Nostalgia or Perversion?
Nostalgia or Perversion?
Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century
until the Present Day

Edited by
Isabella van Elferen

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INTRODUCTION

NOSTALGIA AND PERVERSION
IN GOTHIC REWRITING

ISABELLA VAN ELFEREN

Lord Byron, Absinthe, and Gothic Rewriting

In November 2006 the Dutch Goth scene gathered in a monumental seventeenth-century building in the centre of Amsterdam to participate in “Villa Diodati.” The organisers of this event intended to revive the atmosphere of Lord Byron’s early nineteenth-century villa of the same name, and in their invitation expressed the hope that this environment would lead its visitors to artistic heights:

The year is 1816.
Up in the Swiss mountains Lord Byron rents Villa Diodati, to spend time with his friend John Polidori. Among his guests are Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Clare Clairmont. While outside the storm tortures the old walls of the villa, inside by the fireplace the guests dare each other to put their most frightening nightmares to paper. In this inspiring environment the classics of the Gothic genre were born: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, to name but a few.

Now, 190 years later, in our modern villa, with a dance room and a salon, we’ll evoke the creative spirits of the past. This is a call to all of you artistically engaged, to come together this night. Be part of this tradition and… let’s create art!2

The 2006 Villa Diodati was a cultural event which in some respects transgressed the borders of its model, as its creative stage gave room to the curious convergence of an ironic necrophilic poetry reading, a performance of a J.S. Bach sonata on traverso, a cybergothic choreography to Covenant’s “Call the Ships to Port,” and a live BDSM show. Visitors’ clothing styles ranged from
neoromantic dresses to vampire capes, latex and fetish outfits, and cybergothic goggles and platform soles.

This Gothic gathering is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it testifies to the nostalgic incentive of present-day Gothic milieus. Goths express their dissatisfaction with the modern world in a deliberate movement towards earlier, supposedly more orderly or more aesthetic, times and spaces, such as Lord Byron’s romantic villa or Bach’s “well-tuned” musical universe. Secondly, it shows how this Gothic nostalgia is accompanied by a transgressive drive. Although the Amsterdam party was modelled on Byron’s villa, necrophilia (even if it were cast in irony) and cybergothic music were probably not present in 1816. Finally, the Amsterdam Villa Diodati demonstrates how the nineteenth- and twenty-first-century Gothic are deeply connected by exactly these two factors. Despite the lack of academic research on this theme, the simultaneously nostalgic and transgressive rewriting of past situations and attitudes furnishes one of the consistent links between the various historical appearances of the Gothic. Ever since Bauhaus’ 1979 single “Bela Lugosi’s Dead,” which is often considered the first Gothic pop song, the Goth genre in popular music as well as the subculture it brought forth have rewritten texts and themes from earlier (Gothic) times. In spite of the constant recontextualization that causes slight alterations in its outward appearance, it is the nostalgic and transgressive gesture of the Gothic that gives it a transhistorical quality.

![Fig. 0.1 The Making of Villa Diodati: Nostalgia and Transgression in Gothic Rewriting.](image)

In the Gothic genre, the past always lingers in the present, whether as a disturbing shadow, a reverberation in a hollow space, a mental reflection, or a
projection of the unconsciousness. In whatever form, the Gothic recasts pasts upon presents, and brings with it unease and uncanniness as well as nostalgia and longing. The Gothic gaze into the past is not passive, and does not result in mere mirrored images. Gothic nostalgia is a gesture, a movement, an act, and one that intervenes with the structure and nature of the thing remembered. The Gothic gaze therefore entails transgressive rewriting per se. Nostalgia and transgression are two seemingly opposed yet inseparable aspects of Gothic rewriting, as they are both defined by the desire to re-create stories, situations, or identifications. In the literal rewritings of existing stories, films, or music, both tendencies are apparent—the articles in this book attest to this using various examples.

A specific type of rewriting takes place in the remediation of a Gothic tale from one medium into another; Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula, for instance, has been recast in paintings, films, songs, and computer games, each not only narrating the story, but also adding new layers of interpretation through the performative forces of the (moving) image and sound themselves. But Gothic rewriting can additionally take the practical guise of re-enactment. In re-enactment, the nostalgic and transgressive rewriting of the Gothic is directly embodied. Dressing up as Dracula or dancing to Bauhaus, the remediation of Stoker’s protagonist through the body enables the modern Goth to act out his or her own interpretation—and that in turn engenders wholly new meanings in his or her social surroundings. Re-enactment is a vividly performative form of rewriting; since it takes place in what Erving Goffman has labeled the theatrical front of communication, it interacts directly with social structures and conventions. At Villa Diodati 2006, the past was rewritten in the poetic and prose word, in music, film, photography, as well as in such cultural practices as wearing outfits, dancing and drinking absinthe. In all these forms of rewriting, the 2006 Villa Diodati furnishes a lively illustration for the theme of this book.

**Nostalgia and Perversion in Gothic Rewriting:**

**The Uncanny Rearview Mirror**

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has demonstrated the historically coherent function of the literary Gothic to be a negotiation of the nature and boundaries of the Real. The Gothic shows reality in an uncanny mirror appearance: it thematizes the past in the present, the other in the self, transgression in nostalgia—Jekyll and Hyde symbolise the good and evil sides of one single person, Dracula is not alive nor dead, but undead, and contemporary Goths feel nostalgia for Victorian aesthetics but pervert them by adding fetishistic elements. Gothic literature, film and music show these paradoxes from an anti-dichotomous perspective, without commenting morally: sometimes the black and the white simply converge in one
time, place or person. The Gothic is situated right within the uncanniness resulting from this realisation, uncomfortable and yet undeniable. The liminal perspective resulting from the Gothic’s “epistemological slit from origin” (De Bloois) is consistent in Gothic genres of various historical periods. For these reasons, Carol Siegel considers the Gothic stance to be “a state of continual becoming,” in the Deleuzian sense:¹¹ in the perpetual dialogue with variegated others, the Gothic is located in an eternal in-between, beyond day-to-day binary opposites. She argues that “[Goths] take deterritorialization beyond limits; they come undone. [And] to come undone is to become.”¹² Siegel is reflecting on contemporary Goth subculture, but her argument holds equally true for historical Gothic genres. Like Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming, the Gothic is “antimemory,”¹³ paradoxically unifying dialectic and motionlessness. From this perspective, the Gothic can be described as a critical paradigm foregrounding liminal spaces of history, locality, and identity. It has come to function as a genre that criticises cultural dichotomies through the acceptance and radical incorporation of ambivalence. Overstepping the insecurity of moving in between opposites, the uncanniness of such borderlands is wilfully confronted.

