Modernity & the Gothic

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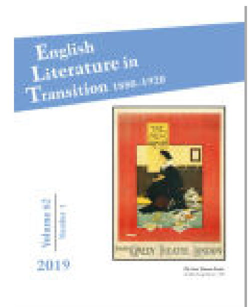

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Book Reviews

Modernity & the Gothic

Daniel Darvay. *Haunting Modernity and the Gothic Presence in British Modernist Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. x + 218 pp. $109.00

IN THE PAST TWENTY YEARS scholarly interest in the intertwined histories of modernism and the gothic has increased noticeably. The publication of edited collections, including Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace's *Gothic Modernisms* (2001), John Paul Riquelme's *Gothic and Modernism: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity* (2008), and now Daniel Darvay's *Haunting Modernity and the Gothic Presence in British Modernist Literature* (2016), all identify and argue for the importance of the overlaps connecting these seemingly distinct ideas. Studies of the gothic and modernism share in the conviction that modernist writers adopted the conventions of the gothic form because these were generative for addressing psychical, political, social and other aesthetic and historical questions. Many also wrestle with the desirable, but seemingly impossible, end of defining the gothic in a manner that does not succumb to negation. As Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall expressed in *A New Companion to the Gothic* (2012), the gothic—especially as the modernists used this literary form—had to represent more than merely "anti-Enlightenment rebellion." In fact, the continuing significance of the gothic depends upon what it accomplishes and advocates. What Darvay's monograph newly argues is that this difficult literary form signals modernity's commencement.

In *Haunting Modernity*, readers learn that British modernist writers engaged with the often overdetermined gothic tradition for a variety of reasons, but these motives were intentional and never extrinsic to the author's intent. Darvay's researches concerning the history of modernist literature in the gothic form focus particularly on late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century authors preoccupied with sexuality, specifically Oscar Wilde and D. H. Lawrence, as well as shifting definitions of Englishness, evidenced in the fictions of Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster. His study is sure to interest literary scholars of the gothic mode and modernism, but his discussions of electricity will also appeal

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to history of science scholars, and his concern with subject formation will attract historians of politics and liberalism.

Darvay has written a monograph that sweeps broadly in time, seeming to adopt a *longue durée* approach to literary history. Instead of structuring his project as a survey of twentieth-century British modernist texts, Darvay begins his inquiry in chapter one with the English Reformation. Noting the influx of works published on the topic of sacrilege, he identifies England's fraught relationship with Catholicism during the seventeenth century as the source of this theme's popularity. Religious upheaval rested uneasily beside the cause of maintaining the monarchy's authority. The English nobility were particularly upset by the rootedness of their country houses in a now disavowed Catholic past. Darvay suggests that gothic novelists beginning with Walpole were actually seeking out creative retribution for the perceived sacrileges for which these aristocrats felt guilty. Studying Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" as a template for later sacrilege narratives owing to its themes of usurpation, ancestry, and punishment, Darvay traces these ideas in *The Castle of Otranto* before examining its vestiges in modernist literature. The psychic crisis of guilt, doubling, and the enemy within is what connects these early gothic fictions to modernist texts like Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. Modernist fictions revel in the imaginative space this genre provided so that "the Gothic paradoxically emerges as guardian of modernity." The remainder of *Haunting Modernity* focuses predominantly on one author for each chapter.

Chapter two studies Augustine, Luther, and Descartes to locate the gothic modernism of Wilde. Wilde set aside Protestantism and toyed with Catholicism not only because, like so many Decadents, he found ritualism aesthetically appealing, but also because the Catholic faith permitted him to abandon the Enlightenment search for certainty. The repercussions of the Catholic sacrament of penance were national and not only metaphysical, because reliance on an intercessor threatened to undermine the self sufficiency required of modern English subjectivity. Deploying the gothic staple of the labyrinth, Darvay shows that these complex obstacles functioned to not only entrap gothic heroines in castles; they also acted as a philosophical and theological metaphor for self knowledge achieved through confession. Epistemological uncer-

tainty, Darvay explains, appealed to Wilde, who revelled in circuitous abstractions. However, this interstitiality enabled prosecutors during Wilde's 1895 trial to cast him as a powerful and corrupting because amoral gothic villain. Because Wilde's trial was built upon uncertain evidence of stained bedsheets and passages of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "his prosecutors virtually turned themselves into potential victims of a longtime Catholic threat that they saw revived in a new form in decadent literature and culture."

