

Gothic

Second Edition

Fred Botting

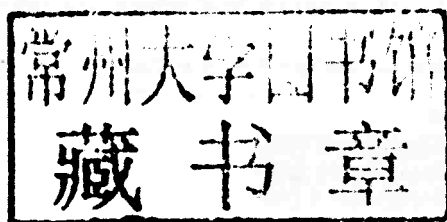


The New Critical Idiom

GOTHIC

Second edition

Fred Botting



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THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

GOthic

Already one of the definitive books covering the popular field of gothic studies, this extensively revised new edition offers a wealth of new material on the topic: two new chapters plot the genre's major developments through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, identifying key texts and contexts, and charting crucial relationships with cognate genres in literature, popular culture and media (from modernism to romance, to cinema, horror, SF and postmodernism). A new introduction offers a precise theoretical and historical overview of the main patterns, effects and significance of gothic fiction and its criticism.

This book contains additional material on American gothic, women's writing and film, and is updated in relation to media and technology with further discussion of stage sensations and photography as well as engaging with all major texts and criticism since initial publication in 1995.

With the added benefit of series features such as an annotated further reading section, this remains the ideal guide to the gothic.

Fred Botting is Professor of English Literature and executive member of the London Graduate School at Kingston University, UK. He has written extensively on gothic fictions, and on theory, film and cultural forms. His current research projects include work on fiction and film dealing with figures of horror – zombies in particular – and on spectrality.

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

The New Critical Idiom is an invaluable series of introductory guides to today's critical terminology. Each book:

- provides a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term;
- offers an original and distinctive overview by a leading literary and cultural critic;
- relates the term to the larger field of cultural representation.

With a strong emphasis on clarity, lively debate and the widest possible breadth of examples, *The New Critical Idiom* is an indispensable approach to key topics in literary studies.

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people – too many to mention by name – have contributed over the years to the development of both editions of this book. At the start of research, members of the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory and the Department of English at Cardiff University offered great support and advice. Later, colleagues, friends and students at various institutions – the universities of Lancaster, Keele and Kingston in particular – provided numerous suggestions and insights, as did a host of researchers involved in the friendly meetings of the International Gothic Association. Staff and postgraduates at Stirling University, too, were particularly helpful in the process of rethinking and revising the book. One person, however, should be thanked by name: John Drakakis. Not only has he overseen the production of both editions, but he has done so with the kind of critical attention and care that is rare these days.

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1

INTRODUCTION NEGATIVE AESTHETICS

Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside, or as the open area of a building to its enclosed spaces. Rather, their relationship takes the forms of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust. Perhaps it is like a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies, which lights up the night from the inside, from top to bottom, and yet owes to the dark the stark clarity of its manifestation, its harrowing and poised singularity; the flash loses itself in this space it marks with its sovereignty and becomes silent now that it has given a name to obscurity.

(Michel Foucault, 'Preface to Transgression', p. 35)

DARKNESS

A negative aesthetics informs gothic texts. First produced in the middle of the eighteenth century, a period when the Enlightenment was establishing itself as the dominant way of ordering

the world, gothic tales were set in the Middle, or 'Dark', Ages. Darkness – an absence of the light associated with sense, security and knowledge – characterises the looks, moods, atmospheres and connotations of the genre. Gothic texts are, overtly but ambiguously, not rational, depicting disturbances of sanity and security, from superstitious belief in ghosts and demons, displays of uncontrolled passion, violent emotion or flights of fancy to portrayals of perversion and obsession. Moreover, if knowledge is associated with rational procedures of enquiry and understanding based on natural, empirical reality, then gothic styles disturb the borders of knowing and conjure up obscure otherworldly phenomena or the 'dark arts', alchemical, arcane and occult forms normally characterised as delusion, apparition, deception. Not tied to a natural order of things as defined by realism, gothic flights of imagination suggest supernatural possibility, mystery, magic, wonder and monstrosity.

