PART I

The Gothic and modernity

I

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Introduction: modernity and the proliferation of the Gothic

On the face of it, modernity would seem at odds with "the Gothic." Granted, that highly mixed mode – a set of often-linked elements rather than a fixed genre – that began in English prose fiction, theater, and some poetry in the eighteenth century has by now crept, throughout the world yet with many of its initial features still visible, into a wide array of media: film, television, surreal art, comic books and graphic novels, paperback "romances" by the hundreds, computer and video games, labyrinthine Web sites in cyberspace, popular or avant-garde music, and the actions and dress of "goth" subcultures, not to mention parodies and self-parodies for more than two centuries. Nonetheless, this extensive "progress" always seems to be pulling backward too, recalling the Gothic's earlier forms, as was the case when the Gothic as we now know it first came about. Even when placed at some distance from, while also referring to, the time of medieval "Gothic" architecture – a misnomer applied by later neoclassicists to the "barbarity" of pointed-arch buildings dating from the 1100s to the 1300s, which were wrongly linked to the fifth-century "Goths" who helped end the Roman Empire[1] – "modern Gothic" certainly seemed a flagrant oxymoron when Horace Walpole published his novella *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. He admitted as much himself in 1765 in the second edition, subtitled *A Gothic Story* (the first use of that label), by way of a second preface that defines this new mode as a "blend" of the "two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern."[2] The "modern" there refers to the rising middle-class novel of that time, concerned heavily with the ideological aspirations of the growing bourgeoisie and anchored in the values of "nature" being "copied with success" and empirically verified "rules of probability" governing character motivation and behavior without supernatural intervention. All of these assumptions were key to that break from older absolutes of religion and politics that soon came to be called the "Enlightenment," a major assertion of modernity by largely Protestant thinkers, of whom Walpole was one. It was the elements in *Otranto* tinged

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with the old-style supernatural, though, thereby recalling "ancient romance" (really pastiches of Shakespearean, operatic, medieval-chivalric, once-Catholic, and ancient Greek features), that then attracted and still attract the most audience interest. Hence Walpole defends them in 1765 as vital to reviving "the powers of fancy," even as he admits some of these elements to be so retrograde that readers should view them as "unnatural … machines" now divorced from their older (and Catholic) groundings while the characters in the story must be rendered as accepting them within the belief systems of their moment. Though already a floating signifier transferred from one referent (fifth-century tribes) to another (high-medieval architecture) and then another (Walpole's hybrid), "Gothic" from Walpole on has thus come to connote a backward-leaning counter-modernity lurking in both the emerging and recent stages of modern life. This retrogression appears to undermine, and in that way "haunt," the assumption that the "modern" has left behind any regressive tendencies that might impede its progress and fulfillment.

Certainly it is those features still redolent of "ancient" romance as they are transformed in their tug-of-war with their "modern" counterpart that have lasted enough in countless variations on this "new Gothic" since *Otranto* to make us know when we are facing the Gothic today even in quite different and more cross-cultural manifestations of Walpole's hybrid scheme. Those features include (a) antiquated settings, often with obscured undergrounds harboring age-old texts, from moldering castles, graveyards, mansions/houses, and primitive wildernesses to urban and suburban under-worlds, multilayered computer programs, and aging train stations or spaceships; (b) ghostly or monstrous figures, intermixing life and death as well as other incompatibilities, that loom forth in or invade these settings, usually because of secrets from the past buried deep in memories or archives, and may be either supernatural or psychological in origin, at times even hinting at a personal or cultural unconscious; (c) central char-acters, such as Walpole's Manfred or Theodore, consequently caught between conflicting systems of belief, being pulled retrogressively toward outmoded superstitions while also being open to more progressive thinking, like the two-faced god of ancient Rome (Janus) that looks backward and forward simultaneously; (d) women specifically, such as Walpole's Isabella and Matilda, trapped and terrified in archaic patriarchal structures yet also starting to see dim possibilities for greater freedom and equality that might blur old boundaries of sex and gender; and (e) over-the-top word-patterns and images that incongruously mix "old romantic" hyperbole – including the obscure and terrifying "sublime" aroused by ruins suggestive of ghosts in Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry*

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of 1757[3] – with forms of quasi-realism, often joined with disruptions of standard linear narrative.

