

»Terror is not of Germany«

Gothic Germanism and the Transnational Tale of Terror in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*

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I. Introduction

This chapter examines *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as a hub in the early nineteenth-century transatlantic circulation of the Gothic between Germany, Scotland, and the United States. The period, especially after 1820, is often associated with a decline of the Gothic, yet it is one of »revitalization«¹ if considered from a transnational viewpoint. I initially revisit Edgar Allan Poe's famous declaration that »terror is not of Germany, but of the soul«.² (Poe 129) The chapter rereads Poe's argument on so-called »Germanism« in Gothic fiction through the lens of Scottish-American connections, arguing that it is less »German literature« as a nation-based category but rather the transnational mode of »Germanism« that plays a major role in the early nineteenth-century circulation of the Gothic. One of the most significant links in this regard is *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the development in its periodical pages of the form of the tale of terror, of which I discuss two examples from 1818 by *Blackwood's* major author, John Wilson: *Remarkable Preservation from Death at Sea* and *Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No 1*. The fulcrum of my investigation is Robert Macnish's ephemeral 1826 tale *The Barber of Gottingen*, published under pseudonym in *Blackwood's*. With echoes of E.T.A. Hoffmann, Macnish's tale tells of the visitation of a devil upon the barber. The tale combines the Gothic with comic elements and contains anxieties about Germanism as well as about the changing nature of artisanal labour under industrial conditions. As part of the print culture of *Blackwood's*, the tale illuminates in a grotesque light the transnational cultural stakes of the Gothic genre, as it circulated across the English Channel and the Atlantic.

1 Davison, Carol Margaret: *Gothic Literature 1764–1824*, Cardiff 2009, p. 187.

2 Poe, Edgar Allan: »Preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*«, in: Edgar Allan Poe: *Poetry and Tales*, ed. by Patrick F. Quinn, New York 1984, pp. 129f.; here p. 129.

II. Terror is not of Germany

Poe's famous statement that »terror is not of Germany« appears in the short preface to his 1840 collection of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, published by Lea and Blanchard in Philadelphia. Contrary to many claims made over the course of the twentieth century, Poe did not speak or write German, as Thomas Hansen and Burton Pollin have convincingly argued.³ Though the connections were rather loose, the volume of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* as a whole still contains evidence of Poe's connections to German literature and culture: his 1839 tale *The Devil in the Belfry*, for example, is set in a fictional Pennsylvania Dutch town and combines the Gothic and the comic in a way that was typical of much reception of German literature and culture at the time.⁴ The early 1832 tale *Metzengerstein* with its vaguely Austro-Hungarian setting, subtitled »A Tale in Imitation of the German«, exemplifies Gothic terror. Poe's engagement with the vogue for German philosophy and literature is thus not to be taken as a scholarly engagement as we might say, for example, of Thomas De Quincey's writings on German literature in *Blackwood's*. Yet it is significant as a statement that sheds light on contemporary debates on national traditions and the Gothic, the position of German texts in that transatlantic network, and on Germanism as a generic mode that often combined the Gothic and the comic.

What do we talk about when we talk about Germanism in the early nineteenth century? John Frow's notion of the *mode* animates the transnational undercurrents of my argument: while »German literature«, in contrast to »German-language literature«, is a nation-based category, »Germanism« as a mode in force across genres can be transnational. Frow notes that »[e]xhausted genres such as the Gothic romance may survive in their modal form – quite spectacularly so in the case of the gothic mode, which passes through early-Victorian stage melodrama into the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the novels of Charles Dickens.«⁵ Frow's short version of the development of the Gothic mode leaves out the role of *Blackwood's*, yet Germanism may still be understood as a mode. In this sense, Germanism in the early nineteenth century is a mode informed by the Gothic and the mystic, often in conjunction either with disgusting horror or with the comic. The comic variety of Germanism, especially in the US, combines stereotypes about a variety of German-speaking or Dutch-speaking populations. This is at least partially explicable through the political situation in Germany which the time began to pejoratively call the *small-state-ery*, the *Kleinstaaterei* of the period between 1815 and 1871. Poe's *The Devil in the Belfry*, for

3 Hansen, Thomas S./Pollin, Burton R.: *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of Literary References in his Works*, Columbia/SC 1995, pp. 1–6.

