Part I

Gothic Backgrounds
In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture

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The Enlightenment, which produced the maxims and models of modern culture, also invented the Gothic. Moreover, the Enlightenment can itself be considered a reinvention, in the sense that the neoclassical values dominating British society in the eighteenth century constituted a conscious recovery and redeployment of ideas gleaned from Greek and Roman writers. After the Renaissance, the classical tradition was associated with civilized, humane, and polite civic culture, its moral and aesthetic values privileged as the basis of virtuous behavior, harmonious social relations, and mature artistic practices. Eighteenth-century writers liked to refer to their present as “modern” and thus distinct from both a classical antiquity appreciated in its historical continuity and a feudal past regarded as a barbaric and primitive stage, the dominance of which had been discontinued. Such an overarching remodeling of cultural values required an extensive rewriting of history.

Here, the word “Gothic” assumes its powerful, if negative, significance: it condenses a variety of historical elements and meanings opposed to the categories valued in the eighteenth century. In this respect, “the real history of ‘Gothic’ begins with the eighteenth century,” when it signified a “barbarous,” “medieval,” and “supernatural” past (Longueil, 1923, 453–4). Used derogatively about art, architecture, and writing that failed to conform to the standards of neoclassical taste, “Gothic” signified the lack of reason, morality, and beauty of feudal beliefs, customs, and works. The projection of the present onto a Gothic past occurred, however, as part of the wider processes of political, economic, and social upheaval: emerging at a time of bourgeois and industrial revolution, a time of Enlightenment philosophy and increasingly secular views, the eighteenth-century Gothic fascination with a past of chivalry, violence, magical beings, and malevolent aristocrats is bound up with the shifts from feudal to commercial practices in which notions of property, government, and society...
were undergoing massive transformations. Along with these shifts, ideas about nature, art, and subjectivity were also reassessed. “Gothic” thus resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors of the past.

The rejection of feudal barbarity, superstition, and tyranny was necessary to a culture defining itself in diametrically opposed terms: its progress, civilization, and maturity depended on the distance it established between the values of the present and the past. The condensation, under the single term “Gothic,” of all that was devalued in the Augustan period thus provided a dis-continuous point of cultural consolidation and differentiation. With the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), “Gothic” also emerges as a critical term (Longueil, 1923, 453–6). And fiction, as a fabricated history, appears as a crucial condition of this emergence. Horace Walpole’s novel, the first “Gothic story,” introduces many of the features that came to define a new genre of fiction, like the feudal historical and architectural setting, the deposed noble heir and the ghostly, supernatural machinations. Walpole’s two prefaces also allude to work of antiquarians with which he was familiar: the “translator” of the story claims it was printed in Gothic script in Italy in 1529 but originates at the time of the Crusades. According with one theory of the origin of romances promoted by antiquarians, the historical background is used to defend the text against contemporary accusations that it may encourage error and superstition: such beliefs are appropriate to the dark ages in which they were written (Walpole, 1982, 3–4). The need to judge romantic and feudal productions according to their own, rather than classical, rules of composition had been advanced by writers like Richard Hurd a few years earlier. Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) also follows antiquarians in locating Shakespeare within a native, Gothic tradition. Not only are the dramatic force and the supernatural and mysterious devices of this recovered imaginative genius of English poetry used by Walpole, but he is proffered as an exemplary literary figure in the second preface to the story.

