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Fontainville Abbey: William Dunlap's forgotten Gothic play, the first American playwright

Vanessa Cianconi[1]

Abstract

Fontainville Abbey (1794), by William Dunlap, inspired by Ann Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest* (1791), is a play that has been relegated to oblivion. Dunlap is considered an outstanding historian, as well as the first American playwright and the first Gothic writer in the country. Forgotten by his peers, Dunlap was also forgotten by the academy. The aim of this article is to show how Dunlap's melodramatic dramaturgy and its dialogue with American literature's seminal texts serve as a receptacle for memory and how this memory, in this case, the memory of the history of American melodramatic (Gothic?) theater, is transformed into phantasmagoria.

Keywords: William Dunlap. Fontainville Abbey. Gothic. Dramaturgy. Phantasmagoria.

Fontainville Abbey: la obra gótica olvidada de William Dunlap, el primer dramaturgo americano

Resumen

Fontainville Abbey (1794), de William Dunlap, inspirada en el *Romance of the Forest* (1791) de Ann Radcliffe, es una obra que ha quedado relegada al olvido. Dunlap está considerado un excelente historiador, además de ser el primer dramaturgo estadounidense y el primer escritor de literatura gótica del país. Olvidado por sus coetáneos, Dunlap también fue olvidado por la academia. El objetivo de este artículo es mostrar cómo la dramaturgia melodramática de Dunlap y su diálogo con los textos seminales de la literatura estadounidense sirven de receptáculo para la memoria y cómo esta memoria, en este caso la memoria de la historia del teatro melodramático (¿gótico?) estadounidense, se transforma en fantasmagoría.

Palabras clave: William Dunlap. Fontainville Abbey. Gótico. Dramaturgia. Fantasmagoría.

Fontainville Abbey: a peça gótica esquecida de William Dunlap, o primeiro dramaturgo estadunidense

Resumo

Fontainville Abbey (1794), de William Dunlap, inspirada em *Romance of the Forest* (1791), de Ann Radcliffe, é uma peça que ficou relegada ao esquecimento. Dunlap é considerado um exímio historiador, além de ser o primeiro dramaturgo estadunidense e o primeiro escritor de literatura gótica no país. Esquecido por seus pares, Dunlap também foi esquecido pela academia. O objetivo deste artigo é mostrar como a dramaturgia melodramática de Dunlap e seu dialogo com os textos seminais da literatura norte-americana servem como receptáculo de memória e como esta memória, neste caso, a memória da história do teatro melodramático (gótico?) estadunidense, se transforma em fantasmagoria.

Palavras-chave: William Dunlap. Fontainville Abbey. Gótico. Dramaturgia. Fantasmagoria.

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> "Certainly you must be very superstitious,"- said Mr. S-, "or such things could not interest you thus."
> "There are few people less so than I am," replied W-, "or I understand myself and the meaning of superstition very ill."
> "That is quite paradoxical."
> "It appears so, but so it is not. If I cannot explain this, take it as a mystery of the human mind."
> "If it were possible for me to believe the appearance of ghosts at all," replied Mr. S-, "it would certainly be the ghost of Hamlet; but I never can suppose such things; they are out of all reason and probability."
>
> (Ann Radcliffe)

The opening of the curtains in the United States and its phantasmagorical memory

Almost every ghost story has the same beginning, in oblivion. The case of *Fontainville Abbey*, a play written in 1794 by William Dunlap, was no different. My first encounter with Dunlap was through his most popular play, André: *A Tragedy in Five Acts* (1798), in a small collection edited by Professor Jeffrey H. Richards, *Early American Drama*, from Penguin Classics, originally published in 1997. The theater, in the construction of the United States as a country, followed, for obvious reasons, the British model. The American stage served the old Platonic purpose: to present the new republic with a moral behavior appropriate for a country still in its infancy. The question of example, or mimesis, should follow the precepts of the Greek philosopher in considering that only good behavior should be shared with the citizens, still in formation, of the new republican state. In other words, the stage should serve to instill principles of good citizenship.

