

Victorian Gothic

Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century

Edited by

Ruth Robbins

and

Julian Wolfreys

palgrave



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Preface: 'I could a tale unfold' or, the Promise of Gothic

Julian Wolfreys

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part
And each particular hair to stand on end
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark I.v.16–21

The gothic was dead, to begin with.

It is generally agreed that the gothic, understood narrowly as a narrative form given principal expression through the novel, had a life-span of approximately 56 years. It was born or, rather, given life, in 1764, with the publication of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. It died, or was dismembered and interred, somewhere around 1818 or 1820, with the publication of, respectively, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. (Recent reassessments of Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* [1821], such as Margaret Russett's *De Quincey's Romanticism* [1997] may allow us another provisional moment of 'conclusion' for the gothic.) Already, towards the end of its rather artificial life, gothic narrative's often galvanic animation was perceived by some of its readers as not being fully charged, a highly visible sign of which was the parody of its already monstrous form, most noticeably in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1798/9, but not published until 1817. Austen's work is a parody, aimed at the work of Anne Radcliffe in particular, as is well known. However, any parody of that which is already internally parodic (intentionally or not); that is to say, any parody of that which is marked by excess, heterogeneity, fragmentation, delirium and what Margaret Russett terms appositely a 'degraded sensibility' (1997, 17), is hard to imagine. The gothic, as a body of fiction, is always already excessive, grotesque, overspilling its own boundaries and limits. Austen's knowing comedy perhaps misses

the impropriety of gothic sensibility even as it registers the decay of a genre which is best understood not so much through the perceived signs of its formulaic decline as by the corrupt condition by which gothic attains any animation whatsoever.

The overly familiar relationship between the gothic as both a form and sensibility and Austen's wit at its expense is worth acknowledging once more, not because of the author's parody, but because of the tension – readable here between the distancing effect which the parodic desires, and the seduction of the writer or, for that matter, the reader – by the gothic. The gothic, though dying even from its first moments of animation, leaves its traces in its audience, only to return again and again. As Jacques Derrida has suggested in a published interview, if the reader notices, day after day, the constant announcement that someone or something is dying, or dead, and if this dying or death continues to be an event, one begins to wonder what is happening (1996, 224–5). Even at the moment when it appears to have given up the ghost, the gothic, keeps on returning, even as it dies, or appears to be decaying. It starts to be celebrated, or perhaps fed upon, by the spectre of criticism, for example, or else it feeds upon itself, adopting a knowingly self-referential manner.

The year after *Melmoth the Wanderer*, that publication chosen by many critics in the twentieth century to signal gothic's demise and the move on to more sophisticated forms of literary entertainment, Walter Scott writes and publishes his critical introduction to Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (which Scott attempts to dress up by insisting on its alternative identity as a historical romance; 1821, 1974). In this same year, as mentioned above, Thomas De Quincey publishes his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. If *Confessions* is a conclusion of sorts, it also marks the return of the gothic even at the moment of its death. This work, though not a novel, is clearly disturbed in its narrative identity by traces of the gothic, from the first instances of the house in Soho and the haunted, haunting anonymous girl, to the perpetually haunting figure of Anne, who returns to disturb De Quincey's troubled self. Even the city of London, with its dark passages and labyrinthine streets, is constructed by De Quincey in a knowingly gothic fashion; the convolutions of which, in turn, inform the often equally labyrinthine structure of the *Confessions'* narrative, with its constant deferrals and displacements of information, its promises of narrative revelations which never arrive, and its passages which, all too often, lead frustratingly nowhere.

Why then should we take notice, albeit in passing, of Scott's introduction (which is also a timely reassessment), and De Quincey's

mordantly witty memoir? Both are, arguably, exemplary texts which respond to the gothic in particular ways, taking apart the gothic corpse, dismembering and re-membering it. Scott's critical appreciation subsumes the gothic in favour of historical romance as the identity given Walpole's narrative of terror. De Quincey, on the other hand, brings out the terror of the streets of the English capital, as well as the terrors of the night, giving them a resonantly *English* context, as one of the contributors to this collection suggests. If the gothic had previously been concerned, at least in part, to make manifest a fear of the foreign other, De Quincey's text brings home the fear, internalizing that in a doubly economical fashion, through the issue of narrative representation, and through the consumption of narcotics.

