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The Necromancer of the Black Forest: A truly 'horrid' novel

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Paper presented at the Fantasy Thresholds Symposium, 16 November 2012

The Necromancer, or the Tale of the Black Forest is the title of one of the 'horrid novels' mentioned in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. It is one of seven titles that Isabella Thorpe says that Catherine Morland must read after finishing *The Mysteries of Udolpho*:

"Dear creature! How much I am obliged to you; and when you have finished *Udolpho*, we will read *The Italian* together; and I have made out a list of ten or twelve more of the same kind for you."

"Have you, indeed! How glad I am! What are they all?"

"I will read you their names directly; here they are, in my pocketbook. *Castle of Wolfenbach*, *Clermont*, *Mysterious Warnings*, *Necromancer of the Black Forest*, *Midnight Bell*, *Orphan of the Rhine*, and *Horrid Mysteries*. Those will last us some time."

"Yes, pretty well; but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?"¹

For a long time, *The Necromancer* and the other 'horrid novels' were thought to have been Jane Austen's invention, until they were discovered in the 1920s by Austen's biographer Michael Sadleir.² However, as *Northanger Abbey* was first written around 1798/99, Austen is referring to recent publications from the Minerva Press, the leading publisher of Gothic fiction in England at the time; Isabella's list provides the reader with a useful overview of the contemporary Gothic fiction of which *The Necromancer* was a popular example.

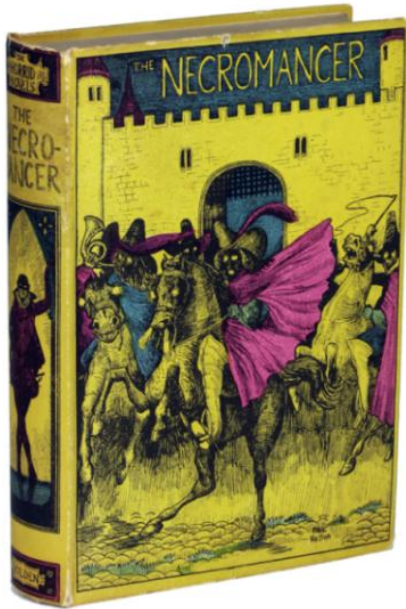
The Necromancer was originally written in German in 1792 by Karl Friedrich Kahlert (published under the pseudonym of Lawrence Flammenberg). It was then translated (unfaithfully) by Peter Will under the pseudonym of Peter Teutold and published in 1794. Peter Will, a minister of the Lutheran Chapel in Savoy, later translated Carl Grosse's *Der Genius* into the more familiar title of *Horrid Mysteries*, another of Austen's 'horrid novels'. Some critics have described the translation as, 'incoherent' (Michael Sadleir), 'incomprehensible' (Frederick S Frank) or even 'out of respect to such of our countrymen as are authors, we heartily wish it may be a translation. We should be sorry to see an English original so full of absurdities'.³ However, publications such as these prepared the way for the rising interest in German folklore in English literature seen, for example in Matthew Lewis's *The*

¹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 25.

² Michael Sadleir, *The Northanger Novels: A footnote to Jane Austen* (English Association Pamphlets, 1927).

³ James D. Jenkins, 'Introduction' in *The Necromancer* (Chicago: Valancourt Press, 2007), p. vii; cf. *British Critic*, vol. 4 (1794): 194.

Monk (published in 1796) which has scenes that have been directly influenced by the German original of *The Necromancer*. This particular style of novel is known as *Sturm und Drang* literature – translated as “Storm and Drive”, or perhaps more conventionally as “Storm and Stress”. It had found its voice through a play by Friedrich Schiller entitled *Die Räuber* – *the Robbers*, published in 1781. *Sturm und Drang* literature was a reaction to the Enlightenment, which allowed authors to explore the extremes of emotion.



Karl Kahlert's original title was *Der Geisterbanner*, which exposes some of the difficulties in translations. The title is sometime (erroneously) translated as the 'spirit' or 'spectral flag'. However, a *Geisterbanner* would be one who *dispels* or exorcises, whereas a *necromancer* is one who *divines* by communing with spirits, thus, linguistically Peter Will faced a number of linguistic problems that led to difficulties in the translation. On the other hand, the book also has the subtitle "A Wondrous Tale Collected from Oral and Written Traditions" which suggests an authority from abroad and, as with many stories of this genre, is purporting to be true along the lines of an urban legend. Kahlert's *Der Geisterbanner* was just one of many that were concerned with ghost-seers and spirit tales. Michael Hadley observes that there were some 70 first editions of *geister geschichten* published between 1790 and 1800.⁴ Kahlert's *Der Geisterbanner*, influenced by Schiller, was one of the pioneers of this new exploration of literature.

