

THE POETRY OF RUINS AND TOMBS, THE GOTHIC

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Introduction

Nothing at first glance is further from the quest for philosophers' happiness and the rationalism generally associated with them than certain literary motifs that were fashionable at the turn of the century. Thus, ruins or tombs are places conducive to the development of a feeling, melancholy, rehabilitated in 1802 by Germaine de Staël as part of what she calls "literature of the North".

It would undoubtedly be inappropriate to see it as a simple consequence of the shake-up of the Revolution and the fall of the Ancient Regime, because this fascination began in the 1770s. More decisive in fact seems to be the opening to foreign literature that has already been marked by the "Sturm und Drang" movement, and the *Werther* by Goethe, and then the opening to the landscape that travellers were able to contemplate even before the Emigration.

Part 1 - The poetry of cemeteries, a fashion from across the Channel

In poetry, moreover, the best-sellers of the period arrived from across the Channel with the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* by Thomas Gray, or the *Night-Thoughts* by Young, a collection translated in 1769 by Le Tourneur and reprinted 20 times between 1770 and 1836. Inspired by real grief, Edward Young's collection depicts the poet's grief with an abundance of images, in a poem that is at once religious, moral and romantic. Young is presented by Le Tourneur as the very model of the original genius. From the preliminary speech preceding his translation, I quote: "Carefully nourishing the feeling of active melancholy, he followed the various movements of his soul, mapped out all his thoughts in the order in which they were born, expressed everything he felt, and expressed it as many times as the same feeling was reborn, without bothering the readers too much".

Similarly, *The Poems of Ossian* of the Scottish poet James Macpherson, supposedly translated from Gaelic, and written by a 3rd century bard, make an audience dream of a primitive poetry. Translated in 1777 by the same Le Tourneur, they offer an alternative to the Greco-Roman model, as Germaine de Staël points out in *De la littérature*. They will soon give impetus to national literatures as the Napoleonic wars push defeated nations to seek their popular roots. These will be the bedside books of a whole generation, including Saint-Just and Bonaparte. And we can quote Fontanes' letter to the latter: "It is said that you always have *Ossian* in your pocket, even in the middle of battles. It is indeed the champion of value."

The poems of the pseudo-Gaelic warrior bard largely inspired painters such as Gérard or Girodet or musicians such as Lesueur, who wrote an opera dedicated to Napoleon in 1804. And the emperor had his room in the Quirinal Palace in Rome decorated with a painting of Ingres representing *Ossian's Dream* in 1811. But other manifestations of this revolution in taste are the English garden, celebrated in *The New Heloise*.

Part 2 - English Gardens and Ruins

They gave pride of place to curved lines and natural vegetation over the straight French-style garden layout, emblematic of classicism. While these English gardens embody new sensibilities, we often like to build ruins called "factories" to recreate landscapes that are ideal for daydreaming. A whole range of literature evokes them, from treatises to poems by De Lisle or novels, consider Julie's garden at Clarens and Rousseau's descriptions.

Landscape painters, such as Hubert Robert, also collaborate in their design. And as early as the 1767 salon, Diderot was ecstatic about *The Ruins* brought back by Hubert Robert from his trip to Italy, and I quote: "Oh, the beautiful, the sublime ruins, everything is destroyed, everything perishes, everything passes. We look back on ourselves, we anticipate the ravages of time." And this is the first line of the poetics of the ruins. Because under the pen of travellers, ruin thus becomes a poetic motif at the end of the century.

The ideologist Volney travels as a historian through Syria and Egypt in the 1780s. He will bring back an ethnographic account of it, but also *The Ruins: Or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, published in 1791. He meditated near Palmyra at sunset, the spectacle of nature that covered both the landscape and human history for him soon opened up to a revelation, that of the natural laws with which future legislation must comply. And a spirit announces to him, in chapter 15, the advent of the new century, that of the revolution.

Contrariwise, Chateaubriand, who travelled to Jerusalem or Italy, deduced from the ruins the truth of Christianity on the eve of the Concordat concluded by Napoleon I. His *Genius of Christianity* published in 1802, develops the poetics of ruins under the revealing title of *Harmonies of the Christian Religion with Scenes of Nature and Passions of the Human Heart*. His *Harmonies* culminate, in chapter 5, with the ruins of Christian monuments which bring together all the motives already mentioned; ruins, tombs, ocean mist. Finally, this poetry of ruins and tombs is circulated in the novel where a very prolific vein first develops across the Channel, the vein of the Gothic novel.

Part 3 - The popularity of roman noir, known as "Gothic novels"

At the end of the century, people devoured scary novels: *The Romance of the Forest* and then the 800 pages of Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, or Matthew Lewis' *Monk*, translated in 1797. The action takes place in disturbing settings; convents, old castles, dungeons, undergrounds, mountains, forests and it puts innocent victims and stereotyped villains in opposition, including the perverse monk who is darkness in Lewis's eyes, or even bandits with a big heart. The success of the genre evokes many imitations in France and influences fiction production, if only by introducing wild and deserted settings like mountain landscapes into many novels.

Novelists like Ducray-Duminil exploit this editorial vein in *Victor ou l'Enfant de la forêt* in 1796, or *Celina ou l'Enfant du mystère* in 1798. The Gothic genre sees its political significance oscillate with the events. But the Gothic novel unquestionably makes it possible to express the fantasies of individuals in a period of profound psychological upheaval. The Gothic novel also contributes to the restoration of the Middle Ages and to the renewal of the representation of nature.

Thus, to conclude, these various motifs depict the shake-up of the norms of taste, both in the choice of subjects that integrate the imperfect or even the ugly, but also the desired effect. The moving or sublime replaces the beautiful with the feeling of greatness, even terror, but mixed with delights. It is this terror that Burke analysed as early as 1757 in his *Treatise on the Sublime*. It heralds, in aesthetics, the privilege granted to imagination over reason, to genius over rules. In short, these motifs are telling of a period when essences give way to the future, shaking classical aesthetics.



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