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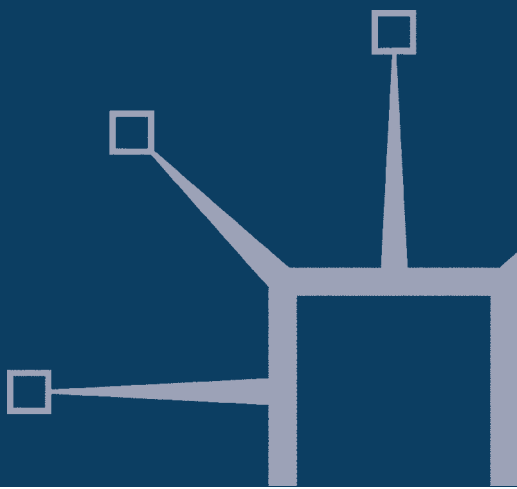
Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik



Gothic and the Comic Turn

By the same authors

LANDSCAPES OF DESIRE: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction
DAPHNE DU MAURIER: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination

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and

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In loving memory of

Daisy Gladys Lowe (Avril's mother), whose sense of humour was often distinctly Gothic

and

Arthur T.C. Peters (Sue's father), who loved a good joke and who enjoyed telling the bad ones too.

I'm not sure I understand myself why, at such a troubled time, I'm headed off in the frivolous direction of comic fiction.

Carol Shields, *Unless*

Contents

Acknowledgements

The seed for *Gothic and the Comic Turn* started to germinate some years ago, probably as an irreverent reaction to the scholarly earnestness with which Gothic literature was being promoted in university departments during the 1990s. It has taken us some time to bring our ideas to fruition, partly because the subject matter proved at times to be intractably difficult (not least because there is necessarily something of a contradiction in writing a solemn academic treatise on the comic). We are therefore very grateful to our various editors at Palgrave, who have extended our deadline more than once.

Certain sections of this book started life as papers given at various conferences on the Gothic. These papers eventually materialized as book chapters and journal articles, some of which have been reworked for inclusion in this volume. We are therefore grateful to the editors and publishers of *Gothic Studies* for permission to reprint, in altered and condensed form, the articles '"Releasing Spirit from Matter": Comic Alchemy in Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye*, Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick* and Mantel's *Fludd*' (Vol. 1, No. 2 [2000]), 136–147) and 'Agriculture, Body Sculpture, Gothic Culture: Gothic Parody in Gibbons, Atwood and Weldon' (Vol. 4, No. 2 [2002], 167–177). We also wish to thank the editors of *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* for permission to include a revised version of the online article 'Dead Funny: Eaton Stannard Barrett's *The Heroine* as Comic Gothic' (Vol. 5, No. 2 [2000]). Our examination of George du Maurier's *Trilby* had its genesis in an essay entitled 'Comic Gothic' written for *A Companion to the Gothic*, edited by David Punter and published by Blackwell in 2000. The sections on Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* draw on two book chapters, 'Strolling in the Dark: Gothic Flânerie in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*', in Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (eds), *Gothic Modernisms* (Palgrave, 2001) and 'Unreal cities and undead legacies: T.S. Eliot and Gothic hauntings in Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and Barnes's *Nightwood*' in Janet Beer and Bridget Bennett (eds), *Special Relationships: Anglo-American Affinities and Antagonisms, 1854–1936* (Manchester University Press, 2002). Our discussion of Barbara Comyns' *The Vet's Daughter* draws on an article entitled 'Skin Chairs and Other Domestic Horrors: Barbara Comyns and Female Gothic', which will be published in *Gothic Studies* in 2005. We are grateful to HarperCollins Publishers for permission to

reproduce a sentence from Carol Shields's novel *Unless* (published by Fourth Estate in 2002).