Building on these historically developed characteristics of the Gothic, Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Eighteenth Century until the Present Day simultaneously broadens the definition of “Gothic” from a literary genre to a gesture of pervasive cultural criticism, and focuses on one aspect of the Gothic, namely that of rewriting. The book aims to theorize rewriting as an inherent part of both the historical and the contemporary Gothic, and to consider nostalgia and perversion as instrumental in the Gothic rewriting process. Although many of the (inter-)textual aspects of Gothic literature, art and culture have been described, analysed and discussed, the tension between nostalgia and perversion as an integral part of Gothic rewriting has to date been left out of scholarly debate. However, these two seemingly opposed forces are so essential to the Gothic rendering of the past that they have become central to contemporary conceptions of the genre—Gothic literature, film, and subcultures are often qualified as either nostalgic or perverse, or as both.

The nostalgic appropriation of the past has long been identified as one of the main characteristics of the literary Gothic. Fred Botting describes Gothic nostalgia as the yearning for a romanticized past: “Gothic novels seem to sustain a nostalgic relish for a lost era of romance and adventure, for a world that, if barbaric, was [...] also ordered.”¹⁴ However, as the example of Villa Diodati illustrates such nostalgic rewriting often also results in transgressions of the past. Discussing the nature of nostalgia, Linda Hutcheon has argued that the nostalgic drive does not so much signify the desire to literally go back to the past, but rather reflects the will to yearn for something which is essentially irrecoverable.¹⁵ As a result of this subjective sentimental drive, she asserts,
“nostalgia ‘sanitizes’ the past.” by nostalgic remembering we conjure up a past we desire to long for, and thus paradoxically transgress history itself by way of memory.\textsuperscript{16} It is precisely in this liminal space between history and memory that the Gothic roams. Anne Williams notes in her evaluation of Gothic literature that “Gothic fiction offers its readers an imaginative space that both insists on ‘reality,’ on historicity, on materiality, and at the same time liberates the reader from the constrictions of that history.”\textsuperscript{17} Embracing both the freedom and the uncanniness resulting from the entrance into the borderland between the real and the virtual—the same borderland that is inhabited by contemporary Goths—the Gothic actively appropriates and acts out the symbiosis of nostalgia and transgression. And it does so in superlative: it underlines the transgressive force of nostalgia by deliberately perverting the orderly texture of the yearned-for past. The nostalgic incentive of the Gothic is not so much defined by its looking at the past (c.q. the supernatural, the irrational, the other), but by its perverting endorsement of it; Gothic nostalgia is decisively active, as it transforms the past, turning it upside down, foregrounding its background, corrupting its order. If nostalgia is characterized by the retrospective creation of an idealised homeland, the Gothic renders this very homeland uncanny by perverting its idyllic quality. Moreover, if perversion is the deviation from or negation of societal norms, the Gothic challenges this dialectic by undermining the boundaries between real and unreal, norm and deviation. An interesting example of this double performativity of the Gothic is provided by David Lynch’s television series \textit{Twin Peaks}. The story is nostalgically set in an American small-town “where nothing ever happens.” From the first camera shots—accompanied by Badalamenti’s disturbing soundscapes—observing the discovery of Laura Palmer’s murdered body, however, the dreamy countryside atmosphere is shot through with ambiguity and uncanniness. The nostalgic “home” is by no means idyllic, but reveals itself as a borderland where the real and the imaginary, and good and evil, dwell side by side.\textsuperscript{18} The transgression is taken further as the story gradually unfolds into a rather nightmarish complex of plots, and comes to a climax in the Black Lodge, an ultimately liminal place beyond transgression where perversion constitutes both norm and deviation. In his Gothic rewriting of the archetypal American hometown, Lynch exposes the seamless overlap of nostalgia and transgression, as well as the overlap of norm and perversion that occurs beyond transgression—without warning, moral judgment or mercy. Like Villa Diodati and many other examples, \textit{Twin Peaks} shows how nostalgia and perversion are intricately linked together in the liminal perspective presented by the uncanny rearview mirror of Gothic rewriting.

The articles in this book address these themes and the questions they bring forward. If elements of both nostalgia and perversion are operative in Gothic rewriting, how are they effected and how do they play out in differing media? In
which ways does nostalgia for the Middle Ages in early Gothic novels relate to
the perversions of conventional religiosity and sexuality in these works? How
do nostalgic Victorian dresses and “medieval” musical arrangements relate to
the flirtations with depression and vampirism in contemporary Goth milieus?
Which artistic or social functions and effects do such rewritings have?
Naturally, the polemic question in the title of this book cannot be answered
unambiguously, as both forces are intertwined, and together constitute the
“double gesture” (Dunn) of Gothic rewriting. Nor is there only one possible
answer to this question, as the intriguing blend of nostalgia and perversion that
characterizes Gothic rewriting may originate from several nostalgic or
transgressive impulses, and may moreover generate variegated interpretations
and meanings in historical and present-day recipients.