4 Guttzeit, Gero: »Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849)«, in: Erik Redling/Oliver Scheiding (eds.): *Handbook of the American Short Story*, Berlin/Boston 2022, pp. 133–152; here pp. 137–142.

5 Frow, John: *Genre*, London 2005, p. 66.

example, features just as many clocks as cabbages, and all Dutch inhabitants of the town have the size of Garden gnomes. Göttingen, for example, features repeatedly in Poe's tales so much that Hansen and Pollin call it »a comic leitmotif in Poe's works«.⁶

The German Gothic tradition remains ambivalent today. Patrick Bridgwater argues that »the German Gothic novel remains the dark horse of European Gothic, little-known even in its own language area«.⁷ Yet the cultural stakes of Germanism in the first half of the nineteenth century emerge clearly in a late statement by Scotsman George Gilfillan, also published widely in the US, for example in 1846. His opinion is quite different from Madame De Staël's earlier championing of German Romanticism:

It were vain to protest against, or to seek to retard, an influence which is fast assuming the character of an irresistible infection. There is no disguising the fact. For better or worse, our poetry and our prose, our history and our criticism, our profane and our sacred literature, are fast charging with Germanism, as clouds with thunder. Be this potent element a devil's elixir, or the wine of life, the thinkers in both Britain and America seemed determined to dare the experiment of draining its cup to the dregs.⁸

Couched in Gothic imagery, this opinion is presented by Gilfillan in a sketch about John Gibson Lockhart, himself a major early contributor to *Blackwood's*, though ironically Gilfillan positions Lockhart as a manly, Anglican defender against Germanism. While aware of the negative connotations of »Germanism«, Poe's take is very different from Gilfillan. In the preface, Poe defends the artistic unity of his collection and suggests Friedrich Schlegel's term of the »Arabesque« as an alternative for his tales without naming Schlegel:

I am led to think it is this prevalence of the »Arabesque« in my serious tales, which has induced one or two critics to tax me, in all friendliness, with what they have been pleased to term »Germanism« and gloom. The charge is in bad taste, and the grounds of the accusation have not been sufficiently considered. Let us admit, for the moment, that the »phantasy-pieces« now given are Germanic, or what not. Then Germanism is »the vein« for the time being. Tomorrow I may be anything but German, as yesterday I was everything else. [...] the truth is that, with a single exception, there is no one of these stories in which the scholar should recognise the distinctive features of that species of pseudo-horror which we are taught to call Germanic, for no better reason than that some of the secondary names of German

6 T.S. Hansen/B.R. Pollin: The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe, p. 57.

7 Bridgwater, Patrick: The German Gothic Novel in Anglo-German Perspective, Amsterdam 2013, p. 28.

8 Gilfillan, George: Sketches of Modern Literature and Eminent Literary Men, New York 1846, p. 480.

literature have become identified with its folly. If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul, — that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results.⁹

Poe's use of »phantasy-pieces« is a good example of his Germanism in that it is very likely a translation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Fantasiestücke*. Yet this is basically the extent of textual influence that can be proved, despite thematic similarities between Hoffmann and Poe. Poe's main source of knowledge on Hoffmann was Walter Scott's *On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition*. As often in Poe and many others, the connection between Germany and the US runs through Scotland, in this case even *Scotland*.

In the preface, Poe subtly shifts the emphasis from German »pseudo-horror« to Schlegelian Arabesque »terror from [...] legitimate sources«, which echoes Ann Radcliffe's distinction in *On the Supernatural in Poetry* between lowly horror and potentially sublime terror. The most important critical move is to loosen the idea of terror from specific national or cultural traditions: terror is »of the soul«. Poe re-frames Gothic angst not as a German national characteristic but as a psychological constant. This, in turn, means that the tradition of the Gothic is quasi liberated and can be appropriated by different nationalist projects, including that of the still young United States. Gothic texts and motifs were moving across the Atlantic in journals and books. Tales or short stories, in particular, – like short lyric poems – afforded cultural mobility or transportability, circulating in transatlantic networks of publication not yet governed by international copyright law.¹⁰