The literary and fictional background to the Gothic revival is clearly manifested as an artificial or fabricated aesthetic phenomenon. Jerrold Hogle notes how *The Castle of Otranto* is embroiled in various levels of counterfeiting: a fake translation by a fake translator of a fake medieval story by a fake author, the novel turns on a false nobleman unlawfully inheriting both title and property through a false will and attempting to secure a false lineage through nefarious schemes. The centerpiece of the story, too, is fabricated from a fake Gothic castle. Strawberry Hill, Walpole’s country house in Twickenham, was designed as a Gothic edifice and built using a variety of architectural and decorative styles, which, Hogle notes, “divorces artifacts from their foundations” and thereby separates substance from representation (Hogle, 1994, 23–5). Diane Ames notes the literary and fantastic basis of Walpole’s construction: “this whimsical congregaion of analogies is not an attempt at archaeological truth in the manner of nineteenth-century Gothic buildings, which failed to achieve it. At Strawberry Hill there are no failures, only fictions.” The building, moreover, was composed using “artificial materials,” like papier-mâché (Ames, 1979, 352–3). Indeed, the pri-
ority of representations over actuality is evinced in two anecdotes about Strawberry Hill: in one, Mrs. Barbauld is reputed to have arrived at the house asking to see the castle of Otranto; in the other, Lady Craven is said to have sent Walpole a drawing of the castle of Otranto in Italy. He, however, denied all knowledge of this building, claiming to have taken the “very sonorous” name from a map alone (Summers, 1931, 79).

The artificiality that surrounds the historical and cultural origins of Gothic productions remained a site of both criticism and emulation in the course of the eighteenth century. Old romances, ballads, and poetry, recovered by scholars like Percy, and decaying, medieval ruins were perceived in a new and more favorable light as somber but picturesque and sublime additions to cultural and natural landscape. The new taste for productions of the Gothic ages also found an outlet in numerous fabricated artifacts from the past: James Macpherson’s Ossian (1760) was the most famous work of fake Scottish antiquity, but eighteenth-century poetic appeals to the spirit of the Celtic bards were common in the works of Thomas Gray, William Collins, and Joseph Warton. Ruins, too, sprang up across the countryside to decorate the gloomier or more rugged corners of estates, while Walpole and William Beckford, at Fonthill Abbey, built their own Gothic mansions. The taste is satirized neatly in an exchange from The Clandestine Marriage, a drama by Colman and Garrick: a rich merchant, showing an aristocratic guest around his estate, remarks of some ruins that “they are reckoned very fine ones too. You would think them ready to tumble on your head. It has cost me a hundred and fifty pounds to put my ruins in thorough repair” (Summers, 1931, 80). The emphasis on the cost of the ruin and the respective status of host and guest signal the cultural and commodity value of this relic of a feudal past within the commercial world of the eighteenth century: rather than inheriting wealth in an aristocratic manner, the merchant has bought his property from the profits of trade, and along with it the ruin of feudal practices as well. In restoring the ruin, moreover, the merchant not only displays the supersession of an economy based on land ownership by that of commerce and the mobile property of credit, but proudly displays it as a sign of his fabricated continuity with the past.

The history in which Gothic circulates is a fabrication of the eighteenth century as it articulates the long passage from the feudal orders of chivalry and religiously sanctioned sovereignty to the increasingly secularized and commercial political economy of liberalism. “Gothic” functions as the mirror of eighteenth-century mores and values: a reconstruction of the past as the inverted, mirror image of the present, its darkness allows the reason and virtue of the present a brighter reflection. In Foucauldian terms, this version of the Gothic mirror operates utopically as “the inverted analogy with the real space of society” (Foucault, 1986, 24). Hence, the mirror, a “placeless place,” enables self-definition through “a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself” and produces a sense of depth and distance in “the virtual space that opens up behind the surface” (24). The utopic mirror of eighteenth-century Gothic history, however, not only delivers a sense of discontinuity through inversion and distancing, but also allows for a perfected reflection, an idealization of elements
of the past and the establishment of a continuity with the present: here the myth of
the Goths appears as a “product of fantasy invented to serve specific political and
emotional purposes” (Madoff, 1979, 337).

For Robert Miles, “the myth of the Goth was first and foremost an ideological
construction,” at work, notably in the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, as “a cipher for middle
class values” in opposition to the “Oriental,” who serves as a figure “for aristocratic
abuse and luxury” (Miles, 1995, 43). The distinction between bourgeois and aristo-
cratic characteristics structures Radcliffe’s portrayals of her villains, so that in The
Romance of the Forest (1791) the evil Marquis de Montalt is an immoral, selfish monster
devoid of compassion or familial feeling and intent only on satisfying his base and
materialistic appetites. In contrast, another aristocrat, La Luc, is held up as a moral,
rational, and almost Protestant paternal figure, wise, kind, and responsible in the
affairs of the rural community over which he presides. The ending, too, emphasizes
the embourgeoisement of Gothic figures with its invocation of a rational and middle-
class fantasy of virtue rewarded. Significantly, as E. J. Clery notes in her reading of
The Mysteries of Udolpho (1793), the victory of virtue is accompanied by the restitution
of property: chivalric virtues are superseded by commercial values so that “virtue”
means “economic viability.” Indeed, the heroine must treat herself as a “commodity”
in a consumer culture where virtue signals the subjection of women to the laws gov-
erning the exchange of property (Clery, 1995, 122).