When reading the chapter "Gothic American Drama," written by Heather S. Nathans for *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, I came across William Dunlap's name one more time. Known for co-founding the National Academy of Design in New York, Dunlap was also an accomplished historian and playwright of reasonable quality, according to critics of his time. Author of several plays for the New York stage in the 1700s, he also pioneered American theater historiography by writing *A History of the American Theater from its Origins to 1832*, published in the same year by J. & J. Harper, New

York. The vision of the American theater historian, in its origins, initially shows the importance of preserving theater history for American dramaturgy. Curiously, despite being of fundamental importance to theater historiography of that country, none of Dunlap's plays appear in the most important anthologies, such as *The Norton Anthology of Drama*, organized by J. Ellen Gainor, Stanton B. Garner, Jr., and Martin Puchner, published by W. W. Norton & Company, or in *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama*, edited by W. B. Worthen, published by Thomson Heinle. Tice L. Miller, professor emeritus of theater at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in the 1995 reissue of Dunlap's *A History of the American Theater from its Origins to 1832*, points to the playwright's pioneering effort in attempting to record American theater for the first time and make it a reference point for all subsequent stage histories in the country. According to Miller, in December of 1832, the *American Quarterly Review* published a lengthy review quoting extensively from the book, drawing attention to its moral tone and stating that Dunlap elevated the stage to make it subservient to the greater interests of society and morality.

Once again, we return to the Platonic issue of morality for a country on the rise. In an article for *American Literature* in 1968, Fred Moramarco sheds light on the debate by stating:

> [...] but also because they reflect some attitudes about the dramatic art which were an intrinsic part of the American consciousness in the late eighteenth century. Particularly, they suggest the degree to which moral considerations influenced and shaped American literary awareness in that period (Moramarco, 1968, p. 9).

Morality on stage has become a widely debated topic amongst theater historians in the United States.

Fontainville Abbey, which premiered at the John Street Theater in New York on February 16, 1795, was originally written in 1794, making it the first text written in the United States under a Gothic poetics. According to Nathans, the term Gothic served as a catalyst for audiences due to its popularity. Some critics argue that incorporating European Gothic creations into the American scene served a less scholarly purpose, but they seemed to forget that many of these productions brought complex agendas to bear by addressing issues of race, class, and gender

in the national imagination. At that time, the political stage was in formation in the United States, and Dunlap's text conversed extemporaneously with Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of a purely American Literature in *The American Scholar*, a speech delivered in 1837 at Harvard College. This article is about Dunlap's melodramatic dramaturgy and how the dialogue between American Literature's seminal texts serves as a receptacle for memory and how this memory, in this case, the memory of American melodramatic (Gothic?) theater's history, is transformed into phantasmagoria.

From Jacobean theater to melodrama

The definition of melodramatic changes over time. Jeffrey H. Richards, in the introduction to *Early American Plays* (1997), explains that, at the beginning of the 20th century, melodrama took on a new meaning, beyond that of a play with music. The new concept of melodrama featured plays with overly sentimental dialogue, stereotypical characters, moralistic plots, and no connection to "real life." In other words, it was vulgar theater of poor quality. Soon, it was relegated to oblivion. Jean-Marie Thomasseau says that the initial definition of melodrama, reproduced below, is a fallacy, as well as being reductive:

> The word melodrama conjures up images of an exaggerated, tearful drama, populated by verbose heroes spouting sentimental nonsense to unfortunate victims hunted down by despicable villains, in an implausible and rushed plot that defies all the rules of art and common sense, and which always ends with the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice[2] (Thomasseau, 1984, p. 3).

The researcher recalls that, even in the 18th century, melodrama served as a reaction against the noir theater imported from England by ordering

> the most daring attempts of revolutionary theater, promotes the cult of virtue and family, restores the sense of property and traditional values,

[2] Le mot mélodrame éveille en effet en nous l'idée d'un drame outrancier et larmoyant, peuplé de héros phraseurs débitant des fadaises sentimentales à de malheureuses victimes traquées par d'ignobles troisièmes couteaux, dans une action invraisemblable et précipitée qui bouleverse toutes les règles de l'art et du bon sens, et qui se termine toujours par le triomphe des bons sur les méchants, de la vertu sur le vice.

> and ultimately offers an aesthetic creation formalized according to very precise constraints[3] (Thomasseau, 1984, p. 6).

