The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction

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Published by Edinburgh University Press

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The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction: Histories, Origins, Theories.

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In 1963, an efficient little shocker called *Dementia 13* (or, *The Haunted and the Hunted*, to go by the title under which it appeared in the United Kingdom) was released, somewhat misleadingly promoted as ‘the most terrifying screen experience of your life’. The film concerns the Halorans, a castellated, fabulously wealthy, Irish landed family whose members appear to be cursed, haunted by the ghost of Kathleen, the youngest daughter, who drowned in a mysterious childhood accident in the family lake. Kathleen may be dead but she is certainly not forgotten and her puzzling demise is commemorated annually by a strange ritual choreographed by the family matriarch, the events of the plot taking place during the seventh such act of remembrance. During the course of the film, it appears as if Kathleen is less-than-faithfully departed and determined to wipe out the rest of the clan from beyond the grave in a series of brutally executed (and well-shot) axe murders. In an unsurprising denouement, the murderer is finally revealed to be rather more flesh and blood than spirit, however, and it is in fact Kathleen’s traumatised brother, Billy, who is set on re-uniting the family in the next world.

While a passable B-movie, only noted by film scholars as the first film directed by the then almost completely unknown Francis Ford Coppola, *Dementia 13* is interesting from an Irish studies perspective for a number of reasons. The eerie use Coppola makes of Irish locations, shooting them as inherently frightening spaces in which anything could be (and probably is) lurking, the dysfunctional family dynamics (the Halorans are possibly even more psychopathic than the Corleones, the central figures in Coppola’s *Godfather* trilogy (1972–90)) and the familiar
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Gothic trope of the past violently erupting into the present connect this minor horror film to a much longer cultural tradition which figures Ireland as a zone of weirdness, the supernatural and the pathological.

At the time of shooting, Coppola was working for the veteran horror maestro Roger Corman, who had just wrapped up The Young Racers (a charmingly terrible film about racing car drivers and the women who love them), which he filmed all around Europe, finishing up in Ireland, and Dementia 13 was basically made with the left-over budget from Corman’s film, with some of its actors thrown in, supplemented by additional players brought in from the Abbey Theatre. The Irish setting was, then, purely happenstance, since, as Kim Newman points out, Coppola would have filmed in Texas had he been there at the time. 2 Coppola got the most out of the location, however, and while naming the dead daughter Kathleen was probably simply a matter of invoking something suitably ‘Oirish’ for an American audience, it (un)happily results in the personal history of the Halorans becoming (unintentionally) emblematic of a national history in which the Irish are haunted by the ghost of a different Kathleen (ni Houlihan) and young men are led into perpetuating murderous deeds on her behalf. Concerning a ritual commemoration of death, and released three years before the Irish state celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising with tremendous pomp and circumstance, the film implicates such commemorative events in a cycle of madness and murder and suggestively anticipates the blame that would later be heaped on the anniversary festivities for the renewed campaign of the Irish Republican Army in 1969. Moreover, the IRA’s Border Campaign had just finished in 1962, and the image of young men conducting murderous assaults because of the memory of a ghostly and allegorical woman would have been fresh in the minds of an Irish audience at the very least. 3

Therefore, although Ireland was little more than incidental to its planning, the film resonates with what had by then become a very traditional version of Ireland as a site of queer goings on, and Coppola is merely utilising a recognisable trope in cinematic tradition which associates Ireland with either quaint Celtic charm or grand Gothic guignol (or sometimes both). For every Finian’s Rainbow (1968 – and also directed by Coppola, who must have been smitten by Irish blarney), with its jolly, cheerful leprechaun grotesquely over-played by Tommy Steele, there is a Leprechaun (1993; dir. Mark Jones) with a leering, gurning, homicidal version of the same mythical creature, played this time by Warwick Davis who seems to be enjoying himself a bit too much in the role. Ireland, and its (real and mythical) inhabitants, are convenient shorthand for the supernaturally bizarre and appealing in Walt Disney’s
Darby O’Gill and the Little People (1959; dir. Robert Stevenson), and Dublin reappears as the location for the origin myth of the title character of the television series Angel (1999–2004). A recent example of this easy identification of Ireland with the demonic and the supernatural, Hellboy II: The Golden Army (2008; dir., Guillermo del Toro), ends under the Giant’s Causeway in County Antrim, which is apparently where the Angel of Death hangs out. While the cinematic incarnation of these Gothic Irish associations is relatively recent, it draws on a long history of such representations in literary terms. If Ireland is a source of demented axe murderers for Coppola, for the ancient Greek geographer Strabo it was inhabited by incestuous cannibals who ‘deemed it commendable to devour their deceased fathers’. For Giralduus Cambrensis (Gerald of Wales), in Topographia Hibernia (c.1185), Ireland was populated by a bunch of deranged perverts who enjoyed sex with goats, lions and especially cows, and he described intimate relations with the latter as ‘a particular vice of that people’. As late as 1775, Gilbert White, the great English naturalist, was encouraging the study of the Irish since the ‘manners of the wild natives, their superstitions, their prejudices, their sordid way of life, will extort many useful reflections’. This particular construction has been especially useful in structuring relations between Ireland and its neighbouring nations. Indeed, the Celtic peripheries have very often been defined in direct opposition to England, so that the highlands of Scotland, the hills and valleys of Wales, and the boglands of Ireland were configured as atavistic zones of the irrational populated by primitive monsters, against which England appeared normal, rational and progressive, a contrast heightened by the Enlightenment. Siobhán Kilfeather has emphasised the juxtaposition of the strange, the dangerous and the Irish in early Gothic fiction, and the direct association of the Celts with the Goths was made by the Scottish antiquarian John Pinkerton in his Dissertation on the Origins and Progress of the Sythians or Goths (1787).

A good representative example of this conflation of Ireland and exotic danger is Sophia Lee’s The Recess (1783–5), a counterfactual history tracing the lives of the twins, Matilda and Ellinor, illegitimate daughters of Mary, Queen of Scots and the Duke of Norfolk. In Lee’s novel Mary and Norfolk had married in secret, sincerely believing Mary’s husband Bothwell dead, only to be shocked by his reappearance, and therefore forced to secrete away their twin girls in an underground hiding place below a monastery, the ‘recess’ of the title, in an attempt to protect them. Matilda and Ellinor have various adventures in the course of a long novel, falling in love with the earls of Leicester and Essex and undergoing hardship and exile in their quest to survive. After her husband,
Leicester, dies, Matilda is kidnapped and taken to Jamaica, remaining there for eight years. Her sister, meanwhile, has her own foreign tribulations, travelling to Ireland in search of Essex, where she excites the unwanted sexual desires of the Earl of Tyrone, who imprisons her so that he has the time to seduce her. Ireland is a wild and dangerous space, and Ellinor has little good to say about it or its inhabitants, complaining that it ‘offers to our view a kind of new world; divided into petty states, inveterately hating each other, it knows not the benefit of society . . . The advantages of commerce, the charms of literature, all the graces of civilization, which at once enrich the mind and form the manners, are almost unknown to this people’. 8 So shocked is Ellinor by the behaviour and dress of the native Irish that she speculates that they have about as much in common with her as the ‘inhabitants of the Torrid Zone’, making the parallel between Ireland and Jamaica as exotic and perilous spaces clear for the reader. 9 Ireland is to be interpreted here as if it has somehow been geographically displaced from its true location in the tropics; those visiting the island from the mother country can rightly view themselves as entering a state of nature and incivility, a ‘new world’ in need of taming, or one perhaps impossible to tame. Tyrone’s sexual licence, his perverted, ‘licentious’ and excessive desire for Ellinor, is mirrored by his rebellious ‘hopes of wholly expelling the English, and ascending the throne of Ireland’, allowing sexual and political subversion to merge together in his body. Indeed, his lust may stem from his political greed, so that Irish rebellion is figured as the cause of Irish sexual dissolution. 10

Although Lee’s novel is set during Elizabeth’s Irish wars, her treatment of Ireland is heavily dependent on eighteenth-century prejudicial accounts of the seventeenth century, especially David Hume’s History of England (1754–62), where the rebels of 1641 are described as naturally inclined towards violence and atrocity, a propensity ‘farther stimulated by precept; and national prejudices empoisoned by those aversions, more deadly and incurable, which arose from an enraged superstition’. 11 Given that both sisters have spent their lives in another rather odd location, the recusant priest hole that is the recess, where they have been kept safe from the dangers of a stridently Protestant land, that Ellinor fails to see Ireland as an equivalent space in which the rejected and endangered find refuge is somewhat disappointing. Ireland is even stranger than the hollowed out cave in which the sisters have been raised simply because it is Ireland, whereas the cave is at least to be found in the homeland. This reversion to ethnic and geographical bigotry is also disappointing given that Lee herself had spent a lot of time in Ireland, living in Dublin, where her parents worked as actors, during much of the 1750s. Lee provides a rather more nuanced view of Ireland and the Irish in The Two
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*Emilys* (1798), the eponymous protagonists of which are both raised on the Irish estate of Bellarney. Although one of the Emilys (Fitzallen) is hateful and manipulative, determined to destroy her ‘rival’, the other Emily (Arden), this second Emily changes the initially prejudiced views of the Irish harboured by her cousin the Marquis of Lenox. The Marquis believes that the Irish are ‘wild’, but the key point here is that he has never even met an Irish person, and therefore Emily Arden can, through her kindness and intelligence, demonstrate to him that while Ireland is indeed rustic it is not necessarily therefore also ‘wild’ and uncivilised.