We also wish to thank colleagues who have engaged with our ideas over the last few years and who helped us move on in our thinking. In particular, the following deserve special mention for their constant encouragement and faith in the project: Janet Beer, Fred Botting, Jerrold E. Hogle, William Hughes, Terry Phillips, David Punter, Andy Smith, Ursula Tidd and Anne Williams. Perhaps the final acknowledgement should be wryly accorded to Peter L. Berger who, in his book *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, notes that: 'people who write books on the comic are legitimate targets for parody, satire and other aggressive modes of the humorous response to intolerable seriousness' (p. xv).

Avril Horner
Sue Zlosnik

Introduction

Although Gothic writing is now safely established within the academy, its comic dimension has received very little critical attention. Indeed, most accepted definitions of Gothic writing resolutely ignore its comic aspect. In his ground-breaking, Freudian-Marxist study of the Gothic, *The Literature of Terror*, published in 1980, David Punter defines three elements that lie at the 'heart' of Gothic writing; these are: the concept of paranoia, the notion of the barbaric and the nature of the taboo – 'aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic constantly, and hauntedly, returns'.[1] *The Literature of Terror* presents Gothic writing as a textual engagement with profound social collective neuroses, the study of which can teach us much about cultural and political oppression. This set the tone for many critical works of the 1980s and early 1990s, during which time Gothic moved in from the margins to become a respectable area of academic enquiry within literary studies. Despite disputes concerning ever more inclusive definitions of Gothic (which Maurice Lévy, for example, thinks far too inclusive[2]), most critics would probably agree that Gothic writing always concerns itself with boundaries and their instabilities, whether between the quick/the dead, eros/thanatos, pain/pleasure, 'real'/'unreal', 'natural'/'supernatural', material/transcendent, man/machine, human/vampire or 'masculine'/'feminine'. Such a concern with the permeability of boundaries, it has been suggested, manifests a deep anxiety about the coherence of the modern subject.[3] Indeed, Gothic writers deliberately exploit the fear of the 'Other' encroaching upon the apparent safety of the post-Enlightenment world and the stability of the post-Enlightenment subject in order to achieve their effects. Thus, lines of confrontation between good and evil are invariably drawn up early in the plot of the Gothic novel, and satisfactory resolution depends upon the clear re-establishment of acceptable boundaries.

However, the threat of their being breached again always remains: hence, of course, the rich progeny spawned by *Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula*. The effect of such texts is to generate fear: the Gothic text challenges the reader with the question 'What are you afraid of?' and, in bringing this question to the surface, therapeutically evokes feelings of horror, terror and revulsion.[4] Unspeakable fears are frequently embodied in external threats such as the vampire or the monster. However, the form such threats take is influenced by historical moment; to that extent, abjection is both temporally and culturally inflected – what terrified the eighteenth-century reader will not frighten the twenty-first century cyberspace surfer.[5]

However, while form may change, certain characteristics of the Gothic remain constant. For example, while concerned, at the level of plot, to re-establish 'good', the Gothic text is frequently marked by an obsession with violence, darkness and death; with 'evil' as a supernatural force; and with the 'uncanny' as an inexplicable phenomenon. This is indeed Gothic as a literature of terror; a literature which reflects the fact that the 'uncanny is inextricably bound up with the history of the Enlightenment and with European and North American Romanticism'.[6] Seen in this light, Gothic writing can be construed as religious in the broadest sense of the word in that it functions to sustain the idea of transcendence in a society that has become increasingly secular since the Renaissance. Indeed, Fred Botting has noted that Gothic texts are 'attempts to explain what the Enlightenment left unexplained, efforts to reconstruct the divine mysteries that reason had begun to dismantle'.[7] Like melodrama (which Peter Brooks describes as 'a form for a post-sacred era'), the Gothic text also polarizes and hyperdramatizes 'forces in conflict' in order to offer what he calls a 'moral manichaeism'[8] – made textually evident in the Gothic by that anxious play on boundaries we have already noted. It is not surprising then to find that, historically, melodrama emerges at the same moment as the Gothic, coming into its own at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Brooks argues that each nourished the other, but whereas melodrama tends 'to move toward a clear nomination of the moral universe'[9] by assigning good and evil to individuals, the Gothic – through its use of the eerie and the uncanny – sustains the notion of an immanent, inexplicable and terrifying world, albeit one in which God is dead or merely ineffective against diabolic forces.