Gothic texts are not good in moral, aesthetic or social terms. Their concern is with vice: protagonists are selfish or evil; adventures involve decadence or crime. Their effects, aesthetically and socially, are also replete with a range of negative features: not beautiful, they display no harmony or proportion. Ill-formed, obscure, ugly, gloomy and utterly antipathetic to effects of love, admiration or gentle delight, gothic texts register revulsion, abhorrence, fear, disgust and terror. Invoking ideas and objects of displeasure, gothic texts were invariably considered to be of little artistic merit, crude, formulaic productions for vulgar, uncultivated tastes. They were also considered anti-social in content and function, failing to encourage the acquisition of virtuous attitudes and corrupting readers' powers of discrimination with idle fantasies, seducing them from paths of filial obedience, respect, prudence, modesty and social duty. Definitively negative, gothic fictions appear distinctly anti-modern in their use of the customs, costumes and codes of chivalry associated with feudal power: the gallantry and romanticism of knights, ladies and martial honour also evoked an era of barbarism, ignorance, tyranny and superstition.

Yet there is a paradox in the appeal to the past. Though 'gothic' calls up feudal associations, medieval styles of architecture and a notoriously fierce Germanic tribe, or grouping of tribes

('the Goths'), all antithetical to models of order established by the Roman empire, the invocation occurs in the middle of an eighteenth century in which the promotion of reason, science, commerce and bourgeois values was in the ascendancy and in the process of transforming patterns of knowledge (empiricism rather than religion), production (commerce and manufacture rather than agriculture), social organisation (city rather than country) and political power (representative democracy rather than monarchy). The past with which gothic writing engages and which it constructs is shaped by the changing times in which it is composed: the definition of Enlightenment and reason, it seems, requires carefully constructed antitheses, the obscurity of figures of feudal darkness and barbarism providing the negative against which it can assume positive value.

The interplay of light and dark, positive and negative, is evident in the conventions, settings, characters, devices and effects specific to gothic texts. Historical settings allow a movement from and back to a rational present: more than a flight of nostalgic retrospection or an escape from the dullness of a present without chivalry, magic or adventure, the movement does not long for terrifying and arbitrary aristocratic power, religious superstition or supernatural events but juxtaposes terrors of the negative with an order authorised by reason and morality. Romance, imagined in the darkness of history, encourages and assuages threats to propriety, domesticity and social duty. The movement remains sensitive to other times and places and thus retains traces of instability where further disorientations, ambivalence and dislocations can arise. Returns of the past, in an opposing direction, involve the very characteristics – superstition, tyranny, violence – supposedly banished by the light of reason. In more psychological renderings, ghostly recurrences manifest an unease and instability in the imagined unity of self, home or society, hauntings that suggest loss or guilt or threat. Generations are subject to the crossing of temporal lines: an ancestor's crime threatens a family's status; immature desires upset social mores; an old misdeed tarnishes paternal respectability. In seeing one time and its values cross into another, both periods are disturbed. The dispatching of unwanted ideas and attitudes into an imagined past does not guarantee they have been

overcome. Savage and primitive energies, archaic and immature, link different historical and individual ages, marking out the other side, the unconscious, as it were, of both cultural and personal development.

Physical locations and settings manifest disturbance and ambivalence in spatial terms as movements between inside and out: the castles, abbeys and ruins at the centre of many early gothic fictions, while recalling feudal times and power, transfer these institutions to zones outside a rational culture in which, in actuality (aristocracy, monarchy, church), they still exist. Not only places of defence, but also of incarceration and power, they are located in isolated spots, areas beyond reason, law and civilised authority, where there is no protection from terror or persecution and where, inside, creaking doors, dark corridors and dank dungeons stimulate irrational fancies and fears. Power, property and paternal lineage combine in the image of the castle. But these sites are often tempered with decay: deserted, haunted and in ruins, like the feudal institutions they incarnate, their hold on and in the present, like their spectral tenants and aristocratic owners, apparently on the wane. With another staple edifice – the isolated house or mansion – there is a similar conjunction of family line, social status and physical property. Conjoining ideas of home and prison, protection and fear, old buildings in gothic fiction are never secure or free from shadows, disorientation or danger. Nature is also divided between domesticated and dangerous forms. Landscapes stress isolation and wilderness, evoking vulnerability, exposure and insecurity. Mountains are craggy, inaccessible and intimidating; forests shadowy, impenetrable; moors windswept, bleak and cold. Nature appears hostile, untamed and threatening: again, darkness, obscurity and barely contained malevolent energy reinforce atmospheres of disorientation and fear.