However, Thomasseau argues that the melodrama of the time featured characters in "exceptional situations"[4] (1984, p. 11) and was "so rich in tormented episodes and complicated machinations"[5] (1984, p. 12) that it is difficult to separate the origins of Gothic theater from those of the 18th-century melodrama. Tice L. Miller, in the introduction to Dunlap's book, considers that the playwright introduced many elements of melodrama to the New York stage, stating that "invented five years earlier by Guilbert de Pixerécourt in Paris, mélodrame differed little from Gothic drama, except for the use of music to enhance the dramatic effect" (Miller apud Pixerécourt, 1997, p. XVI). Bertrand Evans further states: "examination of the work shows it to be concocted of the very elements which we have found in the Gothic plays acted in England during the last thirty years of the eighteenth century" (Evans, 1947, p. 162). Perhaps is the systematic exploitation of pathetic effects the bridge between melodrama and Jacobean theater?

Theater history points to something very curious. Jacobean theater, which spanned the reign of King James I (1603-1625), is known for its darker themes, complex characters, and exploration of moral and political issues. The plays often featured Aristotelian heroes, narratives of revenge, witchcraft, and the supernatural. This drama, often characterized as decadent, presented morally reprehensible plots, with excessive violence and sexual perversions, and such values, or lack thereof, also became associated with the popular, the socially low, an easy way to attract an audience of dubious taste. Its most prominent characteristics: phantasmagoria, madness, metatheatricality, brutal murders, and morbidity raise questions about how so many scenes of horror and perversion were possible in a theater dominated by such rigid moral and aesthetic rules. It is undeniable, in a quick and immediate analysis, that violent crime is a key element

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[3] Elle apprécie en outre le mélodrame parce qu'il tempère et ordonne les tentatives les plus hardies du théâtre de la Révolution, pratique le culte de la vertu et de la famille, remet à l'honneur le sens de la propriété et des valeurs traditionnelles, et propose, en définitive, une création esthétique formalisée selon des contraintes très précises.

[4] [...] situations d'exception [...]

[5] [...] si riches d'épisodes tourmentés et de machinations compliquées [...]

of those plots, as they demonstrate a fascination with how the act of violence is carried out. In addition, they explore the lust and weaknesses that lead the individual to destruction and proclaim the courage with which the victim and villain face their own extinction. In Jacobean tragedies, violence serves as a reflection, albeit painful and difficult, indicating how violence contaminates the characters' morals, leading them to their final downfall.

The French Revolution (1789-1799) put an end to the sentimental culture of the wealthier classes. The Revolution redirected much of the emotional and moral fervor of sentimentalism into melodrama. While sentimental theater optimistically assumed that evil characters could reform, most melodramas — based on popular perceptions derived from the Revolution — divided humanity into good and evil types. Melodrama promoted the belief that evil people would always conspire against the innocent. English sentimental culture was based on the precepts of the philosophy of "moral sense." From John Locke (1632-1704) to Adam Smith (1723-1790), there was a belief that people could be molded from early childhood, so watching a morally appropriate play would also awaken in them the design of an ideal spectator with feelings and conduct that would respond to social pressures, ensuring that each person fulfilled their moral duty. For moral philosophers, morality was inherent and natural; doing the right thing derives from emotional sensitivity, not abstract reasons. However, Rousseau and many other Enlightenment thinkers could not explain how human nature, which was essentially good, turned to evil. Sentimentalism could not explain human villainousness, so only the Gothic could account for such a problem. At the center of the Gothic drama was the villain, usually a melancholic figure, who dominated female characters in captivity and fought ghosts from his past in a ruined castle. Bruce McConachie (2010, pp. 244–245), a renowned theater researcher, explains that "Gothicism offered no complete answer for the evil of such protagonists, but it did fix images of horror that fascinated audiences – all the more so because the spectators' sentimentalism could not explain the evil they witnessed".

Perhaps it is possible, then, to say that the seed of Gothic theater lies in Jacobean theater, and it is from the confluence of these Gothic and sentimental influences that melodrama as we know it today was constructed. There is no

shortage of evidence. Part of the appeal of melodrama was precisely the transposition of violence from behind the scenes to the stage. Moments of heightened violence have always been moments when art suffers the most and tries to fight against them. Thus, Peter Brooks, in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1995), recalls that melodrama is an expression with origins in German expressionism. For the American literary critic:

> Melodrama is a form for a post-sacred era, in which polarization and hyperdramatization of forces in conflict represent a need to locate and make evident, and operative those large choices of ways of being which we hold to be of overwhelming importance even though we cannot derive them from any transcendental system of belief (Brooks, 1995, p. x).

There seems to be a historical connection between all these moments. It is as if they are woven together, from their origins in Jacobean theater (called *noir* by Thomasseau) to Brooks' expressionist art, melodrama serves as a catalyst for the horrors of humanity's resurgence, brought back to the stage.

