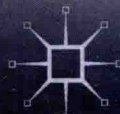


**HAUNTING
MODERNITY AND
THE GOTHIC
PRESENCE
IN BRITISH
MODERNIST
LITERATURE**

Daniel Darvay



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Haunting Modernity and the Gothic Presence in British Modernist Literature

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PREFACE

Expanding key Gothic conventions, modernist writers employ them to show not their symptomatic capacity or destructive face but their generative potential. They use this genre as if they were fully conscious of its artifice, and yet in ways that suggest a willingness to participate as both subjects and objects of its sleight of hand. In this study I am concerned with the ways late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British writers transform the artifice of Gothic ruins into building blocks for a distinctively modernist architecture of questions, concerns, images, and arguments. Since these issues are both diverse and wide-ranging, creating a single overarching definition of the modernist Gothic becomes increasingly problematic if not outright impossible to propose, and searching for such overarching perspective, as if it really existed, is not necessarily the most rewarding route to take while delving into this topic. This might also explain why the major book-length collections on this topic—*Gothic Modernisms* (2001), edited by Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace; and *Gothic and Modernism: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity* (2008), edited by John Paul Riquelme—offer multiple viewpoints as stimulus for further inquiry rather than pronounce a decisive last word on a fully delimited subject.

I focus on authors who share a certain degree of consistency and coherence when it comes to expressing the various roles the Gothic assumes in the early twentieth century, but authors whose work illustrates nonetheless the great depth and diversity these very roles entail. For example, while the generative functions of the Gothic enable modernist writers to use this genre as a way of addressing specific forms of crisis, they do so in very different ways and to widely different purposes. For Virginia Woolf, the crisis

is mainly epistemological, as she seeks to evince inscrutable, often terrifying mechanisms of the psyche through the fantastic nature of vision she identifies with artistic perception, photography, and abstract art. Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster both recognize the crucial role of the Gothic in what they see as a much-needed redefinition of Englishness, but they are motivated by highly individualized sets of assumptions. Frustrated with the xenophobic milieu of pre-War English society, Conrad uses the Gothicized image of Russia to justify his ethnic Polish identity as fundamentally Western. Forster, on the other hand, proposes a quite different geopolitical segmentation of Europe: the redemption of post-Victorian, rural England through the image of Italy as both a Gothic dungeon and a tourist attraction. Last but not the least, the dark aspects of attraction help Oscar Wilde and D.H. Lawrence to lend an aura of power and authenticity to sexual identity articulated as homosexuality through Catholic imagery for Wilde, and as blood consciousness through a Gothic topology of electricity for Lawrence. Although each chapter is more or less self-sufficient, taken together, they add to our understanding of the complex interaction between modernism and the Gothic tradition, both of which are revealed in the process to be prismatic categories that easily lend themselves to multiple shapes and configurations.

My aim is to throw light on some of these configurations with a view to illuminating some of the blind spots of Gothic criticism and to expanding the range of cultural material that falls under the banner of this tradition. I share Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall's frustration with the extant body of "Gothic Criticism [that] has done little to define the nature of Gothic fiction except by the broadest kinds of negation."¹ My approach to this genre is largely consistent with their observation that Gothic narrative, instead of reflecting "anti-Enlightenment rebellion,"² actually "witnesses the birth of modernity."³ At the same time, I seek to draw out the implications of this definition in relation to several distinct strands running through the history of ideas from the early modern period to the first decades of the twentieth century.

While this book is not cast as a historical survey, my inquiry into the Gothic aspects of modernism will take me back to early exemplars of the genre thematically rooted in the English Reformation as well as to some of its significant Victorian transformations. In addition, the eclectic nature of the modern Gothic makes it equally at home in nineteenth-century medico-scientific discourse and the cultural history of electricity, in the social history of the art museum, in the politics of ethnicity and empire,

and in the late nineteenth-century ritualist controversy within the Church of England. Other notable contributing precursor genres include not only eighteenth-century Gothic romance, a body of works that is quite heterogeneous in itself, but also anti-Catholic novels of the nineteenth century, mid-Victorian sensation fiction, and fin-de-siècle spy narratives. One way to launch the discussion on how all these versions of the Gothic eventually get plugged into modernism is to focus on their shared preoccupation with the idea of the enemy within, regardless of whether that enemy is made out to be psychological, sexual, domestic, religious, or political.

As far as the English Gothic is concerned, the prototypical model of the enemy within is to be found in the supernatural resurrection of the Catholic past in seventeenth-century stories of sacrilege, which propose the unsettling possibility that the very stones of one's country house might easily come alive to punish descendants of families that had been guilty of impropriation at the time of the Reformation. To create a foundation for my understanding of the modern Gothic, I discuss the early modern contexts in which sacrilege narratives came to bear extended meanings in politics, society, and culture. The detour taken for the charting of these contexts actually brings us closer to the early twentieth century, and it helps identify as Gothic key elements of modernism that on the face of it would seem to be only tangentially related to the very tradition that gave them birth.

