SHADES OF MODERN GOTHIC, FROM THE VICTORIANS TO THE SURREALISTS

GILDA WILLIAMS

I.

In her essay 'Character in Fiction' (1924), Virginia Woolf wrote that 'on or about December 1910, human character changed', pinpointing a dramatic break with the shackles of the bygone Victorian era, happily replaced by the brave new world of Modernism. Among the pre-twentieth-century literary throwbacks that Woolf admonished was the terror genre, or 'Gothic': the sensationalist, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century popular favourite which combined Romance with horror, exotic and the supernatural. In uncompromising critical essays such as 'Gothic Romance' (1921), Woolf rejected the age-old terror fiction as an outmoded and unwanted, pre-Modern, pre-psychoanalytic literary tradition: a regression of an earlier age, to be erased from literary memory.

In both architecture and literature – despite vastly contrasting disciplinary remits – the descriptors 'Gothic', 'Gothic revival' or 'Victorian' often prompted in the early twentieth century unsympathetic associations with an outworn past which contrasted badly with Modernist experimentation and optimism. Even Kenneth Clark, author of *The Gothic Revival* (1928) and quasi-supporter of the Victorian-age architecture, spent much of his Introduction apologising for writing about a style of such candid distaste, which produced buildings Clark plainly dismisses as 'monsters' and 'unsightly wrecks'. 'The real reason that the Gothic Revival has been neglected is that it produced so little on which our eyes can rest without pain', wrote Clark unapologetically of the Victorians' chosen building style, ensuring that he was not mistaken for a cultural commentator out of touch with the Modernist/anti-revivalist sympathies of his day.[1]

On surprisingly consistent terms across disciplines, for committed Modernists like Woolf or Theodor Adorno (in literature), and later Clement Greenberg (in art), the departed nineteenth century and affiliated terms such as 'Gothic' or 'Victorian' represented all that was corrupt and inadmissible from the cultural past, to be replaced *tout court*. With regard to literature, in 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered' (1967) Adorno singled out the Gothic as the most pernicious sub-product that the culture industry has to offer, a deplorable commodity barely able to disguise its vulgar profit motive. In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986), Andreas Huyssen sets Adorno's anti-mass cultural position for literature in parallel to Greenberg's condemnation of kitsch in art: 'the Other of modernism, the specter that haunts it, the threat against which high art has to shore up its terrain.'[2] As with Woolf and Adorno writing about literature, in nearly all of Greenberg's art writings his opposition between 'Modern' and 'Gothic' is straightforward: 'Modern' carries within it the promise of future, 'Gothic' signals an intolerable vestige of the past. For Greenberg, even his *protégé* Jackson Pollock possessed one damning limitation: a paralysing connection to the Gothic:

> *For all its Gothic quality, Pollock's art is still an attempt to cope with urban life; it dwells entirely in the lonely jungle of immediate sensation, impulses and notions, therefore is positivist, concrete. Yet its Gothic-ness, its paranoia and resentment narrow it.*[3]

