

The Gothic in Victorian Poetry

It is rare that Victorian poetry is considered seriously as Gothic, which may be a result of a tendency to compartmentalise literature into periods and genres. Suspending traditional concepts of both time and form opens up the possibility of fresh readings of poetry as a Gothic form, and permits a historical reading of the significance of Gothic for poets of the nineteenth century. Gothic's ability to adapt and transform itself to reflect contemporary mores and concerns is nowhere more significant than in the mid-nineteenth century, and while its manifestation in poetry is often read as a purely aesthetic trope, this essay will construct an argument for the reflection of deeper social concerns and values in Gothic poems of the period.

We now read the nineteenth century as saturated with the aesthetics of Gothic, as Julian Wolfreys suggests, with:

all that black, all that crepe, all that jet and swirling fog. Not, of course, that these are gothic as such, but we do think of such figures as manifestations of nineteenth-century Englishness. These and other phenomena, such as the statuary found in cemeteries like Highgate, are discernible as being the fragments and manifestations of a haunting, and, equally, haunted, 'gothicized' sensibility.¹

The nineteenth century looks 'Gothic', then, but, as Wolfreys points out, there are deeper implications behind these aesthetic hauntings, indicating unease with social change, faith and death, looking backwards to the Gothic past and forward to an uncertain future. Exploring these implications of anxiety relocates Victorian Gothic as an acutely contemporary mode, in which fragments of Gothic find their way into every corner of literary culture during the period, including poetry. Perhaps this is related to Harold Bloom's concept of Victorian belatedness, in which the Victorian (inevitably male) poet is haunted by anxieties concerning his poetic influence.² Isobel Armstrong goes further, however, in arguing that the concept of belatedness must be considered beyond the individual poet's struggle, and seen instead as the position of the entire culture of the period.³ It is in this context – reading Victorian poetry as post-Romantic, and consequently post-Gothic (on the assumption that Gothic's first wave ended in 1820) – that this essay will approach nineteenth-century poetry, exploring the development of the Gothic aesthetic in the period. The siting of Victorian poetry on this boundary aligns it conveniently – perhaps too conveniently – with Gothic, which as a genre engages with the present whilst considering the future, yet looking over its shoulder at an idealised past. Victorian culture, and particularly Victorian poetry, does this too: think of the medievalised ballads of the Rossettis, of Tennyson and Browning, set in a visually pleasing historical moment, yet picking up threads which resonate with their own culture, strongly aware of their modernity, and looking also to future social transformations.

However, the form of poetry can make such readings fraught with difficulty. 'Gothic' is frequently read as synonymous with 'fiction', and one function of this essay will be to probe and problematise this assumption, particularly in the Victorian period. Martin Willis, writing on 'Victorian Realism and the Gothic', points out the inherent difficulties of pinning Gothic to a particular form, period or even writer. Rather than 'simply pointing at, say, Dickens's work and exclaiming that he is being Gothic here, look, and there', or 'importing Gothic meaning into a text rather than discovering the text's own natural resources',⁴ this essay will argue that Gothic can be inherent in poetry as a uniquely Gothic mode, seeping through the fragments of both form and content which singularise the genre.

Though much Victorian poetry has a narrative element, much does not, and it is therefore necessary to consider how Gothic plots and aesthetic tropes might exist independently and yet continue to indicate the presence of Gothic, going beyond narrative to

indicate wider anxieties, resonating with the socially-responsive nature of the genre. Poetry, with its fragmented approach to form and subject, provides a fertile soil for Gothic writing, with cracks and disturbances in the surface offering rich seams of darker material to be mined and untangled by the reader. Elizabeth Napier argues that Gothic is ‘disruptive and subversive to read’, being fractured to breaking-point into manuscripts which break off, or which cannot be read, letters and overheard words.⁵ This gives the reader an element of displeasure, in which the role of the reader is to unpick and work to find sense in the form, an approach which can be effectively applied to poetry. To read Victorian poetry as Gothic, then, offers a way to enter into the darker anxieties of the age, explored in miniature, with poems reflecting splinters of Gothic anxiety.