It is fair to say that without the references in *Northanger Abbey*, some of these 'horrid novels' would have slipped into obscurity. Many of them only resurfaced following their publication by the Folio Society in 1968. However, *The Necromancer* was also published in 1840 in writer and humanist William Hazlett's *Romancist and Novelist's Library*, and again by the clergyman and authority on the occult and the supernatural, Montague Summers, in 1927. Summers had originally planned to publish all of the horrid novels, but only printed *The Necromancer* and *Horrid Mysteries*.⁵

⁴ Michael Hadley, *The Undiscovered Genre, A Search for the German Gothic Novel* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978), p. 85.

⁵ Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1987), p. 4.

Title	Year	Author	Reprinted
<i>The Castle of Wolfenbach</i>	(1793)	Eliza Parsons	1968*
<i>The Necromancer</i>	(1794)	Peter Teuthold (trans)	1840, 1927, 1968
<i>Horrid Mysteries</i>	(1796)	Peter Will (trans)‡	1927, 1968
<i>The Mysterious Warning</i>	(1796)	Eliza Parsons	1824, 1835, 1968
<i>Clermont</i>	(1798)	Regina Maria Roche	1824, 1835, 1968
<i>Orphan of the Rhine</i>	(1798)	Eleanor Sleath	1968
<i>The Midnight Bell</i>	(1798)	Francis Lathom¥	1968

* 1968 – publication by the Folio Society of all seven volumes

‡ Peter Teuthold is another pseudonym for Peter Will

¥ Although *The Midnight Bell* was published by H. D. Symonds of London; later works by Lathom were published by the Minerva Press

Narrative

When Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1827 that contemporary German literature was ‘thought to dwell with peculiar complacency among wizards and ruined towers, with knights, secret tribunals, monks, spectres and banditti’, he could almost have been using *The Necromancer* as his checklist, although the knights and lords of Romance tales have been replaced with by the lieutenant and barons.⁶

The narrative of *The Necromancer* is sometimes confusing, and this is not necessarily the author’s intention. The characters in the first part of the novel, Herrman and Hellfried (two university friends from three decades before) are the only characters who actually *meet*. They begin to tell each other stories of their past because the bad weather prevents them from going out. The rest of the novel is presented as epistolary sequences. This comes in the form of letters, which themselves cite letters that they have received which repeat verbatim accounts from various characters that they have interviewed. Here we see the structure of the novel as a *mise-en-abîme*:

Structure of the Necromancer

- Hellfried and Herrmann exchange stories. Herrman presents his story in terms of textual evidence:
 - Baron R----’s Letter to Herrman
 - Lieutenant B----’s Letter to Baron R----
 - Austrian Lieutenant’s Verbal account of Volkert’s ability
 - Old Widow’s Account of her deceased husband’s séance
 - Baron T----’s Letter account of Volkert’s summoning of him to the duel.
 - Lieutenant N----’s verbal account of his encounter with the phantom of the inn.
 - John the Servant’s verbal account of his escape from the bandits
 - Volkert’s verbal account revealing his illusions.
 - Helen’s verbal account of her trouble with her desired suitor
 - Wolf’s verbal account of becoming a robber

⁶ Thomas Carlyle, ‘The State of German Literature’ in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, vol. VI, pt 1. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1869), p. 45.

The narrative is framed by Hellfried reading Herman's letter from the baron, which cites a letter from the lieutenant, which in turn describes an account from the old widow and another letter from a different baron. Thus the reader is distanced from the narrative in a form of *mise-en-abîme*. In effect, Herman provides documentation and evidence for his stories in the forms of two authorities: the aristocracy (the barons) and the military (the lieutenant). In doing so, the author attempts to give credibility to the overall narrative. However, this only succeeds in creating the labyrinthine, and often frustrating, structure to the novel. In this instance, there are seven stages that separate the reader from the titular character, Volkert (although the detail that Volkert and the necromancer are one and the same is not revealed until the third section). Herrman and Hellfried, Volkert and his accomplice, Wolf, are among the few characters who are given names, with most of the others being identified by their titles and the first letter of their names. This is another device to suggest that the story is true and the names of real-life personages have been concealed to protect their identity.