Fontainville Abbey, William Dunlap's melodrama

The search for William Dunlap's play was an adventure, remote, but it was. Any theater researcher who comes across brief mentions of a play that was only staged in 1795 and now, with the advent of the internet, finds no trace of its staging or its original text available on any website, would be, at the very least, intrigued. What happened to this play? And why? This is the story: the name William Dunlap returns a few hits on Google, many more on Jstor or Project Muse, international databases paid for by UERJ[6], but insistently, the references only report on his most famous play: *André*, written four years after *Fontainville Abbey*. I believe that, initially, I tried all the usual ways to obtain the play's text, but without success. In an online search at the New York Public Library, I discovered that the text was available for local research, which, unfortunately, would make it impossible for me to access it from Brazil. Indeed, the full text of the play existed, but it was not freely accessible on the internet, nor through the Library's online consultation. It

[6] Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, a State University in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where I teach American Literature.

was only through an email from the NYPL that I was able to obtain a PDF of the play, but it missed the play's epilogue. Through the search system of Yale University's Beinecke Library and the help of a librarian[7], I obtained the first edition of volume XXII of the Longworth Edition of *The English and American Stage*, where four original plays by Dunlap were published in 1807[8].

Very little has been written about William Dunlap. Robert H. Canary's "William Dunlap and the Search for an American Audience," published in the *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* in 1963, is one of the few easily accessible texts on the playwright. Canary's text reinforces the fact that Dunlap was forgotten because he focused his efforts on drama, a field neglected by literary historians. And that was probably not the only reason. His preference for Gothic themes distanced him from what critics considered quality literature. In general, critics considered Gothic literature to be a product of European decadence, a genre that did not lead to the production of genuinely native literature (Canary, 1963; Fisher & Argetsinger, 2023). Until the 1970s, there were no academic works of significance on his work. And today, we can say, there still aren't any. The search for an American audience, under scrutiny by Canary, has always been the playwright's holy grail. For the professor

> His *Fontainville Abbey* (1795)[9] "was not announced as the publication of an American, and we find in a publication of the day the following remark. 'Can it be possible that the author thinks that such an avowal would operate against it?' There can be no doubt that he did think so, and no doubt but that such an avowal at that time would have been enough to condemn the piece" (Canary, 1963, p. 46, 47).

Perhaps this could serve as an explanation for the disappearance of *Fontainville Abbey* from the stage and, consequently, from the literary world, but this is not the truth. Like so many other historians and theater theorists, Canary brings the question of the average theatergoer's taste to his text:

[7] Special thanks to Adrienne Sharpe-Weseman, Access Services Assistant at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

[8] There is a discrepancy between the dates in the PDF (text from 1807), the playwright's note (1806), and the printed editions (1807 and 1809). I chose to use 1807 because it was the first publication available.

[9] Dunlap's text was written in 1794. As the first staging took place in 1795, many researchers indicate this year as the year of publication.

> If this class of men did not support the theatre, "the manager must please the vulgar or shut his theatre". The common man of Dunlap's day was best lured by "shameful exhibitions of monsters and beasts, and other vulgar shows," by which the "state was degraded" (Canary, 1963, p. 47).

Dunlap believed, as early as the late 18th century, that the voice of the American people needed to be heard and that a purely American art form needed to exist. The playwright was not in denial about the state of art in his time, but, as an artist far ahead of his time, he anticipated much of what the Transcendentalists, especially what Ralph Waldo Emerson would reinforce, reminding the audience that the new Republicans did not need English patronage. The American stage raised issues as important as the English stage, even when inspired by a novel from the island. The first issue of the *Theatrical Register*[10] reflects the growing sense of nationalism that was developing in America. Thus, like his contemporary Noah Webster, Dunlap advocated greater separation between America and England and emphasized the need to develop native art forms. He realized that the American stage had been imitative and derivative, but he envisioned a new drama based on local culture.

Dunlap, in a short Preface to Volume XXII of *The English and American Stage* (1809), confesses that although he was inspired by works of European origin, he does not reproduce them on stage, but creates the possibility of an original American text, that is, he approaches the "heaven of invention", of original literature produced by an American:

> Those who are well read in this species of literature will easily discover whence I have borrowed, whom I have imitated, and what parts of my work may be considered as original in the strictest sense. To combine rather than to invent is the lot of modern dramatists. My readers may perhaps be tempted to lament that I have soared so often into the "heaven of invention" (Dunlap, 1809, p. b).