Ireland also makes a cameo appearance in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) when Henry Clerval is murdered by the monster on the Irish coast. Given the setting of this incident in 1797, it is likely that it should be read as an occluded representation of the 1798 rebellion, so that Shelley participates in a larger discourse about the rebellion which figured it as monstrous and atrocious, committed by the subhuman and bestial Irish Catholics. Sir Richard Musgrave, for example, in his monumental *Memoirs of the Various Rebellions* (1801), memorably describes the ‘lower class of the Irish’ as ‘fraudful, ferocious and sanguinary towards such of their fellow subjects as differ from them in religion; and for this reason the Scotch peasant, or mechanic, differs as much from the Irish, as a house dog does from a wolf or a fox’. For critics of the rebellion, the rebels were rather like abject monsters, and Shelley’s association of her creature with the Irish rebels suggests that while it is possible to look on both with pity they are still terrifying presences, and that Ireland is a fit place to find such human detritus. Fred V. Randel has argued that Shelley’s treatment of Ireland in this section of the novel should not be misread as an unsympathetic dismissal of an unregenerate colony. When Victor Frankenstein first sees Ireland from his boat he describes it as possessing a ‘wild and rocky appearance’, a phrase that would seem to confirm negative associations, but he goes on to explain that ‘as I approached nearer, I easily perceived the traces of cultivation’. For Randel, this is an illustration that ‘Mary Shelley temporarily posits and then decisively discounts the stereotypes about the Irish that supported England’s colonial dominance’. Victor’s last words about Ireland, however, position it as a ‘detested’ space, and it remains identified in his mind with murder, madness, imprisonment and loss, so that it is difficult to accept Randel’s liberal reading of the text.

These Gothic associations continue in William Hope Hodgson’s brilliant but bonkers *The House on the Borderland* (1908), which is set in the west of Ireland in a village called Kraighton, 40 miles from Ardrahan in County Galway (where Hodgson lived for a time), a place that turns out to be a gateway to an otherword, out of which come horrific pigmen
(and for some observers, the distance between swinish monsters and the natives would not have been very large). Arthur Machen’s *The Terror* (1917) is set in Wales, but one character, an Irish traveller, announces, ‘I can hardly believe . . . that I’m not still in the wilds of Ireland,’ and who can blame him when the animals all begin a large scale assault on humans – especially given the tendency of the Victorian popular press to depict Ireland as peopled by sub-human beasts. As Luke Gibbons has emphasised, for English readers exoticism ‘begin[s] at home . . . colonization and the animus against Catholicism were inherently bound up with the subjugation of the Celtic periphery’.

It is hardly surprising, then, that many Irish novels written for the English market specifically set out to deflate or at least problematise this sense of Irish oddness and of Ireland as an exotic tourist resort. Famously, in Maria Edgeworth’s *The Absentee* (1812), Lord Colambre moves from Oxfordshire to the family’s estate in the Irish midlands. Though he has been warned by his mother that he is heading into the regional equivalent of the heart of darkness, he actually finds a much more complex and attractive place and eventually persuades the entire family to move back and take their responsibilities towards the country’s improvement seriously. A more neglected novel, Elizabeth Griffin’s *The History of Lady Barton* (1771), opens with its heroine and her husband travelling to Ireland during a storm (echoed, perhaps, by Victor Frankenstein’s journey):

> Behold us then landed upon what may almost be called a desert island, for it is entirely surrounded by an arm of the sea, and uninhabited by every thing but a few goats, and some fishermen, who are almost as wild as they.—It was about four o’clock in the morning, when we arrived at this dismal place, and such a morning, for darkness, rain, and wind, I never saw!

While first impressions are not good, Lady Barton quickly establishes convivial relations with the group of local fishermen she meets, and the ship’s passengers are treated with courtesy and respect by the inhabitants. Lady Barton does maintain the class distance between the natives and the newcomers, describing the former as reacting to her arrival ‘with that sort of surprise which I imagine we should feel, if an order of higher beings were to descend by miracle to visit us’. This distance is lessened, however, by the fact that far from Ireland being a source of dastardly evil, the villain of the novel is Colonel Walter, an absentee landlord born in England, who clearly lacks what Lady Barton thinks is a proper understanding of the responsibility he has for his estate in the Irish countryside. Lady Barton complains that the colonel ‘is now going to Ireland, to take possession of his estate, and a seat in parliament for
a borough he never saw—I am no politician, or I should animadvert a little upon this subject’.22 As Christina Morin has pointed out, the novel ‘constructs Colonel Walter as not just the source of . . . [Lady Barton’s] troubles in the narrative but of Ireland’s as well.’23 Irish strangeness is quickly dismissed and English malignity becomes more prevalent as the novel progresses. Such Irish writers realise the expectations of alienation their English readers anticipate and set up Irish exoticism only to undermine it and suggest the two nations have more in common than might be expected given the representational history into which the authors are intervening.

Although Ireland has been long constructed as a strange place, barbarous and dangerous, it was an Irish political theorist who supplied perhaps the most powerful discourse through which such a construction could be refracted. In 1757, Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* delineated a version of the Sublime which connected it to obscenity, darkness, danger and the primitive past when druids ‘performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shades of the oldest and most spreading oaks’,24 and (perhaps inadvertently) in doing so he provided a powerful language with which the Irish landscape could be described. Burke, of course, considered the Sublime to have positive rather than negative associations, and indeed connected it to the most powerful force in the universe, God, and this positive reinterpretation of the primitive is unsurprising from a man who spent much of his childhood in the extraordinarily impressive Blackwater Valley in County Cork, whose imposing mountains may have helped to shape Burke’s understanding of the power of nature. The sublime power of nature was certainly clear to him, and he also surveyed these destructive forces when he was fifteen and experienced a flood of the Liffey near his family home on Arran Quay. In a letter to Richard Shackleton he admits that the natural disturbances ‘excite’ him, ‘the whistling winds, and the hoarse rumblings of the Swoln Liffy . . . It gives me pleasure to see nature in those great tho’ terrible Scenes, it fills the mind with grand ideas’.25 As Luke Gibbons points out, it may have been these childhood experiences of nature in extremity which provided Burke with the beginnings of his Sublime theory.26

Whatever the source of Burke’s own views, his theorisation certainly provided the basis for versions of Ireland as a Sublime space. When, in Regina Maria Roche’s immensely popular *The Children of the Abbey* (1796), the heroine Amanda Fitzalan travels from Wales to Ireland, upon entering Dublin Bay she is greeted with an extraordinary sight, ‘a scene which far surpassed all her ideas of sublimity and beauty, a scene
The emergence of Irish Gothic fiction which the rising sun soon heightened to the most glowing radiance'.

It is while in Ireland that Amanda encounters Castle Carberry, ‘a large Gothic pile, erected in the rude and distant period’ (a time in which Burke located sublimity) ‘when strength more than elegance was deemed necessary in a building’. The castle is on the pinnacle of a ‘rocky eminence overhanging the sea’ and is surrounded by ruined druid temples to emphasise its majesty and antiquity. As Burke insisted that the power of the Sublime was such that its observers would be struck into reverence and fear at its majesty, so is Amanda impressed by the imposing power of Castle Carberry, and she ‘viewed the dark and stupendous edifice . . . with venerable awe’. In the romantic Irish novel, English visitors to Ireland are often so struck with the sublime magnificence of the scenery they encounter that they are rendered silent. Famously, Horatio Mortimer, the hero of Sydney Owenson’s The Wild Irish Girl (1806), is so astonished at the wilds of the west of Ireland that he lapses into Burkean reverie: ‘Mountain rising over mountain, swelled like an amphitheatre to those clouds which, faintly tinged with the sun’s preclusive beams, and rising from the earthly summits where they had reposed, incorporated with the kindling aether of a purer atmosphere. All was silent and solitary – a tranquillity tinged with terror, a sort of “delightful horror”, breathed on every side.’ There is danger as well as delight in surrendering to the power of the Irish Sublime, and Horatio is in peril here of stumbling out of his stable English self into a kind of interpretive free play, impelled by the Irish landscape.

