

MODERN FICTION AND THE NATURE OF GOTHIC

It has become an accepted tenet of the art of writing that a writer who wants to write a novel must first do the research and then, having written a first draft, do several re-writes before trying to find a publisher. The fashion for research reminds me of what Laurence Olivier once said to Dustin Hoffman when they were making a film together. The young actor, arriving on set for the first day of shooting looking weary and emaciated, explained that he had gone without food and sleep for several weeks in order to get into his part, to which Olivier replied, 'Have you tried acting?' Shakespeare's research for his history plays consisted of a quick read of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, then out with the quill and on with the show.

Re-writing used to mean making a fair copy. In other words, copying out the pages which had survived the writing process but were legible only to the author, before delivering them to the printer or, in the days before printers, giving them to your friends to read. The time required for copying out was a powerful incentive to get it right first time. Life expectancy in those days was another.

Instead of spending time researching and re-writing, writers should learn, as Olivier might disdainfully have put it, to write, or as we might put it, to use their imagination and improve their skill with words. For as John Ruskin put it in his essay, *The Nature of Gothic*, 'the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.' In striving for perfection, he explained, we must learn to accept its necessary counterpart, imperfection. The only exception to this rule, he said, was Leonardo da Vinci, who strove so determinedly after perfection that the result was 'merely that he would take ten years to a picture and leave it unfinished'. Otherwise, the work of every great artist must, in some degree and in some part, be imperfect.

In that respect, he said, art is like nature. 'Imperfection is in some sort essential to all that we know of life. It is the sign of life in a mortal body, that is to say, of a state of progress and change. Nothing that lives is, or can be, rigidly perfect; part of it is decaying, part nascent. The foxglove blossom, - a third part bud, a third part past, a third part in full bloom, - is a type of the life of this world.'

As always with Ruskin, an essay on art quickly turns into a socialist tract. What he liked about Gothic architecture was its inclusiveness, each workman making his own individual contribution to the whole. The 'fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors' with their 'ugly goblins and formless monsters and stern statues' is not to be mocked 'for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone' and this is something 'which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children'.

In his introduction to Ruskin's essay, when it was extracted from *The Stones of Venice* and published by Kelmscott Press as a single book, William Morris wrote that 'the lesson Ruskin teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in his labour'. Taking that as my touchstone, I offer my own suggestions, as more pleasurable alternatives to research and re-writing, for those whose labour is the art of fiction.

Firstly, let your research take the form of reading works of fiction by other writers, preferably dead ones. The reason for this is that you are less likely to imitate them, or deliberately not imitate them, than writers who are still alive. All of literature, all of art, exists in the present. Homer is your contemporary too and a better teacher than your living contemporaries, who

are too young for their true worth to be known. Writers should live in the world of books more than they live in the real world. Of the two, the world of books should be for them more real. Otherwise, why write?

Proceeding by the Dogberry method, as practised by Shakespeare -

Secondarily, always try to get it right first time. Re-writing is either, as Ruskin would have it, a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art, or a sign that you are not very good.

Whichever it is, time spent re-writing would be better spent writing something new. Think of yourself as one of Ruskin's labourers, carving gargoyles on the Gothic cathedral of English literature, each of your ugly goblins and formless monsters being neither more nor less than signs of your life and liberty. As he went on to say, 'it is one of the chief virtues of the Gothic builders, that they never suffered ideas of outside symmetries and consistencies to interfere with the real use and value of what they did. If they wanted a window, they opened one; a room, they added one; a buttress, they built one.' You won't become a better writer by re-writing, but you might by carving another goblin or adding a room or building a buttress.

Sixth and lastly, as Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, 'Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.' A quick read is a waste even of the little time it takes. Better to spend more time on a book that requires more of your attention.

Publishers and editors are enemies to writers. Less than half of *War and Peace* would have got past a modern editor. Victor Hugo's alternating passages of historical fact and melodramatic invention would be considered confusing and unnecessary. Cut one of them. It is often difficult to distinguish between the perfections and imperfections of great writers. Thoreau's dictum, from the point of view of a writer, should be turned on its head. Books must be written as deliberately and reservedly as the author wishes them to be read.

Thirdly, never follow the advice of other writers. Writers are notoriously jealous of each other. Nothing is more likely to make a writer insane with murderous rage than the success of another writer. If you think that any of them is capable of giving good advice, even (or perhaps especially) to someone they know personally, you are a fool.

Which means that we can end as Dogberry did by saying, 'And to conclude, they are lying knaves.'