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Australian Gothic

G. Turcotte

University of Wollongong, gturcotte@nd.edu.au

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Australian Gothic

Long before the fact of Australia was ever confirmed by explorers and cartographers it had already been imagined as a grotesque space, a land peopled by monsters. The idea of its existence was disputed, was even heretical for a time, and with the advent of the transportation of convicts its darkness seemed confirmed. The Antipodes was a world of reversals, the dark subconscious of Britain. It was, for all intents and purposes, Gothic *par excellence*, the dungeon of the world. It is perhaps for this reason that the Gothic as a mode has been a consistent presence in Australia since European settlement. Certainly the fact that settlement began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the rise of the Gothic as a sensationalist and resonantly influential form, contributes to its impact on the literature of Australia.

There may be other reasons for its appeal. It is certainly possible to argue that the generic qualities of the Gothic mode lend themselves to articulating the colonial experience inasmuch as each emerges out of a condition of deracination and uncertainty, of the familiar transposed into unfamiliar space. It is this very quality which Freud identified as the condition of the uncanny, where the home is unhomely — where the *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich* — and yet remains sufficiently familiar to disorient and disempower. All migrations represent a dislocation of sorts, but Australia posed particularly vexing questions for its European immigrants. Nature, it seemed to many, was out of kilter. To cite the familiar clichés: its trees shed their bark, swans were black rather than white, and the seasons were reversed. And while these features represented a physical perversion, it was widely considered to be metonymic of an attendant spiritual dis/ease.

This sense of spiritual malaise is often communicated through the Gothic mode, that is, through a literary form which emphasises the horror, uncertainty and desperation of the human experience, often representing the solitariness of that experience through characters trapped in a hostile environment, or pursued by an unspecified or unidentifiable danger. From its inception the Gothic has dealt with fears and themes which are endemic in the colonial experience: isolation, entrapment, fear of pursuit and fear of the unknown. And for each, the possibility of transformation, of surviving the dislocation, acts as a driving hope. If the Gothic is itself a hybrid form — a mode

delineated by borrowings and confluents, by fragmentation and incompleteness, by a rejection of set values and yet a dependence on establishment — then it is ideal to speak the colonial condition.

For many the very landscape of Australia was Gothic. To Lieutenant Daniel Southwell, one of the First Fleet arrivals, the outcrop of rocks framing the landscape of Port Jackson (now Sydney harbour), suggested the “charming seats, superb buildings, [and] the grand ruins of stately [Gothic] edifices”. Soon real buildings would emerge to complement the imagined ones so that by the 1840s it was both fashionable and commonplace. In *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales* (1980), James Broadbent and Joan Kerr have argued that Gothic architecture in Australia “was strongly associational — a symbol of a colony’s maturity”. But Australia’s “maturity” — particularly in matters literary — was far from universally accepted. Australia was dismissed by many as too immature for proper history, and definitely for a romantic literature, to exist there.

As in many countries, there was in Australia a long-running debate over the importance of realism in, and the unsuitability of romance to, the colony’s literature. For some, the idea of the romantic was linked to Europe and its landscape and could therefore never be reproduced in the “new” worlds since they lacked antiquity. A number of critics maintained that given this failing it was critical that other virtues be celebrated. For some, since Australia had no history to speak of, one needed to celebrate its future potential; for others, the basis for a truly important national literature could emerge only through the celebration — not an exoticising — of the local: dialect, experience, space.

Barron Field (1786–1846), the author of the first book of verse to be published in Australia, adhered to the first view, that in a land without antiquities anticipation was all. In “On Reading the Controversy Between Lord Byron and Mr Bowles” (1823), he claimed that in Australia, “Nature reflecting Art is not yet born;—/ A land without antiquities, with one,/ And only one, poor spot of classic ground,/ (That on which Cook first landed)—where, instead/ Of heart-communings with ancestral relics/ [...] We’ve nothing left us but anticipation/ Where’s no past tense; the ign’rant present’s all....” Field may well have prefaced his poem with the epigraph, “Anticipation is to a young country what antiquity is to an old”, but he nevertheless concluded his work by suggesting

that the only bit of poetry to be found in the “prose-dull land” was a ship which would carry him away — which indeed it did in 1824.