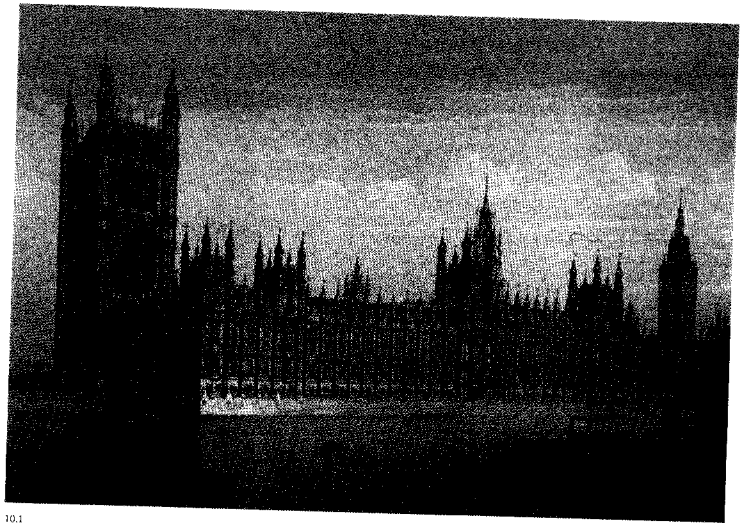
For Greenberg, terms like 'Gothic', 'Victorian' or the later 'Surrealist' were catastrophically out of step with the sweeping, masterful Modernism that he famously envisioned. The Gothic was haunted and suffocating whereas Modernism was free, carving giant walls of glass for light to pour inside and illuminate any lingering nineteenth-century shadows (a point vividly made in Anthony Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny*, 1992). Greenberg abhorred 'Victorian mud and darkness' – a murkiness mercifully replaced by 'iridescence' by the turn of the century.[4] To paraphrase T. J. Clark, 'Gothic' – perhaps like its cousin 'Victorian' – was code for an 'art [that] could sink no lower', to be briskly swept aside in order to blaze the path of a shining Modernism.[5]

For many decades now, Greenberg's position as the leading spokesman for the period has been severely tested, with dissident histories – that of Surrealism, most notably – potently reappraised. In this spirit we might observe contradictory, contemporaneous positions to Greenberg's cultural and terminological prejudices. The following essay will examine early-twentieth-century practitioners who, by rejecting Greenbergian paradigms, refused such a demarcation and embraced notions of Gothic as progressive and liberating. Among these, the Bauhaus took inspiration from Victorian stalwart John Ruskin, who proposed medieval architecture as a model for an egalitarian future. And Surrealist spokesman André Breton considered Gothic literature – with its reliance on dreams and semi-rational states – not as a pre-Modernist anachronism (as it was for Woolf and Adorno) but as inspiration for emancipatory, subconscious creative strategies. This essay will firstly lay out the terms by which the paired terms 'Victorian' and 'Gothic' were cross-disciplinarily contrasted with their redeemer, 'Modernism'; thereafter, these oppositional assumptions will be complicated by some conflicting examples that welcomed Gothic as a symbol of the future. From the Victorian era into early Modernism, the historically imprecise term 'Gothic' served as a flexible placeholder able to represent contrasting moments across the cultural and political spectrum, from extreme left to right; progress to regress; communist triumph to capitalist might – all co-existing side by side. Shades of 'Gothic' were manipulated and readily put to work to fulfil opposing agendas and rewrite whatever symbolic histories were forcibly projected upon it.

II.

Conventionally, English-language Gothic fiction was launched in 1764 with the publication of the proto-novel *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, the spoiled and propertied youngest son of long-time prime minister Sir Robert Walpole. The amateur architect/decorator of the noted Gothic revival architectural founding work Strawberry Hill (Twickenham, 1747–76), Walpole impulsively subtitled *The Castle of Otranto* 'A Gothic Story', thus dragging together the medieval architectural style with a newly minted form of sensationalist literature – and ushering in centuries of terminological confusion thereafter, across two unrelated yet bizarrely overlapped disciplines: medieval buildings and popular horror. The craze for these early Gothic 'ghost stories' soared to mainstream heights around the turn of the nineteenth century with novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and (later) Mary Shelley, the genre's features crystallising into a set of recognisable staples: a cavernous ancient pile, family secrets, patriarchal brutes, female innocents, the undead and the supernatural. Even before the last wave of these early Gothic classics (Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 1820, and James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, 1824) the genre began to feel stale, and had even set about ridiculing itself as with Jane Austen's parody, *Northanger Abbey* (1819).

Just as the Victorian era saw Gothic revival architecture evolve from Walpole's eighteenth-century, faux-aristocratic, hedonistic pleasure palace into the Victorians' exuberantly English civic structures



10.1

(FIG. 10.1)
VIEW OF THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER, FROM THE RIVER THAMES (C.1851).
LITHOGRAPH. COPYRIGHT THE CITY OF LONDON.

