

THE COHERENCE  
OF  
GOTHIC  
CONVENTIONS

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<sup>1</sup>"Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic," *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad: Essays Collected in Memory of James T. Hillhouse*, ed. Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic," p. 131.

<sup>3</sup>Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic," p. 131.

<sup>4</sup>Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic," p. 127.

## CHAPTER 1

## The Structure of Gothic Conventions

Surely no other modern literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional. Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind (and you can tell that from the title), you can predict its contents with an unnerving certainty. You know the important features of its *mise en scène*: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society. You know about the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover. You know about the tyrannical older man with the piercing glance who is going to imprison and try to rape or murder them. You know something about the novel's form: it is likely to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales, changes of narrators, and such framing devices as found manuscripts or interpolated histories. You also know that, whether with more or less relevance to the main plot, certain characteristic preoccupations will be aired. These include the priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; possibilities of incest; unnatural echoes or silences, unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable; garrulous retainers; the poisonous effects of guilt and shame; noc-

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turnal landscapes and dreams; apparitions from the past; Faust- and Wandering Jew-like figures; civil insurrections and fires; the charnel house and the madhouse.<sup>1</sup> The chief incidents of a Gothic novel never go far beyond illustrating these few themes, and even the most unified novel includes most of them.

There are several remarkable things about this formula for the Gothic novel. The first is of course just that a form with the historical stature of the Gothic novel should be so adequately reducible to a formula. Possibly another subgenre of the novel, for instance, could be delineated in a score or so of phrases, but in such a list the phrases would have a very different status. "The poisonous effect of guilt and shame," applied to the mid-Victorian novel, would be a condensation of observations about such varied characters as Sir Austin Feverel, Lucy Snowe, and Gwendolen Harleth. Applied to the Gothic novel, it merely points to specific scenes where characters as similar as Montoni, Schedoni, and Schemoli reflect, in so many words, on how poisoned and poisonous they feel because of their guilt and shame. The formula for the Gothic novel functions at the level of particular more or less obligatory scenes: it would be possible to write a Gothic novel by the formula that would only be useful for describing a mid-Victorian, or eighteenth-century picaresque, or modern one.

The second remarkable thing about the Gothic formula, mitigating its narrowness, is the range of tone and focus possible within it. Granted that the novel contains a hero and heroine, either one can hold the writer's attention, sometimes to the almost complete neglect of the other—*The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Old English Baron* representing either extreme. Again, the novels' obligatory villains, though almost always of the same generation and displaying the same physiognomy, can be just a cursory adjunct to the plot, like Clara Reeve's Lord Lovel, or can be the animating center of the

novel, like Ambrosio. These novels whose chief incidents are so similar are not predictable, either, in their resolutions, for comic endings, tragic endings, mixed endings, and endings where the book simply seems to die from exhaustion are all possibilities. Most profoundly, though, the novels differ in tone and intent. The light, fast-paced entertainment of *The Castle of Otranto*, the campy exhibitionism of *The Monk*, the minute harrowings of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and the psychological urgency of *Melmoth the Wanderer*, while they all point somehow toward an aesthetic based on pleasurable fear, leave very different tastes in the reader's mouth and exercise very different faculties in their authors.

How can talents as distinctive and varied as these authors' all find scope within a narrow set of conventions narrowly defined? Or to put the question in another way, why are these conventions found together in the Gothic novel? Why did it take so long for one and another of the conventions to become disentangled from the formula and available to other novelistic traditions?

To the degree that criticism has attempted to answer this question, it has done so by privileging the spatial metaphor of depth from among the Gothic conventions, taking that metaphor to represent a model of the human self, and reading the other Gothic conventions in terms of that one. Masao Miyoshi, for instance, values the Gothic for thematically exploring man's "sharply personal sense of the war within."<sup>2</sup> Heilman values it for "acknowledg[ing] the nonrational . . . ultimately and most persistently in the depths of the human being," for "plunging into feeling" for "a new dimension."<sup>3</sup> The psychological model adumbrated by such critical language is one in which superficial layers of convention and prohibition, called "the rational," conceal and repress a deep central well of primal material, "the irrational," which is the locus of the individual self, which could or should pass to the outside. A corollary of locating the self in the "true depths"<sup>4</sup> is an ex-

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treme critical irritation with the surfaces of Gothic novels, with the superficialities of "claptrap," "décor," and "stage-set."<sup>5</sup>

My project in this chapter is to show that the major Gothic conventions are coherent in terms that do not depend on that psychological model, although they can sometimes be deepened by it. There is in these novels a large, important group of quite specific conventions—structural and thematic, and including both the "claptrap" and the "elemental and symbolic"<sup>6</sup>—that share a particular spatial model. Although this model is not inconsistent with psychological interpretation, it is distinct and recognizable without it. The units of this model are often not coterminous with the fictional "selves" in the novels, nor does the model necessarily demarcate areas that are qualitatively, affectively, or atmospherically different from each other. And although this group of conventions has been the center of critical attempts to value the Gothic for its portrayal of "depth," a shift of focus shows that even here the strongest energies inhere in the surface.