So evocative did this trope of the foreign visitor having a ‘sublime’ experience when first coming into Ireland become that Owenson’s scene is virtually repeated in Bram Stoker’s The Snake’s Pass (1890), when the hero, Arthur Severn, is so astounded by the extreme environment of the west of Ireland, its ‘mass of violet and sulphur and gold’, that he confesses to feeling ‘exalted in a strange way, and impressed at the same time with a new sense of the reality of things’. Two hundred years later this experience is recreated (though toned down somewhat) in the film adaptation of Cecelia Ahern’s P.S. I Love You (2006; dir. Richard LaGravenese), where the American tourist Holly Kennedy (played by two-times Oscar winner Hilary Swank!) finds herself both amazed and lost in the Wicklow mountains (which have been obviously CGI-ed for extra sublimity). Holly is looking for the ‘national park’ and is gob-smacked to discover that the wildness of the countryside is what the Irish think a park looks like. Luckily, Holly also encounters a gorgeous yet wise local man (an improbable Gerard Butler) who can direct her back to civilisation, and, of course, they end up married. The genders may have been reversed, but the marriage plot of the romantic novel
remains intact, as does the Celtic weirdness and devastatingly sublime Irish environment. Whereas these sympathetic versions of the Irish Sublime tend to emphasise the positive dimensions of the experience, the danger of the Sublime is nevertheless retained, its ability to completely overwhelm and overcome the Self. Certainly, awe is an appropriate reaction to such extremity, but while the experience of terror can be ‘delightful’ to a certain extent, horror narratives have played on the dangers rather than the thrills of Ireland.

Ireland as a whole is readily identifiable as a Gothic space in popular culture. In *The Milesian Chief* (1812), the great Gothic novelist Charles Robert Maturin articulates this commonly held view of Ireland cogently. The country possesses a ‘dark, desolate and stormy grandeur’ and is ‘the only country on earth, where, from the strange existing opposition of religion, politics, and manners, the extremes of refinement and barbarism are united, and the most wild and incredible situations of romantic story are hourly passing before modern eyes’. In this passage, Maturin references the version of Ireland which was dominant. Certainly, seen through the eyes of the English reading public for whom the Gothic authors were writing, Ireland was a spatial and temporal anomaly, and it remains so for a modern cinema audience. Of course, this version of regional space as a classic site of ghostly energies and horrific creatures has always been central to Gothic convention, and where the plot of a traditional Gothic novel does not take place on the Catholic Continent, it usually locates itself in those geographical areas deemed marginal to metropolitan sophistication. Traditionally, horror and the Gothic take place in what has been called the ‘outlandish’: obscure, out-of-the-way places, usually in the countryside and in villages, or – where the Gothic locates itself in an urban environment – monstrosity emerges from under the stairs, from the attic, out of the cellar, spaces on the edge rather than at the centre. To English eyes, the Celtic fringes were such ‘outlandish’ spaces, Ireland peculiarly so given the link between the geographical term ‘outlandish’ and the Catholicism dominant there. Darryl Jones has termed fictions which concern themselves with identities and areas ‘marginal’ (a word he rightly objects to) to England (and also to cosmopolitan America) ‘regional Gothic’, and he claims that ‘in the ideological rhetoric of horror, Catholics, Welshmen, hillbillies and cannibals are all pretty much the same’. He points out that the construction of the Celt as a kind of counter-Enlightenment figure, and of Celtic lands as zones of the weird, went hand in hand with the emergence of the Gothic novel and the appearance of a modern English identity. As English identity was configured as normative, those areas which surrounded it – the ‘Celtic fringes’ – were simply constructed as abnormal.
Moreover, as Christopher Morash has outlined, the Celtic fringes were not only considered repositories of all that which England wished to deny and banish (the irrational, the superstitious, the perverse, the Catholic, the cannibalistic), they also became a kind of collective zone of atemporality, a place of the primitive, the out-of-touch and the backward which the modern world had not yet affected. If the Gothic is often seen as the return of the repressed, the past that will not stay past, Ireland has usually been constructed as a place where the past had never in fact disappeared, a place where the past is in fact the always present. Morash points out that nineteenth-century philologists such as James Cowles Prichard, Franz Bopp and J. Kasper Zeuss all argued that in Celtic languages was preserved the remains of a European ur-language and that ‘in a slide which was common in nineteenth-century ethnography and beyond, this was taken to indicate that the Celtic peoples of the present day were an instance of a cultural anachrony, a race out of time’. In such Celtic regions as Ireland time and space took on different meanings and history itself was out of joint. According to Declan Kiberd, Ireland operated as ‘England’s unconscious’, hence the surprising number of English Gothic narratives which use Ireland as a shorthand indicator of the depraved past rather than the technological future.

This version of Ireland as a Gothic madhouse had to be confronted by Irish writers, but rather than reject it, a great many of them, on first glance, appear to have embraced it, allowing the tropes and themes of the Gothic to infect practically everything they wrote. Any list of important Irish writers includes a rather extraordinary number of Gothic specialists and horror aficionados, and their apparent over-representation in the Irish ranks has rightly seemed to some critics to require an explanation. In fact, one of the great ‘problems’ in Irish literary history has been not only that Ireland apparently failed to produce the equivalent of George Eliot’s realist classic *Middlemarch* (1871–2) but that instead it produced so much literary material that can be called ‘non-realist’, and particularly a large amount of what has now been classified as ‘Gothic’. In assessing the Irish contribution to world literature, Vera Kreilkamp has noted that the ‘marginalised Gothic mode . . . permeates virtually all Irish writing’, and this seems about right to me. Indeed, Kreilkamp suggests that far from existing as a separate tradition in Irish writing, it is the *only* tradition of Irish writing. When Irish writers tried to produce purely realist novels, they generally failed, as the Gothic interrupts, intrudes and disrupts any supposedly stable realist mood.

Since the critical turn to the Gothic in the 1970s, after which a torrent of theoretical and historical material on various versions of non-realism poured from the academic presses, a number of important cultural
historians with an interest in Irish studies have attempted to provide an explanation for this state of affairs. Explaining the Gothic diffusion has been a serious difficulty for theorists of Irish writing, although many have pointed out that because of the impact of colonialism, authority and control have been very much contested fields in Ireland so that distinguishing between the real and the unreal has usually been a function of power. In such circumstances the paraphernalia of the unreal, and a language of fragmentation, paranoia and schizophrenia, have seemed more useful to many writers in representing Ireland than the tools of literary realism. While this explanation is certainly suggestive, the overwhelming pervasiveness of the Gothic remains one of the most contentious areas of Irish studies, and although a great deal of ink has been spilt in the critical discussion, a fully theorised and historically grounded account of the emergence of the genre in Ireland has not really been attempted. This scholarly gap possibly remains because the texts in which the form first made its appearance are not only very little read but are also (apparently) not very good – unlike the more attractive terrain of the nineteenth-century Irish Gothic canon, which contains such extraordinary achievements as Charles Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1829), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas* (1864) and *Carmilla* (1871–72), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The persistence of this over-attention to the Irish Gothic canon and away from Irish Gothic origins has allowed a number of serious misconceptions about Irish Gothic to arise and persist in critical argument.

In this study, I will set out to provide a robustly theorised and thoroughly historicised account of the ‘beginnings’ of Irish Gothic fiction, map the theoretical terrain covered by other critics and put forward a new history of the emergence of the genre in Ireland. It should be noted that although I will theorise the Irish Gothic, I will not be Theorising it – in other words, those looking for a full-blown engagement with Theory should go elsewhere. The study will try to clarify why it is correct to think of the Irish Gothic novel as an Irish Anglican response to historical conditions, and it will also assess this Irish tradition in the broad context of Gothic Studies as a whole, rather than relegate it to the backwaters of literary history, where it has often been placed. Very early Irish Gothic fiction should be subjected to close reading and careful historicisation, but also firmly placed in relation to Gothic as a genre which, as Richard Davenport-Hines puts it, comprises ‘four hundred years of excess, horror, evil and ruin’. In other words, the early Irish Gothic texts should be read in relation to both Irish history of the 1750s and 1760s and to the conventions of the genre in broad terms. Until this is done,
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a reading of the Irish Gothic through, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, seems premature. The main argument I will be making here is that the emergence of Irish Gothic should be understood in the context of the split in Irish Anglican public opinion that opened in the 1750s and seen as a fictional instrument of liberal Anglican opinion in a changing political landscape. This will allow me to demonstrate the connections between these little read, almost completely forgotten, supposedly negligible Gothic fictions and the Irish Gothic tradition more generally, and also the Gothic as a genre of global significance. Of course, even using the terms ‘Irish Gothic’ and ‘Irish Gothic tradition’ has become problematic in recent years, and in this introductory chapter I will address some of the theoretical problems that have stymied discussion of the field so that the way can be cleared for a proper historical account of the genre in Ireland.

II

There has been much (and often confusing) critical discussion since the mid-2000s as to whether ‘Irish Gothic’ constitutes a ‘tradition’, a ‘canon’, a ‘genre’ or a ‘mode’, discussion which sometimes suggests that these are all mutually exclusive terms. The terminological difficulty arises in part because it is difficult to know where Irish Gothic begins and ends since, on close examination, Gothic tropes, motifs and themes appear everywhere and anywhere in modern Irish literature. In a discussion of American Gothic, Fred Botting argues that in the United States ‘the literary canon is composed of works in which the influence of romances and Gothic novels is . . . overt’, so much so that American literature seems ‘virtually an effect of a Gothic tradition. Gothic can perhaps be called the only true [American] literary tradition’. This is even more the case with Irish literature. It is not that Ireland merely produced a large number of important writers such as Roche, Maturin, Le Fanu, Wilde and Stoker whose work is considered central to the Gothic canon, but also that the Gothic appears even in texts which seem, on a superficial reading, to be distant from or antagonistic to the genre – the work of the great national novelist Maria Edgeworth being a case in point. When what constitutes the Irish Gothic is so diffuse, achieving a critical bearing seems difficult if not impossible and this concern has led to calls for some terminological clarification and limitation.

