Part I

The claim that horror and the Gothic ‘mean’ has recently become something of an embarrassment to many theorists of and commentators on the genre. In a powerful study of horror narrative, Roger B. Salomon complains about a ‘rage for explanation’ in accounts of the genre and insists that horror is precisely that which is beyond elucidation, proclaiming proudly that in his own study he will ‘eschew explanation, dealing with what I consider a phenomenon of experience that cannot be explained’. Matt Hills has devoted an entire book to the ‘pleasures of’ rather than the reasons for horror and spends a great deal of time undermining approaches to horror which emphasise the cognitive and psychoanalytic ‘meanings’ supposedly motivating horror stories, warning that such analyses often manage to bypass affect, which he considers one of horror’s defining features. Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall had earlier cautioned against the tendency of critics to diagnose the Gothic as a symptom of bourgeois anxiety and a means of mapping the fault lines of a dominant culture. For both, it isn’t ‘the “business” of Gothic fiction to “articulate” or “negotiate” anxieties’ but rather ‘to be scary or sensational’, which ‘does not amount to the same thing’. In the race to explain, critics ended up explaining away.

Interestingly, it has very often been an Irish Gothic masterpiece which has served as the battleground on which the opponents of interpretation have (to coin a phrase) staked their claims. Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) has been one of the most (over?) analysed texts in the history of Gothic criticism, and there is no sign of this interpretive attention waning any time soon. The fanged Count has been made to serve as the ocus for countless late Victorian concerns, and he has demonstrated a remarkable ability to mutate into almost anything: Irish landlord, peasant, Jew, proletarian, sexual deviant and liberator, New Woman, mother, menstruating woman, medieval aristocrat, terrorist, and anything else you can think of. Many have become increasingly frustrated with this interpretive slipperiness, particularly when the possible sexual meaning of particular scenes and images are made explicit by overenthusiastic analysts. Dracula expert Elizabeth Miller berated the critics in a barnstormingly entertaining survey revealingly called Sense and Nonsense (2006), and in a later article she fantasised about ‘a Dracula in which wooden stakes are wooden stakes, and blood is
merely blood . . . not an easy task when we consider the extent to which the text has been pushed to the brink of total libidinal abandon’. She warned that ‘sexual readings of Dracula owe as much to the tenor of the readers’ times as they do to the original text. In fact, some reflect the late twentieth century’s voyeuristic obsession with sexuality in all its forms, coupled with a determination to project (sometimes in condescending fashion) its own self-proclaimedly sophisticated and liberated views onto a text (and an author) shaped by what is viewed as late Victorian repression. In a similarly exasperated vein (sorry!), countering the more sex-saturated readings of Stoker’s novel, Robert Mighall insisted that ‘Dracula is a horror story about vampires’, not sex, and that rather than depicting a graphic gang-rape reinforcing a repressive Victorian regime on a ‘suddenly sexual woman’, ‘the scene in the crypt depicts a vampire-slaying . . . [and] Lucy is a vampire who is being destroyed according to the method prescribed by folklore.

For this school of criticism, sometimes a stake really is just a stake. Although psychoanalytic readings of Gothic have borne most of the brunt of this scepticism, it is the critical act of apparently dissolving the Gothic text into (interpretive) context that is the actual target. In a now infamous attack on the work of Stephen King, the commentator Don Herron berated the novelist for precisely his tendency to write as if for an audience of scholar fans, complaining he had ‘never read fiction as ready made for critical explication as King’s . . . he loads his work with themes, recurring motifs, cross-references. In essays and books he endorses the idea of a “sub-text” – important adult concerns about politics, relationships, or economics which invest an otherwise popular novel or film with serious intent’. For Herron, such interpretive ‘subtext’ is a way of evading the main function of a horror writer, which is to scare the hell out of the reader, and instead appeals to the intellect rather than the gut. While this ‘appeases the academic mind . . . which seeks propaganda in everything it reads’, it betrays the genre itself, which is about horrifying readers and not making them muse on social or psychosexual anxieties. Herron’s attack on King, however, reminds us that despite the current scepticism about cognitive accounts of horror, some practitioners write precisely in order to comment on social, political and cultural issues and that to ignore this fact would be to misrepresent the genre.