The “dialoguing with the past” (Davison) that characterizes Gothic rewriting
requires scholarly research on this theme to step over chronological and
disciplinary boundaries. Nostalgia or Perversion? unconventionally brings
together the early Gothic novel, present-day female and black Gothic literature,
Goth subculture and music, and the imagery of horror films and comic books.
The analysis of nostalgia and perversion in Gothic rewriting from these various
disciplinary and theoretical angles brings forward a number of interesting
consistencies and differences in Gothic rewriting.

Past in Present, Self in Other: The Articles

The articles in this volume theorize the Gothic’s manifold relationships with
various pasts and others by analyzing the technologies of Gothic rewriting. The
articles in Parts I and II are concerned with the new interpretations of the past
and new perspectives on the present engendered by Gothic rewriting. The
authors focus on the origins, workings, and effects of Gothic rewritings with
special attention to the ways in which nostalgia and perversion operate in these
processes.

Part I theorizes the procedures of Gothic rewriting. Jennifer E. Dunn
explores what she terms “Gothic’s double gesture.” She argues that the Gothic
genre endorses a continual rewriting of the past—and its own history—as well
as of the present through the forces of nostalgia, perversion, and repetition:
through its perverting nostalgia for hidden or repressed aspects of the past, the
Gothic enforces ever-changing views on the present and thus leads to an endless
cycle of reinterpretation. Carol Margaret Davison addresses the effects of the
Gothic’s dialogue with history. She investigates the extent to which the
perverting viewpoint of Gothic nostalgia changes our perception of the idealized
“home.” Through an analysis of maternity and female repression in
contemporary Gothic film and literature, she argues that the Gothic discloses a
Nostalgia and Perversion in Gothic Rewriting

destabilized, uncanny home. Joost de Bloois theorizes the disruptive Gothic gesture as rewriting encompassing nostalgia and perversion, and charts the transgressive faculties of the Gothic. His analysis of Georges Bataille’s assessment of the nature and temporal structure of transgression deepens our understanding of the complex relationships between Gothic nostalgia and perversion, and of the role that Gothic rewriting plays in the experience of the (post-) postmodern condition humaine.

The articles in Part II investigate the renewed reflections on morality, knowledge and identity in the past as well as the present brought forward by Gothic rewriting. Sandra Hessels discusses how Anne Rice’s postmodern vampires are imbued with nostalgia for the Byronic hero, but simultaneously transgress the Romantic past by perverting its normative structures of religion, sexuality, and morality—“Evil is just a point of view”—and thus reflect on postmodern evaluations of difference. In her reading of Corben and Revelstroke’s comic book version of Hodgson’s The House on the Borderland, Züleyha Çetiner-Öktem provides a telling example of how Gothic rewriting subverts the possibility of authenticity, perverting the sane and the knowable into insanity and indecipherability. Funda Civelekoglu investigates how the intertexts and topography of Ian McEwan’s The Comfort of Strangers evoke a hauntingly tangible mixture of Gothic nostalgia and perversion, leading to a re-reading of the various “selves” in this novel.

Parts III, IV, and V of this volume explore the effects of Gothic rewriting—how does perverting nostalgia (or nostalgic perversion) shape our perception of the present, of ourselves and of the other?

Part III is concerned with Gothic re-enactments of the past through remediation and embodiment. Rebekah Ahrendt studies the remediation of the Middle Ages in Gothic music. She argues that the sentimentalized nostalgia of its sounds does not reflect a leap back into history, but rather invokes a timeless memory space, allowing Goths to enact their desire for an idealized past whilst dancing away in the “fantastic vision” of the medieval Gothic. Harun Maye demonstrates how Gothic nostalgia and perversion in Romero’s Night of the Living Dead are instruments of rewriting cinematographic horror and, paradoxically, also indicate the (un-)death of that genre through non-referentiality. Atte Oksanen examines the psychological detachment in the lyrics and music of Joy Division and Diary of Dreams. He identifies the “hollow spaces” that arise through their music as “trance-formations” of the alienating Gothic labyrinth.

The Gothic has often been theorized as an emancipating genre, as it can provide empowering readings of repressed cultural forces such as femininity, blackness, or homosexuality. The authors in Part IV investigate to what extent this emancipating quality is an effect of Gothic rewriting: how does the Gothic
The first two articles in this section contain Gothic re-readings of post-war Dutch literature. Agnes Andeweg examines the ghost story *Letter en Geest* by Frans Kellendonk. She argues that Kellendonk’s novel uses the Gothic dynamics of nostalgia and perversion to address the tensions between private and public life, which leads to an unmasking of the heterosexual fear of homosexuality. In an article closely connected to Carol Davison’s, Rosemarie Buikema and Elisabeth Wesseling discuss two novels by Renate Dorrestein in which perverse mothers turn home into an unhomely space. Dorrestein rewrites classical childrearing manuals from a Freudian, uncanny viewpoint, thereby revealing the darker sides of motherhood and opening the way for new female self-realization. Anita Raghunath provides a reinterpretation of three classic Gothic novels. She demonstrates that the Gothic’s “aesthetic of transgression” was employed for the profound literary Othering of life and identities in the British colonies, assigning excessive behaviour and perverted sexuality both to Caribbean natives and to the planters who lived there. Andrene Taylor’s reading of Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* addresses the theme of “black haunting.” She analyses how the Gothic genre is rewritten in this novel in order to offer new perspectives on racialized sexuality and black identity.