Poets in the period frequently explored a particular aspect of Gothic, focusing on the setting or the character, for example, and adorning their poems with Gothic trappings. These poetics indicate a range of ways in which Gothic becomes nuanced to suit the period and the poet, and I will argue that that use of Gothic aesthetics becomes a form of signalling to the reader the influences and preoccupations of the work. This chapter will focus on the landscape and characters of Gothic, and consider how they can be read together to form an image of a society beset with social anxieties. In the poems under discussion, the poets both celebrate and mourn the past, engaging with a Gothicised view of history while simultaneously writing with an awareness of the multiple traditions in which their work is situated. An unease with the present time is apparent in the works of many, if not most, Victorian poets, but in this chapter the focus is on particular poets who write in a Gothic tradition.

Landscape and the natural world, in the Gothic novel, offers a kind of access to the spiritual or sublime, especially those of Ann Radcliffe, where the heroines frequently reflect upon their awe-inspiring surroundings and connect these directly both to God and to a sense of earthly fear which reflects their coming trials in the novel. Radcliffe often uses poetry, sometimes written by herself, as an epigraph to a chapter to invoke this sense. Landscape is evoked in Gothic only for its effects on the reader, and for its ability to evoke the emotions of the characters. Such an approach is what John Ruskin descried, in *Modern Painters* III, where he discusses poetry and art which attributes human emotions to insensate objects in the natural world. A ‘philosopher’, according to Ruskin, may say ‘that everything in the world depends upon his seeing or thinking of it’, relating all objects, particularly of the natural world, to human comprehension.⁶ This is fallacious, since it is the innate power of the object to provoke this sensation; the examples he offers are the power of a gentian to appear blue, or of gunpowder to explode. This concept of the powers of objects to evoke emotion has been extrapolated by poets, some successfully and some less so, he suggests: it is an adherence to truth which matters and which permits the use of pathetic fallacy to strike the right note for the reader. Giving an example, he explains: ‘The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief.’⁷ Consequently, poets offer landscape as a reflection of human characteristics to demonstrate passionate feeling: if it is done coldly, the effect is false.

The use of landscape as a setting for Gothic, then, is one which possibly would not meet with Ruskin’s approval, but which successfully evokes the feeling of the characters by reflecting it in the landscape. This concept is one which Ruskin acknowledges is used successfully by Tennyson, and is deployed by many other poets of the period as well as by Romantics and Gothic writers of the eighteenth-century. These ideas are exemplified in Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’ (1750), which pre-dates Gothic, but draws on tropes and aesthetics which we now attribute to the genre, such as the churchyard, bats and an ‘ivy-mantled tow’r’ (l. 9) as an appropriate context in which to muse upon the fleetingness of life, the fickleness of human society, and the approach of death. The

landscapes are integral to an understanding of Gothic, then; 'central to these works, a means by which political, psychological, social, and cultural ideals are laid bare, transmitted, and often critiqued.'⁸ Moreover, 'associations with Gothic landscapes have become so deeply embedded in Western culture that authors, sometimes intentionally and sometimes automatically, use these landscapes in non-Gothic texts as invaluable, powerful shorthand to evoke in their readers horror, alienation, or uncertainty at the grotesquery, instability and corruption of their worlds.'⁹ 'Landscape' does not simply refer to Walpole's castle, the lofty mountains of Radcliffe, or the cells and dungeons of Lewis; it refers to the material culture which constitutes the aesthetics of Gothic, from bats to candlesticks. This focus on small spatial areas or individual objects is one which is particularly appropriate to poetry, offering a peep through the keyhole into a Gothic world which is necessarily restricted by form, and yet which accesses an index of a wider tropes through its gestures towards the fictional genre.