[10] In the 1790s there were several magazines publishing articles on American theater and the development of dramaturgy in general. Probably the most important of these was the *New York Magazine*, which published a series of reviews of the New York stage between November 1794 and April 1796. These reviews appeared under the title "The Theatrical Register," and although the magazine's policy of anonymity makes it impossible to know for sure who the author was, the available evidence suggests that they were written by William Dunlap. For a convincing summary of this evidence, see Mary Rives Bowman, "Dunlap and 'The Theatrical Register' of the New York Magazine," Studies in Philology, XXIV, 413-425 (July 1927).

Although Ann Radcliffe never wrote a play, her literary output inspired many playwrights around the world, especially in Germany.

> From *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) came two plays, Boaden's *Fontainville Forest* (C. G. March 1794), and an anonymous melodrama, *Fontainville Abbey; or, The Phantom of the Forest* (Surrey, March 1824) (Evans, 1947, p. 91).

Bertrand Evans ignores the existence of the 1794 adaptation by the American William Dunlap of the same novel by Radcliffe and nominates James Boaden as the first playwright to adapt a novel by the English writer. Boaden adapted *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) in the same year that Dunlap adapted the same Gothic novel. In a note to the reader dated 1806, Dunlap mentions: "Mr. Boaden's play of *Fontainville Forest* must have been performed about the same time in London" (Dunlap, 1807). It is worth remembering that James Boaden's theatrical adaptation is available online at the Internet Archive, while William Dunlap's has been forgotten. Evans further states that:

> It is impossible to measure the full extent of her influence. As we have found earlier, definite debts other than adaptations can rarely be established in Gothic plays (1947, p. 91).

And,

> Mr. Boaden had read the *Romance of the Forest* with great pleasure, and thought that he saw there the groundwork of a drama of more than usual effect. He admired, as everyone else did, the singular address by which Mrs. Radcliffe contrived to impress the mind with all the terrors of the ideal world; and the sportive resolution of all that had excited terror into very common natural appearances; indebted for their false aspect to circumstances, and the overstrained feelings of the characters./But, even in romance, it may be doubtful, whether there be not something ungenerous in thus playing upon poor timid human nature, and agonizing it with false terrors. The disappointment, I know, is always resented, and the labored explanation commonly deemed the flattest and most uninteresting part of the production. Perhaps, when the attention is once secured and the reason yielded, the passion for the marvelous had better remain unchecked; and an interest selected from the olden time be entirely subjected to its gothic machinery. However this may be in respect to romance, when the doubtful of the narrative is to be exhibited in the drama, the decision is a matter of necessity. While description only fixes the inconclusive dreams of the fancy, she may partake the dubious character of her inspirer [...] (1947, p. 91, 92).

Evans also brings up the issue of Radcliffe always having a rational explanation for everything that seemed supernatural in her novels. Boaden's

adaptation, on the other hand, removes the author's rational explanations from the plot. Radcliffe, in her novels, described scenes that seemed explainable only through the supernatural; however, in the end, everything was explained as having come from natural causes.

According to Evans:

> Boaden believed that "the passion for the marvelous had better remain unchecked." His decision, therefore, was to omit, not Mrs. Radcliffe's excesses, but her natural explanations of the supernatural. For the first time, a playwright undertook to out-Gothicize a novelist. The result was a play more elaborately Gothic in its furnishings than any previously acted (1947, p. 92).

Dunlap's adaptation follows the same logic as Boaden's adaptation; there is no explanation for the supernatural elements in the play. The aforementioned epilogue to Dunlap's play, entitled "In the Character of Cupid," reinforces this idea. Dunlap adds a twist to his text by presenting a parade of tragic Greek characters tributary to love stories who, when performing Cupid, affirm that "Shakespeare's best plays gain not their force from Love"[11] (1807, p. 211). By contemporizing the loss of the tragic muse in the light of comedy, "for Love and Hymen ever are her theme" (1807, p. 211), the playwright introduces yet another supernatural element to the play, since Cupid did not originally appear in his adaptation.

The difference between those two plays now lies on the puritanical values of self-righteousness that have always been ingrained into the American character. La Motte's regret stems from the simple fact that he still fears the devil, who was believed to exist in the forests of puritanical America. After all, the forest was the home of the Indians, hence, the demons. The demonic figure of the other has always served to terrify the puritans' righteousness. However, weren't they the ones who represented this conflict between good and evil?