The articles in Part V examine the ways in which Gothic rewriting allows for transgressive rewritings of the self. The physical incorporation of Gothic liminality opens up the boundaries of gender, identity and morality, and permits the other in the self to come out of its convention-bound shelter. As Judith Halberstam has argued, this leads to a confrontation with the desires and fears that societal normativity has locked away—it transgresses the borders of norm and deviation, and appropriates the uncanny, the perverse, and the monstrous. Renee T. Coulombe takes up the theme of Gothic remediation and re-enactment in her evaluation of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She argues that the embodiment of the monstrous and grotesque other by the various characters in this television series signifies the Gothic move beyond nostalgia and perversion, leading to an emancipation of the female body. Gülden Hatipoğlu investigates how in Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* just such a grotesque embodiment of otherness is observed in Ireland. In a grand gesture of purgatorial transgression, the inscription of the grotesque and the perverse in the country’s body reflects the will to rewrite its mythological origin and rebirth. Maria Antónia Lima’s article closes the circle of this volume by returning to the intricate and manifold links between nostalgia, perversion, rewriting and creativity. She demonstrates that the Gothic’s perverted nostalgia and nostalgic transgression lead to a far-reaching blending of self and other, opening up the liminal space of creativity.
Acknowledgements

This volume reflects (or should we say rewrites) the intellectual exchange that took place during the conference Nostalgia or Perversion? Gothic Rewriting from the Victorian Age until the Present Day, which I organised in the ancient convent Soeterbeeck in Ravenstein in the foggy Dutch autumn of 2005. I am deeply indebted to the Radboud University Nijmegen—in particular the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Arts—, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) for their generous support of this event. I thank Gert Jan Bosgra for designing the conference website, poster and flyer, and this book’s cover, and his alter ego DJ Kult:X for his old school Gothic turntable at Soeterbeeck. It doesn’t happen often that scholarly debate is alternated with late-night Goth dancing in an eighteenth-century Augustinian convent… Finally, I want to thank Joost de Bloois, Jennifer Dunn, Monica Jansen, Sjef Poels, Joost Poort, Marjolein van den Heuvel and Klaske for their invaluable intellectual and practical support during the conference and publication. Without your help, this book would only have existed as a spectre haunting me.

I am excited to have assembled an interdisciplinary team of scholars investigating the themes of nostalgia and perversion in Gothic rewriting from so many different angles. Crossdisciplinary exchange such as this is formidably stimulating to me, and I hope it may prove to be so for the reader of this book.

Notes

1 The term “Goth” is used here to distinguish present-day Goth subculture from the transhistorical Gothic genre evolving from the eighteenth-century Gothic novel.
2 See the event website, http://www.villadodati.tk/ (03.2007).
Introduction

10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), Introduction, about the necessity to differentiate the critical function of the Gothic from “the Gothic novel proper” (3).
11 Carol Siegel, *Goth’s Dark Empire* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 158.
12 Siegel, *Goth’s Dark Empire*, 167.
15 Linda Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” in *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory: Volume 6 of the Proceedings of the XVth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association “Literature as Cultural Memory,” Leiden 16-22 August 1997*, ed. Annemarie Estor and Raymond Vervliet [Studies in Comparative Literature 30] (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000): 189-207. “Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia’s power [...]. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire. In this sense, however, nostalgia is less about the past than about the present. It operates through what Mikhail Bakhtin called an ‘historical inversion:’ the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past. [...] The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational.”
18 It is no coincidence that the town of Twin Peaks is topographically located at the Canadian border.
19 Up until 2006, Gothic criticism had been absent from Dutch literary debates. Rosemarie Buikema and Elisabeth Wesseling’s *Het Heilige Huis: De Gotieke Vertelling in de Nederlandse Literatuur* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) provides the stimulating first step into this field of research.
Part I:

Nostalgia or Perversion?
Theorizing Gothic Rewriting
CHAPTER ONE

GOTHIC’S DOUBLE GESTURE:
NOSTALGIA, PERVERSION, AND REPEATITION
IN GOTHIC REWRITINGS

JENNIFER E. DUNN

The so-called first Gothic novel, Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764), performs a double gesture of perversion and nostalgia. The text is the product of Walpole’s obsession with the medieval past, which might be understood as a perverted and perverting nostalgia: overlaid with a romanticizing contemporary sensibility, his representation of a past era is inevitably distorted. Perversion, however, is the nature of nostalgia: it is a projection of subjective sentiment from the present that necessitates distance from the real object of desire, and ensures the endless deferral of our arrival back in the longed-for moment. Nostalgic representations can never be authentic, and can never really recover the past, but this suits the Gothic, which has never prioritized authentic representation and which, with its illegible manuscripts, false identities, and convoluted plots, does everything it can to defer our arrival at the origin of the events in question—which is so often a secret, a scandal, or a pact occurring in the past. A substantial body of Gothic criticism has explored modes of perversion and nostalgia in Gothic narratives. There are, however, less explored modes of perversion and nostalgia that characterize rewritings of the Gothic, and, I would argue, render rewriting more generally a Gothic mode. If the Gothic’s representation of the medieval past is a perverted nostalgia, then this is taken one turn further when, in its plots, the Gothic presents a return of the repressed, the appearance of anxieties and desires in a most perverted form: the supernatural, the uncanny, the spectral. Rewritings of the Gothic are yet another turn of the double gesture, since they return to these moments in the literary past, both repeating and transforming them.