Emily Brontë's poetry offers a kind of 'Victorian meta-gothic', along with Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson, in which 'we are plunged into intimate experience of a universe with its own Gothic microclimate, where we see-saw sickeningly from homely to horror', according to Caroline Franklin.¹⁰ Her poem 'Remembrance' (1846) offers a glimpse of mourning, in the constructed persona of 'Augusta', one of her most significant characters from the 'Gondal' saga, and a figure who 'ultimately reinforced the disturbing connection between mortality and the feminine'.¹¹ Yet this poem lacks 'the desperate desire for the grave' which marks the character's other poems,¹² instead insisting on continuing to live and even 'learn how existence could be cherished,/Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy.' (ll. 23-4) The poet-queen of Gondal may be a prototype for the Gothic heroine of *Wuthering Heights*, but she is also a reflection of suffering womanhood, whose life must continue despite grief. Chichester points out how the early loss of mother and sisters may have provided Brontë with a model for feminine mortality, and it is true that in her novel, the Gondal saga and her poetry the heroines both mourn and themselves die. Yet the death of the mother, as Carolyn Dever suggests, opens up possibilities for the child, making them vulnerable but also offering freedom and opportunities.¹³ 'Remembrance' is a poem of mourning for a husband, but the ability to recover and continue is apparent: the Gothic landscape of the grave and of loss which permeate the first few stanzas is left behind for a new, if joyless, embracing of the world. Other poems offer less hope: while 'Remembrance' moves away from the tomb, 'I Am the Only Being Whose Doom' (1839) finds a sepulchre in the speaker's psyche, where it is 'worse to trust to my own mind/And find the same corruption there' (ll. 23-4). An emotional entombment is worse, it seems than physical death, and the poem leads one through the speaker's emotional development until the reader, too, is trapped within the deadened brain. In contrast, 'The Night is Darkening Round Me' (1837) maps the speaker's psychological disintegration onto the landscape, with the winds, trees and clouds echoing her distress in a wild landscape, yet without using pathetic fallacy in the direct sense; here, Brontë sets up a distinction between the poet's psyche and the setting, which act upon each other and create a 'meta-Gothic' atmosphere which in its interiority is inescapable.

The poetry of Thomas Hood (1799-1845) is most often noted for its humour, and William Michael Rossetti, in his 'Prefatory Note' to Hood's poems, describes both his work and his personality as 'whimsical' and 'absurd', whilst noting that his life was 'dark with lengthening and deepening shadow of death'.¹⁴ Rossetti evidently struggles to reconcile the very different tone of Hood's poems, from the witty to the farcical, the sentimental to the terrifying, commenting that 'into his grave and pathetic poems he can import qualities still loftier ... though even here it is not often that he utterly forswears quaintness and oddity'.¹⁵

'The Bridge of Sighs' (1844) offers a fragmented and ambiguous narrative of a nameless woman, probably a prostitute, 'a class of women of whom the least that was said the better', according to one reviewer.¹⁶ The poem is one of several by Hood which deals

with the problem of poverty, which in this case is exemplified by the assumption of the poem's narrator that the young woman committed suicide due to her circumstances, jumping from Waterloo Bridge, known as 'The Bridge of Sighs' due to the number of young women who did this. The tone of the poem is one of sympathy, and its sentimental and moral admonition to withhold judgment and implicitly to see the 'black flowing river' (l. 66) as having symbolically washed away her past sins, is one which had a clear appeal for nineteenth-century readers. Yet the text calls attention to the helplessness of the woman who is constructed as a heroine in distress: fallen in more ways than one, she is aestheticised, her body outlined by her dripping garments, her face and hair indicating her beauty even in death. She is a mute, objectified woman, transformed by death into a work of art despite the invocation to mourn over her state. For Gothic heroines, 'Their business is to experience difficulty, not to get out of it',¹⁷ because for them, 'life begins with a blank'.¹⁸ In this case, life also ends with a blank, the woman's character washed clean by the filthy water, and yet the reader cannot help but be aware that pity is provoked because of her death, rather than for her life, despite the poet's attempts to summon up charity for her and her sisters.

The poem is one of surfaces and depths, then: the woman is dragged from the depths of the water, and the aesthetic surface is what the reader is presented with. The poem evokes the urban landscape as a metaphor for the busy and uncaring bustle in which she existed:

Where the lamps quiver
So far in the river,
With many a light
From window and casement,
From garret to basement,
She stood, with amazement,
Houseless by night. (ll. 56-62)