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NOTES

1. Chris Baldick, and Robert Mighall, "Gothic Criticism," in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 273.
2. *Ibid.*, 273.
3. *Ibid.*, 278.

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Introduction: Catholicism, Sacrilege, and the Modern Gothic

SACRILEGE AND THE ORIGINS OF GOTHIC

On a first reading, Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" appears to be a country-house poem, a popular seventeenth-century genre in which the poet praises the owner through the description of the house. The poem was written between 1650 and 1653, during the period of Marvell's employment as tutor to the daughter of the retired general Thomas Fairfax. Its overarching theme rests on the identification of the moral integrity and elevated social status of Lord Fairfax with the providential history and grand architecture of Nun Appleton House. However, in trying to incorporate the history of Appleton into his encomium, Marvell quickly found himself entangled in issues of dispossession, questionable heritage, and family drama—the very elements that would come to typify the Gothic genre at the height of its popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. A Cistercian priory dissolved in 1539, Nun Appleton was acquired by the Fairfax family in 1542 as a direct effect of the Dissolution of the Monasteries decreed by Henry VIII in 1536 and gradually implemented over the course of the next five years. By Marvell's time, the fate of the new Appleton House, which was built in part from the stones cannibalized from the original priory, was a politically charged subject as a result of a rich, century-long tradition of literature on sacrilege and impropriation of church assets. To stress the legitimacy of his patron as rightful owner, Marvell invented a providential version of the history of Appleton based on the idea that the functional shift from nunnery to

country house meant a divinely sanctioned removal of corrupt Catholic nuns from a building that could finally live up to its reputation as symbol of purity, integrity, and justice. By grafting this idea onto a dramatized account of ancestry laced with suspicious familial relations, Marvell created in the story of the early sixteenth-century heiress Isabel Thwaites, Thomas Fairfax's great-great-grandmother, a precursor to the Gothic.

According to Marvell's version of the story, which takes up about two dozen stanzas and forms the linchpin of his anti-Catholic stance, Isabel Thwaites is beguiled by "the subtle nuns" (94) and is later confined within Appleton by her aunt and guardian, the Prioress, only to be rescued by her heroic future husband William Fairfax. Here, as in later Gothic fiction, the convent and its inhabitants, like Catholic religion in general, stand for moral corruption and sexual depravity. The dubious origins of Nun Appleton are established early on through a metaphorical description that pokes fun at alleged bastard offspring of licentious nuns: "A nunnery first gave it birth/ (For virgin buildings oft brought forth)" (85-6). The nuns' promiscuity, combined with the acquired craftiness stimulated by their religious order, achieves a twofold purpose in the poem: it discredits monastic existence while also turning the nuns into extraordinary enemies, who can easily seduce with their "smooth tongue" (200) the "blooming virgin Thwaites" (90). Taken from the subtle nun's treacherous speech, which is replete with sexual connotations, the following lines illustrate the rhetorical adroitness with which Marvell carries out this twofold purpose:

Here we, in shining armor white,
Like virgin Amazons do fight.
And our chaste lamps we hourly trim,
Lest the great bridegroom find them dim. (105-8)

By blending the mythological figure of the Amazon with the biblical reference to the "Parable of the Ten Virgins," Marvell creates the powerful image of the vigilant virgin warrior presumably engaged in fighting sin and temptation in an attempt to maintain chastity. The allure of such an image would, in Marvell's view, help inveigle unsuspecting victims like Isabel Thwaites. Yet the image of the nuns waiting for the great bridegroom and savior Christ is also self-contradictory and sexually charged in multiple ways—one of which is that the need for the artificial trimming of the lamps undermines their natural chastity and subverts the entire metaphor to suggest obscene self-indulgence rather than abstinence. When William

Fairfax appears in the mythical role of Protestant deliverer, he saves Isabel from the tyranny of a Cistercian order that is crumbling, at least in part, under the weight of its own corruption.

Marvell reinforces this idea by deliberately reversing the religious assumptions underlying traditional narratives of sacrilege that dominated social, political, and religious life in mid-seventeenth-century England.¹ In doing so, he anticipates the Gothic genre's overriding concern with themes of ancestry, usurpation, and retribution.² The extension of the moral depravity of the inhabitants to the physical disintegration of Nun Appleton enables Marvell to voice contemptuous conjectures about the past and complacent forebodings about the future:

Were there but, when this house was made,
One stone that a just hand had laid,
It must have fallen on her head
Who first thee from thy faith mislead.