Consequently, any "light" of rational revelation in the Gothic is always countered by a fearsome chiaroscuro that mixes illumination with ominous and mysterious darkness, as well as reversals of progressive time, creating what we now know as the scary "Gothic atmosphere" that lingers on in so many forms today. These elements can be manipulated by authors, film-makers, and game creators toward an emphasis on *terror* (the frightened anticipation of potential, but uncertain, threats, as in the 1790s romances of Ann Radcliffe) or a confrontation with *horror* (visible violence, dismember-ment, and death, as in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* of 1796), provided there is always the reassuring safety of the observer implied by the blatant fictiveness, the hyperbolic exaggeration, of the atmosphere and the situation being presented, making it all "just a story." Since the Gothic is a mixture of quite different elements and inherently unstable anyway, some fictions use only partial forms of it, employing several but not all of the above elements alongside very different conventions. Others attempt a full-blown Gothic recalibrated to the cultural fears of their own times by including all these features in some form, invoking the thoroughly Gothic, as opposed to the semi- or near-Gothic, for the many layers it offers of symbolic, as well as emotional, suggestiveness.

True, with these characteristics being somewhat uprooted, even by Walpole, from older ways of thinking that once underwrote them, they, like the word "Gothic," can be transported out of their past contexts, despite some harkenings back that always linger. Because of that mobility, they can be used to intimate, while also to disguise, conflicts between regressive and progressive tendencies, a set of widely felt, underlying, unresolved quandar-ies, in the cultural belief systems (or ideologies) of the audience at the time of each new work. That is why the scholar-critic E. J. Clery has rightly seen Walpole's inaugural "Gothic Story" as both wildly fictionalizing and suggesting – and hence exaggerating, while obscuring – a "contradiction" in the author's and his culture's thinking "between the traditional [or old aristocratic] claims of landed property and the new [more bourgeois] claims of the private family."[4] This sublimated contestation was really more frightening at the time than the ghosts and portents in Walpole's story announced specifically as "exploded now" in first preface of 1764 in an era when such vestiges of "ancient" Catholicism had become symbols mostly of emptied-out meanings. The hybridity of the Walpolean, and now the post-Walpolean, Gothic counters the surface claims of the sup-posedly greater modernity in which it continues to appear. It does so by intimating the Janus-faced nature of the unresolved pulls between older and

newer systems of belief, including the resulting conflicts within or among people, which really underlies nearly all Gothic fictions constructed mainly for middle-class audiences. As David Punter, a major Gothicist, has written, it is in the Gothic that "the middle class displaces the hidden violence of present social structures," what the Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek calls the repressed "Real" of underlying "social antagonisms," and so "conjures them up again as past," thereby falling "promptly under their spell,"[5] using its special mixture of symbols to throw off (or "abject")[6] the conflicted underpinnings of the lives and the world that the members of the bourgeoisie want to imagine for themselves.

All the essays in this *Companion*, even so, propose to explain many of the different forms in which this Gothic mode has reappeared in more recent times by revealing how much the Gothic, despite its apparent countering of the modern, is deeply bound up with the contradictions basic to modern existence, even the "post"-modernity of more recent decades. We – all the authors here – in fact, have set out to analyze many of the manifestations in which this very paradox appears across the very late nineteenth, the twentieth, and the early twenty-first centuries. As we see it, the Gothic hints at the obscure anomalies of its times during these modern periods even more than once it did in 1764–1765 and across the six decades afterward in England, Western Europe, and America, the time and places in which the Gothic first grew into a major symbolic scheme in the West.

The philosopher-historian Charles Taylor has defined the "social imaginary" of modern life in Western cultures, "the ways in which [people during and after the Enlightenment] imagine their social existence ... in images, stories, legends, etc.,"[7] in a way that helpfully reveals the tensions underlying all of them, as we want to argue that the Gothic does as well. For him modernity, yes, is an "amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality) and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution)."[8] But within all of these is the profound complication, given the post-Enlightenment questioning of older certainties, that "we have changed not just *from* a condition where most people lived 'naively' " with an acceptance of supernatural intervention into perceived reality, but also "*to* one in which almost no one is capable of this," while at the same time much of the West believes that such an option remains "*one among many.*"[9] In modernity, then, vestiges of older schemes of belief, as well as newer ones, are still among the alternatives that individuals now see themselves as free, not forced, to select. They remain the kinds of grounding, ironically, that many "moderns" still long for in an increasingly less grounded and secular

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world. In the words of American professor Diane Long Hoeveler, this modern "imaginary" is therefore one of "ambivalent secularization." At the heart of it is a "paradox" within "the invention of the modern individual" that is caused by an "ideological split," taking many different forms, between people needing to accept "immanence," a process of everything emerging from within natural developments, including empirical perception, and the same people desiring some level of "transcendence," a causality from some agency – and a separate level of being – beyond the immediately natural or consciously human.[10] It is the hybrid Gothic among post-Enlightenment creations, we claim here, in which this unresolved undercurrent of modernity is best suggested, most forcefully symbolized, and most vividly struggled over, all under the cover of an extreme form of fiction, indeed a pastiche, that may or may not be taken seriously by audiences.