The lights from the houses are contrasted in the following stanza with 'the bleak wind of March' (l. 63) and the 'dark arch' (l. 65) of the bridge itself. The lighted windows stand synecdochally for the uncaring world, indicating an urban centre around the Thames. The industrialisation of the city, which offers work and implies progress, is here conjured as a contributing factor for poverty in an environment largely oblivious to suffering. Moreover, at a time when the Thames was an environmental concern, spreading disease in the city, the woman is equated with the river, unclean and polluting to the environment of respectability. The clear indication of the poem is that 'Death has left on her/Only the beautiful' (ll. 25-6), purifying her to make her an appropriate object for a poem. Unlike the decaying corpses which appear in Gothic fiction, this beautiful corpse which inspired many artworks, including George Frederic Watts's *Found Drowned* (1848-50) and John Everett Millais's 'The Bridge of Sighs' (1858), is rescued from the city's inhumanity. As Maggie Kilgour argues,

the gothic is symptomatic of a nostalgia for the past which idealises the medieval world as one of organic wholeness, in which individuals were defined as members of the 'body politic, essentially bound by a symbolic system of ideologies and correspondences to their families, societies, and the world around them.'¹⁹

The poem's call to recognise the plight of such women can be read as a call to a simpler past, and a critique of modern society, yet it also focuses on the idealised, mute, and thus compliant, woman who reappears throughout poetry of the period.

A similar approach to the Gothicised urban city and its horrors can be seen in ‘The City of Dreadful Night’ (1874), by the now obscure poet James Thomson (1834-1882), often referred to as B.V., from his pseudonym Bysshe Vanolis, by which he is distinguished from the earlier poet of the same name. This long and complex poem navigates an inhuman city, opening with an epigraph from Dante’s *Inferno*, ‘Per me si va nella città dolente’ (‘Through me you pass into the city of woe’), and indicates a sense of alienation from both the present and the self. The ‘City’ of the poem is one characterised by an absence of hope, and offers a ‘myth of entropy’ in which death is the only solution, longed-for by the City’s inhabitants.²⁰ The despairing, necromantic flâneur who narrates the poem acts as a guide to this particular Purgatory, and it is clear that the poem owes much to Dante, among other sources, though it was the works of Shelley that provide particular inspiration to Thomson.

The poem is divided into twenty-one parts, alternating between recollections of the narrator’s visit to the city and the lost souls he encounters, and a description of the city and its inhabitants. The form is regular but uneven, with some sections in seven-line stanzas, some six-line stanzas, and some in triplets; the changing form causes the ‘disruptive’ effect to which Napier refers, requiring the reader to adjust their pace repeatedly. This echoes the poem’s inconsistent approach to time: ‘A night seems termless hell’ (I, l. 74), and the city’s occupants face interminable darkness which suggests a dissolution of night and day. Moreover, time is meaningless in the depths of melancholy which the city represents:

Take a watch, erase
The signs and figures of the circling hours,
Detach the hands, remove the dial-face;
The works proceed until run down; although
Bereft of purpose, void of use, still go. (II, ll. 32-6)

Yet in the exhortation to suicide which one character presents, and in the figure of the crawling man searching for a thread to return him to infancy and the safety of his mother’s breast, it is clear that time still matters; there is no escape from it except in death, which will be slow in coming.

The city itself seems to be a hellish vision of the London where Thomson was sent to the Royal Caledonian Asylum at the age of eight, and where he lived out his melancholy life. It is a place where light is artificial and only serves to illuminate the corners of despair:

The street-lamps burn amid the baleful glooms,
Amidst the soundless solitudes immense
Of ranged mansions dark and still as tombs. (I, ll. 43-5)

As these lines suggest, the city is both clearly mapped out and yet remains obscure throughout. It is, as Raymond Williams states, ‘a symbolic vision of the city as a condition of human life’.²¹ The poem maps out psychologically where Faith, Love and Hope died in the city, indicating that is their absence which has caused the living death of the inhabitants. In fact, for a nightmarish vision, the poem also offers some clear images of a city, which incorporates the River of Suicides, and which recall Victorian London easily to the reader:

Although lamps burn along the silent streets,
Even when moonlight silvers empty squares
The dark holds countless lanes and close retreats;
But when the night its sphereless mantle wears
The open spaces yawn with gloom abysmal,

The sombre mansions loom immense and dismal,
The lanes are black as subterranean lairs. (III, ll. 1-7)