A marked critical preoccupation with the uncanny (as identified by Freud in his seminal essay entitled 'The "Uncanny" ', 1919) has resulted in the privileging of a methodology based on psychoanalysis that seeks

to bring to the surface what is hidden in the Gothic text. This has resulted in a relative neglect of the formal play of surface effects, despite Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's pioneering work in this area.[10] We shall argue in this book, then, that the orthodox account of what is Gothic does not seem to capture the hybridity of most Gothic novels, which includes their juxtaposition of incongruous textual effects. Such incongruity opens up the possibility of a comic turn in the presence of horror or terror. In this way, Gothic's tendency to hybridity makes possible a mixed response to the loss of transcendence that characterizes the modern condition. Perhaps in the academy we have overlooked the comic in the Gothic – or too quickly pathologized it as the hysterical laughter of comic relief – in our desire to present Gothic texts as suitable cases for academic treatment. There are important essays by Paul Lewis, Victor Sage, Philip Stevick, Sybil Korff Vincent and Julian Wolfreys on the comic in specific Gothic texts but this area of enquiry does not appear to have become established in Gothic studies; there has, as yet, been no extended treatment of this topic.[11] In this book we aim to trace a trajectory of comic Gothic from the hybrid *The Castle of Otranto* through to the 1980s. This is not, therefore, a comprehensive survey; in choosing exemplars, we have tended to identify texts that either have fallen into obscurity or have not yet been considered as suitable subjects for Gothic criticism. We thus want to offer here a rather different picture of Gothic writing. Some of the works examined in *Gothic and the Comic Turn* cannot be contained within the conventional Gothic aesthetic – and might well appear on first reading as merely diverting or 'frivolous'. Yet in their own way they, too, explore the fragmented condition of the modern subject. In such texts, we seem to have a double remove, an inflection within an inflection, since in the Gothic comic turn – as in the joke – terror is suspended and horror is held in abeyance. If, as Brooks suggests, melodrama and the Gothic gesture theatrically towards a lost transcendence, then it could be argued that the comic within the Gothic offers a position of detachment and scepticism towards such cultural nostalgia. This is not simply to suggest that the Gothic comic turn functions as a fifth columnist for Enlightenment values. Rather, we see it as the beginning of a deconstructionist turn inherent within modernity. Such a perspective breaks the cultural twinning of the Gothic and the psychoanalytic in a proto-deconstructive impulse. It is not for nothing that Stella Gibbons sends Cousin Judith, the fixated Gothic mother, off for a luxurious bout of psychoanalytic treatment at the end of *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932). In similar vein, Patrick McGrath shows us the founding fathers of psychoanalysis literally cut down to size as little

manikins in 'The Skewer' (1988). The comic turn in Gothic, we claim, is not an aberration or a corruption of a 'serious' genre; rather, it is intrinsic to a mode of writing that has been hybrid since its very inception. Just as Brooks argues that 'the melodramatic mode is an inescapable dimension of modern consciousness',[12] we shall argue that the comic within the Gothic foregrounds a self-reflexivity and dialectical impulse intrinsic to the modern subject. Rather than setting up a binary between 'serious' and 'comic' Gothic texts, it is perhaps best to think of Gothic writing as a spectrum that, at one end, produces horror-writing containing moments of comic hysteria or relief and, at the other, works in which there are clear signals that nothing is to be taken seriously. The comic Gothic turn self-consciously uses Gothic's propensity to bare the device in order to allay the reader's learnt response of fear, horror and anxiety when encountering certain plots and tropes. Nevertheless, it still functions within Gothic as a critique of modernity. In this sense, the comic Gothic turn is the Gothic's own *doppelgänger*.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1764, is usually defined as the first Gothic novel in English. This claim is incontestable, in so far as *The Castle of Otranto* was the first work to announce itself as 'A Gothic Story' – although, as E.J. Clery has pointed out, 'it was at precisely the moment that *Otranto* was revealed to be a modern work that the adjective "gothic" was first applied to it'.[13] Yet in this tale of death, incest, malevolent intrigue and the supernatural, Walpole offers his readers several moments of farcical humour, combining the uncanny and the melodramatic to comic effect. One of these takes place when Bianca, a young female servant, expresses her terror at having seen a supernaturally large hand within the confines of the castle:

> At that instant Bianca burst into the room, with a wildness in her look and gestures that spoke the utmost terror. Oh! my lord, my lord!' cried she, we are all undone! It is come again! It is come again! – What is come again? cried Manfred, amazed. – Oh! the hand! the giant! the hand! – Support me! I am terrified out of my senses, cried Bianca: 'I will not sleep in the castle tonight. Where shall I go? My things may come after me to-morrow. – Would I had been content to wed Francesco! This comes of ambition![14]

Bianca's servant perspective, with her concern about her 'things', strikes an incongruous note of practicality and materialism in the midst of high feeling presented so melodramatically. As Richard Davenport-Hines has noted, 'Walpole (who always enjoyed harlequinades) devised

exclamatory dialogues which were consistently camp.'[15] Bianca's immediate concern about what she owns (not much, presumably) and what she should or should not strive for in a rapidly changing social world ('Would I had been content to wed Francesco!') comically relativizes the larger themes of inheritance, primogeniture, property, marriages of convenience and aristocratic lineage that inform the main plot. There are many such moments in Walpole's novel. In his second preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, published in 1765, Horace Walpole provocatively drew attention to the hybrid nature of his work, proudly announcing its blending of ancient romance (tales of chivalry and myth) with modern romance (the eighteenth-century novel) and, in the spirit of Shakespeare, the mingling of the tragic and the comic within the same text.[16] This retrieval of the bard's agenda had much to do with the construction of an English national identity that separated itself off from European culture, including Voltaire's judgement that to mix buffoonery and solemnity was 'intolerable'.[17] Walpole's polemical preface thus thumbs the nose at the eighteenth-century embrace of Enlightenment taxonomies which influenced the editing of Shakespeare's plays, 'correcting' them by eliminating, amongst other things, the very hybrid elements that make Shakespeare's work so distinctive. As E.J. Clery has noted:

> The excision of comic elements from the tragedies in the interests of increased probability and decorum had long been a part of English theatre practice. The Fool was removed from *King Lear* after Nahum Tate's 1681 revision and Garrick, as part of his drive for the moral reformation of Drury Lane, left the Porter out of *Macbeth*, and would experimentally cut the Gravediggers from *Hamlet* in productions between 1773 and 1776. Generic impurity opposed the canons of neoclassicism and detracted from the function of moral illustration. Voltaire helped to alter the terms of the argument with his regular attacks on Shakespeare from 1733 to 1776, inadvertently shifting the issue from the universal rules of drama to the question of nationhood and its expression in literature.[18]

Whereas modern critics of the Gothic have been happy to accept the mingling of ancient with modern romance in *The Castle of Otranto*, they have been less interested in Walpole's use of farce and humour. The critical reception of Walpole's work as the first Gothic novel seems to have involved turning a blind eye to its more comic moments, as if these were somehow an embarrassing element in a text which provides

the template for the conventions of Gothic fiction. Yet Walpole himself recognized the work's comic elements: in writing to his friend Elie de Beaumont, he remarked ' "If I make you laugh, for I cannot flatter myself that I shall make you cry, I shall be content." '[19] On learning that many readers were taking the novel seriously, he told Madame du Deffand, 'presque tout le monde en fut le dupe'.[20]