This double consumption is, we would argue, an emblematic figure for the location of the gothic in the Victorian period, whether that location is in the period's publications, in its images or in its cultural discourses in general. The gothic, having been dismembered, is no longer figured in the nineteenth century, from the 1820s onwards, as a single, identifiable *corpus*. (If indeed it ever was. One of the chief features of gothic in its first phase is the frequently fragmentary condition of its narrative, as many critics in recent years have acknowledged.) The twelve essays in this volume address the question of gothic remains, of what remains as the haunting spirit of the gothic throughout the nineteenth century. The essays represent current thinking on the gothic in the nineteenth century, while offering new departures on the topic and suggesting new ways in which the gothic may be understood from various theoretical, historical and cultural perspectives in relation to the Victorian epoch. *Victorian Gothic* addresses comedic aspects of gothic, questions of technology and subjectivity in the nineteenth century, the visual arts and photography, the uses of gothic imagery, issues of colonialism and gender, relationships between forms of publication and the gothic, and as (profoundly gothic) images of children and adolescents.

The range of authors and artists addressed is as broad as the Victorian period itself, and, equally, as diverse and heterogeneous. While certain writers might seem obvious choices for any revisionist discussion of the place of the gothic in the nineteenth century, others will appear somewhat unusual. Charles Dickens and Sheridan Le Fanu doubtless deserve inclusion, as do Richard Marsh, Bram Stoker, and Henry James for their contributions to *fin-de-siècle* gothic narrative. But the reader will also find Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, William Morris,

Julia Margaret Cameron, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Rudyard Kipling, and H. Rider Haggard alongside Oscar Wilde and Vernon Lee. As this brief list suggests, the Victorian gothic is no respecter of location, haunting equally the most canonical of figures, as well as those who are considered as having only the most marginal canonical status. And while writers from the 1830s onwards retain certain features in their writing – particular tropes, narrative conventions, features of form and content – recognizable as belonging to the gothic in its first literary manifestations, more often than not those features are transformed, disfigured, brought back to life, or conjured from some unspeakable place in ways which are wholly unpredictable, and all the more haunting for that. Escaping from the tomb and the castle, the gothic in the Victorian period becomes arguably even more potentially terrifying because of its ability to manifest itself anywhere. Reciprocally, The Victorians may be read as embracing the gothic, taking it to themselves in intimate and disconcerting ways. The essays in this volume respond to this, by exploring how the promise of the gothic is kept by its Victorian inheritors, repeatedly, throughout the major part of the nineteenth century, as the spirit of the gothic is unfolded in myriad strange and estranging ways.

In being so dispersed, in coming to light in numerous, unsettling, and unpredictable ways, assuming new identities, seemingly from beyond the grave, the gothic appears to mark nineteenth-century literature and culture with that haunting promise just mentioned. If the gothic in its narrow sense was, like Wilde's *Bunbury* or Conrad's anarchist bomb, quite exploded, its fragments spread far and wide throughout the Victorian era. The gothic became other than itself, the meaning of the term changing, metamorphosing beyond narrow definition, promising the destabilization of whatever it came to haunt, itself destabilized in itself and from itself. At the same time, the promise of the gothic was – and still is – a promise of a certain return, a cyclical revenance. It still remains as this, and its remains are readable as numerous counter signatures guaranteeing the gothic promise within the literary or photographic text. The promise of the gothic being that there is always one more sepulchral door to open, and, with that, one more uncanny tale to tell. What the tale may be is ultimately of less importance than the promise of that tale, the promise of what that tale will effect, as the words of Hamlet's father's ghost suggest. The ghost in *Hamlet* never keeps his promise, telling Hamlet instead of all too earthly acts. But the very promise of revelation is in itself seductive; it speaks to a desire, and recognizes in its articulation the move-

ment of that desire in search of the secret terror. If the gothic as a recognizable narrative form began to lose its grip over its audience, this may have been in part because the tale all too often unfolded with the revelation that there was no terror which could not be explained away. Thus the promise of the gothic was itself ignored in favour of rational explanation and the banality of closure.