I am in agreement with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who claims the Gothic destabilizes “the sense of inside and outside, the centeredness of the ‘self.’”¹ This generates a crisis about the very foundations and origins of identity:
It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. This something can be its own past, the details of its family history; it can be the free air. The self and whatever it is that is outside have a proper, natural, necessary connection to each other, but one that the self is suddenly incapable of making. The inside life and the outside life have to continue separately, becoming counterparts rather than partners, the relationship between them one of parallels and correspondences rather than communication. This [...] is a fundamental reorganization, creating a doubleness where singleness should be. And the lengths there are to go to reintegrate the sundered elements—finally, the impossibility of restoring them to their original oneness—are the most characteristic energies of the Gothic novel.2

Both of the texts discussed in this essay foreground the conflict of de-centred identity through the trope of the uncanny doppelganger. However, I am also looking beyond the individual’s crisis, because the uncanny always incorporates a problem of origins in a broader context: in the clash of national and authorial “authenticities” in James Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner (1824), discussed below, and in the conflict of literary origins and language that drives Emma Tennant’s rewriting of Hogg in her novel The Bad Sister (1979). “Origins” is a slippery term: to specify somewhat, I discuss origins in the sense of authenticity, with its connotations of validity, uniqueness, and creative originality, and in the sense of foundation, which can signify beginning, stability, or the defining borders of something. All of these connotations encompass the problem of meaning or essence, and the Gothic’s tropes reveal the concentration of these concerns around that problem: its preoccupation with ancestral origins, for instance, dramatizes material anxieties about inheritance, but also more nebulous ones about self and other. Thus, the Gothic conveys “an ethic of nostalgia for origins”3 at the same time that is haunted by the trace that marks the impossibility of origins, the trace that is “not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site.”4 The deferral and indeterminacy of meaning appear/do not appear in the spectral:

To speak of the spectral, the ghostly, of haunting in general is to come face to face with that which plays on the very question of interpretation and identification, which appears, as it were, at the very limit to which interpretation can go.5

I suggest that the question of haunting and origins is especially foregrounded in texts that self-consciously write back to the Gothic. This may seem an obvious point, given that rewriting usually emanates from the political margins, and acts as a remonstrance to canonical literature’s assertions of cultural or national authenticity. But because the Gothic is itself marginal, rewriting it is often a
more complicated matter than correction or rebuttal. In Hogg’s Confessions and Tennant’s The Bad Sister, rewriting functions not to reverse and admonish the repressions of predecessor texts, but to strategically (even terrifyingly) amplify them. This can be traced through transformations of the Gothic’s modes of perverted nostalgia: in the next turn of the double gesture. While this essay offers some conclusions about the afterlife of Gothic fiction and insights into Tennant’s novel in particular, it also raises broader questions about the way we approach contemporary, particularly postmodern, Gothic fiction, and about how we theorize rewriting.

I

I turn now to James Hogg, also known by his pseudonym, the Ettrick Shepherd. Hogg’s The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner narrates the terrifying experiences of Robert Wringhim at the hands of his mysterious double, Gil-martin. Wringhim’s devoutly religious mother Rabina enters into an ill-fated union with Lord Dalcastle, who rapes her on their wedding night. When she develops a relationship with the Reverend Wringhim, a Calvinist preacher, she is condemned by her husband, and her second son Robert is disowned as a bastard. Reverend Wringhim claims care of Robert, while Robert’s brother George Colwan remains with Lord Dalcastle. Rabina’s supposed infidelity and Robert Wringhim’s uncertain paternity cause Lord Dalcastle to dictate the deep family divisions that instigate Wringhim’s ordeal. Gil-martin (whether devil or hallucination, it is uncertain) manipulates Calvinist rhetoric to goad Robert into the “justified” murder of his brother George. The plot turns Calvinist discourse inside out, destabilizing it completely. A similar destabilization of narrative authority is achieved by the text’s doubled structure, which juxtaposes the supernatural tale of Robert’s “confession” with a rational “Editor’s Narrative” without granting final authority to either one. The Editor’s rationalizing account fails to explain convincingly evidence supporting Wringhim’s tale, but the possibility of Wringhim’s madness qualifies the reliability of his confession.

Hogg’s novel is a specifically Scottish transformation of the English Gothic in the most superficial sense, in that it substitutes Scottish landscapes and social issues for the foreign castles and distant medieval past of Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, et al., in effect bringing the Gothic uncomfortably close to home. The novel is also a critique of English cultural dominance. Critics Ian Duncan and Murray G. H. Pitttock argue that Hogg renders the indigenous peasant culture of the Scottish Borders uncanny, in a parodic but critical repetition of the way an English discourse of rationalism and agenda of colonization do the same.” Yet, Duncan points out that this is also a response to
Duncan points out that although Hogg was “a Scott protégé,” his fiction and his persona as the Ettrick Shepherd evoked the superstitions and folklore of the Borders tradition as a counter to the assimilation represented by Scott’s fiction. Scott’s Gothic recovers an indigenous Scottish identity, but through a false nostalgia that relegates it to a pre-modern past, confirming its status as both aesthetic object and as other. As Duncan points out, Robert’s exhumed remains signify this exploitation as “the resurrection of a buried and dismembered national identity […] a material corpse that now falls to pieces as the literati rifle it for commodities and souvenirs.” Thus, Hogg’s rewriting of the Gothic achieves two effects: first, it forges an “other” Scottish Gothic that subverts “the late Enlightenment project of romance revival, in which the reanimation of traditional forms is botched or transgressive” and second, it “reaffirms the potency of traditional rural culture [and its] irreducibility to outside terms of explanation, [its] final, opaque otherness.”

It is clear that Hogg makes explicit the intertwining of perversion and nostalgia in the English Gothic, and in an English Gothic posing as Scottish: it is another turn of the double gesture, and a strategic one. Yet, Hogg’s rewriting is not a simple correction or reversal, as Duncan implies. The text repeats a problematic representation and counters it with an alternative that would seem to undermine the first. These are coded as two documents, the Editor’s narrative and the sinner’s confession. But as noted above, the text does not grant precedence to either document. Rewriting is never as straightforward as one text counteracting and disrupting a predecessor: disruption goes both ways. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue persuasively for the “contradictory nature of symbolic hierarchies” such as “low” and “high”; “each extremity structures the other, depends upon and invades the other in certain historical moments.” The terms in a binary opposition are never discrete, but intersecting and mutually implicated. This formula is especially applicable to the Gothic, which makes a point of destabilizing boundaries and oppositions, and of generating terror from such transgressions. If Hogg’s version of the Gothic is “haunted” by Scott’s (a dialogic palimpsest of official and dissenting voices), then within Hogg’s text, the official rationalizing account is implicated in the schizophrenic discourse of Robert’s confession, and vice versa. If the sinner’s confession seems to dominate the novel by rendering the entire text “irreducible to outside
explanation,” it does so only by embracing its status as other. Of course, this is a dramatization of the disastrous consequences of such assignations, but the text still insists that Scottish identity and Scottish literature must resist denigration as other, and yet derive power by internalizing otherness. This is a Gothic and a post-colonial tactic, signified by Robert’s inability to find safe haven in the Borders, and by his transformation there into the unheimlich corpse: he is not at home in Scotland, body, or mind.  