The concern expressed by the likes of Miller, Mighall and Herron emerges from a long-standing one in literary studies regarding the limits of interpretation and the duties of a literary critic towards the text being interpreted. A consistent worry has been that many critics are exceeding the proper limits of interpretation, that they are guilty of in some way breeching interpretive decorum in pushing explanation as far as it can go. Specifically in terms of the Irish Gothic, the charge has been that many of us are guilty of seeing Ireland and Irish issues everywhere we look – of imposing an Irish context on literature that is really uninterested in Ireland. It should be noted, however, that sometimes Ireland pops up in a novel when least expected. Very late in the plot of Regina Maria Roche’s Clermont (1798) (a text which resides in the cultural memory now only as one of the Northanger Novels) it is revealed that the mysterious past of Madeline, the heroine’s father, the Clermont of the title, involves a hidden Irish subversive past. His wife, Madeline’s mother, was one Geraldine, the daughter of Lord Dunlere, an exiled Irish supporter of James II, of whom he was a ‘zealous’ follower. Suddenly – as if out of nowhere – the heroine’s family becomes implicated in Jacobite sympathy, and for a novel published in the year of the 1798 rebellion, this connection has political implications far beyond the working out of the plot. By naming her heroine’s Irish mother Geraldine, Roche connects her to the Norman Fitzgerald family, the earls of Kildare and the dukes of Leinster, and indirectly too Lord Edward Fitzgerald, a leading member of the Society of United Irishmen, deeply involved in the military organisation of the rebellion, and notorious in the 1790s as a political radical and separatist. Indeed, in using such a name Roche’s novel may slip from Jacobitism into covert Jacobinism. Later, Maria Edgeworth would also code Fitzgerald into the politics of her novel Ennui, whose character Lady Geraldine is highly critical of distorted travel narratives of Irish society. Ireland can, then, catch the reader unawares, and knowing
this may make many Irish studies critics sceptical when told they are over-stepping the interpretive mark.

In an article on Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s ‘Green Tea’ (1871), William Hughes advises against what he considers a rather too hasty tendency of critics who come from within the discipline of Irish studies to allow their interpretive lens to be conditioned by the demands of the discipline itself. For Hughes, the mis-reading of Irish Gothic is due to (political) demands generated by the academy:

*Within the institution of Irish Studies, it might be suggested, a subtle pressure is all too often brought to bear, its imperative being to reclaim such writers as Le Fanu, Stoker and Wilde as generically or distinctively Irish writers, even where their literary productions were shaped by a London-oriented publishing industry as much as by an Anglo-Irish selfhood predicated upon educational and behavioural co-ordinates which link the Irish ascendency to its English counterpart.*

There are a number of problems with the extract just quoted, not least Hughes’s rather too casual use of terms like ‘Anglo-Irish’ and ‘ascendancy’, terms which have been subject to a great deal of scrutiny from Irish historians and critics over at least four decades and which would only be used about figures like the thoroughly middle class Le Fanu, Wilde and Stoker with caution and qualification. However, Hughes’s concern is certainly understandable, and perhaps Irish studies critics have been rather too eager to comprehend the work of canonical figures like the writers mentioned in an exclusively Irish context, though this too is not all that surprising given the institutional weight accorded to approaches which elide rather than explore precisely that context. Since so many critics have been content to pretend that Ireland does not even exist in terms of these writers, or that it is at best a ‘background’ to be left behind as quickly as possible, the contrary tendency to over-emphasise Ireland in New Historicist terms is only to be expected. Moreover, and this is a point that really should not have to be made at this stage, but which, perhaps, it may be worth stating bluntly here: reading these texts and writers in relation to Ireland is not in any way an attempt to claim that other issues and other places should be ignored. Irish studies has done us all the critical favour of returning an Irish dimension to authors and texts that had been read for decades as if Ireland were completely marginal to interpretation, and demonstrating the complexity of the ways in which instead it is an (often shadowy) presence. If, at times, it is necessary to argue that one interpretation necessarily rules out another, then this is a matter of sifting the evidence rather than declaring out-of-hand that the political or institutional gravitation of a large body of critics (most of whom disagree with each other vehemently) is, in effect, queering the pitch and distorting the evidence.