Dunlap returns precisely to this typically American puritan past in his play, perhaps the basis for the creation of the Gothic imagination that is not only characteristic of that country's literature but, in my view, is exactly what represents a departure from the old European Gothic. The Indians described as savages by

[11] This epilogue can only be found in the printed versions from 1807 and 1809.

William Bradford in Of Plymouth Plantation were "cruel, barbarous, and most treacherous, being most furious in their rage, and merciless where they overcome; not being content only to kill, and take away life, but delight to torment men in the most bloody manner that may be [...]" (Bradford, 2007, p. 108, 109). The new world was described as a wild territory, inhabited by demons, ready to take the souls of the good Puritans. And that, metaphorically speaking, they did attack. The year 1692 saw one of the darkest moments in American history, when "a game of accusation, confession, denial, and death took the community, through an obscure struggle for political and social power, on a bizarre and deadly course when its citizens were seized by the conviction that the devil was on the loose in their homes"[12] (Cianconi, 2021, p. 514). The Salem witch hunt had begun. Defending the attack on the women of Salem, Cotton Mather wrote *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692) as a response to a world that was becoming increasingly secular. Matter saw the presence of the devil in Salem as a final campaign to undermine and destroy the Puritan community. The same community that was transforming the wilderness, inhabited by demons, into a new Eden, a garden where its inhabitants inaugurated the idea of the American dream. The forest, or wilderness, that surrounded Salem became the devil's territory.

It is not surprising that Dunlap's play, written only about 100 years after the attack on the alleged Salem witches, reflected the superstitious concerns of that era: "O, sir, I fear'd the phantoms of the place sure in such a place ill spirits dwell" (Dunlap, 1807, p. 156). Still in Peter's words:

> O, for pity, sir!
> We ne'er shall sleep in safety, never rest.
> For in such places murders oft were done,
> In times long past, and here the restless sprites /Walk night by night (Dunlap, 1807, p. 156).

And,

> [...] None have liv'd there lately. There owls and bats inhabit.
> What a noise the devils made! and, clattering round my head,
> They blew my light out with their flapping wings [...]
> (Dunlap, 1807, p. 162).

[12] se iniciou um jogo de acusação, confissão, negação e morte que tomou a comunidade, através de uma obscura luta por poder político e social, um rumo bizarro e mortal quando seus cidadãos foram tomados pela convicção de que o diabo estava à solta em seus lares.

The Puritan reference to the demons of the forest is clear in the servant's words. The abbey, lost in the middle of the forest, was inhabited only by nocturnal animals, which he compared to demons. These frightening animals, believed to be evil beings, hid in the dark.

In contrast, at the end of Act I, La Motte compares the same abbey to a castle, because there he would have freedom. The idea of the house on the hill, the new world as a paradise representing the new Republic and a possible synonym for freedom were also put on stage by Dunlap. For La Motte: "But this, compar'd with prisons, is a palace, A paradise—for here I've liberty" (Dunlap, 1807, p. 162). The ethos of the American freedom, from its roots, is repeated in Dunlap's play.

John Winthrop's sermon on the Arbella in 1630 directs what would become known as God's chosen people to this new paradise on earth, claiming that they are the example to be followed by the rest of the world, a "city on a hill"[13], and that the eyes of the world would be upon them. However, the dangers of the past still haunted Madame La Motte, which Peter assures her do not exist, as they say there are ghosts there:

> All about this abbey. We're safe enough,
> For no one will come near us. They say ghosts—
> (Dunlap, 1807, p. 168)

The images described by Adeline are truly terrifying. As Adeline attempts to investigate the crime committed inside the abbey, she encounters a past filled with horrors that somehow come back to haunt her. The past returns to haunt not only the young woman, but everyone in the abandoned abbey.

> Image of death! phantom of desolation!
> Nay, rather witness real of hellish crimes!
> Why sink I not? What braces firm my limbs?
> Undaunted innocence walks firmly on,
> Though death's deep shadows lengthen at each step.
> (Dunlap, 1807, p. 176).

[13] For wee must consider that wee shall be as a city upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon us. Soe that if we shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. Wee shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned into curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whither we are a goeing.

