



abjection A psychological process of ‘casting off’, identified and theorized by the Bulgarian-French psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva as the basis of horror and revulsion, and so subsequently adopted by literary critics in attempted explanation of the imaginative effects of *horror stories, *Gothic fiction, and narratives of monstrosity. In her book *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (1980; translated as *Powers of Horror*, 1982), Kristeva proposes that we are especially disgusted by anything that is ambiguously located at the physical boundaries of the self, neither clearly inside nor outside us: thus bodily excretions and secretions excite nausea, and so too, in this theory, do babies and indeed mothers. Such unsettling items are described as **object** or **objected** insofar as we attempt to maintain our stable sense of self by imaginatively expelling them or projecting them in the form of monstrous aliens, ghosts, or bogeys.

abridgement A shorter version of an otherwise lengthy written work; also the process of selective cutting that results in such an **abridged** *edition. Many classic literary works have appeared in abridged versions marketed to children or language students, for example, or in an attempt to make them digestible to the impatience of modern readers: Edward Gibbon’s six-volume *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), for instance, was reduced to a one-volume abridgement by D. M. Low in 1960.

absurd, the A term derived from the *existentialism of Albert Camus, and often applied to the modern sense of human purposelessness in a universe without meaning or value. Many 20th-century writers of prose fiction stressed the absurd nature of human existence: notable instances are the novels and stories of Franz Kafka, in which the characters face alarmingly incomprehensible predicaments. The critic Martin Esslin coined the phrase **theatre of the absurd** in 1961 to refer to a number of dramatists of the 1950s (led by Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco) whose works evoke the absurd by abandoning logical form, character, and dialogue together with realistic illusion. The classic work

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of **absurdist** theatre is Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952), which revives some of the conventions of clowning and *farce to represent the impossibility of purposeful action and the paralysis of human aspiration. Other dramatists associated with the theatre of the absurd include Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Václav Havel. For a fuller account, consult Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (2006).

academic drama (school drama) A dramatic tradition which arose from the *Renaissance, in which the works of Plautus, Terence, and other ancient dramatists were performed in schools and colleges, at first in Latin but later also in *vernacular adaptations composed by schoolmasters under the influence of *humanism. This tradition produced the earliest English comedies, notably *Ralph Roister Doister* (c.1552) by the schoolmaster Nicholas Udall.

acatalectic Possessing the full number of syllables in the final *foot (of a metrical verse line); not *catalectic. *Noun: acatalexis.*

accent The emphasis placed upon a syllable in pronunciation. The term is often used as a synonym for *stress, although some theorists prefer to use 'stress' only for metrical accent. Three kinds of accent may be distinguished, according to the factor that accounts for each: etymological accent (or 'word accent') is the emphasis normally given to a syllable according to the word's derivation or *morphology; rhetorical accent (or 'sense accent') is allocated according to the relative importance of the word in the context of a sentence or question; metrical accent (or stress) follows a recurrent pattern of stresses in a verse line (*see* METRE). Where metrical accent overrides etymological or rhetorical accent, as it often does in *ballads and songs (Coleridge: 'in a far coun-tree'), the effect is known as a **wrenched accent**. *See also* ICTUS, RECESSIVE ACCENT.

accentual verse Verse in which the *metre is based on counting only the number of stressed syllables in a line, and in which the number of unstressed syllables in the line may therefore vary. Most verse in Germanic languages (including Old English) is accentual, and much English poetry of later periods has been written in accentual verse, especially in the popular tradition of songs, *ballads, nursery rhymes, and hymns. The predominant English metrical system in the 'high' literary tradition since Chaucer, however, has been that of **accentual-syllabic** verse, in which both stressed and unstressed syllables are

counted: thus an iambic *pentameter should normally have five stresses distributed among its ten syllables (or, with a *feminine ending, eleven syllables). *See also* ALLITERATIVE METRE.

acephalous [a-sef-äl-üs] The Greek word for ‘headless’, applied to a metrical verse line that lacks the first syllable expected according to regular *metre; e.g. an iambic *pentameter missing the first unstressed syllable, as sometimes in Chaucer:

Twenty bookès, clad in blak or reed

Noun: **acephalexis**. *See also* TRUNCATION.