Richard Haslam has been to the fore in cautioning against what he sees as very problematic ‘Irish’ readings of Gothic texts by Irish writers, and in a number of interventions he has set out to rein in the interpretive over-enthusiasm of Irish studies critics (including myself). In a very considered response to my own readings of the Irish Gothic, Haslam has argued that my ‘psychoanalytically-inflected reading of Irish history shapes [my] reading’ of Gothic fiction, and that I, like many others, always tend to see Gothic texts as commenting in some way on ‘the burden of colonial history’, as commentaries on the anxieties of Irish Protestants in general. Luckily, I am not alone in making such an egregious blunder, and Haslam includes Julian Moynahan, Joseph Spence and Terry Eagleton as my brothers-in-error. Apparently we all make the same interpretive mistake as, like academic versions of Stephen King, we are all reading Gothic for the supposed sub-text: ‘this interpretation substitutes allegoresis (a hermeneutic practice) for allegory (a rhetorical practice); in the former, a text lacking the conventionally accepted characteristics of theological, moralistic, historical, political, or personification allegory is explicated as if it were a deliberately designed allegory’. Haslam’s worry is about what he views as the generally illegitimate critical practice of allegoresis, an uncalled-for, unprompted, unnecessary imposition on
unwilling text, a breach of hermeneutical decorum, and ultimately a complete misrepresentation of both a text and the Irish Gothic itself. In an important article on ‘Irish Gothic’ in the rather official Routledge Companion to Gothic (2007) he warns against the tendency towards allegorising he finds in most critics of the Irish Gothic, arguing that ‘critics employing a psychoanalytically inflected historicism attempt to extract the political contexts (allegedly) inscribed allegorically within texts’.\footnote{14}

Northrop Frye had a neat line in responding to accusations of allegoresis. In his Anatomy of Criticism (1957) he explicitly warned that ‘all commentary is allegorical interpretation’.\footnote{15} I, too, would hesitatingly suggest that all accounts which relate something other than simply the plot and the material condition of the text are at least open to the accusation of allegoresis. Frye’s point is that all readings which assess the way a text ‘says one thing but means another’ are necessarily implicated in the mode of allegorical interpretation. As Morton Bloomfield explains, ‘except for textual scholars who attempt to preserve and protect the verbal surface of a work . . . we may put all interpreters into the general category of allegorists’.\footnote{16} Haslam is concerned that Irish studies readers are involved in subordinating both the text and the author to the critic, to seeing in the text what they (we!) want to see in it, and he wishes to re-establish a proper relationship between a text, an author and a critic in which the critic should not set out to make the text say things that the author did not intend.\footnote{17} Since, he argues, Charles Robert Maturin did not intend Melmoth the Wanderer (1820) to amount to a consideration of the Irish Protestant position in Ireland, or the politics of Ireland at the time, it is unfair of critics to claim that this is what the novel does. That kind of interpretation ‘makes itself a little too much at home in the text’ and ends up imposing an allegorical reading which is simply not there; he cautions that hesitancy in interpretation rather than allegoresis should take precedence.\footnote{18}

Certainly, hesitancy and caution are useful qualities for any literary critic. They are even more important for readers of Irish Gothic, given that it has mostly been the work of Irish Anglicans, and as I have argued in the previous chapter, there is a reason why they were attracted to Gothic in their writing. As Tzvetan Todorov has persuasively demonstrated, Gothic fiction is generally marked by a psychological ‘hesitancy’ between a supernatural and a natural understanding of the plot, and this, I think, can be fruitfully linked to the cultural hesitancy of Irish Anglicans, of whom it can be said that ‘there were no greater cultural hesitators in the British Isles’.\footnote{19} It is no part of my general plan here to argue that we should calcify the hesitators and their texts into a very specifically drawn out allegory. However, I also endorse Moynahan’s view that Gothic often violates the ‘official best intentions’ of its authors so that while it may (or may not) be true that any Irish Gothic writer did not intend an allegorical reading of her work this does not necessarily mean that the novel she produced does not include such an allegory.\footnote{20} As I have already explained, Haslam is deeply suspicious of psychoanalysis as a tool of interpretation considering it a cheap way to incorporate readings that a particular critic wishes to propound under the cover of either the personal, political or cultural unconscious (he includes a long footnote disputing Fredric Jameson’s conceptualisation of the ‘political unconscious’\footnote{21}), but while critics (including myself) should perhaps be more tentative in employing such models in literary analysis it is important to recognise that what Haslam is trying to do is to close down analysis by effectively outlawing modes of interpretation with which he does not agree.

