# GOTHIC

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# 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 it 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.

Nostalgia is one of those processes

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

shape, moreover, to obscure fears or anxieties, or contain an amorphous and unpresentable threat in a single image. But only as long as the boundaries separating virtue and vice, good and evil remain clearly delineated. In the context of monstrosity, the role of transgression, and the limits and excesses that it makes manifest, concerns both the delineation of boundaries and the mechanisms – the norms, taboos, prohibitions – that keep them in place. Like the relation between prohibition and desire, transgression involves a crossing of limits or breaking of taboos and rules. Telling a gothic heroine not to do something is often enough to make her wish to do it, the prohibition an incitement to curiosity and desire. The result is not simply punishment for breaking an injunction: desire is often heightened and given more intense significance due to the weight of the initial sanction. Transgression, too, brings out the importance of limits in the act of exceeding them: one becomes more keenly aware of boundaries and taboos, both of their existence and the consequences of breaking them. Crossing boundaries, however, demonstrates the protection they offer. The excesses of gothic fictions, involving the breaking of codes of law or knowledge, disobeying paternal injunctions, indulging immoral desires and appetites, displays transgression and brings norms and limits more sharply into focus. Transgression and excess, the excitement they generate, can also be enjoyed as ends in themselves. But if borders and norms are not clear or too weak, the intensity is also diminished.

Gothic texts operate ambivalently: the dynamic inter-relation of limit and transgression, prohibition and desire suggests that norms, limits, boundaries and foundations are neither natural nor absolutely fixed or stable despite the fears they engender. Crossing a boundary, for all the tension released, shows that it is neither impermeable nor unchangeable. Universal or natural guarantees seem to vanish; norms are sustained only by the conjoined and opposed forces of limit and transgression. Supposedly unchanging laws are opened up: life and death, for Victor Frankenstein, are sites of scientific transformation and the release of monstrous energies; for ghosts and vampires, too, death is not a final limit. Nature, then, is both necessary, part of the make-up of acculturated humanity, but also (in the shape of diverse, multiple and

excessive cosmic, planetary and bodily energies) monstrous, alien to civilisation and rationality. Human nature, too, becomes divided. Frankenstein's monster says as much when he reflects on humans being composed of noble and base elements, compounds of both good and evil, of individual pleasure and social pressures, like Dr Jekyll. Norm and monster, self and shadow, one is inseparable from the other.

Alterity constitutes an important and complex notion in relation to monstrosity and transgression. Transgressors move beyond norms and regulations, thereby challenging their value, authority and permanence. Monsters combine negative features that oppose (and define) norms, conventions and values; they suggest an excess or absence beyond those structures and bear the weight of projections and emotions (revulsion, horror, disgust) that result. Monsters such as vampires, talking bodies, or ghosts are thus constructions indicating how cultures need to invent or imagine others in order to maintain limits. They are pushed in disgust to the other side of the imaginary fence that keeps norm and deviance apart. It requires a repeated effort of constructing and casting out figures of fear and anxiety. Alterity, ambivalence, anxiety are thus both outside and within. When it comes to making monsters and identifying others, the dangers of blurring lines of demarcation, of losing distinction and separation, of dissolving values, meanings and identities require vigilant and vigorous attention. At issue is never just the existence, form or face of others since these features change according to alterations of history, culture and political power. Alterity involves structural relationships: the maintenance of orders based on patterns of exclusion requires hierarchies of difference to maintain divisions. Others are often acceptable, though derogated and degraded, if they remain in a designated and subordinate position: monstrosity marks a refusal to stay in an allotted place, a destabilisation of power relations. Vampires (threatening to invade London from the East) provided a monstrous form for late Victorian fears sustaining colonialism and empire. Associated with magic, primitive violence and sexual corruption, these figures evince standard characteristics of imperialist and Orientalist ideology in the eyes of which members of colonised cultures lack civilisation

(remaining too bound to savage rituals and practices), lack reason (or are too invested in superstitious or magical ideas), lack intelligence (or possess too much diabolical cunning), lack moral discipline (or show too much belief), all of which supposedly justifies exploitation. If they remained in their subordinate place, these figures would be no more than exotic spectacles, curiosities for Western eyes to enjoy as entertainment. But they turn their attentions towards Western culture: what is then depicted as an invasion, disease or contamination of body, mind and culture (that is, not so different from practices of colonisation) also discloses insecurities within the home culture.