One step in this discussion will be to codify the spatial model that has in previous criticism been used implicitly and in allusive glimpses. Roughly, it can be said that when an individual fictional "self" is the subject of one of these conventions, that self is spatialized in the following way. 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, when the self has been literally buried alive; it can be a lover; it can be just all the circumambient life, when the self is pinned in a death-like sleep. Typically, however, there is both something going on inside the isolation (the present, the continuous consciousness, the dream, the sensation itself) and something intensely relevant going on impossibly out of reach. While the three main elements (what's inside, what's outside, and what separates them) take

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on the most varied guises, the terms of the relationship are immutable. 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, though it may happen in an instant, 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. The worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels do not occur in, for example, the catacombs of the Inquisition or the stultification of nightmares. Instead, they are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall. The fires, earthquakes, and insurrections that restore the prisoners of tyranny to their "natural" freedom are tremendously more violent than what has gone on either inside or outside the prisons. Similarly, no nightmare is ever as terrifying as is waking up from even some innocuous dream to find it true. The barrier between the self and what should belong to it can be caused by anything and nothing; but only violence or magic, and both of a singularly threatening kind, can ever succeed in joining them again.

The other thrust of this chapter, however, will be to show that both the identification of center with self and the programmatic symmetry of the inside-outside relation are finally undermined in the same texts.

Of all the Gothic conventions dealing with the sudden, mysterious, seemingly arbitrary, but massive inaccessibility of those things that should normally be most accessible, the difficulty the story has in getting itself told is of the most obvious structural significance. This difficulty occurs at every

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level of the novels. A fully legible manuscript or an uninterrupted narrative is rare; rarer still is the novel whose story is comprised by a single narrator, without the extensive irruption into the middle of the book of a new history with a new historian; rarest of all is the book presented by the author, in her or his own person, without a pseudonym and an elaborate account of the provenance and antiquity of the supposed original manuscript. Walter Scott noted sourly, "We . . . read by a decaying lamp, and in a tapestried chamber, dozens of legends as stupid as the main story." And yet these novels are not *Tristram Shandy*, and their whole point does not lie in the inability of the narration to get from there to here. They are more like the Watergate transcripts. The story does get through, but in a muffled form, with a distorted time sense, and accompanied by a kind of despair about any direct use of language.

At its simplest the unspeakable appears on almost every page: "unutterable horror": "unspeakable" or "unutterable" are the intensifying adjectives of choice in these novels. At a broader level, the novels deal with things that are naturalistically difficult to talk about, like guilt; but they describe the difficulty, not in terms of resistances that may or may not be overcome, but in terms of an absolute, often institutional prohibition or imperative. The confessional, for instance, is central in *The Monk* and *The Italian* (subtitled *The Confessional of the Black Penitents*) because it renders absolute rather than relative the question of what is speakable: the confessant must tell everything and the confessor may repeat nothing. The Inquisition, whose victim must on the one hand "swear to reveal the truth," and on the other "keep for ever secret whatever he might see or hear," and the convents and monasteries in all the novels, whose first law is secrecy, have the same function. These characters seldom need to worry about whether or not they want to, or should, confide in one an-

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Although there are some surprises in the plots, it is not chiefly for the purpose of maintaining suspense that unspeakable things go unspoken. In *Melmoth the Wanderer*, for instance, the reader, like the other characters, infers early on that Melmoth's elaborately preterited proposition is some version of selling one's soul to the devil. Nevertheless, the pages of one manuscript about it are "discoloured, obliterated, and mutilated," and at the crucial moment "wholly illegible" (ch. 3); a narrator of the story keeps falling into convulsions; another manuscript about the proposition is written in the Spanish language but in Greek characters; and it is named only in phrases like "[a condition] so full of horror and impiety, that, even to listen to it, is scarce less a crime than to comply with it!" (ch. 28).

Even people who are ready to talk about Melmoth find it impossible to do so. Fr. Olavida, a priest, expresses what the people around him must guess:

"... I know him," said Olavida, "by these cold drops!" and he wiped them off;—"by these convulsed joints!" and he attempted to sign the cross, but could not. He raised his voice, and evidently speaking with increased difficulty,—". . . I know him, and command him to be gone!—He is—he is—" and he bent forwards as he spoke, and gazed on the Englishman with an expression which the mixture of rage, hatred, and fear, rendered terrible. All the guests rose at these words,—the whole company now presented two singular groupings, that of the amazed guests, all collected together, and repeating, "Who, what is he?" and that of the Englishman, who stood unmoved, and Olavida, who dropped dead in the attitude of pointing to him. (Ch. 3)

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Similarly, when Monçada is talking about Melmoth to the Inquisition,

one of the judges, trembling on his seat, (while his shadow, magnified by the imperfect light, pictured the figure of a paralytic giant on the wall opposite to me), attempted to address some question to me. As he spoke, there came a hollow sound from his throat, his eyes were rolled upwards in their sockets,—he was in an apoplectic paroxysm, and died before he could be removed to another apartment. (Ch. 11)

Note, in each sudden death, the element of tableau, the "two singular groupes" and the "magnified," "pictured" "figure of a paralytic giant." (The tale of Fr. Olavida has in fact been narrated as a series of tableaux leading up to this climactic one.) The function of these pictorial images is to reinforce the sense of fixation, of immobilization, that is the essence of these two paralytic deaths. Fr. Olavida and the Inquisitorial judge, for trying to move through the wall of silence that mysteriously surrounds Melmoth, are violently thrust back into inertness and muteness. The unspeakable here is an interpersonal barrier where no barrier ought to be—language is properly just the medium that should flow between people, mitigating their physical and psychic separateness—but once this barrier has come into being, it is breached only at the cost of violence and deepened separateness. The two priests' paralytic deaths, making them comparable to painted or statued figures, are like an annihilating caricature of the dumb, impotent isolation into which Melmoth plunges all those whose lives he touches.