There is no space here to rehearse Jacques Derrida’s argument that once a text leaves the author she cannot control the ways it can interpreted\footnote{22} or to re-emphasise the now surely uncontested view that an author is not in complete control of what meanings a text contains. I am not here arguing that authorial intention is unimportant or to be dismissed,\footnote{23} simply insisting that there may be more to a text than an author assumes or would recognise. As G. K. Chesterton put it, ‘either criticism is no good at all (a very defensible position) or else criticism means saying things
about an author, the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots. 24 Baldly speaking, even if in these texts the author was not intentionally commenting on the 'Irish Anglican imagination', he may have ended up doing so anyway, and it is the duty of the literary critic to uncover this commentary. It is difficult to see why any literary critic would want to disagree with this position.

The presence (or absence) of allegory in texts which do not declare themselves allegorical is the subject of a major theoretical controversy in post-colonial studies in general, and Irish studies in particular, in ways that bear heavily on this present book. In a divisive article entitled ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’ (1986), the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson theorised that ‘all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I would call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel’. Jameson’s argument was refreshingly clear: the condition of emerging from, or being in, a Third World geographical zone necessitated the writing of the nation even when the author apparently wanted to write about something else – for example, private life – since ‘even those [texts] which are seemingly private . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory’. 25 For Jameson, private and the public worlds cannot be separated in ‘Third World’ countries, and therefore Third World writers cannot help but write about the nation in an allegorical sense. Jameson is also clear that while allegory is not absent in First World writing, there it is ‘unconscious’ – writers do not realise they are encoding the national allegorically – whereas ‘third-world national allegories are conscious and overt’. 26

To say that Jameson’s article landed him in a pot of post-colonial hot water would be to underplay things. Aijaz Ahmad responded with a full-blown attack, accusing Jameson of homogenising post-colonial writers and writings, insisting that the absolute difference between the First and Third Worlds posited by Jameson was spurious, and suggesting that Jameson was close to asserting that in order for a text to count as a Third World text it had to be allegorical. Ahmad noted that ‘if we start thinking of the process of allegorisation not in nationalistic terms but simply as a relation between private and public, personal and communal, then it also becomes possible to see that allegorisation is by no means specific to the so-called third world’. 27 Ahmed’s attack has been rather too superficially used as a knock down response to Jameson’s article, but there is far too much of a rhetorical tendency to caricature Jameson in the article for it to work as anything other than a qualification. What Jameson over-emphasised, perhaps, was the claim that all ‘Third World’ literature should be read as national allegory, and his insistence that this allegory is always intentional is unpersuasive. His major point, though, that being forced into a subordinate position relative to a dominating (capitalist) power has serious affects in terms of shaping the literature emerging from the Third Word (as much as it has limiting though different effects on the literature emerging from the colonial centre) is surely accurate. Neil Larsen has perceptively argued that in Jameson’s article

the potential for error lies in the a priori reduction of every individual instance of ‘third world literature’ to . . . national allegory. But it seems to me correct to regard this allegorising process as a structural tendency in the narrative forms of ‘peripheral’ modernities – a tendency that may, in many instances, never amount to more than an abstract possibility. If it can be allowed that the third world nation itself exists, on one plane at least, only as an abstract possibility . . . then it follows that attempts to represent this nation, to portray it in a narrative or symbolic medium, will reflect this abstraction within the formal elements of the medium itself. 28

Despite the attacks on Jameson, he provided a crucial argument of great use to theorists of Irish studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially since many of them invested heavily in the notion of Ireland as, in Luke Gibbon’s
terms, a ‘First World country, but with a Third World memory’ (a formulation not without critics of its own). For Gibbons, this meant that Irish writing could (should?) be read allegorically, or as necessarily allegorical, and he argued that ‘allegory in a colonized culture is part of the symbolic ordering of life itself’, continuing that allegory in these cases ‘is not just a personification of an abstraction; it is . . . not simply . . . a mask that can be removed at will [but a] part of consciousness itself under certain conditions of colonial rule’. To live in Ireland is to think allegorically, just as Jameson believes that to be a Third World writer is to write allegorically. In Jamesonian terms, then, Ireland has been read as a country operating under a politics of allegory. For Gibbons, those living under the conditions inherent in Ireland think in allegorical terms because these are the only terms in which the historical situation – discontinuous and traumatic – can be assimilated and understood.