However, by the time Clara Reeve was writing her novel *The Old English Baron* during the late 1770s, the excess that induces laughter was seen as a threat to the Gothic novel's potential for inducing fear, perhaps because of the cultural assimilation of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) during the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1777, anticipating Elizabeth Napier's 1987 attack on the Gothic as absurdly extravagant,[21] Clara Reeve castigates Walpole for embracing excess:

> a sword so large as to require an hundred men to lift it; a helmet that by its own weight forces a passage through a court-yard into an arched vault, big enough for a man to go through; a picture that walks out of its frame; a skeleton ghost in a hermit's cowl . . .[22]

These memorable features of Walpole's novel militated against the emotional realism that Clara Reeve sought.[23] Fortunately, however, many subsequent Gothic writers have followed in Walpole's footsteps rather than in Reeve's, attracted by those very elements of humour, fakery and melodrama in *The Castle of Otranto*. This is not to say, of course, that Walpole's novel does not have a serious, even tragic, dimension: its engagement with the transition from a feudal, aristocratic society to one in which status is based on property and on the maintenance of property through the suitable marriages of offspring is entirely topical; in that sense it relates keenly to the Marriage Act of 1753 which had been devised, it seems, to award ambitious parents more power so that they could prevent clandestine marriages taking place.[24]

Given its hybridity and its popularity, it is perhaps no coincidence that the rise of the Gothic novel is roughly contemporary not only with the birth of melodrama but also with the rise of the circus and of opera as popular entertainment.[25] Indeed, Anne Williams sees the larger-than-life qualities of Walpole's novel as closely related to opera, which Walpole attended regularly; on finding 'there are nearly 600 references to opera in the index to the Yale edition of Walpole's correspondence', Williams concluded that 'Horace Walpole went to the opera all the time'.[26] Elevated now by exclusivity and expense, opera was not

always regarded as high culture. John Dennis, writing in 1706, attacked opera as an art form that was foreign, effeminate and Gothic:

> there is something in the *Italian* Opera, which is Barbarous and Gothick…nothing can be more Gothick than an Opera, since nothing can be more oppos'd to the antient Tragedy, than the modern Tragedy in Musick; because, the one is reasonable, the other ridiculous; the one is artful, the other absurd; the one beneficial; the other pernicious; in short, the one natural, and the other monstrous.[27]

The creators of both early Gothic and early opera are, then, castigated for ignoring generic conventions; for embracing surface rather than depth; and for delight in excess – the result is 'absurd' and 'monstrous' works that make you laugh as well as cry. The same ambivalent response is evoked by both melodrama and the circus (in the latter case, particularly in the classic clown performances that seek to plumb the depths of pathos as well as the far reaches of helpless laughter).[28]

Once we accept that the Gothic is part of this complex and popular cultural response to modernity, and that the roots of the Gothic lie in the comic as well as the tragic, we are able to see later Gothic texts rather differently. For example, what Emma McEvoy calls 'a dangerous sense of parody' in *The Monk* we could simply see as Lewis daring to push the hybridity so evident in Walpole's work to new extremes.[29] Less obviously, perhaps, Ann Radcliffe's work flirts with Walpole's comic legacy. *The Italian* (1797) not only perpetuates the emphasis on property and lineage set up in *The Castle of Otranto*, but also metaphorically draws attention several times to the close relationship between horror and laughter in a way that suggests a metafictional awareness. For example, late in the novel, Schedoni and Ellena, guided by a peasant, arrive in Rome and pass close by the walls of the Inquisition building. Here they come across a fair where peasants 'in their holiday cloaths' are enjoying themselves:

> Here was a band of musicians, and there a group of dancers; on one spot the *outré* humour of a zanni provoked the never-failing laugh of the Italian rabble, in another the *improvisatore*, by the pathos of his story, and the persuasive sensibility of his strains, was holding the attention of his auditors, as in the bands of magic. Farther on was a stage raised for a display of fireworks, and near this a theatre, where a mimic opera, the 'shadow of a shade', was exhibiting, whence the roar of laughter, excited by the principal *buffo* within, mingled with

> the heterogeneous voices of the vendors of ice, macaroni, sherbet, and diavoloni, without.[30]

This episode clearly lends itself to a Bakhtinian reading in which the voices of the fair, or carnival, can be heard against the privileged voices of aristocratic authority that dominate the plot. Yet the passage can also be taken as a self-reflexive comment by the writer on her own blend of humour and horror, measured out rather differently from the heady and salacious mixture served up by Matthew Lewis in *The Monk*. Forced to stop near a stage 'on which some persons grotesquely dressed, were performing', Ellena and Schedoni witness a tragedy turned to comedy by the actors' 'strange gestures' and 'uncouth recitation' (*I*, p. 274). Yet the narrator's critical and seemingly authoritative dismissal of the entertainment is itself destabilized, since the peasant guide, entirely caught up in the story of Virginia which is being performed, and who is ignorant of Schedoni's own recently abandoned attempt to murder Ellena (whom he at one point mistook for his daughter), calls out 'Look! Signor, see! Signor, what a scoundrel! What a villain! See! He has murdered his own daughter!' (*I*, p. 274). Here, Radcliffe, like Shakespeare, demonstrates that 'the play's the thing'; that, as in *Hamlet*, there is no clear dividing line in this text between 'reality' and the fictional representation of that 'reality'; indeed, the latter might just be closer to 'truth' than the former. The scene also echoes the artisans' appropriation of the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* – in which the energy, sincerity and the comedy of their performance both destabilize the Duke's reassertion of generic boundaries and implicitly critique the hierarchical nature of his benign, albeit condescending, 'royal' attitude towards their labour. In *The Italian*, Schedoni's earlier comment (on the peasant's convoluted and – characteristically – unfinished tale of Old Marco) that 'the narrative resembles a delirious dream, more than a reality' (*I*, p. 284) applies also to this later scene with its mingling of nightmare, farce, coincidence, comedy and terror.[31] There is perhaps a wry self-reflexivity here and even an implicit awareness that the Gothic (like melodrama and opera – and unlike naturalism or realism) presents, to use Eric Bentley's words, the 'expression of emotion in the pure histrionic form of dreams'.[32] Its value in this context is that, in mingling emotional opposites such as mirth and terror, it reflects the psychic world more accurately than realist writing. Indeed, Philip Stevick suggests that the heightened, distorted and sometimes comic quality of Gothic texts arises from their likeness to dream narratives so that whilst the story might seem ridiculous, even amusing, the 'coexistence of

mythic seriousness, psychic authority and laughter' within the Gothic text reflects the disturbing authenticity of insight gained through an unconscious process.[33] In this sense, the player scene in *The Italian* offers both a corrective to the competing demand for realism in the new form of the novel and an early understanding that theatricality, comedy and melodrama are essential weapons in the Gothic text's rejection of naturalism as a dominant mode for representing modern subjectivity. It is not surprising, then, to find that Dickens chose to preserve this form of creative eclecticism in an attempt to temper the claims of realism.[34] This rejection of formal constraint and containment is also implicit in certain plot elements of *The Italian*, which hint that English politics cannot be kept separate from the outcome of the French Revolution;[35] that religious commitment cannot be contained by the machine of the State, whatever form it takes (here, the Inquisition); that Ellena's newly emerging subjectivity will not be contained by her marriage to Vivaldi (rather hysterically celebrated at the end of the novel and held in implicit tension with the utopian female community portrayed in Volume III, Chapter IV).