For Angela Keane, discussing Gothic and the aesthetic tradition of the picturesque
as “ambivalent signs of British national identity,” the appeal to a Gothic past of
strength, nobility, and liberty recalls “both the nature of a stolen British liberty and
of the barbaric culture out of which native neoclassicism triumphantly arose” (Keane,
1995, 99, 102). The fantasy that sustains continuity with an idealized and naturalized
national past, in opposition to artificial and imported tyrannies of absolutist monarchy,
elevates the parliamentary and constitutional tradition of British government. The
gradual development of British institutions preserves the continuity of a nation
embracing monarchy, church, and aristocracy along with the improvements of com-
mercial enterprise and bourgeois society. It is, like the law, a “commodious labyrinth”
of careful reform and amendment in which the Goths stand as “the symbolic guarantee
of a rational ‘democratic’ heritage” (Sage, 1988, 139). Samuel Kliger refers to this
political deployment of the myth of the Goths in England as “Gothic propaganda,”
though his description seems more in tune with a notion of ideology in that, touching
the “greatest and humblest citizens,” the tracts on Gothic liberty and free constitu-
tional spirit defined “the desire indicated in their sense of collective moral being which
alone deserves the name of ‘nation’” (Kliger, 1952, 209). This desire, moreover,
articulating the collective bonds of nationhood, is structured, not on a “real” past, but
on an imagined, mythical source of unity: “Perhaps it is true that the Gothic ideal in
England remained no more than an ideal” (239).

Ideal though the Gothic political myth may have been, it continued to exert effects
throughout the century. In the heated political debates occasioned by the Revolution
in France, “Gothic” looms large and divisively. Edmund Burke’s virulent attack on
revolutionaries and reformers, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), repeatedly recalls a Gothic heritage to contrast an ordered and civilized England with a monstrously unnatural, irrational, and barbaric France. The bloodless Revolution of 1688 and the unwritten constitution that followed are cited as the basis of English liberty and order, preserving not only the monarchy, nobility, and church, but also the rights of men. A spirit lacking in a Europe beset by revolutionary ideas, the spirit of religion and the gentleman, is also celebrated by Burke as a source of liberty, continuity, and social unity since it maintains the customs, manners, sentiments, and morals that bind a nation together. This appeal to a chivalric, romantic code of conduct upheld by gallant and honorable gentlemen is most evident when Burke nostalgically recalls a visit to the French court years before the Revolution: captivated by the presence of the French queen, he remarks how he “thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.” “But the age of chivalry,” he sentimentally acknowledges, “is gone. – That of sophisters, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever” (Burke, 1969, 170).

This chivalric tradition of respecting an ideal femininity, moreover, was regularly celebrated in the eighteenth century as one of the distinctive and valuable characteristics of Gothic culture (Kliger, 1952, 223). Ironically, it was a woman who, in her rapid and critical response to Burke’s *Reflections*, vigorously attacked the irrational “Gothic” assumptions of his argument. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published as an open letter to Burke in 1790, rebuts his notion of gentlemanly conduct as the “Gothic affability” appropriate to “the condescension of a Baron, not the civility of a liberal man” (Wollstonecraft, 1989, V, 17). She also questions the Gothic heritage of legal and political constitutional amendment, asking why it is necessary “to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of Gothic materials? Why were the legislators obliged to rake amongst heterogenous ruins; to rebuild old walls, whose foundations could scarcely be explored . . . ?” (Wollstonecraft, 1989, V, 41). Indeed, for Wollstonecraft, Burke only mourns “the idle tapestry that decorated a gothic pile, and the dronish bell that summoned the fat priest to prayer” (V, 58). Wollstonecraft’s radical rationalist critique, based on a thoroughly enlightened morality, has no time for Gothic sentiments associated with aristocratic injustice and inhumanity. Her terms, though not her political position, reiterate the criticism of Gothic fiction which, in the panic of the 1790s, presented romances as serious threats to social order, to the point where, as the Marquis de Sade noted, fiction and politics became dangerous bedfellows, the former a product of the “revolutionary shocks” reverberating around Europe (Sade, 1989, 109).

