GOTHIC REALISM IN REYNOLDS PRICE'S *KATE VAIDEN*

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While frequently identified as a "Southern writer," Reynolds Price is not consistently read as participating in the Gothic tradition that is an important part of the Southern – and American – literary heritage. Gothic fiction is generally understood to have originated in eighteenth-century Europe with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Horace Walpole's tale of ghosts and retribution from beyond the grave, but by the end of that century, supernatural elements were no longer required for a text to be – or be read as – Gothic (for example, Ann Radcliffe's quintessentially Gothic novels of the 1790s depict human vice as *the* source of horror), and another noteworthy development had occurred as well: the Gothic novel had come to America with Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 publication of *Wieland; or, the Transformation, An American Tale*. Although Brown leaves room for the *possibility* of supernatural involvement in the story of a seemingly loving and rational husband, father, and brother who, in the grips of an inherited form of religious mania, murders his wife and children and attempts to murder his sister, the focus of the narrative is on the psychological, *human* origins of evil and on the family as the site of horrors. In the nineteenth century, a discernibly Southern form of the American Gothic began to appear in the fiction of authors such as William Gilmore Simms, George Washington Cable, and, of course, Edgar Allan Poe, whose most frightening stories remain those that trace the roots of terror back to the human mind. At the turn of the century, Charles W. Chestnutt emphasized the questions of racial identity, and of blood and inheritance in general, at the heart of the Gothic reality of the South; such an emphasis is easily observable in the fiction of the author most often associated with Southern Gothic literature in the twentieth century, William Faulkner.

"I think the Southern grotesque is far from being unrealistic: it is often a fairly literally realistic response to what the quality of old small-town life was like."
—Reynolds Price (qtd. in Crowder 52–53)

Southern Gothic literature is characterized by obsessive preoccupations – typically, with blood and inheritance; racial, gender, and/or class identities; the Christian religion; and home – and a compulsion to speak (or write) of these preoccupations. The Southern Gothic encodes an impulse to explain, even to vindicate, and to find or protect that which is essential or sacred but in most cases already irrevocably lost, if not utterly illusory. As a literary form, the Southern Gothic is at its most insightful

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as psychological revelation and/or cultural criticism in its exposure of the tendency of these preoccupations and impulses to generate or reveal horrors, as they do in Reynold Price's *Kate Vaiden* (1986).

The virtual silence regarding the legacy of the Gothic in *Kate Vaiden* would probably not disturb its author. Price once commented, "It was a bad day when the critics ever got the word 'gothic' into their repertoire to apply to Southern fiction or Southern anything. Southerners have always been terrifically realistic about not only acknowledging that the world is filled with strange and wondrous and terrible things, but also they were not ashamed to show it, if they had it" (Crowder 52). Price's comment suggests that the categorization of "Southern fiction or Southern anything" as "gothic" is a mistake, if not an insult. His working definition of Gothic literature seems to be fiction that is *un*realistic, that relies perhaps upon supernatural elements to scare or shock, the sort of fiction populated by vampires and ghosts (of the clanking chains variety).

Critics may, explicitly or implicitly, share Price's working definition of the Gothic and/or his discomfort with the term being applied to his fiction. For example, in the opening paragraph of her 1989 article on "The 'Mystical Grotesque' in the Life and Works of Reynolds Price," Lynn Veach Sadler explicitly addresses Price's use of the Gothic mode while simultaneously disavowing the significance of that use:

> Indeed, some of his works, notably *Love and Work* (1968), *The Surface of Earth* (1975), and *The Source of Light* (1981), at first glance seem to outdo traditional Southern Gothic in their suicides, intense and tortuous family relationships bordering on incest, overwhelming introspection and involvement with the past, death in childbirth, guilt induced by the death of one's mother in childbirth, and old maids. (27)

With her diction and syntax, Sadler calls into question the validity, and even the seriousness, of the Gothic features she cites. "[S]ome of his works . . . at first glance" is a concession awaiting a rebuttal, and her cataloguing of truly horrific narrative details ends with the (by comparison) trivial and comic "and old maids." Sadler mentions *Kate Vaiden* near the end of her essay when she claims that it is one of Price's only works "truly in a traditional Southern vein" because of its "humorously weird moments" (39) but pulls back from identifying and exploring as Gothic the far from humorous preoccupations and themes running through that "Southern vein." In fact, she seems uncomfortable with the very word Gothic; while the term "Southern Gothic" does appear in her essay, Sadler opts for "Mystical Grotesque" in her title.

"The South has a culture where people know each other awfully well, both for good and bad. And that intimacy is part of what produces a lot of violence in the South – it's unquestionably the most violent part of the country."
—Reynolds Price (qtd. in Crowder 56)

Like Price, she shrinks from the magnification of the word Gothic and its association with Southern literature, as if its use would validate something rather embarrassing or, perhaps, invoke something difficult to manage.

Gothic texts tend to be backward-looking meditations on trauma; as such, they are often excessive as their characters try to talk themselves through – or out of – that which haunts them. Kate Vaiden is haunted – and compelled to talk about it. Like numerous characters in Gothic texts, she is tormented by a past that is all too present in its power,

ABOVE **Sue Laslie Kimball and Reynolds Price at the 1988 Southern Writers' Symposium at Methodist College (See page 84 for more information about this literary event.)**