Maturin's interest in the unspeakable is not confined to the phenomena that surround Melmoth, not is a bargain with the devil the only thing that can be unspeakable. Any dire knowledge that is shared but cannot be acknowledged to be shared—that is, as it were, *shared separately*—has the effect of

rendering the people, whom it ought to bind together, into an irrevocable doubleness. Monçada and his parricide guide, in their effort to burrow out of the monastery, have this experience.

So we stood, shivering under the trap-door, not daring to whisper our thoughts to each other, but feeling *that despair of incommunication* which is perhaps the severest curse that can be inflicted on those who are compelled to be together, and compelled, by the same necessity that imposes their ungenial union, not even to communicate their fears to each other. We *hear* the throb of each others hearts, and yet dare not say, "My heart beats in unison with yours." (Ch. 9)

It is evident here that the important privation is the privation exactly of language, as though language were a sort of safety valve between the inside and the outside which being closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive, and explosive. At a different point in the underground journey the resonance of this becomes wider.

We lay thus, not daring to speak to each other, for who could speak but of despair, and which of us dared to aggravate the despair of the other. This kind of fear which we know already felt by others, and which we dread to aggravate by uttering, *even to those who know it*, is perhaps the most horrible sensation ever experienced. The very thirst of my body seemed to vanish in this fiery thirst of the soul for communication, where all communication was unutterable, impossible, hopeless. Perhaps the condemned spirits will feel thus at their final sentence, when they know all that is to be suffered, and dare not disclose to each other that horrible truth which is no longer a secret, but which the profound silence of their despair would seem to make one. The secret of silence is the only secret. Words are a blas-

phemy against that taciturn and invisible God, whose presence enshrouds us in our last extremity. (Ch. 8)

In its apocalyptic evocations and its subterranean setting, as well as in its emphasis in the despair of the incommunicable, this segment of Monçada's history suggests the end of William Beckford's *Vathek*, an Oriental tale with some strong Gothic influences. In this tale the Caliph Vathek and his consort, Nouronihar, have trampled on every human and divine sanction in order to obtain access to the storied riches of the Hall of Eblis. When they once succeed, they find themselves in a subterranean version of a Piranesi prison, peopled with other damned souls who wander endlessly, without speaking, each with furiously burning eyes and one hand held over each blazing heart. Vathek and Nouronihar cannot believe that they, too, will come to look on each other in silent hatred, but as soon as their doom is passed, it happens instantly: their eyes burn, their hands become immovably fixed over their hearts, and they begin their eternal silent underground vagrancy. "These unhappy beings recoiled, with looks of the most furious distraction. Vathek beheld in the eyes of Nouronihar nothing but rage and vengeance; nor could she discern aught in his, but aversion and despair."<sup>10</sup>

Vathek, Nouronihar, and their companions are doubly immured: buried first of all in the oppressive subterranean cavern, with the whole of the earth's riches lying between them and the light of day, they are then buried individually in themselves, as unavailable to one another as the common sky is to them all. Their interior animation is no less than it had been, but since no part of it can pass simply outside of them, it becomes a self-consuming, self-feeding fire. All the multitudes of people in the Hall of Eblis have the identical pain, but, like Monçada's and the parricide's fear, it is shared separately. Privacy not only is characteristic of the pain, but is itself the pain.

Plainly in these instances, and implicitly in many others, the barrier of unspeakableness separates, not spaces that are qualitatively different, but spaces that are indistinguishable by any appeal to their content or intrinsic character. Monçada and the parricide, Vathek and Nouronihar know the same thing. The absoluteness of the barrier between them goes with its arbitrariness. It is arbitrary that there should be any barrier at all between identical spaces; if the barrier is to exist, it must be absolute; and if it does exist, its placement, too, must be arbitrary.

The last corollary is obscured in these instances of the unspeakable because what I am schematically calling "spaces" are here coextensive with characters, and the distinctness of one character from another in fiction is hard to perceive as conventional. In other kinds of divisions of the narrative stream, however, it is easier to see the shaping structure as resulting from choice. Take, for instance, the famous Chinese-box narrative structure of *Melmoth*, which at two points comprises a story within a story within a story within a story. Although all the stories do get more or less told in the novel's course, their very distinctness is a token of the divisive power of unspeakableness. The novel could, but it does not, take the form of one continuous narrative, in which a character facing one situation would be from the start heir to gradually-accumulated knowledge about other characters in previous, perhaps similar situations. Instead, narratives like those in all four novels in which, as Taylor Stoehr points out, "the heroes of the repeated tableaux nearly always resemble each other, and are frequently doubles,"<sup>11</sup> and in which the plots, too, are closely parallel, are nonetheless kept rigidly separate by those devices of crumbling manuscripts, conventional secrecy, taboos on the communication of a family curse, and narrators who fall into convulsions at the word "Melmoth" or who (as Jews) talk a strange language and live underground in terror of detection. If, in a story-within-a-story-within-a-story-within-a-story, all the stories are similar

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and parallel, and, what is also true of *Melmoth*, the innermost ones are no more intense or explicit than the outermost, then clearly the focus of formal energy must be these strange barriers: how spontaneously they spring up and multiply, and what extremes of magic or violence are necessary to breach them.