As we would expect for a translated text, *The Necromancer* is steeped in the traditions of the German *Schauerroman*, literally translated as a "shudder-novel". The tone is set from the opening sentence:

The hurricane was howling, the hailstones beating against windows, the hoarse croaking of the raven bidding adieu to autumn, and the weather-cock's dismal creaking joined with the mournful dirge of the solitary owl, when Herrman and Hellfried, who had been united by the strongest bonds of friendship from their youthful days, were seated by the cheerful fire side, hailing the approach of winter. (5)

However, the narrative *immediately* moves to a history of Hellfried and the melodrama is lost, although it is the weather which, three pages later, prevents the two friends from enjoying time outdoors and instead they recount their stories:

The hurricane was howling (as I said before) and the hail stones beating against the windows in so uncivil a manner, that the two friends could not think of going a hunting, but stuck close to the social fire side, spending thus the day amid amusing conversation; their stock of entertaining narratives seemed to be inexhaustible.

The gloominess of the weather gave their conversation a serious tone ... (8)

Hellfried begins to tell a tale about how he once stayed in an inn and his possessions begin to disappear one by one, but later a mysterious English lord returns some of his possessions. Seeking an explanation, Hellfried meets a stranger who promises him answers, but a series of apparently supernatural events follow, leaving Hellfried injured and bedridden for several months. Herrmann agrees that his friend's story might have been unbelievable, if a similar occurrence had not befallen him. Herrman explains that when travelling through the Black Forest, he and his companions discover that the castle in the village where they are staying is haunted.

The landlord explains that one of the former masters of the nearby castle was a “wicked and irreligious man, who found great delights in tormenting the poor peasants” who, when the lord hunted the villagers would “serve him instead of dogs; if any one was not alert enough then he would hunt them, ‘till he fell down expiring under the lashes of his whip”. When the master meets an untimely end he is buried in his garden but has no rest “At certain times of the year he is doomed to appear at the village, at twelve o’clock at night, and to make entry into the castle with his infernal crew, but as soon as the clock strikes one, he is plunged back again into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (26–27).

Seeking the source of the haunting, Herrman’s party become trapped in a dungeon, witnessing a ritual performed by the Necromancer. Herrman tells of his escape, but then tells Hellfried that he will collate letters and manuscripts of the remainder of his story, to be read once he has left.

It’s worth mentioning here that the tropes, such as the descriptions of the ruined castle are comparable to other, classic gothic literature at its best:

We approached and beheld the gothic remains of a half-decayed castle, the gate was open and we entered the fabric. The arched walls, overgrown with moss and ivy, echoed to the sound of our footsteps; a long narrow passage led to a spacious courtyard, paved with stones; now we espied a spiral stair-case of stone, and ascended it in dumb silence. A second long and narrow passage, which received a faint glimmering of light through several small windows, strongly guarded by iron bars, led us to a black door; the chilly damps of the long confined air rushed from the aperture when the Lieutenant had pushed it open; the apartment to which it led bore the gloomy appearance of a prison – the remains of half-decayed tapestry. Covered with cobwebs, gave the room a dark dreary appearance; pieces of broken furniture were scattered about on the floor, a lamp hung in the middle on an iron chain fastened to the arched ceiling. (28-29)

Baron R’s letter to Hermann cites a letter written by Lieutenant B who describes certain events in the Black Forest. After he loses a favourite servant in the Black Forest, the lieutenant meets an Austrian officer who tells the story of Volkert, who had been a sergeant in his garrison but who was “reported to perform many strange ... exploits” including channeling the spirit of a recently deceased man. The revelations – he forbade his daughter from marrying her fiancé because he is her brother – bring tragic consequences. Although Volkert attempts to distance himself from his occult dabblings, he is persuaded by several soldiers to summon a foreign baron who is feuding with a local officer – who describes this summoning in a later letter: ‘Methought I was violently dragged away from weeping friends, and, on a sudden beheld myself in the company of some known persons, who seemed to delight with my torments’ (69–70). The baron accuses the officer of ‘infernal torments by supernatural means’ and continues his challenge to a duel, whereas Volkert leaves, knowing that he risks being implicated. The duel proceeds: the local officer is injured, and the baron is arrested.