Viewed from this perspective, the elephant in the room in Poe's paratext is a Scottish one, as he omits *Blackwood's* tale of terror as one of the most crucial transatlantic connections between the US and Europe in terms of the Gothic short story. One of the best examples of this in extant scholarship is the intertextuality of Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839). As Arno Schmidt noted in his 1969 essay *Der Fall Ascher*, the tale bears striking similarities to a short story by German writer Carl Heun, published under his pseudonym, H. Clauren, namely *Das Raubschloss* (1812). Poe could, of course, not read this story in German, but, as Hansen and Pollin point out,¹¹ he is very likely to have seen an unattributed translation of *Das Raubschloss* by Joseph Hardman as *The Robber's Tower* in *Blackwood's* issue for December 1828.¹² Pollin and Hansen also argue convincingly that Poe took the phrase »not of Germany [...] but of« from a text he saw as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* published in May

9 E.A. Poe: Preface, p. 129.

10 Cf. McGill, Meredith L.: *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853*, Philadelphia 2003.

11 T.S. Hansen/B.R. Pollin: *The German Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, pp. 61–63.

12 Hardman, Joseph: »The Robber's Tower«, in: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 24/147 (December 1828), pp. 875–885.

1836, namely George Henry Calvert's essay on »German Literature.«¹³ Poe varies the phrase from the conclusion, changing the »master-spirit« into the »soul« and then using that word, »soul« instead of »age«. George Henry Calvert, the author Poe was remixing had studied in Germany, more precisely in Göttingen.

If we look again to the whole of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, the Scottish tradition of *Blackwood's* is as prominent as Germanism in Poe's *Tales* and clearly and explicitly admitted by Poe in his fiction: the companion-pieces *The Signora Zenobia* and *The Scythe of Time* are set in Edinburgh and were also published in one story *How to Write a Blackwood Article* containing *The Predicament*. As I've argued elsewhere,¹⁴ *How to Write a Blackwood Article* dramatises Poe's own authorship in terms of America's transatlantic relation to Britain and in particular to the literary metropolis of Edinburgh, the place of publication of *Blackwood's*. In this regard, terror in the short story is less of the soul than of Scotland. The psychological constant of Poe's »soul«, then, turns out to consist less of an anthropological universality than of particular nodes of distribution and practices of translation that, taken together, constitute a transnational network.

III. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the Transnational Tale of Terror

The early nineteenth century witnessed an interest in German *Schauerliteratur* and folktale traditions within Scottish literary circles. This period of cultural exchange helped form the Gothic tradition in Scottish literature, exemplified by the works of *Blackwood's* contributor James Hogg and Walter Scott. If we look to Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà's 2017 *Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Gothic*, there are few but illuminating mentions of the relationship to German culture, for instance on Scott's early translations of Goethe and German ballads.¹⁵ There are interesting sidenotes, too, on the valences of ethnic and cultural origins, for example in Nick Groom's essay on *The Genesis of Scottish Gothic* in the eighteenth century. Groom notes that James Macpherson, author of *Ossian*, claimed to be of German descent and Lowland Scots were often counted to be of Teutonic or Germanic origin in contrast to the Celtic Highlanders.¹⁶ More general lines of transnational connections played into

13 Calvert, George Henry: »German Literature«, in: *Southern Literary Messenger* 2/6 (May 1836), pp. 373–380; here p. 376f.

14 Guttzeit, Gero: *The Figures of Edgar Allan Poe: Authorship, Antebellum Literature, and Transatlantic Rhetoric*, Berlin/Boston 2017, p. 85.

15 Robertson, Fiona: »Gothic Scott«, in: Carol Margaret Davison/Monica Germanà (eds.): *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 102–114; here p. 104.

16 Groom, Nick: »The Celtic Century« and the Genesis of Scottish Gothic«, in: Carol Margaret Davison/Monica Germanà (eds.): *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 14–27; here pp. 17f.

this: from the enthusiasm for Bürger's ballad *Lenore* about a ghostly bridegroom similar in topic to earlier folk ballads such as *Sweet William's Ghost*, to individual lines of influence, e.g., from Benedikte Naubert to Walter Scott.¹⁷ As an example of the mode of transnational Germanism, I shall first examine *Blackwood's* »tale of terror« for its Germanism and transnationalism in two early examples published in 1818 by its most frequent writer (and virtual editor) John Wilson and then discuss the peculiar combination of the Gothic and the comic in the Germanism of another Scottish *Blackwood's* contributor, Robert Macnish.