If the story-within-etc. represents the broadest structural application of the otherwise verbal or thematic convention of the unspeakable, it has a similar relation to the convention of live burial. That verbal formula, "an X within an X," which De Quincey will later draw from the Gothic and apply broadcast, points to a particular spatial relationship (interiority, the "within"), at the same time as it points to the sameness of the separated spaces. The live burial that is a favorite conventional punishment in Gothic novels derives much of its horror not from the buried person's loss of outside activities (that would be the horror of dead burial), but from the continuation of a parallel activity that is suddenly redundant. In *Monçada*, imprisoned in a vault beneath a monastery, the privation of natural time engenders a new and roughly corresponding system.

I had calculated with myself, that sixty minutes made an hour, and sixty seconds a minute. I began to think I could keep time as accurately as any clock in a convent, and measure the hours of my confinement or—my release. So I sat and counted sixty; a doubt always occurred, to me, that I *was counting faster than the clock*. Then I wished to be the clock, that I might have no feeling, no *motive for hurrying on the approach of time*. Then I reckoned slower. Sleep sometimes overtook me in this exercise, (perhaps I adopted it from that hope); but when I awoke, I applied to it again instantly. Thus I oscillated, reckoned, and measured time on my mat, while time withheld its delicious diary of rising and setting suns... Had I led this life much longer, I might

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have been converted into the idiot, who, as I have read, from the habit of watching the clock, imitated its mechanism so well, that when it was down, he sounded the hour as faithfully as ear could desire. (*Melmoth*, Ch. 6)

In many instances, conditions outside the imprisoning wall simply duplicate conditions within. In *The Italian*, a guard for the Inquisition "thought that to be a guard over prisoners was nearly as miserable as being a prisoner himself. 'I see no difference between them,' said he, 'except that the prisoner watches on one side of the door, and the centinel on the other'" (III.x). For *Monçada* in *Melmoth*, the prisons of the Inquisition are waiting when he escapes from the vault of his monastery; and the underground cell of a Jew who has been hiding there for sixty of his 107 years ("*Aer exclusus confert ad longevitatem*," he remarks [ch. 14]) receives him when he escapes from the Inquisition. When Ellena and Vivaldi, in *The Italian*, escape from the threat of conventual live burial through the hidden passages of the convent, they soon find themselves in bondage again: Vivaldi in the dungeons of the Inquisition, Ellena in a massive, ruinous house, under the power of the monk Schedoni.

The main streams of criticism of the Gothic novel have had a strong investment in the specialness of the underground spaces in which imprisonment and live burial take place. Maurice Lévy, for instance, a phenomenological critic, says,

The dream, by the same token as the descent underground, excavates the imaginary space and figures in a real sense the exploration of the deep strata of the soul... Certainly, it is an economical way to show the irrational. But it is also a way of seeking it out where it lives, in its natural milieu, at the only level of depth where it can manifest itself. It is not significant that the

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dream of a ghost should be at the same time a dream of the subterranean, a dream of a deep cavern, a dream of a gaping vault, a dream of the pit?<sup>12</sup>

It is true that some ghastly things happen in these vaults that could not happen outside them. In *The Monk*, Antonia is raped there; Agnes gives birth to a baby there, and when it dies, she cherishes its putrefying body. In three novels the Inquisition threatens or performs physical torture, though this is, unexpectedly, treated with restraint, even by Lewis. These instances are few, however. In *The Italian*, something does indeed happen in the Inquisition that could not happen outside: through the Inquisitor's disinterested zeal for truth, all the novel's murky plots and histories are finally unravelled. Far from representing a "seeking . . . out where it lives" of the "irrational" in "deep strata," and despite formidable descriptions of its physical inaccessibility and interiority, the Inquisition proves to be as irrational as Miss Marple.

We have said that the real terrors of the Unspeakable had to do, not with any special content of the thing that could not be said, but with the violence greeting any attempt to pass an originally arbitrary barrier. The worst danger of being buried alive is exactly analogous: active violence on the one hand, active magic on the other, are almost always reserved for liminal moments, for the instant of moving out of or moving into the dungeon. In *Melmoth*, for instance, Monçada's painful underground escape from the monastery (into the hands of the Inquisition) climaxes with the murder of his brother. This dénouement is seemingly instantaneous on the fugitives' achieving free air. It is as if the opening up of the tensely-balanced, autonomous world of the two men in the tunnel to the outside world had produced an effect of spontaneous combustion.