Acmeism A short-lived (c.1911–21) but significant movement in early 20th-century Russian poetry, aiming for precision and clarity in opposition to the alleged vagueness of the preceding *Symbolist movement. Its leaders, Nikolai Gumilev and Sergei Gorodetsky, founded an Acmeist ‘Poets’ Guild’ in 1911, and propounded its principles in the magazine *Apollon*. The principal poetic luminaries of this school were Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) and Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938). For a fuller account, consult Justin Doherty, *The Acmeist Movement in Russian Poetry* (1995).

acrostic A poem in which the initial letters of each line can be read down the page to spell either an alphabet, a name (often that of the author, a patron, or a loved one), or some other concealed message. Variant forms of acrostic may use middle letters or final letters of lines or, in prose acrostics, initial letters of sentences or paragraphs.

act A major division in the action of a play, comprising one or more *scenes. A break between acts often coincides with a point at which the action is interrupted before resuming at a later fictional time, or at which it moves to a different venue.

actant In the *narratology of A. J. Greimas, one of six basic categories of fictional role common to all stories. The actants are paired in *binary opposition: Subject/Object, Sender/Receiver, Helper/Opponent. A character (or *acteur*) is an individualized manifestation of one or more actants; but an actant may be realized in a non-human creature (e.g. a dragon as Opponent) or inanimate object (e.g. magic sword as Helper, or Holy Grail as Object), or in more than one *acteur*. *Adjective:* **actantial**.

adage [ad-ij] Another word for a *proverb or *maxim.

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adaptation The process of making a work of art upon the basis of elements provided by an earlier work in a different, usually literary, medium; also the secondary work thus produced. Literary works have been **adapted** in many forms: fairy tales as ballets, plays as operas, novels as stage plays (see **DRAMATIZATION**), stage plays as novels or short stories. Since the early 20th century, new entertainment media have encouraged the adaptation of plays and novels as films or as radio (and later, television) dramas, and conversely the ‘novelization’ of film or television screenplays into books. Distinctions are commonly drawn between ‘faithful’ adaptations, in which the distinctive elements (characters, settings, plot events, dialogue) of the original work are preserved as far as the new medium allows, and ‘free’ adaptations, sometimes called ‘versions’ or ‘interpretations’, in which significant elements of the original work are omitted or replaced by wholly new material. For an introductory survey, consult Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005).

adventure story A loose but commonly accepted term for a kind of prose *narrative addressed for the most part to boys, in which a hero or group of heroes engages in exotic and perilous exploration. It is a masculinized variety of *romance, one in which the erotic and religious dimensions common to other types are subordinated to or completely replaced by an emphasis on vigorous outdoor activity and the practical arts of survival amid unexpected dangers, along with a cultivation of such virtues as courage and loyalty. Marvellous events may be witnessed, but usually within a context provided by modern scientific knowledge. The genre flourished in the later 19th century, its most influential master being the French writer Jules Verne, whose series of eighteen *Voyages extraordinaires* include *Voyage au centre de la terre* (*Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, 1864) and *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, 1870). Popular examples in English included H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1886), Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912), and P. C. Wren’s *Beau Geste* (1924). Partial overlapping with *science fiction, as in Verne’s case, or with the *thriller and other popular forms, is sometimes found.

adynaton A *figure of speech related to *hyperbole that emphasizes the inexpressibility of some thing, idea, or feeling, either by stating that words cannot describe it, or by comparing it with something (e.g. the heavens, the oceans) the dimensions of which cannot be grasped.

An example from Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* is 'Language was not powerful enough to describe the infant phenomenon.' It is often a rhetorical index of the *sublime.