(perhaps best exemplified in the shining Palace of Westminster; 1840–70, by architect Charles Barry, with ornamentation by Pugin) (Fig. 10.1), so too the mid-to-late nineteenth century saw literary Gothic return to life with a new mission. The late-eighteenth-century's Gothic 'romances' – all swooning maidens and lecherous patriarchs – were retrieved as the ideal vehicle for a new generation of socially critical, psychologically rich, and sexually ambiguous fiction. These include *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1847); *Carmilla* (Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, 1872); *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1890); and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1899) – although these novels were rarely described then as 'Gothic', because the term was reserved at the time strictly for all things medieval. In these fictions, the early terror genre's distant landscapes of 'barbaric' Catholic faraway lands were replaced by dark passages closer to home: the newly 'satanic', industrialised landscape of England and, often, the unexplored recesses of London. The haunted hallways and secrets concealed within pointed-arch piles of late-eighteenth-century fiction were replaced by Victorian London's shadowy alleyways, and further symbolised by the toxic thoroughfares of the protagonist's own seething, insalubrious mind.

In architecture, the publication of *A History of the Gothic Revival* (Charles Eastlake, 1872) is said to mark the final years in which the Victorian pointed-arch revival was still considered a viable, nationalistically evocative style, connoting proud cultural values that nobly continued in, rather than unimaginatively cited, an ancient 'indigenous' style. By the early 1880s however, such an appraisal was rapidly losing ground, and the Gothic began to be described as outmoded and 'dead'. By the early twentieth century, staunch Modernists like the Italian Futurist leader Filippo Marinetti harshly dismissed John Ruskin's nostalgic veneration of Venetian medieval architecture, an attitude the Italian condemned as 'deplorable' and 'morbid', mired in a despicably 'passéist' picture of Italy.[6]

In the first decades of the twentieth century, for many arch-Modernists a predilection for the over-decorated Gothic was considered a mark of youthful and uncultivated tastes, prone to an excessive emotional reaction which Modernist-era rationalism was keen to stamp out. One of Georges Bataille's early texts, *Notre-Dame de Rheims* (1918), reminisces wistfully about the author's childhood spent in the shadow of the legendary cathedral, a Romanticist attitude Bataille stridently abandoned in later writings. So too the avant-garde musician John Cage claims to have harboured a budding interest in medieval architecture in his youth, a curiosity violently 'kicked out' of him by a well-meaning college professor who urged him to drop such antiquated interests forthwith, and turn his attention to a more worthwhile pursuit, Modernist architecture.[7]

Almost eighty years later, in an essay by the late-Conceptualist Andrea Fraser, 'Isn't this a wonderful place?' (2003), the artist acidly critiqued the audio-tour created for the opening of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao, a self-congratulation which opens with a banal comparison between the shining new gallery spaces and a medieval church. 'Isn't this a wonderful place? It's uplifting. It's like a Gothic cathedral', the audio gushes, advancing a sense of the contemporary museum as a 'temple of art' whose enjoyment is immediately sensual, 'timeless', and secularly spiritual: presumably, for Fraser, an embarrassing and populist art cliché.[8] Across the twentieth century, 'Gothic' is often a stand-in descriptor for out-of-date, unsophisticated cultural products – whether in the immediate appeal of incense-filled, pointed-arch Christian minsters, or sensationalist and juvenile Gothic literature and horror film. Huyssen argues persuasively in *After the Great Divide* that popular and women's culture were regularly positioned within Modernist rhetoric as retrograde and antithetical to authentic culture, which in turn was the prerogative of men, establishing an ongoing contrast between high/male and low/female tastes. 'Victorian' (named after the matriarch–queen), like

'Gothic' (its fiction sometimes dubbed 'feminine fantasy fiction') were both in alliance with female and lowbrow culture, and hardly merited the serious attention of a masculine Modernism.