"One wild moment of yelling agony,—one flash of a fierce and fiery light, that seemed to envelope and

with me soul and body,—one sound, that swept through my ears and brain . . .,—one such moment, that condenses and crowds all imaginable sufferings in one brief and intense pang, and appears exhausted itself by the blow it has struck,—one such moment I remember, and no more." (Ch. 10)

Later, Monçada is able to escape from the Inquisition in the chaos caused by a literal fire; though again, in the event, he has only crossed the threshold from one subterranean prison into yet another. In *The Monk*, Antonia and Agnes are separately imprisoned in the dungeons of a convent. Armed rioters, roused to vengeance when they learn of Agnes' plight, first tear the Prioress limb from limb, and then break into the convent:

The Rioters poured into the interior part of the Building, where they exercised their vengeance upon every thing which found itself in their passage . . . Some employed themselves in searching out the Nuns, Others in pulling down parts of the Convent, and Others again in setting fire to the pictures and valuable furniture, which it contained. These Latter produced the most decisive desolation: Indeed the consequences of their action were more sudden, than themselves had expected or wished. The Flames rising from the burning piles caught part of the Building, which being old and dry, the conflagration spread with rapidity from room to room. The Walls were soon shaken by the devouring element: the Columns gave way: the Roofs came tumbling down upon the Rioters, and crushed many of them beneath their weight.

...The People now hurried out, as eagerly as they had before thronged in; But their numbers clogging up the door-way, and the fire gaining upon them rapidly, many of them perished ere they had time to effect their escape.<sup>13</sup>

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(This combination of a fatal "liberating" fire with a terrible congestion just at the threshold is echoed at the level of individual anatomy in Monçada's fiery escape from the Inquisition: even when he runs free from the smoldering pile, he finds that "The pure air, which I had been so long unaccustomed to breathe, acted like the most torturing spicula on my throat and lungs as I flew along, and utterly deprived me of the power of respiration, which at first it appeared to restore" (*Melmoth*, ch. 11).) The armed incursion in *The Monk* has, moreover, mixed results for the characters whom it is intended to save. Agnes is rescued from her live burial; but Ambrosio, who has decided to spare Antonia's life, panics instead and stabs her to death when he realizes that the vault is being invaded. In *Melmoth*, similarly, the only murder committed directly and visibly by Melmoth himself occurs when someone blocks his egress from a house where he has been committing no violence. Thus violence seems to pertain much less to a sojourn in the depths of monastery, convent, Inquisition, castle, or hiding place than to an approach—from within or without—to the interfacing surface. The same is true of magic, as well; in these novels' treatment, no other token of magical powers is as self-evidently authentic and malevolent as the simple ability to penetrate into cells and vaults and Inquisitorial prisons.<sup>14</sup>

Paradoxically, again, even on a descriptive or phenomenological level the "special" qualities of the place of live burial are its vastness and extensiveness—qualities that equate it with, rather than differentiating it from the surrounding space. The apparently paradoxical relationship between the spatial idea of close architectural submergence and the Burkeian sublime based on a sense of the infinite is illustrated in Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* prints, which were, at least by reputation, so influential in Romantic writing.<sup>15</sup> De Quincey wrote that they suggested "the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction" with which "my architecture

proceed[ed] in my dreams."<sup>16</sup> His language points to the vastly expansive, obscurely defined, and repetitive interior spaces of the *Carceri*. This is the purely Burkeian aspect of the series; or rather, De Quincey's language, and the aspect of the prints that it records, goes even further than Burke in the direction of expansiveness, becoming imaginatively engaged with the process by which these awesome spaces are generated. The texture of even the most distant line, especially in the later, more heavily-burred states, invites and entangles the eye, so that the viewer participates in the power of infinity even while being awed by it. If one could look only at the far distant ground of almost any of these prints, one's response would be a dizzy exhilaration.

It is in the foreground, or in the difficulty of getting from the foreground to the background, that the compositions reveal themselves as prisons. The foregrounds not only are dark and threatening, but usually frame the picture closely and thickly, either with massive stone pillars or just with tall masses of black shadow. Stairways lead from something like a foreground (already indeterminately receded from the framing masses) back and up. These stairs are what ought to help the eye find its way into the space of the picture, but because of the indeterminate depth of the point at which they reach the ground, because of the ease with which stairs become directionally ambiguous in the shiftings of optical illusion, because it is never shown how the stairways and the high balustraded galleries intersect, and because there are so many, and so long, stairways and galleries, which cannot be oriented to one another, the eye is baffled in its attempt to rationalize the near and middle distance and move through it to the relatively bright archways glimpsed in the far distance.

The confusion of the stairways is, of course, only symptomatic of the fact that it is impossible to organize the spaces in any of these prints into architectural space. Architecture delineates and places in relation to each other an inside and an

outside. In the *Carceri* it is impossible to construct in imagination the shell that would delimit this inside from a surrounding outside. Even so is the shell of a Radcliffean castle impossible to imagine. Sometimes, in fact, as in *Carceri* II and IV, where there seem to be clouds in the background, a monumental outside plaza spanned by arches is suggested, but in the other plates the density of detail and the complete lack of open "sky" space make it impossible to imagine them as being in any sense outside. The incoherent, indefinite, apparently infinite space depicted cannot, however, be perceived as inside either. Even to locate it within a building would be to give it a stable horizon, which, while suggested by the convergences of the perspective, never literally appears and is always shifty enough to disorient the foreground from the background. A stable sense of scale is also lacking, the impossibly tiny human figures only rendering the problem of scale more staggering.