IV. John Wilson's Early Tales of Transnational Terror

Founded in 1817 by William Blackwood, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* quickly established itself as a primary venue for what came to be known as the »Blackwood's tale« or »tale of terror« – a form characterized by intensity of sensations and emotions, often featuring main characters in extreme circumstances who tell their own story, recording every single detail that may inspire terror or horror in the reader. The influence of *Blackwood's* extended far beyond Scotland, shaping the development of Gothic literature in the United States. As part of periodical or magazine literature, the *Blackwood's* tale of terror may be viewed as a nineteenth-century transatlantic print culture commodity.

From its beginnings, this Gothic commodity reflected on transnationalism. As Megan Coyer points out,¹⁸ the first tale of terror with an autodiegetic narrator was by John Wilson (his pseudonym, or rather sustained periodical persona – his eidolon – was Christopher North): *Remarkable Preservation from Death at Sea* was published in February 1818. It opens with a typical *Blackwood's* note by a fictional editor, a »Herausgeberfiktion«, that presents the tale as a translation from German, although it is not:

MR EDITOR, I SEND you a translation of a most interesting letter, addressed to a German gentleman, now resident in Hamburg, from whom I received it, with permission to make what use of it I should think proper. I have translated it most literally; and though perhaps rather long for your Miscellany, I was unwilling to weaken its effects by the omission of any passage. The writer is still living, a man

17 Reitemeier, Frauke: »Benedikte Naubert and Sir Walter Scott: Further Suggestions towards a Genealogy of the Historical Novel«, in: Werner Huber (ed.): *The Corvey Library and Anglo-German Cultural Exchanges, 1770–1837*, Munich 2004, pp. 131–145.

18 Coyer, Megan: *Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1817–1858*, Edinburgh 2017, p. 45.

of very rare endowments, and the author of several fine Poems, one of which, on the Immortality of the Soul, I hope to translate for some future Number.¹⁹

Wilson evokes certain associations of German culture and commerce: the fictional addressee is a Northern German gentleman, who is presumably Protestant, which helps explain the difference in tone to the second example below, *Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No 1*, which features a Southern German Catholic priest. Here, the fictional writer, »still living« in Hamburg, is a poet of rare talents writing on the soul, which indexes the mysticism of Germanism. The characteristic focus of the tale of terror is on the sensations and emotions of an autodiegetic narrator in the tradition of William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams*. This is on full display when the narrator falls overboard:

I remember a convulsive shuddering all over my body, and a hurried leaping of my heart, as I felt myself about to lose hold of the vessel, and afterwards a sensation of the most icy chilliness from immersion into the waves [...] I imagined that I felt a hand with long fingers clutching at my legs, and made violent efforts to escape, dragging after me, as I thought, the body of some drowning wretch. On rising to the surface, I [...] uttered a cry of horror which is in my ears to this day, and often makes me shudder, as if it were the mad shriek of another person in the extremity of perilous agony.²⁰

This minute attention to details of sensation, emotion, and train of thought has been linked by Megan Coyer to the early nineteenth-century interest in medical research and what she calls the »medico-popular« imaginary. The German narrator in this first tale of terror is on a transnational journey, but he is in danger of drowning in the North Sea, not able to make contact with the ship from which he fell, thinking that it might as well have been far away »in the heart of the Atlantic Ocean«.²¹

My second early example of the tale of terror, also by Wilson, *Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No 1*, appeared the same year, in the August 1818 issue of *Blackwood's*.²² Again, its textual frame, complete with an editorial fiction of a translation, is the most suggestive in terms of Germanism. The tale purports to be the record of a prison-cell confession of a fallen aristocrat condemned to death for a femicide. It is unusual in its combination of mentioning the name of the victim (»Maria von Richterstein«) and remaining silent about the name of the murderer. The latter asks

19 Wilson, John: »Remarkable Preservation from Death at Sea«, in: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 2/11 (February 1818), pp. 490–494; here p. 490.