III.

In contrast with this disparaging early-twentieth-century opinion of Gothic, as regards architecture, the best known English art critic of the Victorian period John Ruskin was passionately enamoured with the art of the Middle Ages. Since at least the writings of Gothic scholar and fanatic A. W. G. Pugin in the 1830s, the age-old church architecture was packaged as an alluring combination of faith, aesthetics, and a morally responsible citizenry.[9] With the publication of Ruskin's essay 'The Nature of Gothic' (1851–53), a Christian spirit of community and the promise of socio-artistic progress were definitively pulled together around a symbolic revisitation of the Middle Ages. Tirelessly studying and drafting the minutiae of medieval architecture, Ruskin was eager to locate some essential moral source for the superiority of the Gothic style over the Classical, beyond mere stylistic difference. The English critic eventually arrived at the imaginative conclusion that the manufacture of a medieval cathedral implies within it a thriving community of co-operating artworkers – stone masons, glass cutters, carvers, weavers, and sculptors. Such a beneficent and productive social and artistic milieu, Ruskin lamented, was woefully absent in the alienating modern world:

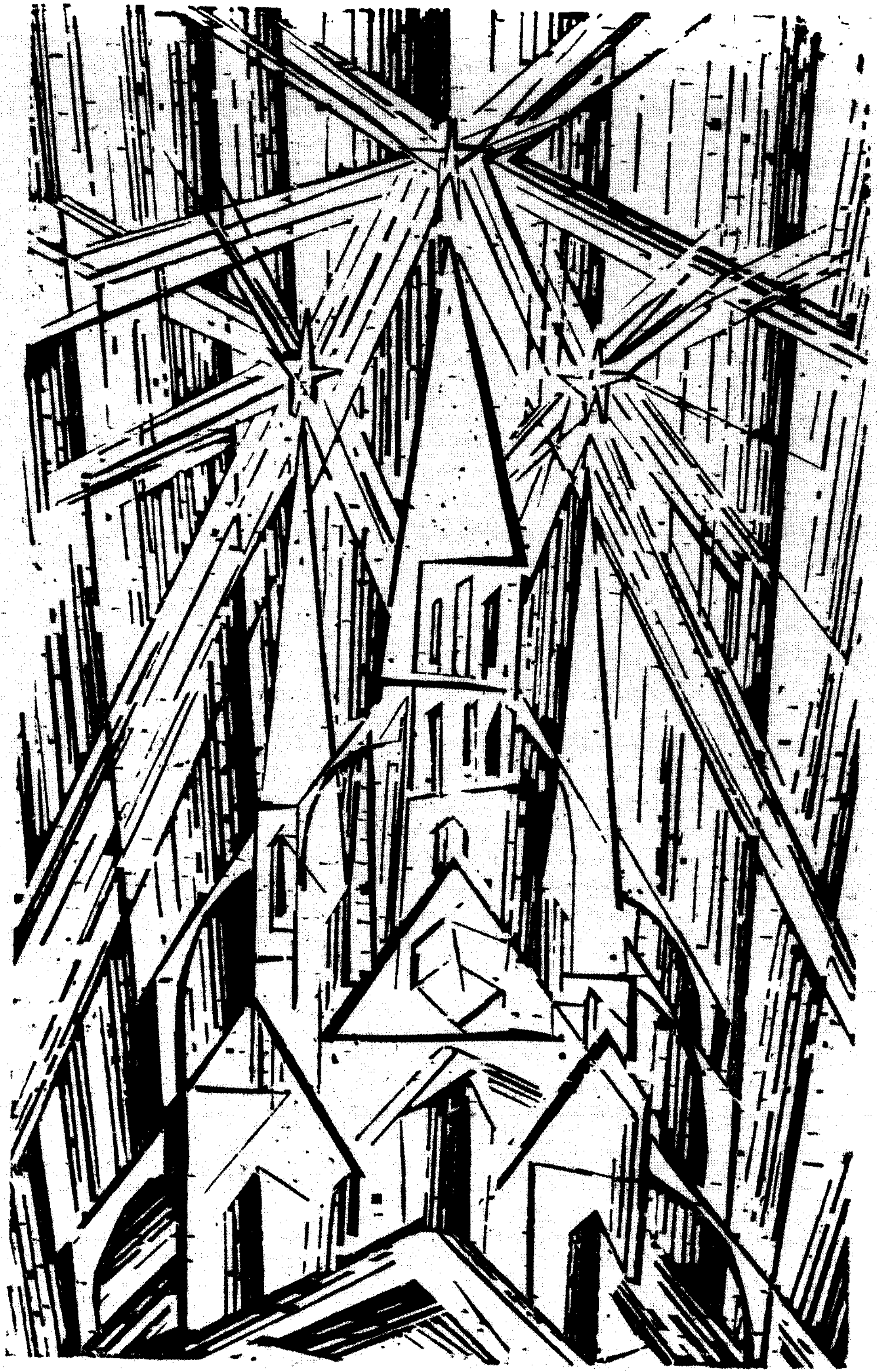
> *[G]o forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral [...] for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure; but which it must be the first aim of all Europe at this day to regain for her children.*[10]