For an example of the terminological confusion in which critics have sometimes found themselves when dealing with Irish Gothic, Siobhán Kilfeather’s generally excellent survey article both describes the period
from the 1760s to the 1820s as the ‘heyday of the genre’ and, conversely, notes that ‘many of these novels are only partly Gothic (or mock-Gothic) but that is typical of the genre’. What is unclear here is whether a novel which is only ‘partly’ Gothic, or which mocks the Gothic, can still be included as representative of the genre. Is a ‘partly Gothic’ text Gothic? From the way this is phrased it would seem that Kilfeather assumes that a ‘partly’ or ‘mock’ Gothic novel should still be thought of as Gothic, and indeed, it would be difficult to accept that Mrs F. C. Patrick’s *More Ghosts!* (1798), which parodies the late eighteenth-century literary obsession with bumps in the night typical of Gothic, should be excluded on the basis that it ridicules rather than simply repeats the genre’s conventions. In a further potentially confusing sentence, Kilfeather indicates that Irish Gothic writers ‘crossed the Gothic with the sentimental novel, the novel of manners, or – most commonly – the national tale’, but neglects to explain whether such ‘crossings’ lifted these texts out of the Gothic ‘genre’ and into another one.

Once we widen our perspective, of course, it is clear that it is not just with the Irish Gothic that terminological confusion holds sway. To say, as Judith Halberstam has said, that the Gothic is ‘overdetermined’ is to understate things considerably! ‘Gothic’ is notoriously one of the most slippery terms in the literary critical dictionary, and it has been defined in very many ways. Indeed, the terms used for such definitions just keep multiplying: depending on which critic you are reading, the Gothic is a ‘genre’, a ‘domain’, a ‘mode’, a ‘discursive site’, an ‘area of literary space, a niche in the ecology of literature’. Robert Miles has spoken of Gothic as ‘a series of contemporaneously understood forms, devices, codes, figurations’. Given the sheer multiplicity of terms used about the Gothic by very eminent scholars it would be unwise to rule anything out, but this has not prevented some attempts at terminological policing. Because of the looseness of the Gothic, that it should be considered a genre at all has been denied. For example, for James Watt ‘any categorization of the Gothic as a continuous tradition, with a generic significance, is unable to do justice to the diversity of the romances which are now accommodated under the “Gothic” label, and liable to overlook the often antagonistic relations that existed between different works or writers’. Similarly, Gary Kelly has opined that the Gothic romance ‘was not so much a coherent and authentic genre as an ensemble of themes and formal elements which could be taken over and adapted in whole or in part by other novelists and writers’.

Although it may initially seem attractive to be able to discard the term ‘genre’ when dealing with the Gothic, on the basis that the Gothic is too unstable or impure since it combines different genres, ultimately
this discarding does not help because it rather obscures literary history. Complaining about the Gothic’s ‘instability’, for example, and positing it as a reason why the Gothic does not constitute a ‘genre’, indicates a belief that it is possible to isolate a pure genre in the first place, one uncontaminated by other genres. However, as David Duff has reminded us, genre theory is a notoriously ‘disputatious field’ precisely for the reason that there are few (if any) texts which belong only to one particular genre. Expecting any genre to be categorically simple or pure is to misunderstand genre entirely, and to ignore the fact that, as John Frow explains, ‘the textual event is not a member of a genre-class because it may have membership in many genres, and because it is never fully defined by “its” genre’ (my italics). Frow supports Ann Freadman’s argument that it is useful to ‘think of genre in terms of sets of intertextual relations . . . the relation between all those texts that are perceived to be relevantly similar to this one, as well as all those texts that are perceived to be relevantly dissimilar’. Texts are ‘uses of genres, performances of or allusions to the norms and conventions which form them’. So, for example, while Charles Dickens’s extraordinarily complex *Bleak House* (1852–3) is best placed in the ‘realist’ genre, this is not to deny that it also has a place in the Gothic genre, as well as participating in a number of other subgenres (like detective fiction) of the much broader genre of the novel. A drive for complete conceptual clarity has been powerfully evident in some discussions of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which has divided many critics over the question of whether it should be considered a Gothic novel at all. Robert Mighall makes an investment with history fundamental to his definition of the Gothic, highlighting a ‘concern with the historical past . . . [and] rhetorical and textual strategies to locate the past and represent its perceived iniquities, terrors, and survivals’, on which basis he excludes *Frankenstein*. For others it is *Frankenstein*’s position as the inaugurating text of the new genre of science fiction that lifts it out of the Gothic’s borders. Imagining that there is a potential generic purity will mislead the literary critic, and accepting that texts use genres (as well as being used by genres) prevents the critic from reaching the counter-intuitive conclusion that one of the most famous Gothic novels of all is not actually a Gothic novel at all.

An analogous case of generic mixing from Irish writing could be made for Maria Edgeworth’s *Ennui* (1804). On the face of it this novel is a realist text, indeed an anti-Gothic narrative, supporting the expulsion of the Gothic, anachronistic elements in Irish society so that modernity can be brought fully to bear on the island. The plot is apparently straightforward enough: the bored English Lord Glenthorn travels to his Irish estate in order to make his life more meaningful. On the way
he encounters the standard stereotypes that were believed to populate Ireland, the inveterately lazy bumpkins who speak in rather silly accents. Glenthorn is presented with two alternative views of Ireland’s future. His land agent, Mr McLeod urges the slow but steady modernisation of the country through the introduction of English methods of agricultural production, education of the Catholic peasantry in non-denominational schools, and encouragement of industry (sounding very like Edgeworth’s father, Richard Lovell); his neighbour, Mr Hardcastle insists that the Irish are un-reformable and lazy and improvident by nature as opposed to culture, and he advocates coercion and a firm colonial hand in keeping them down. The choice lies between allowing the Irish to remain characters in a Gothic story or gently translating them into a national bildungsroman. The ideological weight of the novel appears to come down on Mr McLeod’s side and suggests that the spectre of the Gothic can be banished given enough reforms and patient application of reason and technology.

However, the main problem with this reading of the novel is that it ignores the energies of the text: Lord Glenthorn is completely bored while in ‘rational’ England and is only awakened to life’s possibilities when he meets Ellinor, his Irish former wet-nurse and a banshee-like figure straight out of a Gothic melodrama. His excitement increases once he arrives in Ireland, confronts its Gothic scenery, meets its Gothic cast list and almost becomes involved on the rebel side of the 1798 Rebellion (before fighting on behalf of the state). There is a sense, in other words, that recreating Ireland into a miniature version of England may well be industrially desirable and economically necessary, but that it will be disastrous from a psychological view and that cultural decadence and ennui will follow such a recreation. The plot of the novel certainly seems to opt for a reformable and possibly realist Ireland of the future; the energy of the novel lies with the Gothic melodrama Glenthorn finds being enacted when he migrates there. Ennui is, it seems to me, a good example of Gothic energy refusing to allow realist closure. Edgeworth may be intellectually on the side of English reform but psychologically her novel is more attracted to Irish Gothic irreality. Ennui, I argue, is a case of a novel which has a place in at least two genres: it is certainly a realist novel, but it is also, I think, a Gothic novel, and the two genres conduct an argument within its pages. Which genre actually triumphs is, ultimately, not a determining factor in deciding the genre to which the novel belongs, since it clearly ‘participates’ in both.\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{Bleak House}, \textit{Frankenstein} and \textit{Ennui} are actually fairly late examples of texts in which the Gothic genre co-exists with other genres, and it should be emphasised that the Gothic originated in the eighteenth
century when, as noted by David Duff, ‘genre-mixing’ was both ‘a critical idea’ and ‘a creative fact’. These are not, in other words, anomalous examples. The early history of the novel (including the Gothic novel) is, to say the least, very, very messy, and it is not simply difficult but next to impossible to make hard and fast distinctions between romances, histories, memoirs, Gothic novels and sentimental novels in this period. Genre mixing is simply part of what happens in the eighteenth century, from Horace Walpole’s mixture of the ancient and modern romance, to M. G. Lewis’s *The Castle Spectre* (1797), ‘a drama of a mingled nature, Operatic, Comical and Tragical’, to the ‘new species of writing’, as Samuel Richardson called *Pamela* (1740–1). As Markman Ellis has pointed out, although the ‘novel’ is a highly confusing and potentially misleading generic label to use to ‘describe the bulk of eighteenth-century prose fiction’, it is also unavoidable.