Frederick Sinnett (1830–66) suggested that romance was inappropriate to Australian letters. Like Field, Sinnett understood that Australia could not compete with English antiquity, but that its literature of the everyday should stand on equal ground. That his view of the romantic was largely informed by a specifically Gothic vision is made clear in an extract from his famous essay, “The Fiction Fields of Australia” (1856),

It must be granted, then, that we are quite debarred from all the interest to be extracted from any kind of archeological accessories. No storied windows, richly dight, cast a dim, religious light over any Australian premises. There are no ruins for that rare old plant, the ivy green, to creep over and make his dainty meal of. No Australian author can hope to extricate his hero or heroine, however pressing the emergency may be, by means of a spring panel and a subterranean passage, or such like relics of feudal barons. [...] There may be plenty of dilapidated buildings, but not one, the dilapidation of which is sufficiently venerable by age, to tempt the wandering footsteps of the most arrant *parvenu* of a ghost that ever walked by night. It must be admitted that Mrs Radcliffe’s genius would be quite thrown away here; and we must reconcile ourselves to the conviction that the foundations of a second ‘Castle of Otranto’ can hardly be laid in Australia during our time.

While there may have existed a rhetorically clear line dividing the realists from the romantics, in point of fact much writing produced in the colony blended elements of each, and it is perhaps in this way that Australia began to map out a specifically local variant of the Gothic mode, one which turned to the specifications of the domestic landscape and voice to articulate the fear and exhilaration of the colonial condition. Writers such as Marcus Clarke, “Price Warung” (William Astley), Barbara Baynton and Henry Lawson produced detailed and localised texts anchored in the language, scenery and circumstance of their country. Though they may have insisted on the realist dimension of their work (Lawson, for example would have been aghast to be called a romance writer), their exploration of the anxieties of the convict system, the terrors of isolated stations at the mercy of vagrants and nature, the fear of starvation or of becoming lost in the bush, are distinctly Gothic in effect — and dare one say, uniquely, originally, Australian.

That is not to deny that much early writing in Australia was derivative, or that all of it was in the Gothic style. Australia's first novel, *Quintus Servington* (1830–31), written by the convicted English forger Henry Savery (1791–1842), was a thinly disguised autobiography designed to demonstrate how his fictional equivalent was different from the general convict population. Those darker aspects of his existence are therefore subdued, and the text somehow less Gothic in nature than Savery's own life.

Not so Anna Maria Bunn's (1808–99) *The Guardian: A Tale by an Australian* (1838), the first novel printed and published in mainland Australia (*Quintus Servington* was a Tasmanian text) and the first by a woman. Though a Gothic romance, *The Guardian* manages to display impatience with this aspect of the story, so that it shifts into a range of modes, from the epistolary tale to the Comedy of Manners. Indeed, Bunn seems to hold the not uncommon view that the Gothic is somehow beneath contempt and frivolous, so that she is careful to justify its use as reflecting the immorality of her characters and their situation. Ironically, the novel is set in Ireland and Britain and refers frequently to Australia only to condemn it. Australia is a land to which graceless and incompetent individuals are exiled. As one character laments, "All lost characters are found there". *The Guardian* is the first of a series of dark romances which make use of a Gothic sensibility, to speak, directly or indirectly, about the Australian landscape.

Numerous Gothic romances emerged to fill a demanding interest in such texts, many derivative and flawed, others quite successful in their execution. Some worthy of note include British-born Mary Theresa Vidal's (1815–69) *Bengala: Or, Some Time Ago* (1860) and the delightfully Gothic *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893) written by the prolific, Australian-born Rosa Praed (1851–1935). Undoubtedly one of the oddest of these numerous texts — and one of the most offensive concerning matters of race — is Edward Sorensen's *The Squatter's Ward* (1919) which perhaps most literally transposes the stock conventions of the Gothic tale into the Australian landscape to include a home with trap-doors and underground chambers where the master and his black servant dine.