The sense of power and persecution beyond reason or morality is played out in the two central figures of the narratives: a young female heroine and an older male villain. The latter, beyond law, reason or social restraint gives free reign to cruel, selfish desires and ambitions and violent moods and intentions. His object, the body or wealth of the heroine, registers danger in a series of

frights and flights. Prey to imagined as well as actual dangers, quick to lose rational control and give way, or faint, in fear of bandits, murderers, ghosts where there may be none, heroines enjoy an unusual, if daunting, degree of independence, often drawn by misunderstanding and curiosity into situations that lead to a sense of powerlessness and persecution. Her vulnerability and his violence play out the lawlessness and insecurity manifested in settings and landscapes. Their distance from social and familial bonds is simultaneously the locus of adventurous, romantic independence and physical danger: she may be active but is alone, with nowhere to turn, without protection and security; he, outside social scrutiny, is able to act out all manner of unacceptable wishes unchecked. Both heroines and villains, whether the latter are gentlemen, scientists, outcasts or criminals, are placed in situations where the suspension of normal rules leads to tension and ambivalence: to be independent of social and domestic regulation (also double-faceted like castles or monasteries) can be pleasurable, dangerous, exciting and frightening.

Movements across time and place are double (desired and feared; frightening and comforting) because they are bound up with figures and conventions – mirrors, portraits, ghosts, hallucinations, doubles, misread manuscripts – that link a sense of reality (or unreality) to structures of fiction: tensions between perception and misperception, understanding and misreading, fancy and realism, provide the condition and problem of gothic texts. The devices and techniques employed heighten ambivalence and ambiguity, suggesting opposed ways of understanding events as supernatural occurrences or venally materialistic plots, imagined or actual. Sudden encounters with moving statues or portraits, with skeletons, reproductions of corpses, bloody daggers or bleeding nuns may cause the direct frights and shocks that lead to screams, flight or fainting, or make the heart beat faster, the skin crawl or hair rise, but the macabre repertoire of terror is designed to have disturbing effects on characters' – and readers' – imaginations, prolonging the interplay of anticipation and apprehension: the darkness and decay of ruins, the flickering of candles, the drafts that cause curtains to move, the creaks and echoes of underground chambers all conspire to stimulate

superstitious fancy, mystery and suspense. Fragments of letters, torn testimonies, mouldy manuscripts, bloody daggers, intimate dreadful secrets; mysterious doors and hidden passageways encourage desire as well as trepidation: despite the encroachment of horror, a wish to know presses curious heroines forward. The use of obscurity, the interplay of light and shadow, and the partial visibility of objects, in semi-darkness, through veils, or behind screens, has a similar effect on the imagination: denying a clearly visible and safe picture of the world, disorientation elicits anxiety or extends a stimulating or scary sense of mystery and the unknown. Narratives operate in the same way to delimit the scope of reason and knowledge by framing events from partial perspectives: the rattling of chains is attributed to the presence of a ghost, not the suffering of a long-term prisoner. Reasons and explanations, if they come at all, arrive late and only after a range of apprehensive or expectant projections have been elicited: fear and anxiety about the balance of human faculties and borders of everyday life are provoked in the process of making what is perceived, imagined, real or true both shadowy and threatening. Indeed, sense, in terms of what is perceived and what is understood, is suspended, often to the point of total loss – of consciousness, self-control or sanity.