A prison which has neither inside nor outside is self-evidently one from which there is no escape—which is part of the reason these prints are so oppressive—but it is also one to which there is no access. The particular claustrophobia of the vision is that it rejects the viewer even as it lures her in and exerts its weight on her. The demarcation between interior and exterior falls, I mean, just at the dark framing edges of most of the plates, edges that form a more or less irregular proscenium arch dividing the space of the self from the space of the picture. Unexpectedly, though, it is the hither side of the proscenium, the self, that is felt as "inside," as confined within its relation to the "surrounding" but unavailable picture space. The space only unfolds its unavailability as the eye is tempted into it (as distinct from, say, the uninviting frontal space of Manet) so that it is a fully-dimensioned weight of space that rejects the viewer and pins her down in the shallow space to her own side of the extreme foreground proscenium.

The phrase, "weight of space," which is important to my

argument, is justified not only by the quality of Piranesi's spaces but by the palpableness of the light that fills them. Especially in the deep chiaroscuro of the later states, the brightness that filters forward and down has almost an obscuring effect, heightening the already dramatic aerial perspective and sometimes, as in Plates XII and XIII, seeming to blank the structures over which it floods. Even where this thickness of the light is not so noticeable, the air is often shown as heavy and palpable with smoke, steam, or clouds, as in V, VII, IX, and X, or just with spots that seem to collect brightness as if it were moisture in the air. To say that the *Carceri* are oppressive in atmosphere is to say something literal about the heaviness of air space in Piranesi as opposed to, say, its thinness and lightness in Claude or its elasticity in John Martin. It is an aerial space that is paradoxically like water: to be in it is already to be under it, submerged by it, stifled, gagged, and all but immobilized. It is the "blue mist" and "livid light" of Monçada's tunnel (ch. 8), "the unnatural atmosphere which we had breathed so long, amid darkness and danger, and which now began to show its anti-vital and pestilent effect, in producing alternately on our bodies deluges of perspiration, succeeded by a chill that seemed to freeze the very marrow" (ch. 9).

Thus, the space of submergence is not formally or topographically differentiated from its surroundings; instead, one of its functions is finally to undermine the sense of inside and outside, the centeredness of the "self." A consideration of the Gothic dream will provide us with a good analogy for the formal function of that insidious, infectious atmosphere that alone marks the inside as inside.

Maurice Lévy in the passage I have quoted likens dreams to the subterranean, as privileged abodes of primal material. A popular psychoanalytic reading would likewise look for distinctive, otherwise unexpressed material in the dreams of the novels' characters. But the Gothic dream is, far more

schematically than the place of live burial, simply a duplication of the surrounding reality. It is thrilling because supererogatory. To wake from a dream and *find it true*—that is the particular terror at which these episodes aim, and the content of the dream is subordinate to that particular terror. In *The Italian*, Vivaldi deep in the dungeons of the Inquisition "sunk into a slumber," dreams of a monk, his face shrouded, who approaches him slowly, lifts "the awful cowl," discloses a countenance with an "indescribable air" and "fiery eyes," and draws "from beneath a fold of his garment" a bloodstained poniard (III.v.). An interpretation of this dream in psychoanalytic terms, drawing on other associations from the novel, might start like this. The monk's gown and cowl are not only sexually ambiguous, but even deceitful. The skirted habit is meant to look like a woman's gown: a fabric of sexual mystification behind which hides absence, castration, renunciation. But the worldly monk, vowed to chastity, is the object of the same speculations as a eunuch in a seraglio. The bad monks in this novel are always "gliding" (pp. 1, 15, 19, 76, 81, 105, 263, 390, et al.), as though the seductive, undifferentiated motion of a woman in a gown became sinister as soon as it was suspected of hiding presence rather than phallic absence. The imagery of the dream shows Vivaldi's strengthened suspicion and fear, for the "awful cowl," the phallic aspect of the habit itself, is emphasized at the expense of the feminizing gown; and, indeed, what hides beneath the folds in an aggressive and treacherous symbol of the phallus. (The shift in imagery from gown to cowl has already occurred in the waking world of the Inquisition: while Vivaldi's guides have been dressed in black gowns, the torturers themselves are also dressed in black, "but in a different fashion, for their habits were made close to the shape. Their faces were entirely concealed beneath a very peculiar kind of cowl, which descended from the head to the feet; and their eyes only were visible through small openings contrived for sight.")

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\* \* \*

Given that the dream has interpretable content, what is the effect of interpretation on the waking sequel?

A groan awakened him, but what were his feelings, when, on looking up, he perceived the same figure standing before him! It was not, however, immediately that he could convince himself the appearance was more than the phantom of his dream, strongly impressed upon an alarmed fancy. The voice of the monk, for his face was as usual concealed, recalled Vivaldi from his error; but his emotion cannot easily be conceived, when the stranger, slowly lifting that mysterious cowl, discovered to him the same awful countenance, which had characterized the vision in his slumber. . . . Vivaldi gazed in astonishment and terror.