In an attempt to discover the source of this mystery, the Austrian and the lieutenant return to the castle in the Black Forest. They discover a secret passage and overhear the machinations of a band of banditti who, as in other gothic novels, exploit the peasants' superstitions and move themselves from an apparently haunted castle by means of a secret passage and by making the locals believe that the Wild Hunt was riding that night. Karl Kahlert's description of the Wild Hunt (*wilde Jadv*) was the direct influence for Matthew Lewis's section on this subject in *The Monk*. Knowing that the necromancer is in some way associated with the supernatural events, the Austrian and the lieutenant plan to storm the castle. This is the end of the second section and the end of the first volume.

In the third part of the story, the lieutenant and the Austrian surround the necromancer in a village inn and after witnessing a séance, they storm the room and capture the necromancer, who they realise is Volkert. He is subjected to a brutal interrogation, but is allowed to live. Some time later, the lieutenant is waylaid by some robbers and taken before a criminal court. One of these is Volkert who remembers the lieutenant's leniency, and sets him free (along with his servant who was captured earlier in the story and was forced to join the banditti). The lieutenant uses his servant's information to capture the criminals. When, two years later, the lieutenant arrives at a town, he discovers that the trial of Volkert is underway. Volkert explains to the lieutenant that he dabbled in the occult principally 'to drain the purses of the ... credulous' (142). His deceptions included the summoning of the fiancée's father and the duel, which had actually been staged. Volkert had been assisted by the innkeeper, Wolf, who colluded in numerous machinations which included the mysterious disappearance of Hellfried's possessions; any supernatural element was simply a cleverly staged event. Volkert faces his execution, 'consoled' that he will 'be made a warning example ... against impostors' like himself, while the story ends with Wolf giving a full confession and being sentenced to life imprisonment.

In the build-up of the narrative, *The Necromancer* embraces the gothic traditions: it has secret societies, ruined castles, vaults and caverns, robbers, skulls and mouldered bones and a black marble coffin. The descriptions of the apparent rituals are filled with dramatic description:

At length my conductor broke his mysterious silence; I heard his voice, but I could not understand what he was uttering; the words he was pronouncing seemed to belong to a foreign language. The lamp afforded but a faint light, and I could not well distinguish the objects around me. All was silent as the grave. My conductor whispered only now and then some mysterious words, drawing figures in the sand with his ebony wand.

Now I heard the clock strike twelve, with the last stroke the stranger began to turn himself round about, within the circle, with an astonishing velocity, pronouncing the Christian and surname of my deceased mother. I staggered back, thrilled with chilly horror. On a sudden I heard a noise under ground, like the distant roll of thunder. The stranger

pronounced the name of my mother a second time, with a more solemn and tremendous voice than at first. A flash of lightning hissed through the room, and the voice of thunder grew louder and louder beneath my feet. Now he pronounced the name of my mother a third time, still louder and more tremendous, At once the whole pleasure house appeared to be surrounded with fire. The ground began to shake under me, and I sunk down. The ghost of my mother hovered before my eyes, with a grim and ghastly look; a chilly sweat bedewed my face and my sense forsook me (20–21).

These descriptions occur fairly early in the narrative, and would have made the readers question whether what they witness is rational or supernatural. At the end, Volkert admits that his theatricals are created by ‘powder mixed with wine’, with ‘powder of calophony’ and with a ‘comrade’ who ‘acted the ghost’. However, Volkert’s artificial drama of raising the spirit is repeated later with terrifying effect in Matthew Lewis’s description of summoning Satan himself.

The *Necromancer* maintains the supernatural tone for the first two-thirds of the narrative (Sections 1 and 2, which constitute the first volume, run for just under 100 pages in the Valancourt edition; likewise the second volume is also around 100 pages). However, despite all the apparent supernatural trappings, *The Necromancer*, like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, concludes with a plausible explanation for all of the events. Everything has been ambiguity and deception. The explanation begins in the third volume: Volkert’s confession begins around 30 pages into it; he is executed around two-thirds of the way through and the remainder of the novel is the confession of the innkeeper who became the leader of the robbers. This section did not actually come from Kahlert’s German text, but has been taken from Friedrich Schiller’s *Der Verbrecher aus verlorner Ehre* (“The Criminal of Lost Honour”) written in 1786.