Knowledge and understanding do not constitute the primary aim of gothic texts: what counts is the production of affects and emotions, often extreme and negative: fear, anxiety, terror, horror, disgust and revulsion are staple emotional responses. Less intense, but still negative, affects instilled by bleak landscapes include feelings of melancholic gloom, loneliness and loss. These quieter emotions are punctuated by bursts of destructive rage or anger, cruel cries of villainous satisfaction or expostulations of awe and wonder. The negative aspect of intense emotions is not simply a sign of the loss or absence of rational judgement. Reason is overwhelmed by feeling and passion, and signalled as a horrified, paralysing encounter with something unspeakable, an obscure presence too great to comprehend evoking an excess of feeling or registering an experience too intense for words. Negative aesthetics, in these terms, is double: deficiency, the absence, exclusion or negation of knowledge, facts or things; and excess, an

overflow of words, feelings, ideas, imagining. Its countervailing and contradictory force leaves sense without easy reconciliation to a single and familiar framework. One might lose reason and the clearly demarcated sense of self and world it sustains, but the loss might also entail the excitement of shedding the restraints of reason and being invigorated by passion.

NEGATIVITY

Aesthetic theories, the idea of the sublime notably, emerging in the eighteenth century and informing the revival of gothic and romantic cultural forms, offer ways to grasp the appeal of particular types of artistic and affective negativity. In *The Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790), the German philosopher Immanuel Kant described the sublime as a 'negative pleasure' (p. 91). In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), the English philosopher, Edmund Burke, also discussed the apparently contradictory effects of the sublime in terms of the way it combined delight and horror, pleasure and terror. In contrast to beauty, which formed the standard and ideal of artistic creation and involved a pleasing balance between harmonious natural forms and subjective feelings of love and tenderness, the sublime resulted from a disrupted sense of order and a discombobulation of reason, imagination and feeling: intensities, magnitudes and violent contrasts overwhelmed mental faculties – evoking terror, awe, wonder – and threatened the eclipse of any subjective unity. In the face of too much feeling or imagination, however, a sense of self (in Burke) or higher rational power (in Kant) is recovered in the move from an experience of threatened limitations to a reinvigorated idea of mental capacities: a shocking or thrilling experience glimpsing the loss, absence and negation of subjectivity, objects and order is turned round. It is a dynamic process that involves both loss and recovery. Since objects are kept at an aesthetic distance, at least when it comes to terror (horror signals an excessive proximity and indistinctness of negative, overpowering things), and located in the mind, the experience is intense but subjective: the imaginary quality of the sublime allows for both terror and pleasure.

A negative aspect to pleasure is also noted by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Two notions Freud proposes in 'The Uncanny' (1919) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) are illuminating. The former, which examines belief in animated objects, ghosts, fear of premature burial and notions of the double, manifests the breakdown of a sense of subjective unity in the face of unconscious and external disturbances: what seemed familiar and comfortable is threatened by the return of known but hidden fears, ideas and wishes, disclosing how much a sense of self depends on early development as well as a secure anchorage in social structures. When inanimate objects like statues or portraits start to move, or when machines or corpses come alive, the contours of the world in which one defines oneself seem to have changed radically to suggest that, in horror, reality's frames have ceded to supernatural forces or to powers of hallucination or unconscious desire. Strangeness lies within as much as without. Freud's writings on the pleasure principle discuss how negative experiences are made bearable through processes of repetition: psychic organisation requires balance and pleasure signals the release of tension and the return to equilibrium. Events and emotions that over-stimulate the mind (from childhood development to shell-shock) are first experienced negatively and passively: a mother leaves a child in distress; trauma leaves the mind blank. By repeating the negative experience, however, the individual is able to move from a position of passive victim to someone who has, at least imaginatively, taken an active role in producing and expelling the disturbance. Like the sublime, the experience of loss and negativity which is initially overpowering is reconfigured through an imaginative and active process.

The dynamic processes involved in gothic negativity can be seen in patterns of transgression, excess and monstrosity. From medieval morality plays, which put figures of vice on stage so that their deformities would be visible and repellent, monsters fulfil a cautionary function: they make negative attributes visible in order that they can be seen for what they are and be condemned or destroyed. Aesthetically unappealing, monsters serve a useful social and regulative function distinguishing norms and values from deviant and immoral figures and practices. They give