.....  
'You shall know me hereafter,' said the stranger, frowningly; and he drew from beneath his garments a dagger!

Vivaldi remembered his dream.

'Mark these spots,' said the monk.

Vivaldi looked, and beheld blood!

'This blood,' added the stranger, pointing to the blade, 'would have saved your's! Here is some print of truth!' (III.v.)

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The relation between, so to speak, "print" and "truth," between the dream and the subsequent reality, deflects interpretation from the dream itself to the fact of its being doubled. It is possible that the deflection of interpretation onto the subject of doubleness may be a form of concealment for other subject matter, as I will discuss later. Such a possibility might conform to one kind of psychoanalytic reading, in that metonymic and metaphoric displacement is an important mechanism for the concealment of meaning in dreams; but since the dis-

be  
peaceful

placement here takes place between the dream and the outside world, and is not under the psychic control of the dreamer, the psychoanalytic reading would then be treating the entire novel as a dream rather than privileging the "deep strata" of the dream over the rest of the space of the novel. At any rate, a number of dreams that are innocuous or transparent in themselves are doubled in the same way, with the same accompaniment of terror. In *Melmoth*, Immalee's utterly phlegmatic father admits himself "a mortal man, sensible of fear," when he dreams he is with his frightened daughter and then wakes to find her apparition impossibly beside him. And when she again wakes him, "overcome with horror at this second visitation, I fell back on my pillow almost bereft of the use of my faculties" (ch. 23). Monçada, in the dungeons of the Inquisition, dreams that he is the victim of an auto da fe, but is terrified, not only by the dream's content, but by the duplication of self that results from his creation of an internal world: "... this horrid tracing of yourself in a dream,—this haunting of yourself by your own spectre, while you still live, is perhaps a curse almost equal to your crimes visiting you in the punishments of eternity" (ch. 11).

This particular dream is a good example of the shift of focus by which a fixation on symmetrical, doubled spaces is drained by something more threatening and interesting: a dangerously insoluble uncertainty about where to place the perimeters of the self. The dream is one of the few that does not duplicate a concurrent external reality, and is the more arresting and evidently interpretable for that. At first reading it seems to belong to the class of dreams about the future, prophetic, allegorical, or warning dreams (the warnings always too late), like Elvira's in *The Monk* (III.i), Edmund's in *The Old English Baron*, or Melmoth's final dream of damnation (ch. 38). In those dreams, the temporal displacement prevents characters from waking to find them im-

mediately true, but the content or at any rate the interpretation is retroactively determined by a symmetrical duplication of the "real" world. As it turns out, however, in this case the dreamed-of auto da fe never happens; instead, as we have already seen, the prisons of the Inquisition will themselves succumb to one of those liberating fires. If this dream is not a duplication of an outside reality, though, it serves a much more direct and tendentious purpose. The dream is so horrible that "my own screams awoke me,—I was in my prison, and beside me stood the tempter [Melmoth]. With an impulse I could not resist,—an impulse borrowed from the horrors of my dreams, I flung myself at his feet, and called on him to 'save me'" (ch. 11). ("Save me," too, is borrowed from the dream, where his brother Juan says those words, having borrowed them in turn from a historical story that is also present in the dream.) Monçada then speculates about Melmoth

whether this inscrutable being had not the power to influence my dreams, and dictate to a tempting demon the images which had driven me to fling myself at his feet for hope and safety... [He] took advantage of my agony, half-visionary, half-real as it was, and, while proving to me that he had the power of effecting my escape from the Inquisition, proposed to me that incommunicable condition which I am forbid to reveal, except in the act of confession.

There seem, then, to be two possibilities for the Gothic dream. Either it is "true" and in the service of the narrative's symmetry, or, even more threateningly, it is "false" and in the service of another character. As opposed to the vertical, or authorial, imposition of symmetry, in which the dream duplicates reality, Melmoth as a character specializes in a horizontal insinuating slippage toward other characters, in which his

"borrowed," quasi-authorial power destabilizes that blank confrontation between an identical interior and exterior. Melmoth should not be standing in Monçada's cell at all: as we have seen, violence and conflagration at the threshold are supposed to attend, and will continue to attend, passage in either direction through the prison walls. Melmoth glides across that symmetry as he does across the symmetry between dream and reality, and between self-contained character and self-contained character. There is no conflagration at the threshold, because Melmoth subverts that arbitrary and absolute placement of the threshold. The conflagration does occur, but it has been displaced: it has become the auto da fe in Monçada's dream:

The next moment I was chained to my chair again,—the fires were lit, the bells rang out, the litanies were sung;—my feet were scorched to a cinder,—my flesh consumed like shrinking leather,—the bones of my legs hung two black withering and moveless sticks in the ascending blaze;—it ascended, caught my hair,—I was crowned with fire,—my head was a ball of molten metal, my eyes flashed and melted in their sockets;—I opened my mouth, it drank fire,—I closed it, the fire was within,—and still the bells rung on, and the crowd shouted, and the king and queen, and all the nobility and priesthood, looked on, and we burned, and burned!—I was a cinder body and soul in my dream. (Ch. 11)

This is an impossible dream as well as a glorious narrative, and both for the same reason: the uninterrupted first-person voice that persists so long after the perceptual envelope, and the specular identity more particularly, have been reduced to ashes. What is worse than that doubleness, than the visual "horrid tracing of yourself in a dream," is this dissolution of self, culminating in its openness to subornation by a second person (Melmoth) "beside me." The metonymic relation by which an

impulse toward submission is "borrowed from" a dream is, by the same token, more dangerous, more unstable, and more prone to displacement than the crystalline Gothic relation of "waking to find it true."