For the modern reader, the rationalist explanations for all supernatural elements are disappointing as the novel moves from apparently supernatural gothic to rational fiction. Like the *Mysteries of Udolpho*, important pieces of information, which the characters might have found out for themselves early in the novel if they had explored a little more, are revealed in Volkert’s confession the end and the explanations are an anti-climax.

But the ending – protracted as it is – is not the reason for reading the story. Todorov discusses how, within the gradation of the fantastic there are moments, those that are uncanny or fantastic uncanny, where what is initially presented as supernatural may receive a plausible explanation, even if the effect is unsettling. The thin line in the middle represents the reader’s *hesitation* where they are undecided whether the events with which they have been presented are supernatural or not.

Uncanny	Fantastic-uncanny	Fantastic- marvellous	Marvellous
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It is the reader's hesitation that sustains the feeling of fantastic elements of the narrative – this is the moment when the reader considers whether the events about which they are reading are supernatural or not. In *The Necromancer*, all the apparently supernatural elements are stage-managed trickery or manipulations of the locals' superstitions. I have already discussed the legend of the cruel master who is doomed to ride with the Wild Hunt as told by the devious innkeeper. And, of course, this is the kind of deception that Teutold's readers would have enjoyed. With a title such as *The Necromancer*, the audience knew what to expect – it is the kind of reputation that Isabella Thorpe perpetuates as she lists it amongst the 'horrid novels'. And thus, until the denouement, the reader expects the narrative to lead them to a gothic place. As Todorov argues "The text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as the world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation"⁷ The reader's hesitation is echoed by the fright and subsequent acceptance and denials of the characters – The apparition moved towards the table in awful silence ... Merciful heaven! How I was chilled with horror, when I beheld the features of my deceased mother!' ... 'It was a deluding dream' ... 'It was no dream!' (14–16).

Throughout, the reader is led towards what appears to be a 'probable and supernatural solution' and away from the improbable and rational solution.⁸ In addition, because the narrative maintains the illusion for so long, then the reader's *hesitation* is also sustained. When the supernatural events are explained rationally, which Todorov explains may well be through 'coincidence, tricks [and] illusions', so too, through the way that the narrative is constructed, 'it is *probable*' that the reader will experience the reactions to the fantastic. After all, the text arouses uncanny feelings in the reader, feelings of dread, horror and uncertainty.

Although the rational explanation may feel disappointing, H.P. Lovecraft reminds us that 'the creation of the fantastic is not situated within the work but in the reader's individual experience'.⁹ Consequently, a plausible ending not only gives the narrative an authority from the oral legend from which Kahlert allegedly collected his material, but it also sustains the moment of the fantastic that Todorov describes where the reader *hesitates* and considers whether the events are real or fictitious. Ultimately, it is the *journey* through narrative that sustains the excitement that Isabella and Catherine are seeking. Most of the descriptions work in relation to the feelings of terror created by the disorientation of the characters and the uncertainty of what will happen next. However, even once the narrative moves towards its rational explanation, there are still some truly horrific moments, most particularly the point where the doomed Volkert approaches the scaffold to be

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 33.

⁸ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 49.

⁹ Cited in Todorov, *The Fantastic*, p. 34.

executed and the narrator describes 'the stool stained with the smocking blood of his friend' (166). As is often the theme of these texts, the horror of these texts is not derived from the supernatural, but from the horrendous things that man can do, without the need for the devil to get involved.

One curious thing about this text's inclusion among the 'horrid' Northanger novels is that it is unclear why it would have appealed to Catherine and Isabella in the same way that they would have enjoyed *Udolpho*, *the Castle of Wolfenbach* and *Clermont*, for example. Women do not play a major part in the narrative: there is a moment when the 'spectre' of a woman appears and claims that she can give the characters wisdom and riches, but instead she takes his farthing and is not seen again until a body is discovered on the threshold. The woman had recently escaped from where Volkert had held her in captivity and had been forced to aid his 'illusions'. Certainly there is no female protagonist with whom Catherine and Isabella could identify.

As part of the study of gothic literature, *The Necromancer* presents us with some of the influences on other texts, such as *The Monk*. It may not have found the popularity of other classic Gothic tales and it has not yet found significant academic recognition. However, while the 'supernatural explained' is disappointing in the way it is presented, nevertheless, the novel has its own merits – most particularly the creation of the Gothic atmosphere and tension, the employment of superstitions, and some truly horrific moments – and it does not owe its survival to Isabella Thorpe's list of 'horrid novels'.

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