Poised on the borderline of old and new worlds, such novels suggest much about the struggle early colonial writers faced in finding a local and useful mode of expression to speak their place. They also reveal the prejudices which framed the way many colonists saw the new world. Even the

concept of Australia as a “new” world is offensively European in its understanding, ignoring as it does the long and extraordinarily rich Aboriginal cultures which preceded European settlement.

The Gothic, however, may well have played a part in the process which reversed such views. For Marcus Clarke (1846–81), the Gothic was a way to invest Australia with a living history, by turning to detailed research on transportation and convict conditions, stories of cannibalism and rape, betrayal and suffering, as a way to frame his story of hardship and redemption enacted in an Australian landscape (as he does, for example, in his best-known work *His Natural Life*, first serialised in 1870). Even before this Clarke had described Australia in terms which invoke a Gothic sensibility. In a famous preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon’s *Poems*, Clarke said of his “fantastic land of monstrosities” that in it “alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write”.

Clarke’s juvenilia reflects a preoccupation with the Gothic, including a collaboration with Gerard Manly Hopkins on an illustrated text called *Prometheus*, about a young medical student who animates a lifeless corpse. Clarke’s fascination with the sensational continued to manifest itself in poems and stories with grotesque or ghostly qualities, reminiscent of Coleridge and Poe, and is most pronounced in his *The Mystery of Major Molineux and Human Repetends* (1881) and in *Sensational Tales* (1886). But it is his classic text, *His Natural Life*, which best articulates his belief that Australian history could be the subject of serious literary treatment and which began to shape a specifically Australian form of the Gothic mode, one which is predicated on the darkness and anxiety specific to the Australian experience.

That the public was slow to embrace this work suggests how reluctant many were to accept that their own history was legitimate subject matter. Many more no doubt felt that this was inappropriate material upon which to base a country’s mythology. The “stain” of convictism, it seemed, was not far enough removed. Unlike Walpole, who could invoke antiquity, or Radcliffe who could project evil “elsewhere” — usually France or Italy — the stuff of Australian Gothic implicated the living. The controversial publisher P.R. “Inky” Stephensen (1901–65) for one felt that writing should steer clear of convict subject matter since it bought into British prejudices about Australia’s origins. Despite this, convictism was standard subject matter for Gothicists, from Caroline Leakey’s *The Broad Arrow* (1859) to “Price Warung’s” *Tales of the Convict System*

(1892) and William Gosse Hay's *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans* (1919). It is a fetishising which has continued to the present day, including in Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787–1868* (1987), a work of non-fiction which has been criticised in many quarters for its Gothic “gorification” of convict hardships.

For Barbara Baynton (1857–1929), the Gothic was a way to express not only a peculiarly Australian terror, but a specifically female fear as well. Her classic collection of short stories, *Bush Studies* (1902), delineated an entirely unromantic picture of the Australian bush. Though it may seem oxymoronic, Baynton's Gothic is intensely realist in method, describing with great detail the specificities of outback life — the arid and desolate land, the dangerous vagrants, the women besieged by nature and by men. Her stories comment on male betrayal (“Squeaker's Mate”), race (“Billy Skywonkie”) and male violence (“The Chosen Vessel”). Though at times melodramatic, her work makes clear that the Gothic need not be escapist, excessive or frivolous.

Many of Henry Lawson's (1867–1922) stories work in a similar fashion, refusing to romanticise rural existence. Though his oeuvre is not Gothic *per se*, those stories which convey the greatest sense of dread sketch the terrible loneliness and poverty of life in the Australian bush (“A Child in the Dark, and a Foreign Father”), the dangers of the everyday (“The Drover's Wife”), or the way people are either driven mad by the sere existence, or haunted by the land itself (“Rats” and “The Bush Undertaker”). In the latter an old man disinters an Aboriginal grave and then stumbles onto the body of a dead friend — “dried to a mummy” — and carries it home to be buried. The story is susceptible to an interesting reading of the way the Australian landscape must be stripped of its Aboriginal presence if room is to be made for its colonisers. Indeed the old man is “haunted” by a goanna after robbing the Aboriginal grave, and he is forced to kill the totemic creature before he can bury his friend. In a phrase which recalls Marcus Clarke's, the story ends, “And the sun sank again on the grand Australian bush — the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird, and of much that is different from things in other lands”.