20 Ibid., p. 491.

21 Ibid., p. 492.

22 Wilson, John: »Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No. 1«, in: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 3/17 (August 1818), pp. 596–598.

to see the fictional Catholic clergyman Gosschen for his confession, and the text is the autodiegetic narration by Gosschen, though most of it is taken up by the recorded monologue of the murderer. Rather than integrated into a longer novel, the sensationalist presentation of perverted murderous infatuation aims at the effect of terror named by the priest himself in his first impression: »the phantom [of the murderer] struck me with terror.«²³ The priest identifies the murderer as a »maniac« and describes the drawing of »a decapitated human body« lying on the table.²⁴ »I brought her into sin« and »when she would have left her sin [...] I slew her.« The hyper-violent, phallically inflected act of repeatedly stabbing Maria is viewed by the manic murderer as »just«. The murderer, as an intradiegetic narrator, appears unreliable when he speaks of »robb[ing] her of what fools called her innocence« and then of himself as »the husband who had murdered her«, as no marriage is ever mentioned by the priest. In a decidedly Scottish Calvinist turn, the murderer accuses God of making him »a madman« and »a murderer«: »Thou foredoomedst me to sin and to hell.« His final wish is to be laid »in one grave on earth« with the murdered Maria von Richterstein, whose name combines associations of Catholicism (the virgin Mary) and the seat of a judge (»Richterstein«). Its Germanism may also be linked to the publication of *Frankenstein* seven months earlier, in January 1818.²⁵

Despite one obvious interpretation, the tale remains remarkably open-ended. After the murderer's demand for unity with the murdered, the priest's narration is interrupted in the middle of the second sentence: »In a moment he was dead at my feet. The stroke of the dagger was like lightning, and –«.²⁶ The obvious interpretation is that the murderer committed suicide using the dagger that has been described as »this very dagger« in his hands. Yet the dash after the »and« – the dash is famously familiar to Poe scholars as a typical gesture – signals the open end. In the dark cell, the lightning appears less like a neutral description of the effect of the light, but rather as the sign of divine judgment: God as the avenging judge of Maria von Richterstein. While it is unlikely, by not mentioning the person who strikes, the text even leaves open the possibility of the priest having struck the murderer: »at my feet« is then no factual place but an indication of power. Again, the text can only be read as insinuating this, but the semantics of Catholic Gothic and the influential character of Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* allow for such a reading, especially since Lewis's influence extended across the Channel to Hoffmannian devilish priests.

The Germanism of Wilson's text is most explicit in the editorial note, which explains that the narrative takes place in the German city of Regensburg. The text em-

23 Ibid., p. 597.

24 Ibid., p. 596.

25 All quotations *ibid.*, p. 597.

26 Ibid., p. 598.

loys the historical name, still used in Romance languages, of the originally Roman settlement *castra regina* or *Ratisbona*. This situates the text in a Gothic environment that is explicitly Catholic, as the Gothic genre travels from the European South farther to the North (Wilson's two tales take the opposite direction, but »Extracts« is far more explicitly Gothic than »Remarkable Preservation«). In forgoing »Ratisbon« for »Ratisbonne«, the Latinate name and in particular the French spelling reinforce this Southern Catholic setting. While Wilson's earlier editorial note to *Remarkable Preservation* had promised the future translation of only one poem »which, on the Immortality of the Soul, I hope to translate for some future Number«, ²⁷ this bracketed editorial note of *Extracts* establishes German narratives as a veritable storehouse and forbidden library of the Gothic that needs to be approached with caution:

[The following striking narrative is translated from the MS. Memoirs of the late Rev. Dr Gottlieb Michael Gosschen, a Catholic clergyman of great eminence in the city of Ratisbonne. It was the custom of this divine to preserve, in the shape of a diary, a regular account of all the interesting particulars which fell in his way, during the exercise of his sacred profession. Two thick small quartos, filled with these strange materials, have been put into our hands by the kindness of Count Frederick von Lindénbäumenberg, to whom the worthy father bequeathed them. Many a dark story, well fitted to be the groundwork of a romance, – many a tale of guilty love and repentance, – many a fearful monument of remorse and horror, might we extract from this record of dungeons and confessionals. We shall from time to time do so, but sparingly, and what is still more necessary, with selection.] EDITOR.²⁸