This doubleness extends to Robert’s other doppelganger: not Gil-martin but the “author” himself. Both Hogg and the Ettrick Shepherd appear at the end of the story, in the Editor’s Narrative. The Editor presents a letter about the suicide’s grave, signed by Hogg and actually printed in Blackwood’s Magazine the year before the novel was published. In seeking out the grave himself, the Editor asks the Ettrick Shepherd to lead him there, but the Shepherd refuses. Superstitious, and speaking with a thick accent, this appearance poses a sharp contrast to the literary Hogg of the Blackwood’s letter, who knows all about the grave, and even possesses clothing taken from it. Hogg’s appearance returns the repressed author to his text, but in this doubled, uncanny form. First of all, we do not expect to see the author in the narrative, especially in a novel first published anonymously. The pretense is that the confession is a real document, discovered and presented by the Editor; Hogg is hidden behind this pretense, and his appearance in the narrative plays with the text’s origins (the question of who really wrote the story) and with the originality of the confession (both an “original” primary source, and an “original” product of the imagination). Second, both of Hogg’s appearances precede the final unburial of the corpse, and recall its description in Hogg’s letter. Hogg admires the blue bonnet found in the grave but says he “durst not have worn that one” (234). Yet, when the Editor encounters Hogg as the Ettrick Shepherd, he is wearing one just like it. In this way, complicated authorial origins, represented by Hogg’s uncanny appearance, are bound up with the problem of national origins embodied in the corpse. Like Robert and the text itself, the figure of the author is double: haunting and dismissing himself from the text; its origin and a repudiation of origins; speaking but also unspeakable. This raises questions about the ability to articulate an authentic national literature at all, since the author is not at home in his text.

Neither, as it turns out, is the author at home in hers over a century later. Emma Tennant’s The Bad Sister, set in London and Scotland in the 1970s and 1980s, is a rewriting of Hogg’s novel, but one that transforms the Gothic’s perverted nostalgia yet again, while also drawing out (one might say unburying) the anxieties about authorship in Hogg’s text. In Tennant, the uncanny appearance of the author does not suggest that national origins and Scottish agency have been compromised. Instead, The Bad Sister dramatizes that all
origins, from ancestor to homeland, from literary predecessor to the meaning behind the signifier, can only be simulated. Consequently, language and text become sites of dangerous and terrifying manipulations.

The plot of *The Bad Sister* is very similar to Hogg’s, but with reversed genders and some seemingly minor changes. Jane Wild, the disowned and illegitimate daughter of Michael Dalzell, is suspected of murdering her father and her half-sister Ishbel; Jane’s diary, a surreal account of doubles and a tormenting, radical feminist named Meg, is presented; finally, a grave with an preternaturally preserved body, eventually identified as Jane’s, is found in Scotland. The murder case is never solved, though the text embeds Jane’s journal in an explanatory “Editor’s Narrative.” In the same rationalizing move made by Hogg’s Editor, this attempts to diagnose Jane as a schizophrenic, and her story of confused doubles as a “type of transference” (222).

One difference between the two texts is that Tennant multiplies Hogg’s duality into a plurality of discourses and intertexts. The Editor’s account reproduces a newspaper article replicating Hogg’s *Blackwood’s* letter, but also a psychiatric report, interviews, and photos: all “empirical” evidence, usually given by male experts and witnesses, that attempt to explain Jane’s account. Jane’s diary, in turn, alludes to *Jane Eyre* and the murder case of the Papin sisters in France, and is prefaced with Marina Tsvetaeva’s poem “Insomnia:” all female-centred intertexts. Additionally, Jane’s diary is characterized by a self-consciousness about language: wordplay, puns, metonymy, and metaphors proliferate. Sometimes these act as a playful nod to sources. For example, her father’s surname, Dalzell, echoes the Scottish pronunciation of “devil,” pointing to the text’s Scottish predecessor. Other times, this self-consciousness extends to a jaded attitude about jargon: “Tennant is acute in her observation of the tired social uses of words to mask realities.” When Jane sees advertisements in a supermarket—“cardboard women […] in their cardboard surrounds” holding boxes of products—she reads through the sales pitch. *She* knows each box “lies open and shallow. It has revealed nothing at all” (56). The “cardboard women” also signify nothing, and this extends to the “real” women in the neighbourhood outside the store:

One of the women was knitting […]. Her options were closed. She had copulated with the wrong man. She has been sterilised now, as a punishment for her mistakes, and she sat quietly, drawn to the artificial light below, its stern lack of mystery resembling hers. Her eyes were empty and black, like a moonless sky.

(55)

The world outside is as sterile, empty, closed, and artificial as the world inside the store. And for all her smugness, Jane is also one of these “cardboard women:”
I am the double, now it’s me who’s become the shadow. […] And the world will try to stamp me out, as I run like a grey replica of my vanished self. […] Unless […] bringing the world to rights […] bringing to Meg’s red altar the essential sacrifice […] I am restored to life and greenness and in tearing out the simulacrum need no longer live as one myself. (148)

Inescapably, the real is always revealed to be an empty signifier: an advertisement, shadow, replica, or simulacrum.