.....
But sure those buildings last not long,
Founded by folly, kept by wrong. (209–12, 217–18)

As a way of fulfilling this ominous prediction, and in a final attempt to secure the providential fate of Appleton House, the poem circumvents the over two decades separating Thwaites's real-life marriage with Fairfax (1518) and the Dissolution period itself (1536–1541), essentially fusing the two affairs into a single divinely ordained event:

The wasting cloister with the rest
Was in one instant dispossessed.
At the demolishing, this seat
To Fairfax fell as by escheat [i.e. reversion],

.....
Though many a nun there made her vow,
'Twas no religious house till now. (271–74, 279–80)

To become a genuine house of God, Nun Appleton first has to toss out the unworthy residents infecting its walls before it can welcome the rightful owners, who will restore it to its due glory and prosperity. What might seem to be stolen property is lawful restitution; what might look like desecration is secular justice; and, finally, what might appear to be heresy is in fact true Christianity. Thus is the Henrician Dissolution recuperated at

once as a preemptive attack on potential Catholic retribution, as the true legacy of the English Reformation, and as the cornerstone of modernity purged from the superstitious past.

Marvell's focus on sacrilege is rooted in the pervasive religious turmoil of his time. The general fear of divine revenge for religious dispossession was at the center of social and political controversy at the mid-seventeenth century, and it reflected England's uneasy relationship with its Catholic past.³ The Civil Wars (1642–1651), which ended with the victory of the Parliamentarians over the Royalists, led to the execution of Charles I, the exile of Charles II, and the establishment of the Commonwealth and Protectorate under the military rule of Oliver Cromwell. In terms of religious politics, this victory also meant the abolition of episcopacy in England and the formal authorization in 1646 of the sale of church lands that had been considered to be God's property entrusted for safekeeping to bishops and archbishops by virtue of apostolic succession. Narratives of sacrilege such as Joseph Mede's *Diatribae* (1642–52), Lancelot Andrewes's *Sacrilege a Snare* (1646), and most significantly perhaps, Sir Henry Spelman's *The History and Fate of Sacrilege* (written in 1632 but not published until 1698) described the various misfortunes and calamities that befell those who dared to defraud God's property. The surge of publications on sacrilege during this period suggests that many of these narratives were mobilized in support of the Royalist cause, which sought to maintain the king's authority over the Church through bishops.⁴ As Thomas Fairfax had fought with Cromwell against Charles I, Marvell showed support for his Protestant patron by turning the traditional sacrilege narrative against itself, and also against a king who labeled "the alienation of Church lands" as "a sin of the highest sacrilege."⁵ However, unlike Marvell's idea of instant dispossession, which evoked a teleological version of history as uninterrupted progress in the wake of a sudden break with the past, seventeenth-century disputes over church property suggest the picture of a nation still very much entangled in its Catholic genealogy, caught on the cusp between sin and crime, between religious superstition and secular law.

If we are to understand the many faces of Gothic fiction, and, among them, the genre's constant preoccupation with infinitely dubious family lineage and the social and political implications emerging from it, we must examine the period in history when England began using the idea of a doubtful past to invent a forward-looking present. The period in question, broadly conceived, coincides with the years of convoluted church

reforms, including the Henrician (1530–1538), Edwardian (1547–1553), and Elizabethan (1559–1563) Reformations.⁶ However, its effects extend well into Marvell's time, as indicated by the persistence of the sacrilege motif in his work, and by the religious turmoil characterizing mid- and late seventeenth-century England. A focus on this time period, albeit often combined with a Catholic Mediterranean setting, is also a commonplace of eighteenth-century Gothic writing. Emblematic Gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797) feature remote Continental settings, and Horace Walpole's inaugural *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is allegedly based on an Italian manuscript printed in 1529 and discovered "in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England."⁷ Sketching the intellectual background and the political legacy of the English Reformation enables us to see why Gothic authors chose to select this particular period in history as the main object of spatial, temporal, and aesthetic removal from everyday life, and how this removal would come to redefine nonetheless their conception of that very life. Doing so also helps explain the plasticity of the Gothic, as it continues to adapt to changing conceptions of everyday life in the hands of modernist writers. Marvell's revision of traditional stories of sacrilege to fit the worldly needs of Thomas Fairfax is a prime example of such generic adaptability.

Long before the Enlightenment created a philosophical context for the introduction into Gothic fiction of animated artworks as anachronistic markers of a purported age of credulity, sacrilege narratives had advanced the idea of supernatural punishment by way of church monuments that come alive in order to ruin the guilty and inhibit the gullible. These narratives are ghost stories rooted in the memory of the Dissolution of the Monasteries, one of England's greatest officially authorized acts of iconoclasm, and perhaps the most exclusively targeted architectural destruction in the history of modern England.⁸ Between 1536 and 1541, by the order of Henry VIII, Catholic churches and religious houses were systematically divested of precious ornaments, defaced, pulled down, sold, or converted—all in the best interests of the court. Lead was stripped from the roofs, boards plucked up, and stones repurposed to repair and build royal buildings and private houses. The shift of ownership meant that for centuries to come successive generations of English nobility would periodically become frustrated with the idea that the country houses they inhabited were remnants of a disavowed past destined to haunt them. The history of the Fairfax family is a case in point. But by the end of the seventeenth

century, Spelman's *The History and Fate of Sacrilege* grew into a comprehensive catalog of similar chronicles supported by additional examples from as early as the time of the Old Testament.