The triple anaphoric repetition of »Many a« story/tale/monument makes clear how rich Gosschen's imagined archive of »dungeons and confessionals« is, even as the text immediately attempts to establish a (faux) critical distance in the editorial emphasis on »necessary [...] selection«, as it implies reasons of propriety for doing so. As »Count Frederick«, the imagined figure of transcultural mediation in the note is typically German, but his last name is also clearly made up to the point of becoming comical: one needs to be careful not to miss the forest for the trees. »Lindénbäumenberg« doubles trees: »linden« is the German word for lime trees but also the biological name in English for the botanical genus *tilia*, and »Bäumen« is the dative form of the plural noun *Bäume*, i.e. trees. The excessive and ungrammatical acute accent in »Lindén« presents an overgeneralisation of the correctly used diacritical sign to mark the umlaut »ü« in »Bäumen.« The note also foregrounds the materiality of Gosschen's text, as it specifies its book format as »[t]wo thick small quartos«.

27 J. Wilson: Remarkable Preservation from Death at Sea, p. 490.

28 J. Wilson: Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No. 1, pp. 596–598.

This emphasis on the materiality of Gosschen's rich textual archive is combined with a foregrounding of diacritical signs, which I read as a metatextual hint that the name *Gosschen* is an allusion to the German publishing house Göschen. Famous for his editions of Goethe and Schiller, Georg Joachim Göschen had also published August Apel and Friedrich Laun's *Gespensterbuch* (1810–1817), some stories from which became part of the English translation of the French *Fantasmagoriana*, read in the year without a summer 1816 on the shores of Lake Geneva by Lord Byron, John William Polidori, Mary Shelley, and Percy Shelley. As a variation on the library of Göschen's publishing house, Gosschen's Diary stands for Gothic Germanism, the potential of German literature to be employed by *Blackwood's*. This also explains the subtitle »No. 1«, which is now usually omitted in reprintings of the text: the »extracts« of the title can be read as a gesture to the German Romantic logic of the fragment and as a sign of an imagined demand for serialised Gothic Germanism.

After the British craze for German literature of the 1790s, the subsequent Germanophobic backlash against its perceived political and cultural chaos persisted into the 1840s, as demonstrated by Gilfillan's position quoted above. Yet other engagements with German literature and culture in the pages of *Blackwood's* were manifold. One of its contributors, Robert Pearse Gillies (eidolon Kemperhausen), translated German texts, including an abridged version of Hoffmann's *Die Elixiere des Teufels*, which was published in 1824. Thomas de Quincey, in 1826, focused not on the poets but rather on German prose authors, »who in general have neither written under the constraint of foreign models, nor sought to manifest their emancipation from that constraint by the monstrous, or the blank affectations of caprice«, the latter of which may well serve as a definition of Germanism.²⁹ *Blackwood's*, then, is both indicative and formative of ideas of German Gothicism or Gothic Germanism. In this sense, Wilson's two tales tell of the »remarkable preservation« of British literature from the influence of Gothic Germanism on the one hand, and, on the other, of the lethal fragments from the Gothic storehouse of publishers such as Göschen.

V. The Barber of Gottingen: Comic Gothic and the Monstrosity of Alienated Labour

My next case study of Scottish imaginations of Gothic Germanism is Robert Macnish's 1826 *Blackwood's* tale *The Barber of Gottingen*. Macnish's first story for *Blackwood's* had been on metempsychosis, which explains his pseudonym and eidolon of *A Modern Pythagorean*. In Paris, Macnish had studied with Franz Josef Gall, the founder of

29 de Quincey, Thomas (as the English Opium-Eater): »Gallery of the German Prose Classics«, in: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 20/119 (November 1826), pp. 728–744; here p. 728.