Aestheticism The doctrine or disposition that regards beauty as an end in itself, and attempts to preserve the arts from subordination to moral, *didactic, or political purposes. The term is often used synonymously with the **Aesthetic Movement**, a literary and artistic tendency of the late 19th century which may be understood as a further phase of *Romanticism in reaction against *philistine bourgeois values of practical efficiency and morality. Aestheticism found theoretical support in the *aesthetics of Immanuel Kant and other German philosophers who separated the sense of beauty from practical interests. Elaborated by Théophile Gautier in 1835 as a principle of artistic independence, aestheticism was adopted in France by Baudelaire, Flaubert, and the *Symbolists, and in England by Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and several poets of the 1890s, under the slogan *l'art pour l'art* ('*art for art's sake'). Wilde and other devotees of pure beauty—like the artists Whistler and Beardsley—were sometimes known as **aesthetes**. See also DECADENCE, *FIN DE SIÈCLE*. For a fuller account, consult Leon Chai, *Aestheticism* (1990).

aesthetics (esthetics) Philosophical investigation into the nature of beauty and the perception of beauty, especially in the arts; the theory of art or of artistic taste. *Adjective: aesthetic or esthetic*.

affective Pertaining to emotional effects or dispositions (known in psychology as 'affects'). Affective criticism or **affectivism** evaluates literary works in terms of the feelings they arouse in audiences or readers (see CATHARSIS). It was condemned in an important essay by W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley (in *The Verbal Icon*, 1954) as the **affective fallacy**, since in the view of these *New Critics such affective evaluation confused the literary work's objective qualities with its subjective results. The American critic Stanley Fish has given the name **affective stylistics** to his form of *reader-response criticism. See also INTENTIONAL FALLACY.

afflatus A Latin term for poetic inspiration.

agitprop [aj-it-prop] A Russian abbreviation of 'agitation and propaganda', applied to the campaign of cultural and political propaganda mounted in the years after the 1917 revolution. The term is

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sometimes applied to the simple form of *didactic drama which the campaign employed, and which influenced the *epic theatre of Piscator and Brecht in Germany.

agon [a-gohn] (plural **agones** [ă-goh-niz]) The contest or dispute between two characters which forms a major part of the action in the Greek *Old Comedy of Aristophanes, e.g. the debate between Aeschylus and Euripides in his play *The Frogs* (405 BCE). The term is sometimes extended to formal debates in Greek tragedies, and may be further applied to later forms such as the *psychomachy. In Harold Bloom's theory of the *anxiety of influence, it is applied to the struggle between the new poet and the precursor. *Adjective: agonistic.*

alazon The *stock character of the braggart in ancient Greek comedies. The same comic type reappears in later dramatic traditions under new names: *see* BRAGGADOCIO.

alba *See* AUBADE.

Alcaics A Greek verse form using a four-line *stanza in which the first two lines have eleven syllables each, the third nine, and the fourth ten. The *metre, predominantly *dactylic, was used frequently by the Roman poet Horace, and later by some Italian and German poets, but its *quantitative basis makes it difficult to adapt into English—although Tennyson and Clough attempted English Alcaics, and Peter Reading has experimented with the form in *Ukulele Music* (1985) and other works.

aleatory [ayl-eer-tri] (**aleatoric**) Dependent upon chance. Aleatory writing involves an element of randomness either in composition, as in *automatic writing and the *cut-up, or in the reader's selection and ordering of written fragments, as in B. S. Johnson's novel *The Unfortunates* (1969), a box of 27 separately bound printed sections of which 25 can be read in any order.