And,

> Exploring still another room,
> I found A worm-gnaw'd chest. Impell'd, I touch'd the top,
> But shrinking back, chill fear pass'd sudden o'er me.
> Again advancing, with a desperate force,
> I op'd it there my every fear confirming,
> A grinning skeleton my eyes saluted,
> Startling, I dropp'd the lid. The hollow sound
> Re-echo'd solemn from the neighbouring walls;
> All the apartment shook; and clattering round
> A shelf with rubbish fell and strew'd the floor.
> This parchment roll'd among it; having seiz'd [...]
> (Dunlap, 1807, p. 179, 180).

To which Madame La Motte replies: "O my dear child, what horrors thou'st disclos'd! And can it be this marquis—" (Dunlap, 1807, p. 180). Adeline intently reads the parchment she found, which tells stories of the abbey's horrific past. The marquis's brother was imprisoned in the tower by his own brother and allegedly was murdered there. Adeline sees the "grinning" skeleton and, at first, does not know who it is or where it came from, but soon grasps its meaning. "Image of death! Phantom of desolation!" exclaims the girl.

The last act of the play begins with La Motte entering Adeline's room with a dagger in his hand to complete what the marquis ordered him to do, - to kill Adeline in a gruesome way:

> Ha! if I longer stand I shall relent.
> It must be done. Now, fiends of hell, assist me!
> Life, life's the prize—fortune, life, liberty! (Dunlap, 1809, p. 190).

Signing the devil's black book was something the Puritans believed they could do. The forest, almost enchanted by evil powers, was a character itself in American history. The demonic nature of the Puritan forest was what could give La Motte the strength to finally end with Adeline's life. However, the dualities imbued in the supposed righteousness of that people chosen by God served as a form of self-control. La Motte's integrity brings up, once again, the question of American self-righteousness, the citizen who cannot escape his own control. Despite the utopian tone of *What is an American?* (1782), Crèvecouer saw the North American as the "new man": individualistic, self-confident, pragmatic, hardworking, a solid man of

the earth, free to pursue his self-defined goals and, in the process, reject the ideological zeal that had ravaged Europe for centuries. Thus, La Motte probably sees himself as this new man, master of himself, capable of saying no to the temptations inflicted by the devil.

> Marquis:
> What change is this? Whence is this new found courage?
> La Motte:
> By nature upright, vice a coward made me;
> Resolving to be virtuous, I am brave (Dunlap, 1809, p. 194).

The early history of the United States aligned the possibilities of a new narrative of god's chosen people who, even though haunted by demons, were capable of defeating them. La Motte recounts that he lived in a dream, like a sleepwalker in a horrible delirium. Interestingly, Brockden Brown[14], in "Somnambulism: A Fragment" (1797), tells the story of a crime committed by someone who, like La Motte would do, to protect his beloved, kills her while he sleeps. Somnambulism, still mysterious, serves as an excuse for a heinous crime.

> O no, Hortensia! I've been in a dream,
> A walking sleep, a horrible delirium (Dunlap, 1809, p. 195).

Like Boaden, Dunlap removes from the play anything that could make the supernatural plausible, since anything without a logical explanation is beyond natural causes. What was given to Boaden's adaptation as Gothic, in Dunlap, at least in my view, is the representation of this new man in a world that is being built, the self-righteous man, always capable of acting in a morally correct manner. The idea of being for the new colonist in relation to society came from contradictions in the Protestant Reformation and the intellectual tradition of the colony. In that conjecture, the initial Puritan thinking, which included strong support for the community, is transformed so that it is once again expressed with a characteristic emphasis on the development of this being as the result of what the new American citizen should become. Since the Puritans believed they had

[14] Charles Brockden Brown and William Dunlap were close friends, which led the playwright to write his colleague's biography in 1815, entitled The Life of Charles Brockden Brown. The influence was probably mutual.

discovered the truth, it was their duty to eradicate error before it spread[15] (Cianconi, 2014, p. 34). As previously mentioned, La Motte, in a way, becomes the representation of the righteousness of this new man by challenging the power of the devil: the Puritans' number one enemy. The divine superpower of self-control, stemming from the girl's innocence, is what prevents the fugitive from killing her, as La Motte explains below:

> This poignard then I brandish'd, high uplift,
> And Terror, worst of fiends, urg'd on the stroke;
> But Innocence hung hovering o'er thy couch,
> And dash'd the dagger from my powerless arm:
> Thy angel looks then rescued me from hell,
> And I resolv'd to give my life for thine (Dunlap, 1809, p. 198).