The construction of feminine sexuality as monstrous follows a similar and ambivalent pattern. Defined as other to man, women are subordinated to a regime of ideas, values and practices (patriarchy) in which their position is demarcated and authorised by 'nature' as different from and less than males in terms of rational powers, moral character, physical strength. Though idealised romantically in terms of beauty or domestically in terms of maternal affections, female alterity (despite powerful counter-arguments for equal rights being made since the late eighteenth century) is linked to over-sensitivity, decorativeness, nature and commodities and held in place through figures of monstrosity. Displaying and even enjoying arbitrary male power in the persecution of women, abuses like enforced marriage, sequestration of self and property or threats of violation, murder or imprisonment remain recurrent, apparent and abhorrent issues in gothic fictions. Pleasure and fear accompany stories of women being chased along dark corridors and fictions rarely endorse an unequivocally emancipatory message. At times seeming to license male fantasy salivating over the images of defenceless and vulnerable femininity, thereby replicating the position of villains, fictions also disclose a range of injustices inflicted on women. Homes and families do seem constraining when one is obliged to be demure and subservient or to accept someone one has not met as husband just because he is wealthy or well-connected, or see a future breeding sons and heirs. And worse, paternal authority is clearly neither protective nor beneficent when one's fratricidal uncle or married father-in-law will stop at nothing to possess one's hand or body.

Much gothic fiction, however, was produced by women, some earning a degree of economic independence, and the focus on heroines able to be physically and romantically active outside domestic spheres hints at different cultural horizons for women, if only imaginatively. Yet there is also conservatism in evidence: in taking heroines on often dangerous journeys outside the home, romances show readers the terrors of inhabiting a world without male protection. The axis of patriarchal persecution–protection is set against a romantic horizon of freedom. Too much independence in fiction, many critics complained, might lead to actual excesses, provoking all sorts of domestic and filial revolts. Though the question of female sexuality returns in diverse forms and in different periods of gothic production as an object for (monstrous) male enjoyment or site of social control, it retains the potential of monstrosity, of bodily pleasures, desires, energies that exceed prescription and containment, that remain double: ideal and frightening, comforting and horrific.

## TRANSFORMATIONS

Gothic texts are not realistic. Emerging in the eighteenth century, gothic fiction develops in relation to the romance and the novel. The latter, sometimes referred to as the 'modern romance', privileges realism, probability and morality in its representations of facets of eighteenth-century life. Romances, in contrast, delivered tales of love and adventures that, as their name suggests, returned to courtly tales of knights and castles, and included supernatural, fantastic mysteries and mythical creatures, from dragons to goblins and fairies. The gothic tale set out to combine both types of writing, though the combination of romance with characters imbued with more contemporary rational attitudes was not always critically successful. Since the eighteenth century the development of gothic fictions has involved similarly inter-generic patterns, adding a darker aspect to more acceptable literary forms. In criticism of the early nineteenth century, gothic writing is sometimes referred to as 'dark Romanticism'. Many Romantic writers were careful to maintain a critical distance, for example, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Kant all

bemoaned the crude taste for popular fiction. None-the-less, Romanticism did share an aesthetic history with gothic fiction (interests in the sublime, in dramatic and medieval literary styles, and romance itself), and a 'darker side' can be found in concerns with creative consciousness: rebellious and freethinking, the solitary visionary can become alienated and outcast; the self can be split in two, its double becoming a figure of imagination or fantasy separated from reality and acceptable models of existence.