For those of Gibbons’s theoretical persuasion, Haslam is wrong to accuse his interlocutors of allegoresis because he misunderstands the role that allegory plays in Irish culture and consciousness. There is, though, probably an over-attachment to allegory by post-colonial critics in Irish studies. As Kevin Barry has argued persuasively, this approach tends to privilege a particular mode as having a very specific political resonance, a privilege that automatically reads other literary devices in a negative manner. So, for example, for Gibbons, whereas allegory brings together two or more different things without ever asserting their complete identification, which therefore allows allegory to possess a politically radical charge, metaphor smooths out difference in favour of similarity and homogeneity, and is therefore politically conservative. It is highly unlikely that such complete identification between a political viewpoint and a literary device (rather than a genre) is tenable, and the obsession with allegory has perhaps trapped critics slightly. Moreover, ‘allegory’ is probably not all that useful a term to use in this context, as these critics themselves have recognised. Both Jameson and Gibbons have attempted to make the term resonate in a more capacious way than its traditional iterations. In an earlier discussion, Jameson had spoken of allegory as useful to a world of radical discontinuity and fragmentation (by which he means the contemporary world) as a means of bringing together the bits and pieces of reality and experience, in ‘a clumsy deciphering of meaning from moment to moment, the painful attempt to restore a continuity to heterogeneous, disconnected instances’. In his article on ‘Third World Literature’ he warns against an overattachment to the ‘traditional conception of allegory’ ('an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalences'), which he calls a ‘one-dimensional view of this signifying process’ and advocates the allegorical ‘spirit’ which is ‘profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol’. This warning is echoed by Gibbons, who argues that ‘for allegory to retain its critical valency it is vital that there is an instability of reference and contestation of meaning to the point where it may not be at all clear where the figural ends and the literal begins’.

As should be clear by now, however, the term ‘allegory’ is misleading in such contexts, and not simply because questions necessarily arise regarding the supposed ‘intentionality’ of the authors involved. Making a distinction between ‘traditional allegory’ and ‘post-colonial allegory’ does not really help. Historically, the term ‘allegory’ evokes straightforwardly allegorical works like Edmund Spenser’s The Faerie Queene (1590–6), John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress (1678), John Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel (1681), Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (1872) and George Orwell’s Animal Farm (1945). In each of these texts allegory operates in a fairly clear-cut manner in which the text’s ‘surface’ meaning (this is a story about farm animals rebelling against their human masters) is really an obvious cover for the real story being told (this is about the Russian Revolution and its aftermath). Allegories of this nature are generally not that difficult to decipher, often because the allegorical nature of the text will be pointed out by the author or the text itself. Of course, there have been cases where critics have claimed to have uncovered intended allegories after the fact and with
no confirmation possible by the author. A notorious example of this is a 1964 article by high school teacher Henry Littlefield concerning what he argued was the buried allegory in L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1901), which, it turns out, was not really about Dorothy and her friends the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Cowardly Lion traversing the land of Oz at all but was, in fact, an allegory of American economic and political life in the Gilded Age. This came as surprise to most readers of Oz, but it had the happy effect of making a complex period of economic history eminently explicable to students and the allegorical interpretation was seized on enthusiastically by generations of economic historians, textbook writers and high school and university students who — if asked — would explain confidently that the much loved novel was ‘really about’ the bi-metallic controversy, and who could also tell you that the Wizard himself was really President McKinley, the Scarecrow the put-upon Mid-West farmer, the Tin Man the exploited proletariat, and the Cowardly lion William Jennings Bryan himself.