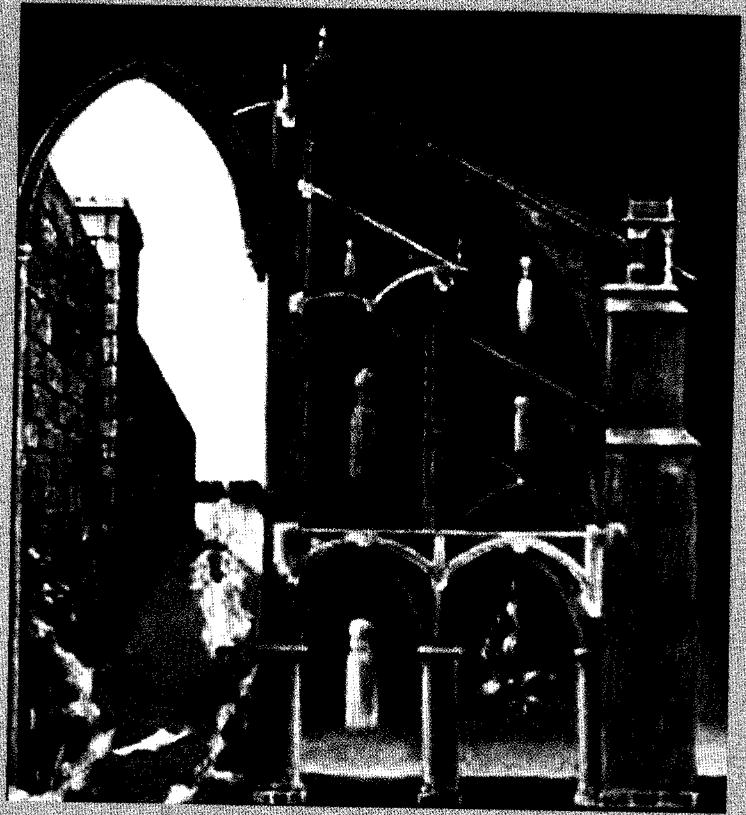
In contrast to this picture-postcard fantasy of the Gothic cathedral's happy society of busy craftsmen, co-operating in their designated tasks like bees building the hive, Ruskin despised the perfect symmetry of the Classical building for the terrible signs not only of a slavishness to architectural principles, but of actual tyrannous architects yoked to equally tyrannous leaders, physically and creatively enslaving their beleaguered artisans. The pointed-arch cathedral for Ruskin becomes evidence of a functioning democracy comprised of art-loving and -making citizens, all enlisted in the creation of a magnificent, lasting artefact. In that socially minded spirit, Ruskin – and, subsequently, the younger William Morris – wished to recuperate an idealised, English, pre-Reformation artistic past.