Moreover, Gothic has always been a self-consciously impure genre. There has always been a great deal of ‘crossing’ going on in fiction thought of as Gothic, and the Gothic itself, from the very beginning, describes itself as ‘spliced’, heterogeneous, anomalous, hybrid, a literary mutant. To object to the terminological confusion that is generated because of this mixing is to imagine that there could possibly be somewhere a Gothic uncontaminated by other genres, or a ‘pure’ Gothic mode that exists ready to be added as a kind of ingredient as part of the combination of a given novel (so that some novels have a pinch of Gothic with a dollop of the sentimental and a dash of the realist novel). When reading what has traditionally (and incorrectly) been considered the ‘first’ Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), it becomes clear that the Gothic has always been configured as an impure. Using *Otranto* as an ‘origin’ text has always been attractive because when, in the second edition, Walpole gave it the more expansive subtitle, ‘A Gothic Story’, he seemed to provide a kind of generic stability to a term that was causing desperate literary critics to pull their hair out. Yet, James Watt rightly observes that this novel only gave an ‘illusory stability to a body of fiction which is distinctly heterogeneous’. That illusory quality should have been obvious from Walpole’s second preface, of course, since he straightforwardly admits that his fictional experiment is a generic hybrid, a ‘blend’ combining two different ‘kinds of Romance’ (one we would now call ‘realist’, the other traditional romance) in one work. Like most hybrids in the history of Gothic, Walpole’s proved an unstable combination quite liable to break down, an amusing but ultimately unsatisfying experiment in generic splicing. The second novel which declared its Gothic affinities, Clara Reeve’s *The Old English Baron: A Gothic Story* (1777), is rather more
like a realist novel than a Gothic one in that Reeve reduces what she saw as Walpole’s supernatural excrescences to a minimum and attempts to make her story as faithful to reality as possible. For both Walpole and Reeve, the term ‘Gothic’ indicated not the supernatural but the medieval, and it was only later that it became clear that it was in relation to elements other than historical period (such as theme, tropes, props, stock characters) that these novels were influential. ‘Gothic’ then came to designate not temporal setting but a vast panoply of other elements, amusingly set out in the anonymous article ‘Terrorist Novel Writing’ (1797) with its famous ‘recipe’:

Take –
   An old castle, half of it ruinous.
   A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.
   Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.
   As many skeletons, in chests and presses.
   An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.
   Assassins and desperados, ‘quant suff’.
   Noise, whispers and groans, threescore at least.\(^{71}\)

As Jacqueline Howard comments, the Gothic has always been ‘an indeterminate genre’, comprised of ‘impurities’,\(^{72}\) from the very start not something ‘distinct’ from realism, but a genre which contained and combined the realist and romance genres. Part of what makes the Gothic Gothic is that it is a mixture. It is a genre which absorbs and assimilates other genres. To be blunt about it, ‘Gothic’ has been a mess since it was first used as a descriptive term for fiction, and that it continues to be such a terminological problem is very appropriate,\(^{73}\) and when the Gothic intrudes on other genres it tends to have a similarly destabilising effect. Thus, like *Ennui*, Irish texts which seem in one sense straightforwardly romantic national tales or realist novels often have their narratives of reconciliation disrupted and dissipated by the invasion of the Gothic elements, narrative devices, tropes and themes, preventing settlement and closure. Much Irish writing, while not full-blown Gothic, is ‘interrupted’ by Gothic as if to remind the reader of what the historian Brendan Bradshaw has described as the ‘cataclysmic element of Irish history’.\(^{74}\)

That Gothic is therefore a genre which is generically unstable (like most other genres, but even more so) should not be too disturbing (unless we are addicted to certainties). According to Jacques Derrida, the ‘law of genre’ means that while a text ‘cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre’, and it is also true that ‘every text participates in one or several genres’. Assigning a text to a genre is therefore necessary, but ‘such participation never amounts to belonging’.\(^{75}\) Precisely the wrong question to ask about a novel like *Frankenstein* is
whether it is a ‘Gothic’ or a ‘science fiction’ novel – because it is both. Richard Haslam complains about the tendency of many critics (including myself) to use the term ‘Gothic’ to apply to radically different novels and points out that ‘some Irish authors use the Gothic mode extensively in one work (Maturin’s *Melmoth*) but not in another (Maturin’s *The Wild Irish Girl*). Or they splice the Gothic mode with other supernaturlalist or quasi-supernaturalist modes’. However, to split the ‘Gothic’ from the ‘supernaturalist’ in this way is to misunderstand the always already ‘spliced’ nature of the Gothic genre. Haslam’s addiction to classification prisons is even more damaging when it comes to eighteenth-century texts when these genres were in their infancy. As Michael Gamer points out, when looking at ‘Gothic’ or ‘romantic’ texts from the eighteenth century we are dealing with a period ‘in which the texts we now associate with each had not yet been categorized in the ways we would now find familiar’. For Gamer, Gothic texts ‘regularly contain multiple modes of writing’, and Gothic is a ‘site that moves, and that must be defined in part by its ability to transplant itself across forms and media’. This tendency to shift, to move and to morph is understandably frustrating for critics and historians since it is much easier to deal with objects and events that have a relative stability, but we must take things as they are and not re-make them to fit our intellectual preferences.

The Gothic as a genre often behaves rather like the ghosts and phantoms that populate many of its canonical texts. As Fred Botting explains, ‘Elusive, phantom-like, if not phantasmatic, floating across generic and historical boundaries, Gothic (re)appearances demand and disappoint, and demand again, further critical scrutiny to account for their continued mutation.’ James Watt has urged that one way to deal with this elusiveness is through a renewed focus on discrete literary examples and urges literary historians to ‘focus in detail on the functioning of specific works, so as to provide the basis for a more nuanced account of the way that the genre was constituted in the late eighteenth [century]’. This kind of focus is specifically what I want to achieve here. For some critics, historical and terminological messiness, blurriness and amorphousness are enemies to be beaten into a conceptual clarity that glosses over the complexities of history and genre theory, but I suggest that such clarity is reached only by ignoring how individual texts actually work.

III

Given the overall ‘messiness’ of the Gothic genre, critics should exercise great caution when looking at regional or national variations. ‘Irish
Gothic’ is not a genre but rather a particular inflection of a genre, weighted with political and ideological ballast. While not a genre, it is, however, a tradition, and more often than not a very self-conscious one, given that later texts constantly revisit earlier ones, ‘revising plots, revisiting themes, reanimating characters . . . recall[ing] their predecessors as much as they innovate and modernise’. Despite the self-conscious, and often self-referential, tendency of Irish Gothic, calling it a ‘tradition’ has become very controversial in Irish studies and has been attacked by a number of very prominent critics. The notion that there even is a Gothic tradition in Irish writing is still relatively new, and ironically the critical figure involved in convincing scholars to examine the tradition was also at the same time undermining its existence. As a brilliant biographer of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and a formidable cultural historian, W. J. McCormack is, perhaps, the major theorist of the Irish Gothic. In his seminal ‘Irish Gothic and After’ (1991) he examined the field in some detail, tracing its beginnings in a number of now obscure novels from the late eighteenth century such as Roche’s *Children of the Abbey* (1796), Mrs Kelly’s *Ruins of Avondale Priory* (1796), Mrs F. C. Patrick’s *The Irish Heiress* (1797) and *More Ghosts!* and Mrs Colpoys’s *The Irish Excursion* (1801), and followed its trajectory through the writings of Maturin, Lady Morgan, Lady Clarke, Le Fanu, William Carleton, Wilde, Stoker, W. B. Yeats, John Millington Synge and Elizabeth Bowen. This list of writers looked, to some, to be a ready-made Irish canon, an interpretation bolstered by McCormack’s argument that ‘if the Irish tradition of gothic fiction turns out, on examination, to be a slender one, there are other ways in which such material is of literary significance’. Indeed, McCormack’s article fell foul of the more general reaction to *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* in which it appeared. Although the editor, Seamus Deane, explicitly stated that the anthology was not meant to amount to a ‘canon’ of Irish writing, and was through its very inclusiveness designed to undermine and problematise all such pretensions to canonicity, critics of the project claimed that in its selection of editors and its exclusion or under-representation of some Irish writers it effectively amounted to a politicised rather than a catholic representation of the richness of a vaguely defined ‘Irish’ literature. ‘Irish Gothic and After’ was taken by some as positing a canon of Irish Gothic, and McCormack later returned to the issue to complicate such a simplistically linear reading of his choices.