We would add, too, that this conflict in the social unconscious, which the Gothic hints at while also obscuring, enables, even more than Hoeveler describes, a "raucous, contested terrain" of struggles between ways of thinking.[11] At that level of the modern, individual or group quests for workable configurations of human psychology, class, sex and gender, race, nationality, power, law, cultural "superiority" or "inferiority," and even aesthetic form – all problems in constructing any "imaginary" of the modern self in the wake of "ambivalent secularization" – are pulled between retrograde or regressive and emergent or progressive constructions of all these, as well as between claims of "immanent" or "transcendent" causalities as realms from which solutions to the conflicts might come. It is by being extremely and eclectically fictional in a Janus-faced way, we would argue, that forms of the Gothic have become essential to the articulation of such a contentious modernity. The regressive *and* progressive nature of the Gothic has been *and remains* necessary to deal with the social unconscious of modern humanity in all its extreme contradictions spawned by its looking backward and forward so much of the time, even today. We therefore propose to trace the Gothic's now global proliferation across many of the sociocultural and aesthetic spaces that modernity has spawned under the assumption, the basis of this book, that the Gothic is endemic to the modern. After all, the ever-extending tentacles of modern enterprise are always haunted by the doubts, conflicts, and blurring of normative boundaries that the Gothic articulates in every form it assumes because, at its best, it is really *about* the profoundly conflicted core of modernity itself.

No Gothic text after the dawn of modernity, of course, can better exemplify this mode's intimations of modernity's deep tensions in a part-naturalistic, part-fantastic fiction than Mary Shelley's original

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Frankenstein (1818), the most influential Gothic text ever published and the basis of numerous modern adaptations that reshape its suggestions about early-modern conflicts into "monstrous" symbols of similar or different undercurrents at later stages of history. Rearranging virtually all the "Gothic" elements of Walpole's *Otranto*[12] while anxiously reflecting the cultural quandaries of its day about science, technology, industrial production, individual initiative, and the nature of the unconscious, Shelley's Gothic story has its title character try to give shape to a post-Enlightenment humanity by fashioning a prototype of its supposed perfectibility, but also, in the same process, symbolizing in that construct some of the most pervasive conflicts troubling Western humanity after the American and French revolutions. These Janus-like tugs-of-war, inside and outside Shelley's novel, include recollections of medieval alchemy being resisted by later-eighteenth-century chemistry and the even wider debate of the 1810s over whether the source of infusible life is transcendent (from an outside electrical "light") or immanent (arising within "the minutiae of causation" visible in relations among the body parts used to compose the new humanoid being).[13] The large and swarthy end product of this morass is monstrous to Victor Frankenstein because it/he, in being the "living dead," is a stitching together of the ancient and the modern, thus incarnating conflicted modernity in that alone. In the Gothic yoking of opposites, it/he also becomes a haunting site, as well as an alter ego of his maker, in which he and we can throw off, but also behold, myriad social and psychological antagonisms underlying modernity. Among them are the need for, yet the dehumanization of, industrial workers on the part of the educated middle class;[14] an awareness of, but also a revulsion at, the white race's dependence on many different "other" ones (suggested in the creature's multicolored face);[15] the deep male need for the maternal and the feminine (as in Victor's dream of re-embracing his dead mother right after his creation comes to life)[16] set over against patriarchy's sidelining of women as science takes even giving birth away from them; and the desired separation of the producer from his product in the rising Industrial Revolution intermixed with the possibility, given the Enlightenment rooting of responsibility in every person's inner depths, that this monster's actions really carry out his creator's own preconscious desires (as we see when the creature kills Victor's fiancée and reminds us that Frankenstein unconsciously holds her responsible for the death of his mother). Why else does Victor come to feel, anticipating so much of the vampire-and-cyborg traditions in more recent Gothic, that the creature may well be "my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced," like some extension of a rapacious modern entrepreneur, "to destroy all that was

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dear to me" in the process of being an alienated self-representation of its creator and the human race?[17]