Alexandrianism The works and styles of the Alexandrian school of Greek poets in the *Hellenistic age (323–31 BCE), which included Callimachus, Apollonius Rhodius, and Theocritus. The Alexandrian style was marked by elaborate artificiality, obscure mythological *allusion, and eroticism. It influenced Catullus and other Roman poets.

alexandrine A verse line of twelve syllables adopted by poets since the 16th century as the standard verse form of French poetry, especially dramatic and narrative. It was first used in 12th-century **chansons de*

geste, and probably takes its name from its use in Lambert le Tort's *Roman d'Alexandre* (c.1200). The division of the line into two groups of six syllables, divided by a *caesura, was established in the age of Racine, but later challenged by Victor Hugo and other 19th-century poets, who preferred three groups of four. The English alexandrine is an iambic *hexameter (and thus has six stresses, whereas the French line usually has four), and is found rarely except as the final line in the *Spenserian stanza, as in Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes':

She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

A rare example of extended alexandrine composition in English is Robert Browning's poem *Fifine at the Fair* (1872).

alienation effect (A-effect) The usual English translation of the German *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effekt*, a major principle of Bertolt Brecht's theory of *epic theatre. It is a dramatic effect aimed at encouraging an attitude of critical detachment in the audience, rather than a passive submission to realistic illusion; and is achieved by a variety of means, from allowing the audience to smoke and drink to interrupting the play's action with songs, sudden scene changes, and switches of role. Actors are also encouraged to distance themselves from their characters rather than identify with them; ironic commentary by a narrator adds to this 'estrangement'. By reminding the audience of the performance's artificial nature, Brecht hoped to stimulate a rational view of history as a changeable human creation rather than as a fated process to be accepted passively. Despite this theory, audiences still identify emotionally with the characters in *Mother Courage* (1941) and Brecht's other plays. The theory was derived partly from the *Russian Formalists' concept of *defamiliarization.

allegory A story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning. The principal technique of allegory is *personification, whereby abstract qualities are given human shape—as in public statues of Liberty or Justice. An allegory may be conceived as a *metaphor that is extended into a structured system. In written narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or a chain of events external to the tale: each character and episode in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), for example, embodies an idea within a pre-existing Puritan doctrine of salvation. Allegorical

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thinking permeated the Christian literature of the Middle Ages, flourishing in the *morality plays and in the *dream visions of Dante and Langland. Some later allegorists like Dryden and Orwell used allegory as a method of *satire; their hidden meanings are political rather than religious. In the medieval discipline of biblical *exegesis, allegory became an important method of interpretation, a habit of seeking correspondences between different realms of meaning (e.g. physical and spiritual) or between the Old Testament and the New (see TYPOLOGY). It can be argued that modern critical interpretation continues this allegorizing tradition. *See also* ANAGOGICAL, EMBLEM, EXEMPLUM, FABLE, PARABLE, PSYCHOMACHY, SYMBOL. For a fuller account, consult Jon Whitman, *Allegory* (1987).

alliteration (head rhyme; initial rhyme) The repetition of the same sounds—usually initial consonants of words or of stressed syllables—in any sequence of neighbouring words: ‘Landscape-lover, lord of language’ (Tennyson). Now an optional and incidental decorative effect in verse or prose, it was once a required element in the poetry of Germanic languages (including Old English and Old Norse) and in Celtic verse (where alliterated sounds could regularly be placed in positions other than the beginning of a word or syllable). Such poetry, in which alliteration rather than *rhyme is the chief principle of repetition, is known as **alliterative verse**; its rules also allow a vowel sound to **alliterate** with any other vowel. *See also* ALLITERATIVE METRE, ALLITERATIVE REVIVAL, ASSONANCE, CONSONANCE.

alliterative metre The distinctive verse form of Old Germanic poetry, including Old English. It employed a long line divided by a *caesura into two balanced half-lines, each with a given number of stressed syllables (usually two) and a variable number of unstressed syllables. These half-lines are linked by *alliteration between both (sometimes one) of the stressed syllables in the first half and the first (and sometimes the second) stressed syllable in the second half. In Old English, the lines were normally unrhymed and not organized in *stanzas, although some works of the later Middle English *alliterative revival used both stanzaic patterns and rhyme. This *metre was the standard form of verse in English until the 11th century, and was still important in the 14th, but declined under the influence of French *syllabic verse. W. H. Auden revived its use in *The Age of Anxiety* (1948).