In his important study *Dissolute Characters* (1993), McCormack argued that the Irish writers of Gothic literature did not produce a definitive ‘tradition’ but merely mobilised the conventions found in English Gothic.
too strongly the image of a direct and chronological line of great writers influencing one another. The danger with such constructions is that they effectively close themselves off to external forces and pressures, make Irish culture into an inward looking and self-generating force, and suggest a coherence and formal and ideological similarity that simply does not exist between the texts and authors themselves. In relation to Irish Gothic itself, McCormack posed a chronological problem: there is a large gap of twenty-five years between the publication of Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and Le Fanu’s first novel, *The Cock and the Anchor* (1845) (which, according to McCormack, is not a Gothic novel), and a further gap of nineteen years before *Uncle Silas* (1864) arrived. Such a gapped and discontinuous line could be called a ‘tradition’ in only the most dubious sense. McCormack wanted to complicate this idea of a tradition by examining what he called ‘interventions’ into Irish literary history; he pointed out that Honoré de Balzac’s *Melmoth réconcilié* (1836), rather than any Irish text, is a crucial connection between Maturin and Le Fanu.84

McCormack’s main difficulty is with the political and historical implications of the entangled concepts of ‘canon’ and ‘tradition’ in the writing of Irish literary history. He is not simply uncomfortable with the ‘Irish Gothic canon/tradition’ but also with canons and traditions as constructed by literary historians with ideological agendas to promote. Indeed, his chapter ‘Cashiering the Gothic Canon’ begins with what might be construed as a polemic against previous literary historians who have constructed Irish literary history from an Irish nationalist perspective (precisely the argument used against the *Field Day Anthology* in the first place). Although he surprisingly exempts Seamus Deane’s *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986) from a shame list of ‘literary chroniclers’85 he singles out versions of Irish literary history which canonise in order to promote a ‘patriotic’ view of Irish writing. He complains, for example, that ‘the Jonathan Swift whom editors know’ (and whom, it is implied, gains McCormack’s approbation) ‘is scarcely recognisable as the figure of similar name recurring as a patriot in the literary histories’. Indeed, ‘the chroniclers inhabit a last ditch of cultural nationalism’.86 That McCormack emphatically includes the Field Day school and its supposed supporters in the Irish media in his disapprobation is clear from a reference in *From Burke to Beckett* (1994) in which he argues that ‘much of what declares itself post-colonialist in its concerns is readily detectible as Irish nationalism, unreconstructed yet occasionally garnished with the origami of notable house-Trotskyites in the Dublin newspaper world’.87

Although McCormack is very dissatisfied with the notion of an Irish
Gothic tradition in part because such a construction results in Sheridan Le Fanu being uncritically linked to writers such as Stoker and Maturin – writers he considers to be often embarrassingly bad by comparison – the position of Le Fanu is merely a local and restricted example of the tendentiousness of canon making and tradition drawing in general which he has spent a great deal of his critical career undermining. It is the political implications of canon making and the ideological connotations of a certain view of an Irish literary tradition, as well as the historical simplifications involved in constructing Irish literary and Gothic traditions, that attract McCormack’s destructive focus. In *Dissolute Characters* he declares it his ‘modest’ aim to so problematise Le Fanu’s relationship with the ‘so-called’ and ‘doubtful’ Irish Gothic tradition, that it would be impossible to fit him in to prevailing models, but it is clear that in doing this McCormack wants to add to the growing problematisation of the ideas of canon and tradition in Irish literature itself.88

The appeal to ‘tradition’ masks historical processes, elides questions of origin and naturalises complex literary and cultural relations, and does this for ideological reasons. McCormack urges the ‘unmasking of tradition as cousin-german to ideology’. 89 As Terence Brown pointed out in a review of *Dissolute Characters*,

it is none of McCormack’s purpose . . . to suggest the kinds of continuities, influences, rewritings, and critical engagements that are the stuff of less forensically sceptical literary history. Literary history in McCormack’s quizzically interrogative mind is by contrast, a contested, troublingly uncertain activity which can only be awarded respect when it respects the weird contingencies of the human variable and the negotiations that occur in all writing between the world as text and the world as social and political construction. His version of a literary history is really a kind of anti-history which is arranged in terms of fissures and discontinuities.90

McCormack’s complaints have been strongly echoed by others. Richard Haslam too is very ill-at-ease with the concept of ‘tradition’ and wants that term retired. He invokes the suggestion made by Robert Hume, who, in an influential article, urged that Gothic be thought of as a ‘mode’, and a ‘very loosely defined mode’ at that.91 Haslam insists that ‘It may now be time to go all the way—retiring “the Irish Gothic tradition” and replacing it with “the Irish Gothic mode”—as long as the latter phrase is understood to be shorthand for a distinct but discontinuous disposition, a gradually evolving yet often intermittent suite of themes, motifs, devices, forms, and styles, selected in specific periods, locations, and rhetorical situations, by a succession of different writers’. 93 In a recent intervention into this debate, Christina Morin has supported Haslam’s call for an end to an obsession with tradition found
in Irish studies. She argues that both the terms ‘Irish Gothic’ and the ‘Irish Gothic tradition’ are too restrictive, and while ‘helpful’ in pointing out connections between writers, misleading in their apparent transparency. Margaret Kelleher is also suspicious of the term ‘tradition’ and suggests that while ‘the Gothic mode with its distinctive anxieties is a significant form in nineteenth-century Irish writing’, ‘the coherence and extent of such a tradition may be overstated’. My own response to this complaint by Kelleher is that while certainly the ‘coherence’ of the tradition could be overstated, this would matter only if you have already invested in the idea that traditions have to be ‘coherent’ rather than rather messy, inchoate and amorphous. While the critical numbers against the notion of an ‘Irish Gothic tradition’ are stacking up, there are still others, like Jim Hansen, who use the term without appearing to worry too much about the complications involved, but at the moment, such critics appear to be in the minority.

Of course, the attack on notions of tradition in Irish Gothic Studies is merely a symptom of a much wider suspicion of traditions and the traditional in modernity and post-modernity, and when we widen our interpretive lens it becomes clear that ‘tradition’ is one of the most abused terms in existence. As many have contended, modernity is in large part predicated on the rejection of tradition which was configured as a kind of historical burden preventing the individual from realising his self-worth. Raymond Williams points out that the term ‘traditionalism’ is generally applied as a ‘description of habits or beliefs inconvenient to virtually any innovation’. ‘Tradition’ indicates a ‘handing down’ of knowledge or material, and since modernity involves the slaying of the past and the rejection of that handed down on authority, to call something a ‘tradition’ is actually a way to dismiss it. The myth of the modern is that it is all that the past is not: it is progress. As Michel de Certeau has argued, ‘modern Western history essentially begins with the differentiation between the past and the present’, and as Diarmuid Ó Giolláin explains, ‘a key implication of modernization is that tradition prevents societies from achieving progress’.

Interestingly, Gothic novels are often about precisely this shift from the traditional and pre-modern to an innovative modernity. While ‘Gothic’ as a term may gesture towards the Middle Ages, Gothic novels themselves are usually interested in ‘transition periods’ more generally, in-between times of change, what Robert Miles has called the ‘Gothic cusp’, on the birth of modernity. Gothic, in other words, is about that transition from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern’ society, and traces the dangers and difficulties involved in such an epistemic transformation. In its repeated recurrence to the refusal of the past to go
away, the Gothic demonstrates the kinds of neurotic replications that occur when a society or an individual attempts to deny the force of the traditional. In renouncing the traditional, the Gothic often compels its characters to deal with monstrous representations of traditional knowledge and traditional behaviours. The dead come back to life and terrorise the living. The Gothic is located at this historical juncture as it is a product of a society that is seeking to heal itself from the crisis involved in such a traumatic transition where the traditional has been supposedly superseded. In other words, the Gothic has been rather less suspicious of traditions and the traditional and rather more interested in what happens when you deny traditions than some of those attacking the notion that an Irish Gothic tradition exists at all.

‘Tradition’, the handing down from one generation to another, generally with the implication that it be treated with respect, is simply antithetical to much thinking generated by modernity, in part because such handing down imbues the past with an aura it perhaps does not deserve. Unfortunately, there has also been a tendency to see the traditional only in its most objectionable guises and a concomitant automatic, knee-jerk rejection of anything that comes with the aura of the past and authority. Much scholarly work has gone into investigating the ‘invention of tradition’, the manufacture of tradition for ideological reasons, to keep the present generation in ideological subservience to an older one. In literary terms, too, ‘tradition’ has been imbued with a kind of sanctified aura, mainly because of the work of T. S. Eliot and his crucial essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919), which called for the individual writer to channel the work of his great literary forebearers, to attempt to embody ‘the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer’, effectively surrendering himself to the awesome power of the Western tradition.

The attack on ‘tradition’ has certainly been felt in English Studies, and from the 1950s onwards, generations of ‘anti- Establishment’ intellectuals have directed their polemic against the canon as derived from older theorists like Eliot and F. R. Leavis, as representative of a conservative ideological orientation. Indeed, one of the first results of the attack on canons and traditions was a new critical respect for Gothic, supposedly marginalised as a minor and embarrassing strain in literature by conservative readers. Critics turned in ever-increasing numbers to laud the importance of this much-maligned genre, claiming for it victim status, a necessary move as ‘the cultural politics of modern critical debate grant to vindicators of the marginalized or repressed a special licence to evade questions of artistic merit’. Certainly, the Gothic has become paradigmatic as the ‘Other’ of classical realism and has led critics to eulogising it as the ‘battered child’ of modern literature.
When we turn again to the attack on the notion of an ‘Irish Gothic tradition’ it is clear that ideological concerns are behind it. W. J. McCormack complains that ‘the notion of Anglo-Irish literature is given an excessive stability by the acceptance of tradition as accumulated and accumulative succession’; he notes that ‘in its Yeatsian form’ the assertion of a tradition is ‘a statement of certain continuities’; tradition, he later opines ‘is frequently identified with a conservative literary history’; his book is all about ‘unmask[ing] the Yeatsian tradition’; he is sympathetic to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s view of tradition as ‘cousin-german to ideology’. This is also what lies behind Richard Haslam’s discontent with ‘tradition’. He contends that:

‘Tradition’ denotes the handing across generations of sacred knowledge and rules; in literary critical contexts, the designation evokes the solemn architectonics of Eliot, Leavis and Yeats. However, tradition is too weighty (and weighted) a word to describe the irregular development and deployment of Gothic forms and themes in the work of Irish writers over the course of three centuries.