Interestingly, Victor Sage, in his essay 'Gothic Laughter: Farce and Horror in Five Texts', cites Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* as 'a very clear example of the peculiarly close relationship between horror and humour in the Gothic novel' and goes on to present *Dracula* (1897) as 'both a theory and an example of the peculiarly self-conscious complexities of humour which attach themselves to the gothic tradition'.[36] Comparing the Gothic novel with the theatre, Sage argues that 'the mistaken identity and the exaggerated, mechanical withholding of information, which is the driving force of stage farce, becomes in the context of the Gothic a metaphor for epistemological doubt and theological unease in the presence of death'.[37] Whilst emphasizing slightly different aspects of the Gothic, critics such as Victor Sage and Philip Stevick seem to agree that the 'surface' element of Gothic fiction allows for an easy dialectic between the rational and the irrational, emotion and intellect, artificiality and authenticity and, above all, between horror and laughter. Indeed, it is the Gothic's preoccupation with 'surface' that enables it so easily to embrace a comic as well as a tragic perspective, resulting in what Peter Berger has described as a 'distinctive diagnosis of the world'.[38] The comic turn is often located in the telling itself; as Frank Carson, the Irish comedian, used to remind his audience, 'It's the way I tell 'em.'

If the Gothic text demonstrates the horror attaching to such a shifting and unstable world, it also, in its comic dimension, celebrates the possibilities thereby released. This is perhaps most evident in the

Gothic novel's ludic qualities, particularly its interest in intertextuality and its playful concern with fakery. Walpole's embrace of the fake can most obviously be seen in his Strawberry Hill home (his 'Gothic villa') in Twickenham and in the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764 as a true translation by 'William Marshall, Gent.' of a sixteenth-century Italian manuscript by 'Onuphrio Muralto', supposedly a 'Canon of the Church of St. Nicholas of Otranto'. This element of fakery combines with the high degree of hybridity in Walpole's text to produce a mode of writing that is not only at odds with realism and naturalism, but is also unusually self-reflexive and ludic. The fragmentation and stylization characteristic of melodrama often take the form in Gothic narratives of the framing tale or reference to a previous tale or lost text; for example, the myth of Prometheus and Milton's *Paradise Lost* function in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as indicators of loss. Thus meaning, and with it authenticity, is constantly deferred to another textual source. In this sense the Gothic text can be seen as taking up a sceptical position towards authority and morality and as problematizing authenticity and legitimacy. Jerrold E. Hogle has suggested that the binary of 'fakery'/'authenticity' that helps structure the Gothic novel is indicative of a specifically modern and fractured subjectivity. For Hogle, the modern condition finds expression in the Gothic text through fakery and simulacra.[39] He argues that:

> The Gothic refaking of fakery becomes a major repository of the newest contradictions and anxieties in western life that most need to be abjected by those who face them so that middle-class westerners can keep constructing a distinct sense of identity. The progress of abjection in the Gothic is inseparable from the progress of the ghost of the counterfeit, particularly as that symbolic mode and the ideologies at war within it keep employing each other – and acting out abjections – both to conceal and to confront some of the basic conflicts in western culture.[40]

Hogle thus suggests that the rise of modernity, from the Renaissance onwards, has resulted in a crisis of identity in the western world. Inflecting this perception with his reading of Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Hogle goes on to argue that the stability of the feudal world was replaced by the social mobility and geographical displacements/relocations characteristic of a post-Renaissance world. The resulting psychological instability manifested itself in a breakdown between the sign and its referent: 'Educated Europeans felt that they

were leaving behind the age of the "obligatory sign", the notion of signifiers as always referring to an ordained status in people and things where "assignation is absolute and there is no class mobility".'[41] Thus both Brooks and Hogle see modernity as an age of fragmentation and breakdown in which the transcendent and the numinous are lost, or displaced from their original sources. For Brooks, however, melodrama offers an optimistic resolution to such breakdown in that it 'can open up the angelic spheres as well as the demonic depths and can allay the threat of moral chaos';[42] that is, through melodrama we can learn to shoulder questions of ethics – instead of deferring them to God – so that the best in human behaviour is brought out as well as the worst. The Gothic, on the other hand, offers no such redemption, for either Brooks or Hogle. Indeed, for Hogle, the appeal of the Gothic is, as for Veeder, mainly therapeutic in that it allows us to explore 'the fears and anxieties, even feelings of terror or horror' which accompany the 'cultural and personal quandaries' resulting from modernity.[43]