phrenology, and Macnish would later publish medico-popular books on drunkenness and on sleep. In a letter to William Blackwood, Macnish wrote: »I have some idea of writing something about the University of Gottingen, and introducing two professors belonging to Glasgow under fictitious names«. ³⁰ Macnish's idea of Göttingen originates in the desire to satirise and parody academic life, particularly in Germany, and it is paired with the Scottish counterpart of Glasgow. In *The Barber of Gottingen*, the barber mentions the Professor of Moral Philosophy and Provost of the university, Doctor Dedimus Dunderhead, as a figure of authority. In this regard, it is an early example of a tradition reaching from Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh to Alexander McCall Smith's Prof. Dr. Moritz Maria von Igelfeld of the eponymous book series running since 1997.

Macnish's tale begins when »one night about ten o'clock, as the Barber of Gottingen College was preparing to go to rest« »the door of his shop opened briskly, and a short, burly, thickset man made his appearance«. ³¹ The man of about fifty demands a shave, which the »tall, meagre, spindle-shanked« barber initially refuses. However, the man does not take no for an answer and, grasping the barber by the throat and pulling out a pistol, forces the barber to proceed. The barber lays on the soap for some time but when he wants to get the razor, »the loud voice of his customer fell like thunder upon his ear. – ›Brush away, my old boy – nothing like it«. ³² When the barber gets tired, the devilish man tells him to »swallow a little of this glorious stuff – the Elixir Diaboli of Doctor Faustus«, making him work through the night. In a farcical turn, the barber manages to flee but the devil chases him up a steeple, nine stories up, and catches him, only to drop him from the top. ³³ When the barber is about to hit the ground, he wakes up in bed beside his wife and »found, to his inexpressible satisfaction, that he had been dreaming«. ³⁴

Macnish varies the formula of the tale of terror considerably, employing a heterodiegetic rather than an autodiegetic narrator. But the minute attention on terror-inducing interiority can still be found: the heterodiegetic narrator employs free indirect speech to convey the sensations, emotions, and thoughts of the hapless barber. For example:

His will was useless; every movement of his body was in direct opposition to its dictates. What could he do? If he stopped one moment, that cursed sound of ›Brush away‹, was thundered into his ears. If he moved for his razor, he was brought back

30 Macnish, Robert: *Tales, Essay, and Sketches*. Vol. 1: With the Author's Life, ed. by David Macbeth Moir, London 1844, p. 44.

31 Macnish, Robert: »The Barber of Gottingen«, in: *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 20/118 (October 1826), pp. 604–610; here p. 604.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 605.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 607.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 610.

by the same invoking spell. If he refused to shave, he ran the risk of being shaved himself.«³⁵

That it is Poe's rather than Macnish's tales that became part of the world literary canon is no surprise, yet *The Barber of Gottingen* remains part of the connective hub of *Blackwood's* that is a crucial part of the transatlantic circulation of the Gothic and it confronts the issue of Germanism much more explicitly. In Macnish, waking up from a bad German dream is an obvious strategy to play down the horror of Germanism, giving the tale a nonconsequential feeling. As in Poe's *The Devil in the Belfry*, German Gothicism in the figure of the fat devilish man in »The Barber of Gottin-gen« has been domesticated and become more of a fairy tale dream rather than a haunting ghost or a stalking monster.

What other anxieties are at work in the text, then? Which topics can be discussed in an analysis of Macnish's variety of comic Gothic Germanism? I suggest we read the exchange between the devilish customer and the barber in terms of the logic of the monsters of the market, as discussed by David McNally. In such a reading, the barber becomes a figure of alienated labour under the conditions of night work and its increasing mechanisation.

Despite being one of the lower class members of the community of the university, the barber initially prides himself in his work as »peruke-maker to the professors of Gottingen«.³⁶ In this regard, he represents an artisanal figure, relatively unaffected by the increasing mechanisation of work in manufacturing and factory production. His shop is even called his »*sanctum sanctorum*«.³⁷ Yet the devil who comes to his door does not want his soul but his uninterrupted labour, as the barber is forced to put on soap for what seems like forever: »Times without number was he [the barber] obliged to shift the brush from one hand to the other from actual exhaustion. It was in vain: there seemed to be no termination to his efforts«.³⁸ As the clocks chime, time is strictly kept (as in Poe's *The Devil in the Belfry*), and though his monstrous supervisor falls asleep, the barber can never stop, as the passing of hours is chronicled minutely: »he continued to ply at his endless task. The least pause brought on increased exclamations from the stranger«.³⁹ In an uncanny sound, the kettle keeps spouting vapour after several hours of work, the image obliquely yoking together the promise of the end of the workday and the constant presence of steam power.