In calling for the retirement of ‘tradition’ from the Irish Gothic critical idiom Haslam invokes the support of not only Robert Hume but also Fred Botting, one of the major figures in Gothic criticism. There is, though, a serious problem with relying on Botting to back up this dismantling of ‘tradition’ in favour of ‘mode’ in that he actually uses both terms fairly inconsistently throughout his study of Gothic. Indeed, to suggest that Botting favours a shift from ‘tradition’ to ‘mode’ is to misrepresent his view. Botting’s argument is that given the sheer diffusion of ‘Gothic forms and figures over more than two centuries’ it is difficult to define Gothic as ‘a homogenous generic category’; as a ‘mode’ it exceeds ‘genre and categories’. There is certainly no rejection of the notion of a ‘Gothic tradition’ here since in the same paragraph he writes, ‘While certain devices and plots, what might be called the staples of the Gothic, are clearly identifiable in early Gothic texts, the tradition draws on medieval romances, supernatural, Faustian and fairy tales, Renaissance drama, sentimental, picaresque and confessional narratives as well as the ruins, tombs and nocturnal speculations that fascinated Graveyard poets’ (my italics). A page and a half later, discussing American Gothic, Botting claims that in the United States ‘the literary canon is composed of works in which the influence of romances and Gothic novels is far more overt’, so that American literature seems ‘virtually an effect of a Gothic tradition. Gothic can perhaps be called the only true literary tradition’ (my italics). He afterwards points to Horace Walpole as the founder of ‘the Gothic tradition’ (my italics);
introduces that Charles Brockden Brown was a negotiator of ‘European and American Gothic traditions’ (my italics); and considers that David Lynch’s Blue Velvet (1986) absorbs ‘the American Gothic tradition’ (my italics).

The term ‘tradition’ is indeed a problematic and sometimes distorting one in literary critical history, but if we were to retire all terms which were problematic and distorting we would be left with a much denuded and even more distorting view in which ‘mode’ does not help one bit. The Gothic is a genre which warns against such railing against and repression of traditions, such deconstructions of the traditional, so it is rather odd to find it co-opted into the anti-traditional project. An important objection to the intense suspicion of ‘tradition’ when discussing Irish Gothic is that ‘tradition’ is a much more polyvalent term than many of its critics have allowed. Indeed, McCormack himself makes it clear that he objects only to a specific formulation of tradition, tradition ‘in its Yeatsian form’ – the view of ‘tradition’ articulated by the modernists. Modernist views of tradition are not the only ones, even if they have been allowed to dominate discussion in the literary critical world. While McCormack wants to ‘cashier’ the monologic, modernist view of tradition, he reminds us that it is perfectly possible to ‘consider tradition historically as the (sometimes contradictory and violent) convergence of readings, not of texts’.

Indeed, once we move outside the sometimes narrow confines of literary history we find that ‘tradition’ has been used in this much more complicated way as including both actual works and the processes involved in interpreting and transmitting these works. For example (one that might not gain me very many friends), the Catholic Church in the Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation, debated at the Second Vatican Council in 1962, problematised an old-fashioned view of Catholic tradition as simply referring to the deposit of faith and redefined it as ‘the whole process by which the Church “hands on” . . . its faith to each new generation’.

The relationship between Irish Gothic texts – or Irish texts that employ Gothic tropes and themes – and the process of reception and interpretation of these texts is (hesitatingly and in a limited way) analogous to the relationship between scripture and interpretation in the Catholic tradition: ‘Tradition comes before and during and not just after, the writing of Sacred Scripture’. Haslam’s reminder of the term ‘mode’ is certainly useful, but it is rather strange
to think that its use requires the ‘retirement’ of the term ‘tradition’. To invoke a more theological discourse, I would suggest that the Irish Gothic mode subsists in the Irish Gothic tradition, and that this tradition includes all articulations of the Gothic mode (including all critical reflection on it) that have any relationship to the subject matter of ‘Ireland’, as broadly conceived as that can be.

In this way ‘tradition’ can be re-conceived, in Paul Ricoeur’s words, not as ‘the inert transmission of some dead deposit of material but . . . the living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity’. The sociologist Edward Shils has made the very useful distinction between tradition as something that is authoritatively handed down and tradition as ‘a chain of transmitted variants, as in the “Platonic tradition” or the “Kantian tradition”’. Shils’s point is that it is perfectly possible to use a non-essentialist, and indeed non-authoritarian, version of tradition which reveals how traditions are historically constructed while maintaining the sense that there are indeed things handed down from one generation (of writers) to the next. Likewise, for the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, traditions are always negotiated rather than a simple set of authoritative texts or rules. The Eliotean notion of a Tradition would be difficult to maintain in a country like Ireland anyway, given the violent discontinuities and gaps in its history. In an attempt to explain the absence of a strong realist canon in Ireland, the theorist David Lloyd has posited that there were simply too many elements within Ireland that could not be assimilated by a realist form. He argues that the paradigm of the realist novel is the bildungsroman, the novel of education and growth, and it thus relies on notions of development and maturation, expressive of a society growing teleologically into a nation state. Ireland was, however, composed of many elements which were uninterested in such statist narratives, and these ‘non-modern’ elements could not be properly accounted for by the standard realist conventions, and thus the realist novel never really had a chance in Ireland. This also helps to explain why applying modernist notions of tradition and canon to Irish writing at all is simply to make a category error, and why attempts to do so will always break down.

Accepting the much more complicated and conflicted version of tradition suggested by W. J. McCormack and used elsewhere helps us to come to grips with some of the complications of Irish literary and social history – especially since it also helps the critic break away from the historically myopic scepticism towards tradition that has defined modernity and post-modernity. Taking full account of this view of tradition as a very complex, contradictory, often ‘violent’ process of
textual production and cultural interpretation allows us to see critical responses to the use of Gothic themes and tropes as constituting part of the Irish Gothic tradition, a tradition in which no one single ideological or political affiliation is discernible. While appreciating the force of McCormack’s critique of putative ‘traditions’ as often all-too-easy constructions of the ideological imagination, I would suggest that the kind of Irish Gothic line left after his deconstruction resembles a Gothic edifice, full of suggestive gaps, obscure corners, imposing promontories (the ‘great’ works), fractures, fragments. In other words, despite the effects of historical process and ‘external’ interventions, a list of writers which includes figures as substantial as Maturin, Le Fanu, Wilde, Stoker, Yeats, Synge, and Bowen, all of whom have a connection to the same political and geographical space, all of whom have recourse to the same broadly defined conventions of Gothic, all of whom have some thematic associations, may still amount to a (much complicated) version of a tradition, indeed, a Gothic tradition in the full sense of the word. The Irish Gothic is a canon, a tradition and a mode all at once. A literary tradition survives in the face of McCormack’s justifiable worries that ideology rather than history lies behind the positing of an Irish Gothic. To assert a Gothic tradition in Ireland we need not make a disguised claim to Irish self-sufficiency or even to any great thematic coherence linking very different texts and authors; we have merely to suggest that certain Irish writers pursued certain similar questions that were historically specific to the Irish situation, and in doing so they utilised the Gothic conventions. The ‘Irishness’ of the tradition comes from the fact that the writers had some important Irish connection, dealt with Irish issues, and were partially influenced by (or at least vaguely aware of) an Irish line of precursors.

Engaging with contemporary debates about the extent and importance of the Irish Gothic helps to clear the field for a proper discussion of the history of the genre in Ireland, ironically by acknowledging and accepting the messiness and blurriness of definitions and traditions. In Chapter 1, I move on to placing the genre in the Irish Anglican community and tracing the reasons for its emergence in the aftermath of the political crisis of the 1750s. The apparently obvious relationship between Irish Anglicans and Irish Gothic has been challenged since the late 2000s, and this chapter gives serious attention to such objections (unpacking the theory of a ‘Catholic-nationalist Gothic’) and also seeks to examine carefully the reasons why the Irish Gothic is correctly associated with Irish Anglicans. I argue that the Irish Anglican community in Ireland should be thought of as an ‘enclave’ dependent on images of horror and terror to police its borders. In the 1850s, with the Money Bill
dispute, this enclave suffered an extraordinary crisis and split into liberal and conservative camps. This split led ‘liberal’ Patriot Anglicans to move from pure horror and terror to the much more complicated genre of the Gothic. The chapter also shows that one possible reason for the attractiveness of the Gothic for the Anglican community in Ireland is that it is a genre peculiarly obsessed with questions of identity and liminality. Historicising the Irish Gothic in the 1750s is the first step to understanding its ideological and theological biases, and helps to explain why previous theorists have been right to insist on the Protestantism of the genre.