However, while for some the gothic was to become unbearable, first in the 1820s and, subsequently, in the twentieth century through critical assessment of the gothic (this is a narrative concerned with aesthetic proprieties which literary criticism has told compulsively and repeatedly until recent years), for many others, it remained – and continues to remain – *unburialable*. The promise of the gothic is comprehended in all its uncanny potentiality as both *trait* and *retrait*. The gothic mode leaves its mark, in the nineteenth century, in the most conventional of narratives, the most ordinary of photographs. But even as we read that trace, we only read where the gothic has been, we only comprehend its effect in the places from which it has already retreated. We understand the gothic therefore as always already spectral through and through. All that is left in the Victorian text is the promise of the gothic, the disturbing trace, the haunting absence. Such a narrative surrounding the gothic is, itself, a gothic narrative, concerned with constant returns, uncanny disturbances, dismembered remains and improper forms, deferrals and differences. The essays in this collection recognize the condition of the gothic and, in response to that, make their own collective promise – a promise at once shared and multiplied – that while there are indeed yet more tales to be told, more skeletons to bring out of closets, there are also new and interesting manifestations of the same old stories. The promise is also one which suggests that, in returning to the Victorians so as to understand their own gothic compulsions, their spectral and technological manifestations of the uncanny, we begin to comprehend that the promise of the gothic itself returns once again – to haunt our comprehension, to trouble the certainties on which we rely for our identities, and to continue returning in ever stranger articulations of revenant alterity.

The gothic is to be found everywhere then, but never as itself, never in the same form twice. The gothic becomes truly haunting in that it can never be pinned down as a single identity, while it returns through various apparitions and manifestations, seemingly everywhere: in comic discourse, through photographic images, in the attempted return to a pseudo-medieval sensibility, in the very form of

publication itself, in the social construction of children or sexuality, in the projection of discourses of Orientalism, via mesmerism and other 'technologies of the uncanny', as Roger Luckhurst puts it, and in countless other discourses and historical, material traces as well, as these essays suggest. To paraphrase as well as briefly cite the essays in *Victorian Gothic*, the gothic becomes restructured even as it restructures 'the new discipline of archaeology', and its discourses, when given fictive expression in a colonial context. In the same context the effect of the gothic economy is to destabilize discourses of power and knowledge, and, with that, supposedly stable subject positions. The gothic serves furthermore to formulate what is described as an 'alliance between' aestheticism and decadence, where such formulation or figuration operates through the blurring of vision, the distortion of identity once again, and the anatomization of experience. In these and other disturbing ways, the Victorian gothic 'manifests itself' as 'both a subversive supernatural force and a mechanism for social critique'.

The gothic is also bound up with the late Victorian interest in hypnosis, trance states and the construction of the modern subject, in the sense given that term by Michel Foucault. Such construction, under the influence of the gothic, is also a potential act of solicitation which invokes terror at the prospect of a 'complete loss of identity'. The gothic aspect of the construction of the subject is also manifested through photography. A technology of shadows and spectres, photography readily draws upon the 'grisly props of gothic representation' while also aiding, as a technology of the uncanny – that 'most gothic of psychic effects' – in the reconfiguration of subjectivity. Furthermore, the gothic figures not only the reconstitution of the modern subject but also a disruption of social order, as well as an implicit challenge to 'coherent structural reason'. It does so frequently through its attention to the grotesque or to its exploitation of the comic. In all such activities, the gothic may be read in all its many apparitions as being concerned with a challenge to stable identities through the 'production of a combination of conflicting sensations'.