The text’s play with signifiers and Jane’s jaded attitude belie an anxiety about the shifting nature of language. In Jane’s world, signs and meaning move around. Metaphors of doubles and vampires spring to life, taking literal form. Jane’s own name, Dalzell, is not her own, and is replaced with Meg’s choice, “Jane Wild,” only to become later the more anonymous but more accurate “Jane Doe.” This instability of language is often a dangerous thing. Nowhere is this more clear than in Meg’s declaration that:

Mr Dalzell was a symbol of the father of all women […] His assassination was symbolic […] The left hand performs the act figuratively, the right hand performs it literally. There is no difference between the two. He was the incarnation of capitalism. We have incarnated our disapproval of him. (40)

Here, even a so-called progressive feminist discourse only simulates a liberating ethic while manipulating the figurative into the literal, and inverting real and unreal. Like Calvinist doctrine, feminist rhetoric is turned inside out; but Tennant is not merely replicating Hogg’s plot by substituting one theme for another. The very nature of language, and of representation and interpretation, is also destabilized. Jane’s world is, in her words, “a system of one-way and dead-end signs more potent than a written language” (127), palpable with meaning, yet meaningless. It is through this “dead-end” world that Jane travels, seeking an original self, her male half named Gilmartin, whom Meg promises in exchange for the death of Jane’s “bad sister.” Transformed by Meg into a supernatural androgyne, Jane is “infinitely strange,” “a new genetic pattern like a neon sign in cuneiform” (54); yet this is not a transcendence of the dead-end circuit of signifiers, but her absorption therein. Her text ends when she kills her sister, is reunited with Gilmartin, and sets off on a journey through the Scottish hills. She is not progressing ahead along a teleological path to a new present/future, but returning to the Borders, to her own deeply problematic beginning: to an origin/end—a meaning, a unified identity—we know cannot be grasped.

The text brings us inevitably to this conclusion that is a return, in more than one sense, to Jane’s “origins.” And going back to the beginning of the text itself,
we find an epigraph, a stanza from Wordsworth’s “Yarrow Unvisited,” which reads:

Let beeves and home-bred kine partake
The sweets of Burn-mill meadow;
The swan on still St Mary’s Lake
Float double, swan and shadow!

This is not included by the Editor, the self-defined authority of the text, but by some “other,” unknown author. The poem points to an origin: the double swan and St Mary’s Lake in the Borders recall Tennant’s literary double and The Bad Sister’s origins in Hogg and Scotland. But, as with Jane, the return to origins fails to yield any meaning or closure. As in Hogg’s novel, the body that should but does not explain the story is found in the Borders—in fact, in the very Ettrick Forest where Hogg was a shepherd, and where Tennant herself spent her childhood.16 On viewing the body, Tennant’s Editor admits to “a sudden realisation of the uncanny” (220). He writes:

There was no way [...] in which it was possible tell the sex of the corpse. There was something completely hermaphroditic about it, but I can’t explain what that quality was. The face was completely blank and smooth, and the eyes closed. (220)

If the corpse and this moment of unburial are unspeakable, so is the Editor, who momentarily “can’t explain.” The body is uncanny because it stands for Jane and for her text, which will not be repressed or buried, submerged in the Editor’s discourse, but will also not be read: Jane’s body and her text are “blank” and “closed,” refusing to yield to interpretation. The search for the ultimate origin—the meaning behind the signifier—is finally perverted. In this postmodernist world of shifting language, the return to origins is an impossible one, and the desire for that return signifies an equivalent emptiness, a false nostalgia.

II

Tennant’s complex rewriting of Hogg illustrates what I have been calling the Gothic’s double gesture. To specify, this double gesture works through repetition that is also transformation, troped variously as decay, deformity, metamorphosis, and simulation in The Bad Sister, but always centred on the spectral nature of language, articulation or representation, and writing. This is a Gothic poetics characterizing the internal operations of Tennant’s and Hogg’s texts, but also their intertextual relationship, and in this way points to the Gothic
quality of rewriting. Rewriting takes many shapes, including the updating of classic stories, generic experimentation, and challenges to the canon. It also includes the more general reworking of Gothic tropes in contemporary fiction (by Angela Carter, Iain Banks, Anne Rice, and Stephen King, to name but a few examples). Functionally, rewriting emanates from the political margins, acting as a remonstrance to canonical literature’s assertions of authenticity and originality. In Adrienne Rich’s words, it can be “re-vision:” “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.” But the Gothic is already located at the margins, as a popular genre and as a genre specializing in representations of the socially and psychologically marginal (servants, outcasts, women; desire, the repressed, the abjected). Rewriting the Gothic is more complicated than correction or rebuttal, and the Gothic has always resisted such straightforward categorizations. Its own problematic origins in Walpole show the Gothic has never been a discrete or unified genre, but a generic hybrid: Walpole’s preface to the second edition calls his novel a merging of “two kinds of Romance, the ancient and the modern” (7). Walpole’s Gothic conventions were rewritten by Clara Reeve in *The Old English Baron* (1777) and later repeated (transformed) in the innumerable Gothic narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, all of which drew on a range of generic sources. It is more useful and accurate to approach the Gothic “as a mode that exceeds genre and categories” since “the diffusion of Gothic features across texts and historical periods distinguishes the Gothic as a hybrid literary form, incorporating and transforming other literary forms as well as developing and changing its own conventions.” It is important to remember this context, and, as James Watt urges, to look beyond the homogenizing critical label “Gothic.” Acknowledging that the Gothic “feeds upon and mixes” different intertexts allows us to examine how this tendency is employed in a postmodern context where the distinctions between text, intertext, reality, and fiction are often destabilized.