The poet and critic T. J. Matthias also associates popular fiction and revolutionary politics. For him, however, the “Gothic” of the Gothic novel, which had become so popular in the previous decade, retained none of the glamour and national value of the Goths. Fiction, like radical pamphlets, encouraged licentious and corrupt behavior, both sexual and political in form. The link between Gothic fictions and revolutionary actions is evident in Matthias’s representation of the “Gallic frenzy” caused
by novels and the “superstitious corruption,” “lawless lustihood,” and rapacious brutality of villainous Frenchmen (Matthias, 1805, 4). In contrast to Matthias’s association of corrupting fiction and politics, another writer and critic equally appalled by events in France makes a strong, if unfashionable, case for the beneficial and stabilizing effects of the Gothic romance. Clara Reeve, who had years before promoted a more sober, reasonable, and bourgeois type of romance in her novel The Old English Baron (1778), prefaced her Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon (1793) with comments promoting the work as, in Arthur Cooke’s words, an “antidote to the new philosophy by presenting a glorification of the manners and customs of medieval times.” Reeve writes of her intention

In Reeve’s version of the Gothic romance a continuity is evinced between the myth of the Goths as a national and political fantasy and fiction as its support. In Matthias’s account, assuming eighteenth-century judgments of the corrupting effects of popular fiction, an absolute division between the novel and good social and political order is underlined. The ambivalence of “Gothic” as a critical term again appears: not only is it a utopic mirror that preserves an imagined and ideal continuity with the past, but it also serves as an inverted reflection marking a distinct break in the progress of history.

The ambivalence of “Gothic,” moreover, appears within eighteenth-century aesthetic criticism, crossing boundaries and disrupting categories as much as it serves to preserve them. The Gothic mirror offers a heterogeneous and conflicting reflection of the present. This is particularly evident in the terms that Reeve uses to promote the effectiveness of the Gothic romance in the troubled political times of the 1790s: she employs standard eighteenth-century critical judgments stating that representation should provide examples of virtue or warnings against vice. This distinction, however, was more commonly invoked in the criticism of Gothic fiction rather than in its defense. Indeed, judgments of the value of realistic novels depended on the exclusion of improbable romances. Samuel Richardson makes the contrast explicit as he advances the “easy and natural manner” of the new writing called the novel, arguing that its value emanates from the way that it “might possibly turn young people into a course of reading different from the pomp and parade of romance-writing, and dismissing the improbable and the marvellous with which novels generally abound, might tend to promote the cause of religion and virtue” (Richardson,
In her preface to *Evelina* (1778), Fanny Burney warns her reader in similar terms to expect no transportation “to the fantastic regions of Romance, where Fiction is coloured by all the gay tints of luxurious Imagination, where Reason is an outcast and where the sublimity of the Marvelous rejects all aid from sober Probability.” Where romances display only a “wild strain of the imagination,” the novel ought to “exhibit life in its true state” (Johnson, 1986, 175–6); where romances present “fabulous persons and things,” novels offer a “picture of real life and manners” (Reeve, 1970, I, 69). The novel’s positive image and socially beneficial function emerges in the contrast with the romance: fiction ought to provide examples of good, virtuous behavior through representations of real life and nature, the probability of its depictions bound up with its enlightened and didactic function. Romances were seen to eschew moral and rational instruction and stimulate all kinds of luxurious, superstitious, and indulgent fancies, thereby seducing young readers from the proper paths of social and familial duty and virtuous understanding (Williams, 1970). Here, the specter of unbridled, appetitive consumption shadows the case for the novel: the growing market for fiction offered to a newly leisured middle class by authors, publishers, and circulating libraries threatens, without proper parental supervision, to overwhelm a ravenous reading public with material of no moral, rational, or social value whatsoever (Lovell, 1987).