A similarly insidious displacement of the boundaries of the self occurs after Monçada has escaped from the Inquisition and gone into hiding. He happens to be watching from the window as the parricide, now an officially recognized tool of the Inquisition, is mobbed and lynched by the public. His identification both with his recent betrayer and with the crowd is on this occasion as painfully riveting as his identification with his second self in the dream had been.

It is a fact, Sir, that while witnessing this horrible execution, I felt all the effects vulgarly ascribed to fascination. I shuddered at the first movement—the dull and deep whisper among the crowd. I shrieked involuntarily when the first decisive movements began among them; but when at last the human shapeless carrion was dashed against the door, I echoed the wild shouts of the multitude with a kind of savage instinct. I bounded—I clasped my hands for a moment—then I echoed the screams of the thing that seemed no longer to live but still could scream; and I screamed aloud and wildly for life—life—and mercy! . . . My existence was so purely mechanical, that, without the least consciousness of my own danger, (scarce less than that of the victim, had I been detected), I remained uttering shout for shout, and scream for scream—offering worlds in imagination to be able to remove from the window, yet feeling as if every shriek I uttered was as a nail that fastened me to it—dropping my eyelids, and feeling as if a hand held them open, or cut them away—forcing me to gaze on all that passed below, like Regulus, with his lids cut off, compelled to gaze on the sun that withered up his eyeballs—till sense, and sight, and soul, failed me, and I

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fell grasping by the bars of the window, and mimicking, in my horrid trance, the shouts of the multitude, and the yell of the devoted. I actually for a moment believed myself the object of their cruelty. The drama of terror has the irresistible power of converting its audience into its victims. (Ch. 12)

The symmetrical fixity of Monçada's identification, like that of his earlier identification with the clock, is a vulnerability, though also in some ways a source of energy. First, it makes him vulnerable to pain, like Regulus. Second, it makes his wits vulnerable; Maturin's note to the incident recounts a similar, true case in which the observer "stood at the window as if nailed to it; and when dragged from it, became—an idiot for life." Finally, it puts his life in jeopardy, for a "flash of well-known eyes," "fixed on me for a moment," had dwelt on him in his helpless though all-seeing frenzy, and the witness (presumably Melmoth) had betrayed him to the Inquisition.

The penetrating flash of Melmoth's eyes is like the horizontal wash of real power over the fragile, paralyzing structure of ocular symmetry by which Monçada had at once identified with what he saw and rendered himself unable to intervene in it. It is, however, the stable crystalline relation, the one that enforces boundaries with a proscriptive energy in direct proportion to their arbitrariness, that dominates "the Gothic convention" as I have been describing it so far. "X within and X without" or "an X within an X" are the guiding structures of these conventions: a story within a story, a secret held by one character and the same secret held by another, a prison from which there is escape into another prison, a dream from which one awakens to find it true. For characters within these conventions, to be active is either to impose an arbitrary barrier or to breach one, a breach that is transgressive and attended by violence at the threshold. This is the range of Gothic conventions that is available for interpretation based on depth and the depths. It seems to give little support

to the overall attribution of particular atmospheric, affective, symbolic, or psychological content to the "within" as opposed to the "without." It gives more support to interpretations of the relation of doubleness between the counterpart "X" spaces, and interpretations too of the barrier of resistance to their merging. Some psychological readings of the Gothic make this shift of focus from contents to container. Masao Miyoshi's *The Divided Self*, for instance, as its title indicates, takes the formal fact of division as its given and examines an array of different kinds of meaning that could be attributed to this division. As that title also indicates, though—and this has been common to psychological criticism of the Gothic—the formal fact of division looks meaningful only to the extent that the divided space already looks like a "self," i.e., a character. The status of fictional characters is thus treated as non-problematic, and their creation as an easy and obvious task, even though it is exactly in the "creation of characters" that the Gothic novel looks most alien, has been most vulnerable to criticism, has strained its resources most, and may therefore be inferred to be acting on the most daring ambitions. At most, psychological criticism has been able to pair two characters who are "doubles" into one self; but when the same formal structure divides non-personified spaces or units of the narrative, it seems to fall away from interpretation.

<sup>1</sup>Similar lists of Gothic conventions are to be found in every work on the Gothic novel. The most compendious of such works are Eino Railo, *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1927; New York: E.P. Dutton, 1927), and Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: The Fortune Press, [1938]).

<sup>2</sup>*The Divided Self* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. xiv; my italics.

<sup>3</sup>Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic," pp. 131, 121, my italics.

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