The problem with Littlefield’s argument is not the claim that Oz can (and perhaps should) be read as in some ways commenting on, related to, complicated by the historical controversies raging while Baum was writing. It would, in fact, be bizarre to argue otherwise. The difficulty lies in Littlefield’s pushing this claim to its illogical conclusion: that Baum was intentionally allegorising and that his novel directly maps on to late nineteenth-century America. ‘Genuine allegory’, as Northrop Frye has pointed out, ‘is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone’; most literary texts are simply not allegories in this manner, and using the term in relation to them is more likely to confuse than clarify. It would be best to avoid using the term ‘allegory’ in situations where the argument merely concerns whether it is useful to read a text in relation to particular political, social, cultural or religious issues. Indeed, in these circumstances another term put forward by Northrop Frye serves much better. In his analysis of romance Frye posits that, by its structures and conventions, romance always provokes alternative meanings, but he insists that ‘the word allegory here is misleading: I should prefer some such phrase as “symbolic spread”, the sense that a work of literature is expanding into insights and experiences beyond itself.

Frye’s preference for the term ‘symbolic spread’ is helpful in two ways. In the first place it ensures the critic does not over-egg the pudding by making excessive claims regarding the intentional coding of the text being interpreted, such as claiming that Bram Stoker intentionally meant Dracula to ‘stand for’ Irish landlordism, or indeed Irish agrarian terror. But the term also helps critics avoid the trap of a bizarre and slavish devotion to authorial intention, which should continue to be acknowledged as vital in reading and interpreting texts, but only as one part of the interpretive package. Although Richard Haslam believes that many Irish studies critics are suffering from the old ‘affective fallacy’ whereby the reader tends to read her own prejudices back into a work rather than take full account of the actual text in front of her eyes I suggest that perhaps Haslam is suffering from a version of the ‘intentional fallacy’ in his (generally fruitless) search for what these Gothic writers ‘really’ meant. Again, the point is not to dispense with the authorial intentions – whatever such dispensing would look like – but merely to suggest that they do not govern what a text means or how it holds that meaning. The validity of any particular interpretation remains with the kinds of evidence provided for that reading: in other words, it is not enough to declare, out of hand, that a particular interpretation is simply illegitimate because it does not take sufficient notice of authorial intentions (known or unknown) but must depend instead on the robustness of the textual and extra-textual evidence provided to support the reading. ‘Symbolic spread’ may be a bit cumbersome, but it will serve much better than ‘allegory’, which could then be incorporated as a specific version of such ‘spreading’.

Siobhán Kilfeather has asked some apposite questions about these complex issues of interpretation, wondering, ‘if one decides to read the gothic as an allegory of the state of the nation, how far does one let the particular situation of the author – where he or she is coming from – determine the intention, if not the full meaning of the allegory? Or is the
allegorical dimension something provided by the reader?' Answering these questions is not straightforward, but it is unlikely that either the author or the reader ‘determines’ the ‘full meaning’ of the text or the way it symbolically spreads. Given that straightforward allegory is very rarely in question (though who ever claimed it was?), the job of the critic is to carefully and tentatively explicate fairly complex relationships between author, text and context (usually thinking in New Historicist ways when doing so). Frye’s term ‘symbolic spread’ helps here because it does not have the implications of intentional allegory where one thing in a text can directly be explained in terms of another. There should be relatively few ‘gotcha!’ moments in genuine interpretation, where a text’s code is suddenly cracked and meaning becomes transparent. Frye himself was very strict in using ‘symbolic spread’, believing that the symbolic spread of realism tended ‘to go from an individual work of fiction into the life around it which it reflects’ (a rather unfortunate formulation), while the symbolic spread of romance (which would include the Gothic) ‘tends rather to go into its literary context, to other romances that are most like it’, but there is no compelling reason to maintain this distinction. As Anne Williams has pointed out, Frye’s solution to the tensions between allegory and ‘symbolic spread’ is ‘unsatisfactory’, a claim very few would dispute at this stage. The argument that romance ‘symbolically spreads’ to ‘other romances’ rather than to ‘the life around it’ emerges from a view of both realism and non-realist to which hardly any literary historians would now subscribe – and Rosemary Jackson’s theorisation of fantasy as a genre which involves considerable commentary on the real is more persuasive. As Williams puts it, ‘the aura of “other meaning” attaching itself to romance landscapes involves more than “intertextuality”’. In an earlier study of eighteenth-century Irish Gothic I endorsed ‘the New Historicist notion that texts and the histories in which they are imbedded are mutually productive processes’, the term ‘symbolic spread’ usefully describes the means by which this mutual production of interpretation takes place.