If Romanticism sees gothic metaphors change to address psychological and imaginative limits, the genre alters again in relation to Victorian writing and culture: romance persists in stories of young women, sullen masters and old houses on moors (rather than castles in the Apennines) and ghosts signify dubious class origins or family secrets. But an age of industrial prosperity and scientific advancement brings new concerns: the growth of cities delivers a new darkness of poverty and crime and the boundaries crossed by science transform the understanding of humanity's place in the natural world, theories of evolution raising the spectre of regression (the 'descent' of man) alongside questions of faith and material progress. While religious ideas were threatened by science, technology, curiously, became attached to a world of spirits: new media with seemingly magical powers, like photography, telegraphy, electricity, provided ways to test or support public interest in spirits and psychic phenomena. The growth of imperialism also encountered a number of supra-rational or otherworldly powers, the spoils of colonialism delivering more than was bargained for. By the end of the century, figures of regression, threats from colonised lands, internal issues of sexual, moral and cultural degeneration, and a host of psychic and scientific experimentation, saw a return to familiar gothic monsters (vampires, ghosts and doubles) and a range of new figures, composites for the sexual, racial, class and cultural anxieties of the times.

The first decades of the twentieth century, preoccupied by the speed of technological and economic development, seemed to have little time for monsters. The all-too-real horrors of World War I pushed fantastic terrors aside. None-the-less, scientific innovation, mechanisation and the rapidity of urban and

economic life seemed to render things and selves less substantial: a sense of ghostliness pervaded the times and the techniques of innovative literary presentation. New media extended the popular shelf-life of gothic fiction: cinema relished stories of ghosts, vampires and doubles that offered metaphors of its own technological magic. Animating unreal things and extracting hallucinatory powers, the black and white world of the screen made the shadowplay, terror and disorientation of gothic aesthetics its own and called it 'horror'. Other developments saw generic combinations of romance, mystery and adventure diverge in different popular genres and media: science, horror and weird fiction, comic books, tales of fantasy, women's romances. Given such generic diffusion, it is surprising that, after World War II, there is anything left that is specifically gothic. Yet, familiar rather than frightening, or as relics of all sorts of stiff and dusty Victorian attitudes being swept aside in the white light and heat of technological, economic and social transformation, gothic forms and figures begin to tell different stories in contexts of sexual, national and social liberation: their monstrous displays of power and persecution provide images of the artifices and illegitimacy of patriarchy, social conformism, racism, imperialism. Negatives of the grand narratives that shaped modernity, gothic forms are reinvented for postmodern interrogations as well as for the accompanying freedoms of consumerist, corporate, creative and post-industrial orders. New biotechnological innovations need new Frankensteins, new media require new ghosts. Women's writing re-examines gothic images of femininity and masculinity to challenge the constraining artifice of sexual and social categories, liberating sexual difference from normative constraints. Monsters not only display alterity, but also demonstrate – and criticise – the cultural practices of making others, interrogating the legitimacy of condemnation, prejudice and exclusion: their position moves from eliciting pity, sympathy and fear to demanding admiration for defiance and insubordination. Exploding patterns of limit and transgression, norm and heterogeneity, monsters become aligned with performances and techniques of subversion. Identity, like text and history rendered plural and playful, is a matter of

political choice or lifestyle, a consumer culture in which vampires predominate as singular aesthetes or fabulous rebels. At the same time, technological innovations in medicine, media and surveillance provide hitherto unimaginable powers of control along with the means to transform irreversibly cellular, organic and planetary bodies, the shadow cast on humanity and its habitat offers new darker global horizons for fictional speculations.