According to Spelman, the particular accidents and misfortunes dogging the numerous families guilty of impropriation should invariably be ascribed to divine vengeance. In some cases, the repercussions are long drawn out, such as when entire families are slowly consumed by internal feud and are eventually driven to bankruptcy, madness, murder, and extinction. In other cases, however, God shows indulgence by swiftly acting through the brute force of material reality that the wise should take to be omens of more pervasive tragedies to come. Toxic lead poisons some of the usurpers; church bells sink the ships that attempt to haul them away; church steeples topple over onto houses, crushing those within; monastic buildings cast their sacred stones and walls on the defilers. Marvell and Thomas Fairfax might have been familiar with Spelman's account of Edward Paston, who, as the third-generation owner of Bingham Priory, changed his original plans for building his stately new house "upon or near the priory," and instead ended up building it at Appleton (just a few miles from Nun Appleton House) after "a piece of wall fell upon a workman, and slew him."⁹

The imaginative recuperation of material punishment for sacrilege exhibited in Marvell's poem would come to play a prominent role in the birth of the Gothic novel. Traditionally considered to be the founding text of Gothic fiction, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) puts on display for an eighteenth-century audience what is essentially a fictitious story of sacrilege. As some of the unfortunate descendants in Spelman's catalog, the protagonist of Walpole's novel is forced to suffer the devastating consequences in the form of divine retribution of his ancestor's usurpation. Manfred, the actual lord of Otranto, is pursued by the curse of Alfonso the Good, the rightful owner, who had been unlawfully dispossessed by Manfred's grandfather Ricardo. Like those offenders on Spelman's list that are sensible enough to atone for their crimes before too late, Ricardo is quick to make reparations in hopes of appeasing the wrath of God. However, even though he makes a "vow to St. Nicholas to found a church and two convents" (CO, 105), the saint can only delay but not deflect Alfonso's imprecation that "the Castle and Lordship of Otranto should pass from the present family whenever the real owner should be grown too large to inhabit the castle" (CO, 27). It takes more than three generations for the curse to be fulfilled, and for Ricardo's descendants to

realize that even claims to nonecclesiastical property are subject to religious approval.

In agreement with sacrilege narratives, while also setting a generic trend for future Gothic plots, Walpole makes his protagonist go through the utterly terrifying physical ordeal that cuts Manfred's ties with his family and offers him the prospect of imagining himself as a discrete subject who internalizes the supernatural through self-scrutiny and feelings of remorse. For Manfred, the family is an infinite source of distress. It is not sufficient that he is about to lose his property due to the sins of his grandfather. In addition, fate ordains that he bear the responsibility for bringing about in effect the death of his own son, and thus for the extinction of his own lineage.

As his son Conrad is crushed to death by a giant helmet falling down from the sky, Manfred is still unwilling to interpret the tragedy as the literal fulfillment of Alfonso's prophecy. Instead, to compound his problems, he insists on marrying his deceased son's fiancée Isabella, after accusing his wife Hippolita of failing to supply him with a male heir. Finally, his stubborn refusal to acknowledge the will of God leads him to stab his own daughter, as he mistakes her for Isabella, whom he is trying by any means to prevent from marrying Theodore, the true heir of Otranto. Walpole's story follows the classic structure of sacrilege narratives: once the crime is committed, retribution is inevitable, so it is only a matter of time before the guilty parties are punished and made to repent. In Manfred's case, renunciation of wealth, a murdered son, and filicide are the brute material conditions of atonement, the price he is made to pay for the introspection that prompts him to finally yield and conclude, "I question not the will of heaven—poverty and prayer must fill up the woeful space, until Manfred shall be summoned to Ricardo" (CO, 105).

As in Marvell's poem, Walpole's approach to sacrilege rests on the contradistinction between the invocation of an antiquated Catholic mysticism rooted in brute material punishment, on the one hand, and the making of a progressive Protestant reason circumscribed by imaginative abstraction, on the other. In showing how the two are in fact inextricably conjoined, the Gothic expands Marvell's co-optation of sacrilege and reveals itself a genre indebted to inherently self-contradictory aspects of the English Reformation. We can see these aspects come to life in Reformation debates gravitating toward the frustrating realization that the internalized, individualized conception of conscience and discipline is an imaginary construct inscribed within the very realm of false idols, corrupt doctrines, and