Yet this familiarity which the first three lines above indicate is undermined by the final part of this stanza; the psychological distancing here is through the familiar being made uncanny by the darkness, which is emotional and existential as well as literal. The 'countless lanes' in the dark are akin to the subterranean passages of Gothic fiction, places of threat, but also of enquiry, as Valdine Clemens explores:

the dark tunnels and underground passages of Gothic edifices represent descent into the unconscious, away from the socially constructed self toward the uncivilized, the primitive. Violence, pursuit, and rape occur in these lower depths, yet they are also the realms where valuable discoveries are made.²²

It is debatable to what extent the discoveries to be made in these 'close retreats' can be declared 'valuable', in the context of this poem, and yet in the connotations of psychological complexity, sexual anxiety and emotional distress there are aspects which are brought out later in the poem which imply that discovery has been made, if not a positive one.

The penultimate section of the poem offers an example of the grotesque, a sphinx before which a stone angel disintegrates, first wings, then sword, then body, which may be read as representative of the earlier deaths of Faith, Hope and Love. In the grounds of the cathedral, the sphinx is unexpected; huge and implacable, it stands in for the immovability of the universe, its failure to empathise with humanity. With its 'cold majestic face/Whose vision seemed of infinite void space' (XX, ll. 47-8), the creature of stone is both uncanny and grotesque, opening a space for the reader to contemplate the vast emptiness of the universe alongside the speaker.

The poem also manifests a close relationship with Gothic through the description of the mansion which appears in X: 'The hall was noble, and its aspect awed,/Hung round with heavy black from dome to floor;' (ll. 15-16). The description of the deserted hall is indeed one of Gothic splendour and melancholy which does justice to Walpole, but the speaker overhears a young man who maps this building explicitly onto his own psyche, describing it as 'The chambers of the mansion of my heart' and 'The inmost oratory of my soul' (ll. 42, 46). It is here that he encounters the 'Lady of the images', a concept made more resonant by the poet's insistence that the City itself is a vision, and consequently its structures and inhabitants metaphoric and symbolic. This beautiful, dead woman, representing perhaps the death of false hope, is doubled, at the end of the poem, with the enormous statue of 'Melencolia', based on Dürer's engraving (1514). This final image offers a terrifying closure to the poem: 'Because the vision is mythic, however, the statue is made to preside over the whole of reality as well. This is why the lines are so alarming.'²³

Images are, perhaps, a last resort for Thomson in the poem; in XVI the 'pulpit speaker' is heckled by a listener who asks that he 'Speak not of comfort where no comfort is,/Speak not at all: can words make foul things fair?' (ll. 39-40) Words are useless in the face of despair, just as time is meaningless and light cannot illumine. In the following section, the narrator removes another potential source of comfort, by describing the moon and stars in all their glory, and mocking men who 'think the heavens respond to what they feel.' (XVII, l. 7) Not only does this undermine the notion that God has sympathy for his creation (a concept which the previous section denies more explicitly), but it also suggests that pathetic fallacy is of human devising and means nothing: to take comfort from the beauty of nature is to falsely deceive oneself, since it is unaware of our existence. The argument here is paradoxical, however, since the city itself reflects so closely the contorted psyche of the despairing visitor,

and consequently reflects in Ruskin's truest sense the alignment between humanity and its landscape, expressing the truth of the soul in despair.

Thomson's vision is both of his time and eternal; despair does not change through the centuries, but the aestheticisation of misery is a trope to which poets return. The poetry of Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) has become the face of medievalised Gothic in nineteenth-century poetry.²⁴ Written before the accession of Victoria to the throne, but popular with readers and artists throughout the nineteenth century, his poem 'Mariana' (1830) has become emblematic of a Gothic aesthetic in which the landscape is used to reflect the interiority of character situated within it, along with 'The Lady of Shalott' (1833; 1842). The poem, along with many others, indicates Tennyson's nostalgic desire for a medieval past which is both comforting and threatening – but, most significantly, aesthetically appealing. In a letter, Tennyson wrote that it was 'the distance that charms me in the landscape, the picture and the past, and not the immediate to-day in which I move.'²⁵ Townend briefly acknowledges the role that the eighteenth-century rise of Gothic played in the interest in Victorian medievalism, and this is particularly apparent in Tennyson's work, as well as that of William Morris.²⁶