Postmodernism, emerging as a global aesthetic style at the end of the 1970s and associated with the wider transformations of modernity, seems particularly hospitable to the resuscitation of gothic forms and figures. Its aesthetic reflexivity, enjoyment of fabrication, simulation and doubling parallels the gothic genre's consciousness of textual artifice, its playful use of narrative and social conventions, its camp constructions of the past and its evocation of striking affects. But postmodern challenges to social and cultural authority have implications for the genre: not only do they facilitate its diffusion in various forms and media, they also signal a new context in which meanings and affects change. The negative aesthetics historically linked to gothic forms alters: prohibition cedes to pastiche and play, and signs of negativity or transgression become reassessed as attractive, acceptable commodities. With genre, familiarity and repetition are necessary, but too much repetition breeds over-familiarity: a little bit of excess or difference is required. If features of gothic excess include transgression or disturbing effects, over-familiarity will diminish a capacity to cross borders or produce terror or horror. Yet genre and its formal restrictions are also at issue in contemporary diffusions: hybrid mixtures of style, mode, zone and mood emerge too quickly for any attempt at classification. When and where does a gothic genre stop and others, such as magical realism, dark romance, science fiction, fantasy, occult, horror, cyberpunk, splatterpunk, steampunk, neo-Victorian, body horror, slasher or weird fiction begin? Is gothic just one mode, mood or inflection among others? Can its particular dark atmospheres, its estranging effects and its in-human monsters remain distinctive or useful in processes of composing, classifying and comprehending contemporary texts?

## CRITICISM

It is no accident that academic studies of gothic forms burgeoned in the wake of postmodernist critical challenges to ideas of literary value, canon and approach. Before the later twentieth century most criticism of the genre, tacitly or not, shared the views of eighteenth-century and Romantic commentators in derogating gothic fictions as minor, low, popular and formulaic productions. In periods advocating the greatness of literary tradition and vision, or analysing the complex ironies of style and form, gothic writing did not qualify as Literature and hence warranted scant attention. At best, and often well informed in terms of scholarship, criticism echoed eighteenth-century antiquarianism in exploring the dusty byways of literary and cultural history: gothic, as a word, a style or a revival, was a footnote to understanding the broader context of Romanticism. This strand, in which gothic forms are examined in terms of established literary-historical periods, genres and national traditions, continues to shape much contemporary scholarship.

Aesthetic values and canons are not innocent since selection involves exclusion, with value often occluding prejudice or political agenda. Feminist critical interventions, notably, observed the absence of women writers from reading lists, criticised the patriarchal assumptions and ideologies at work and promoted the cultural significance of representations of female experience and sexual difference in a range of texts by women. 'Female Gothic' drew out particularities of women's experience, suffering and oppression under patriarchy and enabled a range of reinterpretations of women's gothic writing that explored, exposed and exploded the limitations of patriarchal representations of gender and sexuality. Re-examinations of the historical conditions and political implications of gothic writing also involved negotiating matters of class oppression. Karl Marx, in *Capital* (1867), used the metaphor of the vampire to describe how capitalism exploits living human labour. Marxist criticism, noting the historical conditions of cultural and economic production, traces contradictions and class antagonisms in which gothic figures like monsters appeared as exploited yet resistant bodies of dehumanising

systems, signalling tensions in the ideological fabric that naturalises a bourgeois view of the world.

The movement from oppression to repression marked another influential, and perhaps the most extensive, orientation of gothic criticism: psychoanalysis. Influenced by German Romanticism, the work of Sigmund Freud with its focus on the entanglement of fear and desire, on 'dark continents' of female sexuality and the unconscious, the return of buried, anti-social wishes, on dreams, hysteria and phobias often reads like a gothic novel. Stressing the role of politics and history in the shaping of cultural and individual identity, these approaches were supplemented by criticism that attended more closely to the interaction of language, discourse and power in the construction and performance of conventions, values and norms. Texts were embedded in social exchange, generating and receiving meanings through the circulation of partial and practically effective forms of knowledge. They were subject to reinterpretation under changing conditions. Deconstruction, tracing gothic attention to textual form, tracked uncertainties through figures of the spectre: haunting signalled the division and multiplication of meanings, absences interrupting presence. Historicism unpicked the imbrications of gothic metaphors and moods in other texts such as medical or legal documents. Performative analyses of cultural power and resistance bear heavily on readings of gothic fiction's capacity to engage with sexual meanings and norms.