These lines from the 14th-century poem *Piers Plowman* illustrate the alliterative metre:

Al for love of oure Lord livede wel straitte,
In hope for to have hevене-riche blisse.

See also ACCENTUAL VERSE.

alliterative revival A term covering the group of late 14th-century English poems written in an *alliterative metre similar to that of Old English verse but less regular (notably in Langland's *Piers Plowman*) and sometimes—as in the anonymous *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—using rhyme and elaborate *stanza structure. This group may represent more a continuation than a revival of the alliterative tradition. For a fuller account, consult Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (1977).

allusion An indirect or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, the nature and relevance of which is not explained by the writer but relies on the reader's familiarity with what is thus mentioned. The technique of allusion is an economical means of calling upon the history or the literary tradition that author and reader are assumed to share, although some poets (notably Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot) allude to areas of quite specialized knowledge. In his poem 'The Statues' (1939)—

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side
What stalked through the Post Office?

—W. B. Yeats **alludes** both to the hero of Celtic legend (Cuchulain) and to the new historical hero (Patrick Pearse) of the 1916 Easter Rising, in which the revolutionaries captured the Dublin Post Office. In addition to such *topical* allusions to recent events, Yeats often uses *personal* allusions to aspects of his own life and circle of friends. Other kinds of allusion include the *imitative* (as in *parody), and the *structural*, in which one work reminds us of the structure of another (as Joyce's *Ulysses* refers to Homer's *Odyssey*). Topical allusion is especially important in *satire. *Adjective: allusive.* For a fuller account, consult Joseph Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader* (1998).

alterity A *Latin term meaning 'otherness', and commonly found in philosophy and literary theory since the 1970s. It often arises in analyses of relations between the self and the other (person), in discussions of encounters between different cultures, and in

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observations upon the difficulty of understanding the art and thought of past ages.

ambiguity Openness to different interpretations; or an instance in which some use of language may be understood in diverse ways. Sometimes known as ‘plurisignation’ or ‘multiple meaning’, ambiguity became a central concept in the interpretation of poetry after William Empson, in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), defended it as a source of poetic richness rather than a fault of imprecision. Ambiguities in everyday speech are usually resolved by their context, but isolated statements (‘they are hunting dogs’) or very compressed phrases like book titles (*Scouting for Boys*) and newspaper headlines (GENERALS FLY BACK TO FRONT) can remain ambiguous. The verbal compression and uncertain context of much poetry often produce ambiguity: in the first line of Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’,

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,

‘still’ may mean ‘even yet’ or ‘immobile’, or both. The simplest kind of ambiguity is achieved by the use of *homophones in the *pun. On a larger scale, a character (e.g. Hamlet, notoriously) or an entire story may display ambiguity. See also DOUBLE ENTENDRE, EQUIVOQUE, MULTI-ACCENTUALITY, POLYSEMY.

American Renaissance The name sometimes given to a flourishing of distinctively American literature in the period before the Civil War. As described by F. O. Matthiessen in his influential critical work *American Renaissance* (1941), this renaissance is represented by the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, H. D. Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. Its major works are Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (1855). The American Renaissance may be regarded as a delayed manifestation of *Romanticism, especially in Emerson’s philosophy of *Transcendentalism.

amoebean verses [a-mě-bee-ăn] A poetic form in which two characters chant alternate lines, *couplets, or *stanzas, in competition or debate with one another. This form is found in the *pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, and was imitated by Spenser in his *Shepherd’s Calendar* (1579); it is similar to the **débat*, and sometimes resembles *stichomythia. See also FLYTING.

amphibrach [am-fib-rak] A metrical *foot consisting of one stressed syllable between two unstressed syllables, as in the word ‘confession’