Mariana herself is a minor character in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, and in this poem the unification of landscape and character reaches its pinnacle, though this itself is an irony since Mariana is separated from the landscape by seclusion, the claustrophobic enclosure which characterises the situation of Gothic heroines from Radcliffe to Reeves being enacted in this fragment of a life. While 'Mariana' contains no terror or horror, as Gothic might traditionally display, it contains at heart an ambiguity which opens itself up into a nameless dread, for women, at least. The decay of the building ('Weeded and worn the ancient thatch/Upon the lonely moated grange', ll. 7-8), the stasis and grief of the heroine, and her inability to act upon her misery, are combined to delineate a character whose life is determined for her. As Tucker points out, comparison with Browning

shows that, while Tennyson could create character and sustain its moods, he could not dramatize it beyond a relatively narrow range of internal and external action – a range of action that is most compelling, in fact, when it addresses those conditions or psychological mechanisms that thwart change.²⁷

Tucker's argument is that Tennyson's characters are bound by their past lives and by their situation; like many Gothic heroines, then, Mariana is able only to reflect on the inevitability of her situation, which cannot change unless it is changed by the actions of a hero. This fairy-tale construction owes much to Gothic in its retelling of the Arthurian myth of the Maid of Astolat. It also indicates the complex relationship between women and the natural world; Mariana is presented as detached from her surroundings rather than comfortable in them, constructed as oppositional to the birds whose voices are heard in the poem, and yet visually she melts into the background, of the same colours and disintegrating state as the Gothic building she occupies, whilst paradoxically restrained by them. Moreover, the character is constructed as exterior and objectified, with any sense of her own voice muted by the noise of the landscape which surrounds her. The setting and stock characters of Gothic are juxtaposed here, and the effect is that of approaching doom and hopelessness. Tennyson transforms the Gothic trope of pathetic fallacy, in which the landscape reflects characters' emotions, into a poetic device which is explored by many other poets of the period.

This is a very different angle on the Gothic character to those provided by other poets, however. Browning's dramatic monologues, especially 'Porphyria's Lover' (1836) and 'My Last Duchess' (1842), offer strong male characters who appear to represent Gothic villains: unchivalrous towards women, proud of their own strength and virility, and anxious to

*(O Mother, Mary Mother,
Lost, lost, all lost, between Hell and Heaven!)* (ll. 295-301)

The soul which enters is the final Gothic touch: it recalls the German ballads of which the Rossettis were so fond, of lost souls which come to claim their sweethearts, and the final crossing of the threshold unites them in an unholy relationship, with 'Sister Helen's demoniac vengeance was bought only at the price of her own soul.'³⁴ Rossetti's interest lies, it seems, in the mental strength of a woman whose desire for revenge is stronger than her life, mortal or eternal.

The poetry of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (1861-1907) was described by Robert Bridges as 'wonderously [sic] beautiful... but mystical rather and enigmatic'; her work contains an occult strain which owes its dark aesthetics to Gothic.³⁵ Her short poem 'The Witch' (1893) offers a rather different approach to the wicked woman from Rossetti's; this witch conforms to female stereotypes: she is 'not tall or strong' (l. 2), and claims 'I am but a little maiden still,/ My little white feet are sore' (ll. 12-13), and begs, 'Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!' As a consequence, the (presumably male) narrator is blinded by her innocence and child-like appeal, since she has positioned herself as a helpless heroine in need of rescuing, and admits her. The poem's title has warned the reader, but the narrator remains in ignorance until it is too late, and the reader must question whether the poem is an indication of the hidden strength of women beneath their apparent frailty, or a revival of folkloric tales of terror, akin to some of the poems of her great-uncle, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The poem is, of course, a warning: the concluding lines are ambiguous and yet terrifying:

She came - she came - and the quivering flame
Sunk and died in the fire.
It never was lit again on my hearth
Since I hurried across the floor,
To lift her over the threshold, and let her in at the door. (ll. 17-21)