The Gothic's emphasis on fakery in the representation of extremes of feeling and experience inevitably invites the ludicrous excess of further layers of fakery in the form of parody. The Gothic text's tendency to self-parody is well expressed by Chris Baldick in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*: 'Many Gothic tales are already half-way to sending themselves up.'[44] Given both the prominence of Romanticism in literary studies and the nineteenth-century construction of Romanticism as epitomized by the unique and individual nature of imaginative experience, it is not surprising that parody has, until relatively recently, been seen as derivative, lightweight and parasitical. It is only since the early 1990s that work by critics such as Linda Hutcheon, Margaret Rose and Simon Dentith has claimed some sophistication for parodic writing, arguing that, in foregrounding its own textuality, parody represents part of a complex cultural dialogue.[45] Dentith, for example, cites Robert Phiddian (writing on Swift) with approval in this respect:

> all parody refunctions pre-existing text(s) and/or discourses, so that it can be said that these verbal structures are called to the readers' minds and then placed under erasure. A necessary modification of the original idea is that we must allow the act of erasure to operate critically rather than as merely neutral cancellation of its object. Parodic erasure disfigures its pre-texts in various ways that seek to guide our re-evaluation or refiguration of them. It is dialogical and suggestive as well as negatively deconstructive, for it (at least potentially) can

> achieve controlled and meta-fictional commentary as well as purely arbitrary problematization.[46]

It is in this spirit that we approach parody when discussing *Gothic and the Comic Turn* – for most of the texts we examine in this book are either parodying previous Gothic texts or are more generally parodically appropriating Gothic tropes and devices. We thus offer our own definition of parody here as a literary mode that, while engaging with a target text or genre, exhibits a keen sense of the comic, an acute awareness of intertextuality and an engagement with the idea of metafiction. This is a deliberately generous and inclusive definition that differs, for example, from some postmodern definitions of parody that (perhaps in an attempt to elevate its cultural function) minimize or excise the importance of its comic dimension.[47] We would suggest, furthermore, that it differs from travesty, pastiche and satire in that travesty reduces the target text to something ludicrous, pastiche 'works by imitation rather than direct transformation'[48] and satire does not necessarily engage with precursive texts. This is not to say that we see the cultural function of parody as limited and anodyne, since it is clear that it can function satirically in certain contexts. Indeed, parody's comic engagement with precursive texts not only allows an irreverent response to target works and authors but also enables the writer, if he or she chooses, to engage critically with aspects of the contemporary world. It is thus essential to place parody within its historical and cultural moment. It is also clear that certain kinds of parody, in self-consciously foregrounding intertextuality, draw attention to writing itself, so that they offer both a reflection on fiction and the act of writing fictions. Thus parody can function as a key aspect of comic Gothic, not in the traditional sense of being parasitic upon an 'original' text, but because, through 'repetition with critical difference',[49] it foregrounds the production of the modern subject through discourse. In this sense, parody can offer Gothic a comic turn. This turn frequently allows a fresh perspective on a changing world, one of accommodation rather than terrified apprehension. As the Gothic novel evolves in the twentieth century, this dialogic and metafictional strain inherent in Gothic writing becomes even more evident, particularly during the postmodern period.

We suggested earlier that the comic turn in Gothic is not an aberration or a corruption of a 'serious' genre but rather a key aspect of Gothic's essential hybridity. In the comic turn what we see is an exploitation of the stylized theatricality of the Gothic device, which is always teetering on the edge of self-parody. The result is not so much an abdication of