The mirror invoked in the privileging of novel over romance is that of mimesis: representations of real life and nature ought to encourage the reader’s understanding of his/her proper place in society and inculcate the appropriate moral discriminations essential to neoclassical taste. Examples of virtuous and vicious conduct were held up for the emulation or caution of readers, good examples promoted as models while, in clear contrast, immoral, monstrous figures were presented as objects of disgust, warnings against the consequences of improper ideas and behavior. The novel thus serves a useful corrective function in the private confines of domestic consumption: recognizing their own deficiencies in the realistic texts they peruse, readers can act to improve themselves and assume a virtuous place in society. With romances and Gothic fiction, however, the social function of the mirror is distorted, its reflections exceeding the proper balance of identification and correction. The utopic mirror of perfected or inverted reflection is intermingled with a heterotopic form. For Foucault, a heterotopia, in contrast to a utopia, is a “counter-site,” an “effectively enacted utopia” in which the real sites of culture are “represented, contested, inverted.” The main features of Gothic fiction, in neoclassical terms, are heterotopias: the wild landscapes, the ruined castles and abbeys, the dark, dank labyrinths, the marvelous, supernatural events, distant times and customs are not only excluded from the Augustan social world but introduce the passions, desires, and excitements it suppressed. The heterotopic mirror, moreover, exists in reality with palpable effects: “it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy” (Foucault, 1986, 24). The mirror of fiction, too, has a counter-Augustan effect. Not only does it transport readers into remote and unreal places, but it is read in a specific place in the present, thereby disturbing a sense of reality along with the aesthetic values supposed to sustain it. The heterotopic mirror
“makes the place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through the virtual point which is over there” (Foucault, 1986, 24).

The disturbance of boundaries between proper reality and unreal romantic identification becomes the major concern of eighteenth-century criticism because it disrupts the order discriminating between virtue and vice: mimesis finds itself distorted by the fanciful effects of romance so that readers, instead of imitating paragons of virtuous conduct, are possessed of “a desire of resembling the fictitious heroine of a novel,” thus losing any sense of reality (Pye, 1786, 337). “A novel heroine,” another critic commented, “though described without a fault, yet if drawn out of nature, may be a very unfit model for imitation” (Cumberland, 1785, 333). The problem of fiction is clearly stated by George Canning when he asks “are not its imperfections so nearly allied to excellence, and does not the excess of its good qualities bear so strong an affinity to imperfection as to require a more matured judgement, a more accurate penetration, to point out the line where virtue ends and vice begins?” (Canning, 1787, 345).

Confounding realistic and fanciful representations, blurring their exemplary and cautionary functions, was detrimental to the undiscriminating eyes of young readers. And yet, this mixture of romance and mimesis formed the basis of Walpole’s blend of ancient and modern in which the former was all “imagination and improbability” and the latter copied from nature: instead, Walpole sets out to describe what “mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions” (Walpole, 1982, 7–8), deliberately transporting eighteenth-century figures into romantic worlds. Fiction itself, as much as the landscapes and cultures it represents, operates in the manner of a heterotopia: consumed in the eighteenth century, it nonetheless counteracted the dominance of neoclassical taste with an alternative and seductive vision of society, nature, and art.