The figure of the customer turns monstrous when there is no longer any light to see. When the barber complains of the lack of light, »two horrid luminous eyes«

35 Ibid., p. 607.

36 Ibid., p. 604.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 608.

39 Ibid.

begin »glaring upon him. They were those of the fat man, and seemed lighted up with that hideous spectral glow which is to be seen floating in cemeteries and other places of corruption.« This unnatural glow makes the head and face of the devil-figure appear in »deep crimson« and his hair turns Medusa-like: »His dark hair appeared converted into sable snakes«. This Gothic imagery is mixed with that of hell: when the stranger laughs, »the whole inside of his mouth and throat resembled red-hot iron, and looked like the entrance to a furnace within his entrails. Nor was the breath which emanated from this source endurable: it was hot, suffocating, and sulphureous, as if concocted in the bottom of hell.«⁴⁰ The artisanal barber is forced by a well-fed man to work at night under a horrific glow as from gas lighting, while steam is being produced, the furnace is red hot, and the place reeks of sulphur.

The barber remains a figure of individualised work even today. Viewed as a monster of the market at the time of the factory acts in Britain, the devil-figure is more of a fat capitalist, forcing a hot furnace, steam production, interminable working hours, and mechanistic tasks on an exemplary artisanal worker. In this way, the isolated setting of the German university town, seemingly far removed from the rapidly industrialising urban centres of Britain, allows for an additional layer of containment beyond the fantastic genre of the story, though one that would not threaten its educated middle-class readers too much, just like the comic variety of Germanism.

VI. Conclusion: Writing Fear »of the soul«

The Barber of Gottingen, then, is an example of the comic mode of the Gothic as much as of the connective hub of *Blackwood's* between Germany and the US. In the tale, terror is of, or rather, in, Germany and remains in Germany, as comic elements help mitigate the cultural threats of low Germanism. The cultural logic of early-nineteenth-century Gothic shifted to the Protestant and especially Calvinist Gothic of James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd of *Blackwood's*. In this, Germany with its Protestant North and Catholic South could function as a medium between the Protestant UK and the Catholic South of Italy, Spain, and France, as is evidenced by John Wilson's early *Blackwood's* tales. While the Caledonian antiszygy was originally defined by Gregory Smith in 1919 as the union of the polar opposites of realism and fantasy, the mixtures of Scottish and German as well as Gothic and comic in *The Barber of Gottingen* offer an interesting counterpoint to such texts as Hogg's *Private Memoirs*.

At first glance, the lack of the umlaut »ö« in *Gottingen* might be taken as lack of exactness, though there are examples of the ö-umlaut in *Blackwood's*, some of which we saw in Wilson's tales. »Gottingen« to German ears makes the name sound more similar to God or *Gott*. To speakers of English, it may yet sound, if not look, more

40 All quotes above *ibid.*, p. 609.

like *Gothington*. Is the ö simply lost in translation or can it serve as a clue to a deeper meaning? The diacritical play with the umlaut in Wilson's *Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No 1*, which alludes to the Göschen publishing house, speaks for such underlying transnational forces at play, just like Thomas Carlyle's later novel – poised between Scotland and Germany – will contain: *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh in Three Books* (1833/1834). In any case, »Gottingen«, like »Count Frederick von Lindénbäumenberg«, is already an index of the processes of translation that the Gothic and the comic varieties of Germanism undergo and from which they emerge. The readers of Macnish's tale, reading of terror in Germany, may »yet« find, »to [their] inexpressible satisfaction, that [they] had been dreaming«. ⁴¹ In contrast to Poe, then, terror in Wilson and Macnish is less of the soul than of Germany, but ever more so, it is of Scotland and of *Blackwood's*.

41 Ibid., p. 610.