Chapter 2 takes seriously the objection that critics of Irish Gothic have been exceeding the proper limits of interpretation, that they are guilty of in some way breeching interpretive decorum in pushing explanation as far as it can go. Specifically in terms of the Irish Gothic, the charge has been that many of us are guilty of seeing Ireland and Irish issues everywhere we look – of imposing an Irish context on literature that is really uninterested in Ireland. I will pay particular attention to the concern that ‘reading Ireland’ into Irish Gothic texts is a form of allegoresis rather than interpretation. The chapter will then move on to looking at the use of allegory in eighteenth-century Irish writing as a context for understanding certain allegorising trends in Irish Gothic writing of the mid-century, paying particular attention to the context provided by aisling poems, Jonathan Swift’s *The Story of the Injured Lady* (1746), and later national novels.

Chapter 3 builds on the argument concerning the use of allegory in eighteenth-century Irish writing and examines that curious (and curiously neglected) novel *The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley*, often now posited as the ‘first’ Gothic novel written and published in Ireland. The novel was published in 1760, just months after a major anti-union riot had taken place in Dublin and in the context of a major pamphlet war debating the merits of patriotism in Irish politics. The novel itself is rather mysterious in that we know nothing about its authorship and very little about who actually read it. Although no one has ever interpreted the novel in terms of the politics of the 1750s, this chapter will argue that it is only by re-placing it in the print culture of Patriot Dublin that we can begin to understand why a specifically ‘Gothic’ fiction emerged at precisely this moment in Ireland’s history. The novel is particularly obsessed with questions of marriage and consent, and these were the terms in which the debate about a potential union of Great Britain and Ireland was being conducted at the time of publication. The main characters in the novel insist on the importance of consent in all contracts (and especially sexual contracts), and they frame all instances where consent is not sought as an attempt to enslave and demoralise.
The chapter argues that reading the novel into 1750s Dublin and the pamphlet debates on the union and the Money Bill dispute reveals that the emergence of Irish Gothic fiction drew very deeply upon patriot sentiment and argument, and establishes that the tradition of Irish Gothic fiction begins as an expression of liberal Irish Anglican thought.

Chapter 4 examines the monstrous construction of the Catholic in Irish writing and imbeds this construction in monster theory and the Gothic more generally before moving on to examine ways Irish Catholic historians attempted to challenge this construction through a revision of the history of the most infamous episode in Irish history, the 1641 rebellion. It examines, in particular, the new histories of the rising produced by Catholics such as John Curry as well as furious Irish Anglican reaction to this attempted ‘unmonstering’. This is a prelude to a reading of Thomas Leland’s Gothic novel *Longsword* in Chapter 5, which treats the novel in parallel with Leland’s later *History of Ireland* (1773) as two parts of a project to unmonster the Irish Catholic and promote liberal Anglican Patriotism. The conclusion briefly traces the history of Irish Gothic from the mid-eighteenth to the twenty-first century and examines whether it can be said that the genre is passing out of popularity in Ireland. The book will, therefore, attempt to thoroughly ‘explain’ the emergence of the Irish Gothic, but it will also help the reader see where the tradition goes after the 1760s, right up to contemporary writings.

Notes

1. Ozzie Jones while the O’Grady farm is under attack from an evil Irish creature in search of his pot of gold. *Leprechaun*, film, dir. Mark Jones, 1993. The leprechaun’s weakness is a four-leaf clover, and at the end of the film he is defeated when the child hero, Alex, sticks a clover plant to some chewing gum and manages to get it into the leprechaun’s mouth. This is the first of a (so-far) six-film franchise.


3. It should, perhaps, be emphasised that these political echoes are almost certainly coincidental and not indicative of Coppola’s insights into Irish society or predictive abilities. Texts have echoes and resonances far beyond the control of their authors, and Gothic texts, in particular, as W. J. McCormack has explained, often violate the ‘official best intentions’ of their authors. ‘Irish Gothic and After’, 111. This interpretive slipperiness is compounded in relation to *Dementia 13* which, although ‘authored’ by Francis Ford Coppola, had additional scenes added by the producer, Roger Corman, after an initial screening of Coppola’s version. Corman was apparently disappointed by the relative restraint on display and he wanted some supplementary violence. He was also concerned about the shortness of the film and added a prologue in which
a psychiatrist ‘tests’ the psychological fortitude of audience members, given that they are about to undergo such a terrifying experience. The additional material was directed by Jack Hill.

5. Gerald of Wales, *History*, 74.
9. Ibid., 224.
10. Ibid., 229.
12. Lee, *Young Lady’s Tale*.
21. Ibid., 17.
22. Ibid., 10.
27. Roche, *Children of the Abbey*, 91. Obviously, Roche here mingles Burke’s two categories, but the implications of her use of his treatise are clear.
28. Ibid., 147–8.
33. For Ireland in popular cinema, see Barton, *Acting Irish*; Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, *Cinema and Ireland*; Gillespie, *Myth of an Irish Cinema*.
34. Colley, ‘Britishness and Otherness’.
35. There is currently a strong tendency in horror cinema to locate the Gothic in places like Eastern Europe. See, for example, *Hostel*, dir. Eli Roth, 2005; *A Serbian Film*, dir. Srdjan Spasojevic, 2010.
36. Haydon, “I Love my King and my Country”.
38. See also Hechter, Internal Colonialism.
40. Kiberd, Inventing Ireland, passim.
42. For this argument, see especially Gibbons, Transformations, 15–16.
43. I am, to put it mildly, unqualified to write such a study.
44. Davenport-Hines, Gothic.
45. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are currently strong contenders to take over from Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as the most cited theorists in Gothic Studies. See, for a very provocative intervention, Powell, Deleuze.
46. Botting, Gothic, 16.
49. Ibid., 86.
50. Halberstam, Skin Shows, 92.
52. Watt, Contesting, 6.
54. Miles, Gothic Writing, 4.
56. Miles, Gothic Writing, 3.
57. Watt, Contesting, 1. Although, part of the attraction of Watt’s study is that despite the fact that he begins by claiming that the Gothic is not a genre he carries on using the term ‘genre’ to refer to the Gothic for the rest of the book.
58. Kelly, English Fiction, 49.
60. Frow, Genre, 23.
62. Ibid., 25.
63. Mighall, Geography, xiv.
64. There is no space here for a full reading of the role of the Gothic in Edgeworth’s novel. For a beginning to such a reading see, Killeen, ‘Irish Gothic Revisited’.
66. Quoted in Duff, Romanticism, 161.
67. Samuel Richardson to Aaron Hill, 26 January 1746/47, Selected Letters, 78.
68. Ellis, History of Gothic, 12.
69. Watt, Contesting, 1.
70. Walpole, Castle of Otranto, 9.
71. Reprinted in Clery and Miles (eds), Gothic Documents, 183–4.
72. Howard, Reading Gothic Fiction, 2.
73. Contrarily, Jim Hansen argues that rather than being a generic mess, ‘the English Gothic novel, with its fleets of unquiet ghosts, overly-sensitive confined women, usurping Catholic counts, and ineffectual suitors,
provides what might be the most lucid and flagrant set of generic tropes, approaches and concerns in the history of modern English literature’

Terror and Irish Modernism, 7.

74. Bradshaw, ‘Nationalism and Historical Scholarship’, 251.
77. Gamer, Romanticism and the Gothic, 2.
78. Ibid., 4.
80. Watt, Contesting, 1.
81. Ellis, History, 13.
83. McCormack, Dissolute Characters, 2–11.
84. Ibid., 2–33.
85. Ibid., 2.
86. Ibid., 2.
88. McCormack, Dissolute Characters, 3.
89. McCormack, Ascendancy and Tradition, 337.
91. Platzner and Hume, ‘“Gothic Versus Romantic”’, 273.
92. A rather misleading word here – Haslam appears in no doubt as to the sagacity of his approach.
94. Morin, ‘“Gothic” and “National”?’, 185, note 12.
95. Kelleher, ‘Prose Writing and Drama in English’, 472.
96. Hansen, Terror and Irish Modernism.
97. Williams, Keywords, 320.
98. de Certeau, Writing of History, 2.
100. Montague Summers claims that ‘the connexion between the Gothic Romance and Gothic Architecture [of the twelfth century] is, so to speak, congenital and indigenous’. Gothic Quest, 189. This claim was echoed by Varma, Gothic Flame, 18, and Kilgour, Rise of the Gothic Novel, 11.
101. McIntyre, ‘Were the “Gothic Novels” Gothic?’, 645.
102. Miles, Ann Radcliffe, 87.
104. For the classic study, see Hobsbawn and Ranger, Invention of Tradition.
105. In Irish terms see Comerford, Ireland.
109. Ibid., 12.
110. Ibid., 303.
111. Ibid., 305.
112. Ibid., 306.
115. Indeed, bizarrely, Haslam points out that McCormack himself uses both the term ‘mode’ and the term ‘tradition’ in his studies. Most critics I have consulted do not see a conflict between the terms.
117. Ibid., 14.
118. Ibid., 16.
119. Ibid., 21.
120. Ibid., 115.
121. Ibid., 175.
123. Ibid., 12.
124. Ibid., 303.
126. Ibid., 62.
129. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.
131. This is a description Richard Haslam dismisses as ‘picturesque’ (and we know what he means by that). ‘Irish Gothic: A Rhetorical Hermeneutics Approach’.