The heterotopic mirror not only distorts the proper perception of the relation between present and past, but introduces a divergent reflection in which “Gothic” marks a discontinuity between political and aesthetic versions of history. Indeed, the perception of both art and nature was undergoing significant revision in the course of the eighteenth century, a revision in part enabled by the diverse aesthetic associations of Gothic culture. Aesthetic judgments of architecture employed classical notions of beauty, valuing regularity, simplicity, proportion, and useful, unified design (Home, 1839, 84). In consequence, Gothic architecture was viewed negatively. John Evelyn’s *Account of Architects and Architecture* (1697) describes how Goths and Vandals demolished beautiful Greek and Roman buildings, “introducing in their stead, a certain fantastical and licentious Manner of Building, which we have since called Modern (or Gothic rather), Congestions of heavy, dark, melancholy and Monkish Piles, without any just Proportion, Use or Beauty, compared with the truly Ancient” (Lovejoy, 1948, 138). Natural beauty, too, was appreciated in the same neoclassical terms for its ordered and harmonious appearance. Anything irregular, unsymmetrical, or disproportioned
In the natural world was thus seen as a monstrous aberration. Mountains, for instance, were considered “unnatural Protuberances,” “Warts” on the otherwise beautiful and ordered surface of nature (Nicholson, 1963, 139). However, with the reevaluations of romance, the aesthetics of the sublime and the imagination, nature was reinvented so that mountains became “temples of Nature,” “natural cathedrals,” places of wonder and sacred inspiration (2).

The change in perception attending the “return to Nature” associated with the Gothic revival was, Lovejoy notes, “a substitution of one for another way of conceiving of ‘Nature’ as the norm and model of art” (Lovejoy, 1948, 164). Here, the popularity of the sublime displaces the centrality of beauty in the appreciation of art and nature. For Hugh Blair, the sublime “produces a sort of internal elevation and expansion of the mind above its ordinary state; and fills it with a degree of wonder and astonishment, which it cannot well express” (Blair, 1796, I, 53). The emotion is evoked by previously devalued natural and architectural objects, so that “a great mass of rocks thrown together by the hand of nature with wildness and confusion, strike the mind with more grandeur, than if they had been adjusted to one another with the most accurate symmetry” (I, 59). Gothic architecture, too, is viewed in the same, sublime spirit as mountains: “a Gothic cathedral raises ideas of grandeur undivided upon the mind, by its size, its height, its awful obscurity, its strength, its antiquity, and its durability” (I, 59). And, Blair later observes, romances also deserved to be appreciated for the same reasons: useful and instructive, they, too, expand the mind (I, 70–1).6

Romance is thoroughly entwined in the development of a nonclassical aesthetic, involving a new sense of nature and, along with it, a positive notion of imagination and creative originality. In the Dedication to his Reliques (1765), a collection of bards and ballads, Thomas Percy comments that these “rude songs of ancient minstrels,” “barbarous productions of unpolished ages,” should be considered “not as labours of art, but as effusions of nature, showing the first efforts of ancient genius, and exhibiting the customs and opinions of remote ages” (Percy, 1966, 1–2). Nature and genius are valued attributes of romantic poetry, distinct from the imitations of classical models, as Edward Young contends in Conjectures on Original Composition (1759). Nature is privileged as one of the elements that guarantee the distinction between an original writer and a mere imitator: “the pen of an Original Writer . . . out of the barren waste calls forth a blooming spring. Out of that blooming spring an Imitator is a transplanter of Laurels which sometimes die on removal, always languish in a foreign soil” (Young, 1966, 10). It is not only creativity that gains from its association with wild natural processes: the imitations of classics, by contrast, are demeaned for their foreign, and implicitly Roman, and unnatural qualities. Indeed, through its connection to nature, romantic poetry came to be seen as a source of mystery and sacred inspiration. Nature, its perception and appreciation, changed when viewed with eyes attuned to the sublimity of romance; conversely, the value and qualities of writing changed as a consequence of a new sense of natural power. Arguing against the weight of neoclassical aesthetic opinion, Richard Hurd presents a powerful image
in favor of romance as “some almighty River, which the fblings of the poets have made immortal” (Hurd, 1963, 5). He goes on to contest the validity of judging Gothic productions by classical rules before inverting the hierarchy to proclaim “the preeminence of the Gothic manners and fictions, as adapted to the ends of poetry, above the classic” (76). Shakespeare and Spenser head Hurd’s list of Gothic poets, since the nature they present and from which they draw inspiration is thoroughly imaginative and nonclassical in form: “a poet, they say, must follow Nature; and by Nature we are to suppose can only be meant the known and experienced course of affairs in the world. Whereas the poet has a world of his own, where the experience has less to do, than consistent imagination” (93). The nature associated with poetic imagination is of a higher order than the reality imitated by neoclassical writers: while pertaining to the “marvellous and extraordinary,” Hurd notes, it is not unnatural but part of what he calls “these magical and wonderworking Natures” (93). In the heterotopic mirror of the past, then, a new, Gothic nature is discovered, a nature of sublimity and imagination that will be appropriated by romantic poets, while Gothic finds itself relegated to the popular and trashy realm of cheap, formulaic fiction.

