

Haunting Modernity and the Gothic Presence in  
British Modernist Literature



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## PREFACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## NOTES

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



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