With the Ruskinian conception of Gothic, the style becomes at once artistically liberating, socially progressive, and spiritually fulfilling – particularly for those blessed with an artistic temperament. Ruskin's labour-based conceptualisation of Gothic was later co-opted and reframed within a Germanic and Modernist visual paradigm in Lyonel Feininger's roughly executed woodcut *Cathedral of the Future* (Fig. 10.2). Feininger's shining symbol for the new Bauhaus, with its angular spires and primitive flying buttresses, glorified a stylised village church: a modest yet potently optimistic symbol of the future, repositioning Ruskinian/Victorian Gothic symbolism at the service of a Modernist socio-cultural agenda.

The Gothic's endless shape-shifting abilities allow it dramatically to switch symbolic political alliances: after the Victorian era's majestic and mighty English Gothic (its Parliament stretching to the length of almost three football pitches along the Thames), the style is put to work to symbolise the Bauhaus's Ruskinian-inspired association of the style with a small-scale, thriving artistic democracy.

In literature, despite Adorno or Woolf's condemning view of the old fiction, Gothic tales enjoyed status as a unique source of inspiration among the Surrealists. In André Breton's 'Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism' (1936), the Surrealist spokesman claimed that dreams, memories, and other semi-rational emotional sources that Horace Walpole claimed as the inspiration for *The Castle of Otranto* should be reintroduced as valid tactics for Modernist-era creative work.[11] (In 1956 Theodor Adorno categorically refused Walpole's claims; 'no one dreams that way', he decried.)[12] The Surrealists represent an example of a significant twentieth-century artistic avant-garde movement which displayed a sustained interest in Victorian-era terror fiction, for example Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Bataille wrote in 1957 of 'the moral significance of the revolutionary nature of Emily Brontë's imagination and dreams' which he and others in the Surrealist circle – among them Antonin Artaud and Tristan Tzara – admired in that novel.[13] Though never fully a Surrealist, the artist Balthus compared his youth to that described in *Wuthering Heights*, and in 1935 created a series of lithographs





10.3

(FIG. 10.2 OPPOSITE)
LYONEL FEININGER,
KATHEDRALE (CATHEDRAL)
(1919). WOODCUT. MUSEUM
OF MODERN ART, NEW
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(FIG. 10.3)
DOROTHEA TANNING,
*A MRS. RADCLIFFE
CALLED TODAY* (1944). OIL
ON CANVAS. PRIVATE
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THE ESTATE OF DOROTHEA
TANNING, ADAGP, PARIS
AND DACS, LONDON.

published in *Minotaure* of Emily Brontë's supernatural tale, depicting the protagonist Catherine as a sexually provocative young girl cast into dangerous scenarios to which she responds with charged defiance. Like Balthus, virtually all the artists of repute who have taken terror literature as their subject matter can be seen as falling well outside of the Greenbergian abstracting tunnel-vision, following instead a figurative and illustrational model plainly at odds with the trajectory of Modernist abstraction. Among these we find the quasi-Surrealist Dorothea Tanning, who brought literary and architectural strains of 'Gothic' together in paintings such as *A Mrs. Radcliffe Called Today* (Fig. 10.3).

For the Surrealists and their followers, art inspired by terror literature claimed an affinity with the earlier fiction by virtue of shared methodology (dreams) as well as content (the irrational and the mysterious; erotically ambiguous scenarios), all represented through an illustrational pictorial language aimed at an enigmatic form of visual storytelling. The Surrealists' multiple evocations of Gothic are among the reasons Greenberg abhorred the movement; for Greenberg, Surrealism was Gothic, and this represented all that Modernism wisely rejected:

> *The Surrealists, promoting a newer renascence of the* Spirit of Wonder, *have cast back to those periods after the Middle Ages which were fondest of the marvellous and which most exuberantly exercised the imagination: the Baroque, the late eighteenth century, and the Romantic and Victorian nineteenth century. Surrealism has revived all the Gothic revivals and acquires more and more of a period flavour, going in for Faustian lore, old-fashioned and flamboyant interiors, alchemistic mythology and whatever else are held to be excesses in taste of the past.*[14]

Greenberg catalogues here a cross-historical density of negative associations with 'Gothic' and 'Victorian', gathering within them all that in art is retrograde, decorative and nostalgic – in sum, all that marks the 'bad' (non-Modernist) art and the weakest art-historical moments of the past ('the Baroque, the late eighteenth century and the Romantic and Victorian nineteenth century'), across lesser disciplines ('Faustian lore, old-fashioned and flamboyant interiors, alchemistic mythology'). 'Victorian' or 'Gothic' served as a shorthand for all that is excessive and stifling about pre-Modernist art.

Even prominent post-Greenbergian reassessments of Surrealism undertaken by American scholars such as Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster all but omit the Gothic sources from their research; the Gothic appears only in a pair of footnotes in Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (1993).[15] It seems as if, even in recuperating for late twentieth-century audiences the Surrealist art that Greenberg had ignored, a later generation of post-Modernist art historians felt it equally necessary to ignore its unpalatable connections with literary Gothic, part of the dated, irrecuperable, Bretonian side of Surrealism. In *Compulsive Beauty*, Foster drew together the many strands of Surrealism within the rubric of the 'the uncanny', the subject of one of Freud's final great texts. In some ways Sigmund Freud represents the emblematic figure able to draw together the disparate strands uniting Modernism, Gothic, Surrealism, and nineteenth-century thinking. Freud considered himself a pioneering scientist, and yet a Gothic sensibility has been suggested at work across his work; Freud himself remarked how psychoanalysis behaves in an uncanny fashion.[16] In some ways the quintessential new science of the modern-age, psychoanalysis, obeys the logic of the Gothic plot, whereby the dark 'secrets' behind a patient's current psychoses lie buried in the past in the form of trauma, awaiting retrieval and resolution. Freud famously based his definition of 'the uncanny' on the German translation of the term 'unhomely', and the terror genre is often credited there as the first arena to have conceived of the haunted (*unheimlich*) house as a place possessing a kind of life of its own, a point emphasised by art historian Brian Dillon in the catalogue to *The Surreal House* (2010). As witnessed in the figure of Freud, unexpected points of contact exist between what are conventionally considered Modernist versus counter-Modernist positions, also observed when mapping the fluctuating, malleable evocations of Gothic: from Victorian to Modernist, from psychoanalytical to Surrealist.

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1 Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste* (1928) (London: John Murray, 1962), pp. 9, 8.

2 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (1986) (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 56.

3 Clement Greenberg, 'The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture' (1947), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 2, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 166.

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7 John Cage, 'Indeterminacy' (1958), in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), p. 261.

8 Andrea Fraser, 'Isn't this a wonderful place? (A Tour of the Tour of the Guggenheim Bilbao)', in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), p. 233.

9 See A. G. W. Pugin, *Contrasts* (1836).

10 John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53), cited in *The Genius of John Ruskin*, ed. John D. Rosenberg (Charlottesville, VA and London: University of Virginia Press, 1998), p. 179.

11 André Breton, 'Limits Not Frontiers of Surrealism', in *Surrealism*, ed. Herbert Edward Read (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), pp. 110–11.

12 Theodor Adorno, 'Looking Back on Surrealism' (1956), in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Rainey, p. 1114.

13 Georges Bataille, cited in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. Penelope Rosemont (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. xli–xlii.

14 Clement Greenberg, 'Surrealist Painting' (1944), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 226.

15 Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 230n; pp. 280–81n.

16 'Indeed it would not surprise me to hear that psychoanalysis, which seeks to uncover these secret forces, had for this reason itself come to seem uncanny to many people.' Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1819), trans. David McLintock; intro. Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 150.

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