The almost fetishistic appeal to both the text and the author by critics like Haslam in determining whether or not a given fiction is operating as in some ways a commentary on contemporary history fatally misunderstands how texts actually make meaning. As Luke Gibbons has perceptively insisted, it is simply impossible to always be able to determine ‘on textual grounds alone . . . whether a text is functioning allegorically or not’. Just because a clear and direct correspondence between text and historical situation is not immediately discernible is inadequate grounds on which to dismiss claims that the text ‘speaks to’ or makes meaning in relation to these situations. It may be necessary to ‘go “outside” the text, to its historical conditions of meaning, in order to give full scope to its semantic potential’. The historically sensitive critic is not a magician capable of conjuring up meaning where he wants it to be but is charged with the job of noticing ‘the historical contiguity of the text to other narratives and symbolic forms that are working their way through the culture’. This is an echo of Fredric Jameson’s point about the process of interpretation itself: the critic, he insists, is not to be chained to the content of a text so much as he is to attempt to enact ‘a laying bare, a restoration of the original message . . . beneath the distortions of the various kinds of censorship that have been at work upon it’.

As a (relatively) contemporary and very obvious example of ‘symbolic spread’, I would cite John Carpenter’s Halloween (1978), which soon after its release came to be seen as a quasi-conservative (perhaps ultra-conservative) commentary on the sexual revolution of the 1960s and a warning that sexual promiscuity equals death. In the film, all the teenagers who have sex are brutally murdered with a phallic-like knife by the deranged Michael Myers who appears to be engaging in a notso-subtle reinforcement of family values. Using the term ‘allegory’ here would be ill-advised. Carpenter later expressed shock that his film could be read as an endorsement of abstention and insisted that it was not his intention to bring an end to the sexual revolution, and given Carpenter’s well-known liberal political views, it is highly unlikely that he was being purposefully misleading here. It would be bizarre to argue that, simply because there was no conscious intention on Carpenter’s part, the film should not be read as containing a commentary on sexual behaviour, and indeed
Carpenter now accepts that this is how the film operates in terms of its meaning-making.  

Similarly, Haslam’s puritanical approach to the interpretation of texts would appear to render illegitimate readings of Dracula (1897) which see in the staking of Lucy Westenra a re-inscription of patriarchal values on a sexually transgressing woman because such an interpretation was probably not consciously meant by Stoker (although accusing the critics of allegoresis is a polite way of putting this). Unfortunately, Haslam appears to be on the verge of becoming the Mary Whitehouse of Irish Gothic Studies and is finger-wagging his way through most critical material on the Irish Gothic canon.  

Although he claims that his work is an example of what Steven Mailloux has termed ‘rhetorical hermeneutics’, which examines how ‘interpreters interact with other interpreters in trying to argue for or against different meanings’, in as much as he has unfortunately become obsessed with correcting what he considers the interpretive excesses of everyone else, he seems to me to be trying to do the (literary) police in different voices. Critics surely have a duty to be over-interpreters (though cautious ones) rather than play it safe all the time. The act of criticism defended here is what Wayne Booth has called ‘overstanding’, which he contrasts with the more common ‘understanding’. If ‘understanding’ a text involves asking straightforward questions about it which the text appears to suggest in and of itself, ‘overstanding’ necessitates asking questions that seem foreign to the text at hand and may seem at first rather outrageous. As Jonathan Culler puts it, ‘it can be very important and productive to ask questions the text does not encourage one to ask about it’. One of these outrageous questions is: how does this Irish Gothic text intervene in Irish history, if at all (keeping in mind the possibility that it doesn’t)? Irish writing, and perhaps Irish Gothic writing more particularly, necessarily (because of Ireland’s colonial history), ‘symbolically spreads’ from the specifics of the text into the cultural situation in which it was produced in ways that are often (though not always) unintentional and unconscious and which require careful (and hesitant) uncovering by the literary critic.