In *As bruxas como desculpa* (2014), I argue that the imaginary idea of a New World led the 15th-century man to construct many legends and, consequently, to the desire to find that longed-for paradise. The idea of an "earthly paradise" located at the "end of the east" at the end of the medieval era was added to another fundamental myth: Sir Thomas More's myth of *Utopia*, inaugurated in 1516. Similarly, in the Puritan imagination, the New World was analogous to the Paradise Lost, and the wilderness functioned as a kind of testing ground, where the struggle between good and evil was met. For Roderick Nash (1982), the Bible characterizes the wilderness as the cursed land, the environment of evil, a kind of hell on earth. The colonizers of New England, immersed in the Old Testament ideology, believed that it was their god's command to transform the wilderness into a paradise similar to Eden. Soon, their imaginative minds recreated the ever-present image of the devil terrorizing their lives in the unknown vastness of the New World.

La Motte's final move of leaving the forest, or the wilderness, as it represented a lawless locus where anything was possible, that including the supernatural, is to go precisely in the direction of protection against the demon that lurks there.

> I fear the marquis's return. Let's fly
> To Fontainville, upon the forest's border,

[15] This paved the way for the idea of the "Manifest Destiny," a term coined by John O'Sullivan in 1845. The belief in the "Manifest Destiny" was often associated with religious ideas, asserting that Americans were destined to spread civilization and democracy throughout the world.

And put ourselves within the law's protection (Dunlap, 1809, p. 198).

At the end of Act V, before La Motte is acquitted of the crimes he committed, it becomes clear to the reader that "to prove that converts true to virtue's law" (Dunlap, 1809, p. 208) is the puritanical issue that serves as the backdrop for the final resolution of Dunlap's play. By converting the savages into believers in their god, they cease to be the representation of evil in the forest and become virtuous in the eyes of their angry god[16], who could cause harm to those who did not please him. Puritanical righteousness, once again, is placed under scrutiny. Here, the New World became the city on a hill. Winthrop's divine beings had to follow the will of what they considered divine to become examples to the world, as they were aware of Satan's constant vigilance and the need to build communities that embodied their god's divine will.

The American voice on the stage of the 1700s: a conclusion

Marvin Carlson, in *The Haunted Stages* (2003), asserts that every play is necessarily haunted. For him, all theater brings a spectral presence of those who return, not necessarily to stay, but in an instrumentalized way, drags the past into the present and remains in the now to remember something that once was. Throughout literature history, the ghostly function serves as the work of a memory that cannot be forgotten. Probably because it is an archive of memory or one that raises the need for memory, theater is the art form that comes closest to history. It is important to remember that, for the professor, there is a direct relationship between the past and the theater as a receptacle of memory.

> The close association of the theater with the evocation of the past, the histories and the legends of the culture uncannily restored to a mysterious half-life here, has made the theater in the minds of many the art most closely related to memory and the theater building itself a kind of memory machine (Carlson, 2003, p. 142).

[16] See Sinners in the *Hands of an Angry God*, written by Jonathan Edwards in 1741. Edwards deliberately compromises Puritanism with the terror of modern man, the terror of insecurity. God was no longer bound by any promise, neither metaphysical nor legal. Curiously, the same god who was supposed to make them feel safe probably terrified them with the fear of condemnation, which, according to Edwards, would come "slowly and, most likely, quickly" upon many of the faithful.

Carlson reflects on the relationship between the past and the theater through an evocation of the past. His choice of vocabulary immediately recalls Freud's concept of the uncanny or unfamiliar, but at the same time, providing a certain comfort. The theater building itself confronts us with the ghost of our previous visits to the theater and how much we underestimate it. The building as a memory machine transforms the United States into a haunted house.

By calling William Dunlap's play Gothic, the idea of the country as a (haunted?) house is reinforced. *Fontainville Abbey* (1794) does not inaugurate American theater per se, but haunted by the seminal texts of American history, from its founding as an English colony, reverberating what appeared to be the cultural choices of the island, to the proclamation of its independence, Dunlap's play carries the phantom of a history founded on Puritan concerns, which probably inaugurated the Gothic poetics in that country. To rediscover Dunlap is to look at a new way of narrating the United States, as Ralph Waldo Emerson would claim some forty years later. Thus, Marvin Carlson, in affirming the existence of a direct relationship between the ruins of the past, the anxieties about a hopeless future, and the theater as a receptacle of memory, amalgamates the thread that weaves theater history, melodrama, and the Gothic in the United States of America.

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