Addressing these points might seem unnecessary, and I am far from alone in arguing that the Gothic continues to transform itself into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But I raise these points in order to develop more explicitly and fully their implications. If the Gothic is always evolving (we might say, is endlessly rewriting itself) then it is facile to assume that Gothic tropes appearing in postmodern fiction are devoid of the nexus of anxieties the Gothic has always signified and the fear it has always worked to provoke. In other words, if the Gothic and postmodernism meet at the juncture of artifice, self-conscious language, and narrative play, then the Gothic imbues these qualities with contemporary anxieties: about the uncanny, about power, about the nature of reality, and especially about language itself. This has been overlooked in criticism of Tennant’s Gothic, for example, which glosses over
her play with shifting signifiers, artifice, and the superficial in order to read her texts’ relationship with the Gothic as a correction/subversion of its representations of the “other” (women, “foreigners,” the lower class, etc.). The possibility that the postmodern Gothic is simultaneously continuous with and a break from earlier Gothic traditions, and that this ambiguous and ambivalent stance might itself stand for and generate other anxieties, has not been fully explored.

Criticism of the postmodern Gothic has sought to assimilate it into the very model of centre and margins, or inside and outside, that the Gothic specializes in disrupting. Allan Lloyd Smith, for example, introduces two modes of the Gothic’s manifestation in postmodernism: “the stylised flat repetition of Gothic narrative structures” (he names Susan Hill’s *Mrs de Winter* as an example) and “the more momentary incursions of the Gothic into novels by broadly non-Gothic writers” (such as Thomas Pynchon’s *V*). Susanne Becker outlines a similar twofold system in her evaluation of contemporary Gothic writing by women: one of “continuity: an ongoing elaboration of the large web of women’s Gothic intertextualisations” versus “deconstruction: a challenge to the limits of Gothic form.” These divisions illustrate two different understandings: the view that the Gothic persists as a unified genre into the twentieth century and beyond, and the view that the Gothic has eroded into a set of conventions to be used selectively in the pastiche manner of postmodernism’s “literature of exhaustion.” Correspondingly, the function and meaning of the Gothic are assigned to opposing categories. On the one hand, the Gothic is understood as a “parallel tradition” and read as a counter-mode to a discourse of progressive postmodernism. As such, it may be understood as representing “the underside of culture [that] is blood, torture, death, and terror,” exploring the profane in a rejection of institutionalized values, and/or exposing postmodernism’s veiled status as central worldview:

> the fantastic postmodern expresses the fears of [postmodern] society for, and the pressures exerted upon it by, those it has traditionally excluded from participation or has made subservient to the interest of making its “central” character into its present shape […]. It is in this framework […] that the postmodern Gothic needs to be read.

As postmodernism’s counter-narrative, the Gothic is essentialized as purely subversive, corrective, and uncanny, and also as other: locally, as a racial, gendered, cultural, etc., other, but more generally, as a refusal of meaning, a mode in which interpretation and signification operate other-wise. On the other hand, the Gothic is assimilated into the (central) discourse of postmodernism: its attention to the slipperiness of language, surfaces, and shifting boundaries between the knowable and the supernatural are put to service as signifiers of the
artifice, superficiality, and lack of the real that characterize the postmodern world. In this latter approach, the Gothic’s spectrality ceases to be readable or meaningful, as the Gothic is called up as a simulacrum of itself and as an empty image of the (literary) past: the implication is that rewritings of the Gothic have no significance beyond pastiche. Both approaches also tend to promote a narrow mode of literary criticism reliant on trope identification. As Jacqueline Howard has noted in her argument for the Gothic’s dialogism, “cataloguing and codifying the literary conventions perceived to be common to the [Gothic] form” is “ahistorical and homogenizing,” and compels “a ‘monologic’ structure or closure—that is, a single ‘authoritative’ reading which disallows a text’s semantic richness and suppresses alternative ways of speaking.” They also fail to theorize repetitive gestures across texts and time: to ignore the way the postmodern Gothic intertwines nostalgia and perversion in its rewriting of earlier texts and conventions.

*The Bad Sister* is a re-vision (in Rich’s sense) of Hogg’s text insofar as it problematizes Hogg’s male-centred world by displacing it with a female-centred one. Explicit references to feminism and images of women call attention to the text’s agenda of challenging gender roles, sexual stereotypes, and notions of femininity. *The Bad Sister* can be read as returning marginalized female subjects to Hogg’s narrative, and inserting a feminist inflection into Hogg’s representation of Lord Dalcastle. The father who rapes his wife and disowns his son becomes the Father that is “a symbol of the father of all women” and “the incarnation of capitalism.” Jane is disowned by Dalzell because her mother Mary is Irish and working-class; the Scottish laird would never legitimize such a union and its offspring. Meg’s rage is directed at the tyranny of patriarchal capitalism that “justifies” Dalzell’s behaviour, and her rage allows *The Bad Sister* to write back to the similar patriarchy that allows Rabina’s rape and abandonment in the *Confessions*. *The Bad Sister* does not admonish Hogg’s text (which represents Lord Dalcastle ironically) but rather returns the oppressed female to the narrative and gives her a voice. However, in doing so, Tennant also returns the *repressed* feminine. Hogg’s novel problematizes Calvinist discourse, and Rabina is an avid Calvinist; it is her religious faith and connection with Reverend Wringhim that lead to Robert’s disinheritance, and set the story in motion. Further, Rabina’s faith is bound up with her possible infidelity, and this signifies her *indeterminacy*. Rabina is between categories: not the loyal, passive wife her husband expects her to be, but not the promiscuous mistress he eventually adopts, either; not wholly a faithful woman (in both senses), but not wholly a cuckolder. Rabina slips from our grasp, as she eventually disappears from the narrative altogether, although the indeterminacy she signifies recurs in the narrative, as discussed above. It is the threat of indeterminacy, embodied in Gil-martin but also coded as feminine, that haunts