Gothic fiction's engagement with cultural and inter-cultural concerns, particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, has proved amenable to Orientalist, colonial and post-colonial critical modes, both in the analysis of the effects and horrors of imperialist practices, ideology and racist representation and in responses that interrogate the contradictions of those representations in disclosing the limitations and aberrations of dominant positions. 'Civilisation' is neither natural nor universal: it is a Western construct often maintained in fear of the very cultures it exploits and misconstrues. Its encounters with alterity see a fantasy of mastery breaking down. The experience of colonisation, moreover, receives gothic treatment. The movement from one culture to encounters with new landscapes and peoples leaves colonists

caught between worlds: haunted by past traditions, disturbed by strange environments, customs and beliefs, their responses to colonial situations are sometimes fearful, callous or violent, and provide cause for melancholy, guilt or shame. Imposing a Eurocentric view on a new culture is not without tension or resistance, indeed subjugation, banishment, enforced assimilation, slavery, genocide can be its very real consequences. The recipients of the process who see native traditions, beliefs and peoples erased by the colonial subjugation find a mode of registering and resisting cultural dispossession in ghostly and ghastly images, often appropriating the metaphors of coloniser as figures of their own haunting. Haunting, engaging a sense of loss and dislocation, of history, culture, identity and autonomy also tells the suppressed stories of colonisation, of its terrors, trauma and violence, and offers a path, in the telling, to recovery.

Gothic figures, from opposed positions, thus become subject to criticism that engages with both colonial and post-colonial experience. In presenting complex and conflicted cultural histories, moreover, gothic writing has found itself increasingly involved in redefinitions of the development of particular national literatures, articulating the different geographies, languages, beliefs and myths that, after political independence is achieved, come to compose a country's new make-up. Concerns with national difference are already evident in early gothic fiction, given that many writers came from Scottish, Irish and Welsh backgrounds. Current patterns, such as 'Australian Gothic' or 'Canadian Gothic', also register the various specific cultural effects of British imperialism. In this volume, the history of gothic forms in the USA sketches one version of how a national literature develops in relation to and beyond its (European) influences, to trace the specific locations, cultures and historical exigencies through which it presses forward. US cultural history also points towards a transformation in the use of gothic images across the world: in the forefront of world economic transformation (consumerism, media and culture industries notably), US models have established post- or multinational structures in which corporations, commodities, finance, scientific innovation proceed very rapidly and without the checks of national borders. In this spread

of information, money, images, both Western and Eastern countries – particularly those, like Japan and Korea, combining rapid industrial and post-industrial development with diverse local cultural traditions – have produced distinctive but highly effective gothic tales, images and media that deal with the 'new dark age' associated with the 'new world order'. What does it mean to live in a world of pervasive media and virtual technologies; in a global, inter-connected and fragile financial network; in a threatened ecology; or among porous national borders and widespread yet localised political conflicts? What has very recently been termed 'globalgothic' is a mode of criticism that tries to engage the very different senses of self, world and culture which global transformation instantiates. There is occasion, it seems, to be anxious and seek figures that give form to fear. The shape of monsters to come, however, remains unclear. Patterns of criticism may be more predictable, almost mimicking the vast inter-connected network circumscribing creative and critical industries, with gothic figures of monstrosity and spectrality spreading from literary, cultural and media forms to haunt other fields, periods and histories and extending and revising the specific nature and role of gothic modes (Shakespeare has recently been re-re-invented as gothic) in the manner of many generic, sub-generic and medial transformations and re-contextualisations. Demands that critics be 'research experts' may further encourage specialisations focused on highly discrete concerns with a 'darkening' of diverse genres, cultural phenomena, topics or themes. Further multiplications of association, significance and context may occur, with 'gothic', as a noun and as an adjective, doing and being done to in equal measure, all testing the ability of critical approaches to frame or, even, gauge the significance of the word.