Shelley's *Frankenstein* even plays out the conflict in the Walpolean Gothic and the modern social imaginary over the human body. Here there is a shocking concentration on the massive physicality and sexual outreach of the body and yet a desire to distance that body from people in an objectified representation of it. Both drives are intensified in the outsized creature's desire for a mate, yet also in Victor's effort to make its larger-than-normal body an othered representation of humanity away from himself and all those around him, like all the dis-embodied ghosts in *Otranto* that the creature does resemble. Here the subject (Victor again) does not really want to confront the sheer multiplicity of the grossly physical or the confusingly sexual even while raising up a model or signifier of them. This paradox is still visible in modern humanity's greater comfort with artificial and technological simulations of the body than with the gross fluidity or morbidity of it. We are therefore confronting more undercurrents of modernity itself, as well as inconsistencies in Victor's personal unconscious, in Shelley's novel, both later when he destroys the body-in-process of the female creature he has promised to make[18] and earlier when he hopes he can look on the visage of his male creation and find it artistically, as well as physically, "beautiful."[19] What he confronts at both moments is an inchoate mass of sensual and racial multiplicity that leads him to throw off this complex and conflicted reality, including his own homoeroticism (his attraction to the *man* he imagines he is making), into what now seems a horrifying representation of the *in*-human, even though it really embodies elemental man and nearly all of Victor's personal longings.[20] Modern humanity's use of technologies to extend and reconstruct the self and thereby estrange, and even protect, the self from itself could not be symbolized more vividly or reveal the quandaries within it more thoroughly. In the face of such capacities of the Gothic so visible in *Frankenstein* and its endless reworkings, there can be little doubt that this mixed mode is modernity's dark, if fictive, "ghost," the specter within it that haunts it with hyperbolic symbols of the most underlying and unresolved conflicts between and within the modern world's constructions of human life, the body, and the world.

The Gothic, we would also claim, is about the conflicted "social unconscious" of modernity even when it reappears within what many critics now regard as *post*-modernity. By most accounts, the postmodern in its many aesthetic forms, compared to the modern (supposedly finished by the mid-1960s) and brought into prominence for many by Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), openly makes "references" to "earlier styles and conventions" that assume a near-complete divorce of those signifiers from

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fixed meanings or older contexts; the consequence is usually "a deliberate mixing of different styles and media (often with self-referential or parodic intent)," because of their uprooted condition, along with a stepped-up "incorporation of images relating to consumerism, mass-communication, etc."[21] This peculiar combination, as the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has said, reveals what underlies this entire way of seeing and writing: "that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" in an era of global capitalism ungrounded in a single location or any agreed-on system of beliefs.[22] We in this collection believe the Gothic is, first, a precursor of this counter-aesthetic and thus, more recently, a fellow traveler with postmodernity as defined above. *Lot 49* itself, it could be argued, is evidence of that fact. Its haunted 1960s heroine becomes obsessed with interpreting sporadically appearing signifiers that may hint at a one-time organization for posting letters that was possibly operative back in Walpole's eighteenth century. This system may have been taken over by a more recent one, but it may then have gone underground and continued to exist, leaving ghostly verbal/visual indicators scattered around San Francisco, a mystery that is never solved and may even have been hallucinated. This regression of layers is indicative of a late modernity where nearly everything is commodified texts looking back only to texts and where the perceptions of characters may therefore be just as ghost-like and ungrounded.[23] As the late professor Allan Lloyd Smith has shown us, such "indeterminacy" of meaning is basic even to Walpole's Gothic, since *Otranto* withdraws believability from its "ancient romance" ingredients, thereby making its ghosts signs of empty signs (of effigies and paintings more than people). The Gothic thus sets in motion "competing non-privileged narratives and contradictory discourses ['ancient' versus 'modern romance']" "to produce an uncertainty of signs [the uncertainty of the postmodern] by locating each of them within more than one interpretive framework."[24] One danger, to be sure, is that the Gothic as postmodern can become sheer capitalist reproductions of its emptied elements, what Jameson laments as the "airport paperback categories of the gothic and romance," void of any reference to the conflicted "underside of culture."[25] Several of the essays in this *Companion*, though, argue what Lloyd Smith and, quite recently, Professor Glennis Byron have found instead:[26] that the creative Gothic as pre-postmodern (*Frankenstein*, for example) and postmodern (in *Lot 49* and much more) uses the uprooted and circulating signs that enable capitalist globalization – frequently the ghosts of earlier specters – to give form to the fears and irresolvable conflicts now underlying that very globalization, as was the case even in Mary Shelley's time, given *Frankenstein*'s allusions to international slavery and colonization in the signs of them on the creature's face.

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