All the manifestations and qualities of gothic effect observed by the contributors to this volume move the idea of the gothic beyond the narrow understanding of the gothic as a narrative or novel form. They address what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her groundbreaking *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, describes as the function of the gothic. As Sedgwick argues, the function of the gothic was to 'open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institution-

ally approved emotions ... [it] became a great liberator of feeling' through its acknowledgement of the 'non-rational' (1986, 3). As Sedgwick suggests, if we are to accord this definition to the gothic, we must at the very least also acknowledge the discontinuity between such a sense of the gothic and the narrow definition of gothic or what Sedgwick describes as the 'gothic novel proper' (1986, 3). It is this very discontinuity – which is also a radical transition – which serves to liberate the spirit of the gothic from its ponderous conventional body, and which comes to serve the Victorians in the numerous ways which are explored by the essays presented here. At the same time, however, the radical transformation of gothic, which is in turn a gothic transformation, makes the definition of the gothic much harder, from certain conventional critical positions, and it is with the provisional identification of the gothic in different and differing ways that criticism has concerned itself. The act of defining the gothic beyond its narrative conventions is fraught with difficulties, not least because of what Sedgwick terms the 'conflicting claims of the general and the specific' (1986, 4). Sedgwick's analysis of contingent naming focuses, appropriately enough, on the frequency of the term 'unspeakable' in gothic narrative. As she argues, the frequency of such a term may be raised critically to the level of the thematic, but, equally, the unspeakable names a certain play within narrative structure.

This problematic – which is, simultaneously, a problem of defining the gothic and a gothic problematic, that which appears as a gothic trope arriving to disturb the act of definition – is also identified by Anne Williams in her revision of the poetics of gothic. In her *Art of Darkness*, Williams, like Sedgwick, seeks to move beyond the narrow definition of the gothic as 'primarily ... a form of prose fiction, as something relative and subordinate to its early contemporary, Romanticism' (1995, 1). Williams' planned movement is articulated through the understanding that the nature of the gothic is dual, and that 'it has a "male" and a "female" genre' (1995, 1). Part of the problem in speaking adequately of the gothic has arisen, Williams argues, from conventional criticism's inscription of the gothic as an aberrant and marginal novel form, an inscription which, for the likes of Leavis, Watt and Booth, is also an erasure (1995, 1–3).¹ Williams' introduction to her study provides a useful summary of conventional, often masculine, critical attitudes to the gothic as an 'outmoded embarrassment' (1995, 4). As the keepers of the flame of realism and what she calls the 'High Prose Fiction tradition', certain critics, Williams suggests, 'have regarded the gothic as long dead, or else

(if alive) as irrational "feminine" popular romance' (1995, 6). Such definition is dependent on keeping to the narrow understanding of the gothic, while not recognizing the radical fragmentation and dissemination of gothic in the nineteenth century.

If, as Robert Miles suggests, the question 'What is "gothic"?' seems easily answered, this is no doubt because of a formalist adherence to the rote identification on the part of the critic of 'the same plots, motifs and figures endlessly recycled' (1993, 1). Nothing could be easier, less troubled. Yet such an approach, if we recall Sedgwick's argument, and to follow Miles also, falters once we begin to pay attention to gothic's affirmative resistances, or what Miles terms 'gothic's deep structure'. gothic writing, Miles argues, following David Punter, is "'disjunctive", fragmentary, inchoate' (1993, 1); furthermore, gothic 'worries over a problem stirring within the foundations of the self ... Gothic ... is not fantasy in need of psychoanalysis but a coherent code for the representation of fragmented subjectivity' (1993, 2). There is for Miles, after Foucault, an 'instability of discourse, its tendency, especially within the "dialogic" space of narrative, to fragment or round on itself' (1993, 6). Thus, for Miles, as for other recent critics of the gothic, as well as for a number of the critics in this volume, the gothic is concerned with the self, with the other within the self, and with what Kelly Hurley terms 'the ruination of the human subject ... [through] the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated' (1996, 3).²

