

Introduction

chaotic proliferation of meaning' whereby the word has come to be applied so variously as to have lost much of its original force: his paper amusingly mourns the decline of the 'glorious epithet', which in its original sense at least, it has to be admitted, we in this conference and this collection have perhaps further exacerbated.

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'Gothic' and the Critical Idiom

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The object of this paper is to mourn the radical evolution, over the last two or three decades, of a word dear to my heart and which I hate to say has been seriously damaged by the blind, ruthless, chaotic proliferation of meaning which accompanies the progress of history. This is a mourning paper.

Is it unavoidable that words in general should progressively deviate or diverge from their 'original' meaning? Is the concept of *origin* an operative one, where semantics are concerned? Is language such a slave to culture, that it must echo the slightest mutations in our modes of life with such disconcerting immediacy? These are questions which I am not equipped or prepared to discuss, which I am not even sure are worth discussing. What I would like to concern myself with, what I am really concerned about, is the recent evolution of the word 'Gothic'.

Its development over the centuries has not, it is true, always been consistent or homogeneous. As we all know, for a long time it served the regrettable purpose of vilifying medieval architecture, medieval literature, medieval manners and medieval superstition. It was only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that the word gradually lost its derogatory connotations, owing to the redeeming pursuits of antiquaries and topographers, whose weighty volumes and delightful drawings enabled the English public to look at the gothic remains scattered all over the country with new eyes. The poets were also instrumental in restoring consideration to a much maligned style: David Mallet, Thomas and Joseph Warton, James Beattie—not to mention the host of anonymous scribblers who invaded the columns of periodicals with their rhymes of doubtful merit—started a new vogue: by the middle of the century, it became fashionable to visit the ruins of Pomfret Castle, Godstowe Nunnery or Netley Abbey, in order to meditate on the 'transient smile of Fate'. The Gothic experience, associated with a measure of awe, became a pleasurable one.

This paved the way for Walpole's eulogistic interest in the Middle Ages. What he had in mind, when he described his *Castle of Otranto* as a 'Gothic Story', is not quite clear. Possibly nothing more than a concern for historical accuracy, and the desire to excuse his recourse to supernatural agents.

Little did he know that his dilettante dabbling at fiction would have such far-reaching consequences: after him, the word 'gothic' served to characterize a specific kind of composition associated with fear, later amplified into female terror—when Ann Radcliffe decided that her heroines should conform to the re-