Nonetheless, even as Gothic is expelled from the new-forged heights of proper culture, it continues to have heterotopic effects, retaining an aura of the mysteries and terrors of romance while losing the sacred sense of poetic and imaginative vision that gave romance its value. Without the grandeur of a wild and natural past, however, Gothic finds itself as the mirror of a baser nature, a symptom of a voraciously consumeristic commercial culture in which pleasure, sensation, and excitement come from the thrills of a darkly imagined counter-world, embracing the less avowable regions of psyche, family, and society as well as the gloomy remoteness of past cultures and rugged landscapes. Gothic remains ambivalent and heterotopic, reflecting the doubleness of the relationship between present and past. Indeed, Gothic continues to stand as a trope of the history of the present itself, a screen for the consumption and projection of the present onto a past at once distant and close by. The play of distance and proximity, rejection and return, telescopes history, both condensing the past into an object of idealized or negative speculation and unraveling and disarming the gaze of the present with its ambivalent return. In the constructions of the eighteenth century, Gothic embraced both the customs of the medieval period, the diverse writings associated with the northern tribes of Europe and the Elizabethan poets, like Spenser and Shakespeare, who inherited its magical tradition. History was romanced. In the 1930s, stories are set in an early nineteenth century, “now become a ‘Gothic’ period itself, its customs cruelly repressive in twentieth-century eyes” (Baldick, 1992, xv). Subsequently, the end of the nineteenth century provides the trappings of Gothic mystery and romance: Francis Ford Coppola’s Bram Stoker’s Dracula, for instance, “authenticates” its Gothic appeal in lurid images of Victorian decadence, a setting that, ironically, served to establish the anxieties of the modernity addressed in the novel itself. Here, again, Gothic remains a bobbin on a string, cast away and pulled back in the constitution of the subject of the present, a subject whose history and modernity will have been.
Notes

1 Longueil (1923) observes: “the word is ‘protean’ even in its orthography. The NED lists the spellings Gotic, Gotiq, Gothicke, Gotic, Gothique, Gothic” (453 n.).

2 For discussions of the origins of romance, see Warton (1979, esp. I, 110–48), Mallet (1847), Hurd (1963), Johnston (1964) and Kliger (1952, esp. 210–40).

3 E. J. Clery (1995) writes of attitudes to economic shifts in the period: “for opponents of a market economy, the difference between real and unreal ownership was clear-cut. Mobile property, bound up in the unstable, ‘imaginary’ mechanisms of speculation and credit, was the threatening alternative to the system of heritable wealth derived from land rents, which laid claim to the values of stability and, by avoiding the abstraction of capital investment and profit, natural law” (74).

4 For a detailed discussion of the political senses of Gothic in England, see Kliger (1952). Mallet (1847) identifies the Gothic spirit of liberty as a legacy to European nations in opposition to a “despotic and military” “yoke of Rome” and an oriental tyranny: “For although the Gothic form of government has been almost everywhere altered, or abolished, have we not retained, in most things, the opinions, the customs, the manners which that government had a tendency to produce? Is not this, in fact, the principal source of that courage, of that aversion to slavery, of that empire of honour which characterize in general the European nations; and of that moderation, of that easiness of access, and peculiar attention to the rights of humanity, which so happily distinguish our sovereigns from the inaccessible and superb tyrants of Asia?” (58).

5 See Punter (1980) for an extended analysis of the bourgeois significance of Gothic fiction.

6 Blair (1796) is careful, however, to distinguish the “magnificent Heroic Romance” from the form of fiction that has “dwindled down to the Familiar Novel” (I, 75).

References