The critical move beyond the conventions of gothic narrative is articulated then, at least in part, by the act of reading gothic's sense of the alterity of subjectivity, and the alterity which undoes any sense of the subject's own comprehension of coherence, presence or meaning. Whether it is through the spectro-poetical manifestations of identity made possible by the technology of photography, the uncanny assault on the sense of self by the otherness of the foreign; whether it is through either the withered or corpulent, hectic or abused figure of the grotesque child, through the projection of spectro-sexual ambiguities or even, as one essayist suggests, the uncanny manifestations of feet in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins as the disturbing sign of gothic-fetish; in any of these examples, the comprehension of the gothic is expanded through an understanding of the role gothic effects have to play in the constitution of modern, fragmented subjectivity. At the same time, the variety and heterogeneity of subjects addressed in these essays point to what Jacqueline Howard terms gothic's "'multi-voiced-ness'", its 'propensity for multiple discourse' (1994, 13, 12). If the body and the subject are fragmented and dispersed, then so too are

the voices of the gothic subject. For the gothic subject, properly understood, is never singular; there are always other voices, other disembodied, ghostly articulations within and against the dream of full, simple, self-evident speech to be read in any apparently stable voice, such as that desired in realist narrative. Such qualities in turn speak to the 'plural dimensions of reading' (1994, 1) which, for Howard, is also a provisional definition of the gothic mode, all of which resist the imposition of a homogeneous definition of the gothic, while proving 'unsettling for the reader' (1994, 12).

However unsettling the haunting of stability, of homogeneity and the self-same may be, it directs us, in conclusion, to an act of inversion in the Victorian period, inversion as consumption *and* internalization, whereby the gothic, broken up, comes to be dispersed throughout the culture and throughout the nineteenth century. A common 'device' in the gothic narrative of the period 1760–1820 was the textual fragment, as Veejay Mishra discusses in his *The Gothic Sublime* (1994, 83–116). Not only do fragments of long-lost texts reappear, fortuitously or ironically, within novels and, to a lesser extent, plays and poems, but fragments were created in their own right, as a textual manifestation of the gothic sensibility. The fragment, of which the paradigmatic example, Mishra suggests, is the now neglected 'Sir Bertrand' by Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1994, 83), is a textual, *material* embodiment of dismemberment and of the narrative tendency in gothic to come to an impassable and unspeakable hiatus. Byron went so far as to write a fragment, self-referentially titled 'A Fragment'. As Fiona Robertson puts it in her study of Sir Walter Scott, the abrupt halt in gothic 'marks the points at which [gothic's] narratorial language breaks down and is defeated by the enormity [or, we would contend, the sheer alterity] of what it attempts to describe' (1994, 81). The fragment published as fragment is but one example of what Mishra describes as 'versions or symptoms of the extreme otherness of the gothic sublime' (1994, 83). Such fragments, and the silences which they generate speak of the unspeakable, bearing witness to an absence at the heart of meaning. The Victorian gothic takes the fragment as symptom to its heart. Whatever realist fiction cannot speak, there is the gothic fragment as other. Wherever photography in the nineteenth century seeks to re-present its subject, there in the phatic image is the disturbance of that subject. The unreal, the ghostly, the uncanny: all are maintained throughout the Victorian period as the apparitions and manifestations of fragments from some other place. Yet they return, even as they appear, not only

from some other place, but from the other *within* that identity we name as Victorian. The fragment, no longer outside, unfolds itself inside those very contours which seem to define unequivocally Victorian identity.

Notes

1. On critical approaches to the gothic, see also Jacqueline Howard's excellent *Reading Gothic Fiction: a Bakhtinian Approach* (1994), which draws on both the dialogic work of Mikhail Bakhtin and the work of Todorov and others on the fantastic, to move the discussion of gothic beyond the conventional critical impasse arrived at as a result of reading the gothic, as an 'inferior genre' (5). Howard provides an overview of critical approaches (18–36), suggesting, as does Williams, that the beginnings of gothic revisionism can be located with the 1969 publication of Robert D. Hume's article 'Gothic versus Romantic: a Revaluation of the Gothic Novel' in the *PMLA*. Coral Ann Howells' *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (1978) is one of the first book-length re-evaluations of the gothic.

Similarly to Williams, Howard's study addresses itself to the issue of gender in relation to gothic (53–105), as does Susan Wolstenholme in her 1993 study, *Gothic (Re)Visions: Writing Women as Readers*.

2. On the subject of the gothic body and the spectacle of the body in pain, see Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: the Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (1994).

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