The terror of the unknown and the never-explained leaves the reader's imagination to occupy the empty space once the poem concludes, making the inferences drawn all the more terrifying. This approach which was popularised by the late nineteenth-century ghost story is manifested effectively in poetry, which also shows the influence of Christina Rossetti. For both Rossetti and Coleridge, to cross a threshold (typically denoting the entrance of a bride to her marital home) is often a moment of crisis, in which the woman's fate is determined. In fact, a Gothic reading of this poem offers a somewhat different approach to it: Eugenia DeLaMotte claims that 'The Gothic novelist always pauses at the threshold of the villain's dim domain, allowing the heroine and the reader to shudder with sudden intuitive horror.'³⁶ This suggests a reversal of roles; the woman may be a witch, but who or what is the speaker? Is it the 'little maiden' who is condemned by entering the room? If Gothic novels by women insinuate that domesticity and marital bondage are worse than death, this opens up a potential new approach to the poem, and similar ambiguity is apparent in her poems 'Wilderspin' (1899) and 'The Other Side of the Mirror' (1896), among others.

Smith and Hughes emphasise modern critics' approaches to 'the Victorians as inherently Gothic' even though as Killeen acknowledges 'Victorian men and women were more likely to think of themselves as living in an age of civilised progress rather than Gothic barbarism'.³⁷ This is, of course, indicative of changing views of both Gothic and the Victorians, but the use of Gothic as a poetic trope also indicates the genre's tendency to use distance in both time and place to create a space in which to offer social criticism of the

writer's society. Robert Mighall argues that Victorian Gothic fiction 'reinforces the strangeness of the [urban] environment and its inhabitants and establishes a distance between the respectable and the outcast, the observer and the observed.'³⁸ This is apparent in 'The Bridge of Sighs', in which the poem's narrator cries out to the (distanced, respectable) inhabitants of the urban space to show charity; it is also a significant aspect of many of the poems of Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, among others. This distance is a familiar technique, and one which is used increasingly throughout the poetry of the nineteenth-century.

There is a clearly delineated emphasis on the historical aspects of Gothic in many of the poems discussed, and one which points to contemporary anxieties. Richards suggests that 'the passion for the past among these Victorian poets is directly related to their sense of alienation and their desire for some kind of escape.'³⁹ Their sense of alienation from their present is apparent in all the poems under discussion here, along with many others not included, and indicates the position of many poets who see themselves as social critics, outsiders to a problematic society, even if this is not how we regard them now. Armstrong argues that Gothic can be read as 'an art of *resistance* to bondage ... a moment when the individual consciousness gave material form to art within a corporate social organisation and found a way of representing certain aspects of freedom.'⁴⁰ She refers, here, to Ruskin's conceptions of Gothic explored in *The Nature of Gothic* (1851), and the work of the craftsmen of Venice, but the concept bears examination in the light of poetry and its ability to use both Gothic and the grotesque to test the limits of freedom in the society in which it exists. The poetry of the nineteenth-century which most strongly shows the hallmark of Gothic origins is that which not only manifests the aesthetics of the genre but which also situates its crucial arguments and concerns in a historical past which provides a disguised replica of its own time.

The poems discussed in this chapter, and many others besides during the nineteenth century, indicate an anxiety about social conditions, including gender, poverty and sexuality; they also tend towards morbid expression which gestures towards a death-wish or anxieties about death as an unwanted journey or union with an unknown 'Other'. Armstrong claims that 'an obsession with death is the logical outcome of the oppressed condition';⁴¹ though not all of the poets of the period can be described as oppressed in a material sense, many saw the condition of living within Victorian society as itself oppressive, to the artist as well as to marginalised groups. For those for whom death becomes a fascination, it is not always the primary focus of poetry, but becomes a liminal concept, existing just beyond the bounds of the text: in few poems do we see, or experience, a death, but it is implied in nearly all of them. Edmund Burke describes the terrible sublime as 'an apprehension of pain or death', though 'death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain'.⁴² The Gothic as a genre 'allowed writers to engage with death-related subject matter considered too macabre, controversial, or sensitive', and the concentrated fragments of Gothic matter which poetry of the Victorian period offers are saturated with this anxiety around social issues, closely related to changing post-Enlightenment approaches to faith.⁴³

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