In chapter three Darvay studies the politicization of the gothic form evident in the plots of post-1871 invasion literature culminating in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. Equating it to fears of Catholic invasion, Darvay argues that gothic plots concerning spies and espionage originated in late-eighteenth-century anxieties about British Jacobinism. Gothic fictions appearing at this time by Ann Radcliffe and William Godwin expressed uneasiness regarding surveillance and governmental authority. Establishing the model of the spy as both foe and defender of the English way of life, *fin-de-siècle* gothic fictions returned to the theme of political espionage out of an anxiety about the state's role in delimiting insider and outsider status. As a Polish expatriate, Conrad was deeply troubled by the uncertainty of his place within English society. The gothic, and particularly the paranoid gothic spy plot, permitted Conrad to confront his anxieties about being an eternal outsider in both Slavic and Western cultures.

By offering a history of the Grand Tour, chapter four interprets Forster's *The Longest Journey* and *A Room with a View* as condemnations of urbanization in Britain, and appeals to reinstate an agrarian way of life for the health of the nation. Pulling in themes of imperialism, the gothic permitted modernist authors such as Forster to frame an English presence in Italy in terms of absolution and retrieving something lost. Rather than a playspace for aristocrats, "the Grand Tour was ultimately a vehicle of domestic social restructuring, so Forster's Italy makes rural England cosmopolitan while saving it from domestic, middle-class urbanization." In this way Darvay shows that the Tour offered an update to long standing and stereotypical ideas about the criminality and degeneracy of Italy adopted from late-eighteenth-century gothic fictions.

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Chapter five uses theories of consciousness to open up the gothic doubling trope in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Adopting ideas of the sublime from sensation fiction, Darvay shows that the mind in Woolf's novel becomes an infinite space that requires ideas about human psychology to understand, and the Burkean language of aesthetics and the sublime to describe. Sensation fictions by M. E. Braddon and Wilkie Collins moved criminality into the domestic sphere, but because they absorbed themes from the gothic, they simultaneously assisted the project of modernity by moving plots out of the past and into the present. Darvay argues that the role of art, and especially photographs and drawings of madness, demonstrates the centrality of aesthetics to the discourses of modernity and the gothic. In fact, because modernists were concerned with representational authenticity the visual arts act as a significant indication that "modern psychology was born out of the Gothic tradition." Woolf's fictions focus upon the enemy within that she identified in modern society, and in *To the Lighthouse* specifically the artist protagonist possesses extraordinary powers of perception. This capacity permits her to unmask hidden characters, a typical feature in the gothic form, while also vouchsafing her a sublime vista into the otherwise dark domains of human consciousness.

Darvay's final chapter approaches Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* to continue his examination of the psychological aspects of the gothic. These sexualized secret interiors act as both the spurs for desire and checks upon these urges. Focusing on the simultaneously material and immaterial phenomenon of electricity, which appealed to Britons in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for its occult and scientific possibilities, Darvay shows its metaphoric potential in signifying revolutionary change within gothic fictions. Galvanism has long appealed to novelists writing in the gothic mode, appearing in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, because modern science cannot fully contain this superhuman power or the monsters they invigorate. In much the same way the Brangwen family in Lawrence's *The Rainbow* employs the symbol of electricity to indicate sometimes monstrous emotions, impulses, and urges they cannot fully comprehend as they struggle to conform to the modern conditions of life.

Throughout *Haunting Modernity* Darvay is careful to frame the gothic in terms of its plurality and plasticity, which makes the interstices between this literary mode and the discourse of modernity that he identifies all but incontestable—however slight. I was most convinced by Darvay's explanation of the gothic's instrumentality for defining Englishness in opposition to a foreign and vestigial Catholicism. This cultural and historical framing permits *Haunting Modernity* to address the modern and the gothic in a manner that contributes illuminating texture to these aesthetic, cultural, and political ideas.

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Chesterton & Literary Modernism

Michael Shallcross. *Rethinking G. K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2018. xii + 295 pp. $150.00

FROM MY FIRST adolescent encounter with his Father Brown stories, G. K. Chesterton messed with my mind. Did I enjoy the stories? I could not decide. Did they convey anything deeper than their sketch-like plots? I was not sure. Something not quite revealed seemed to flicker ghostly through them, but finally the pristine edges of the stories' rhetorical surfaces remained my only perch.

Years later, I would revisit my initial struggle with Chesterton's fiction. In an essay (1977) on the Father Brown stories, I focused on the author's darker (albeit not necessarily hopeless) sense of occluded human perception in a twilit life relentlessly subject to change and ambiguity. In a later article (1990) on *The Club of Queer Trades*, I pushed harder, imaging Chesterton's "ideal reader" as someone prompted to personally complete each narrative through a new or renewed openness to changeable perception.

But in *Rethinking G. K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism* Michael Shallcross asks: what if searching for a consistent core of meaning is not quite pertinent to this author's fiction? What if a reader's experience of perceptual haze results from irresolvable ambiguities scripted for a theatrical performance designed more for the author than for the reader? Expanding on an article he published in *ELT*, 59.3 (2016), 320–43, Shallcross examines Chesterton's rickety effort to find some sort of