rather than popular romance feature in this avant-garde reception of the Gothic. Such elements coax readers to reject the belief in conventional representation to gain a renewed sense of reality.

References


Bauduin, Tessel M. *Surrealism and the Occult: Occultism and Western Esotericism in the Work and Movement of André Breton* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).


Lovecraft, H.P. “Supernatural Horror in Literature.” *The Recluse* (1927), 23–59. (Several later revisions.)


Praz, Mario. La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica (Milano-Roma: Società editrice la cultura, 1939).