If the Gothic proved popular as a mode for Australian fiction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it experienced a lull until the 1970s, though extraordinary examples did emerge in the intervening decades such as Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) and Hal

Porter's *Short Stories* (1940). Other notably dark tales include Kenneth Cook's terrifying account of a young teacher's experience in a country town, *Wake in Fright* (1961), a first novel which modernised Baynton's merciless renderings of outback life. Joan Lindsay's (1896–1984) curious *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) managed to make the genteel world of a Melbourne ladies' college both sinister and mysterious in a novel which told of the disappearance of school girls during a Saint Valentine's Day picnic in 1900. Both Thomas Keneally and Frank Moorhouse would produce novels and short story collections where the Gothic would hover always at the edges — for Keneally in novels such as *The Fear* (1965) and the controversial *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972); for Moorhouse, with a species of erotic-Gothic in *Tales of Mystery and Romance* (1977) and in *The Everlasting Secret Family and Other Secrets* (1980).

Perhaps the most portentous presence on the literary landscape was Nobel Prize winner Patrick White, who developed his own brand of Gothic, one which blended a metaphysical with a scatological darkness, and a scathing language which attacked what he considered to be Australia's "dun-coloured realism". For White, Australia was provincial in all the worst ways, and his sprawling, at times even hateful, fictions, mercilessly exposed the ridiculous, the self-important, and the banal. In doing so, White also re-wrote the possibilities for Australian fiction, creating, like William Faulkner, his own language of revelation and analysis, one which proved that the suburbs could be just as chilling as the outback (though he addressed the latter in novels such as *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*).

White abhorred pomposity in all its guises and responded to such artificiality with ridicule of the cruellest order. Mrs Hunter, in *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), dies on the commode, with base puns aplenty; in *The Vivisector* (1970), Hurtle Duffield sits on an "out dunny" meditating on the importance of art while thinking of shit and sperm, a scene which is only surpassed by his hunchback sister's efforts at stirring liquid manure in the back yard. White's characters are eaten by their dogs, beheaded, crucified; they are cannibals, transvestites, saints and idiots. In short, his world maps a psychologically Gothic terrain which is also extraordinarily physical. It is also relentlessly, though not necessarily lovingly, Australian.

The 1970s saw the emergence of a new range of voices, including those of Peter Carey and Louis Nowra. Carey's *The Fat Man in History* (1974) is filled with terrifying stories, part science

fiction, part thriller, part horror tale — stories which expose the darker side of the human condition and which comment on a range of issues including the insidiousness of American imperialism. His bleakest novel, *The Tax Inspector* (1991) explores the world of child abuse; *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) is narrated by a three-foot-six “monster”, with a rag-doll mouth, shrivelled legs and unusual eyes which raise a shudder in all who see him.

Louis Nowra’s plays *Albert Names Edward* (1975) and *Inner Voices* (1977) marked the beginning of a series of psychological explorations of the darkness which governs human interactions. Nowra would go on to write two comically bleak novels, *The Misery of Beauty* (1976) and *Palu* (1987), which focus on hybrid characters who straddle several world views, languages or attitudes, unable ever to resolve their crises of being.

Where the Gothic literature of the 1960s and ’70s may have been dominated by male writers, the 1980s saw the emergence of major women writers who would turn to the Gothic mode to question not only the mores of Australian society, but also to comment on and condemn Patriarchal values. Indeed, the Gothic has proved resilient and flexible, and as appealing to post-colonial writers as it was for their predecessors in articulating the tensions and problems of their community. Barbara Hanrahan and Kate Grenville, for example, have produced dark urban stories which celebrate damaged but vibrant heroines, victims of abuse who nevertheless rise above adversity to move triumphantly forward. Gothic texts have been produced by Janette Turner Hospital — *The Last Magician* (1992) and *Oyster* (1996) — Glenda Adams — *The Tempest of Clemenza* (1996) — and Gabrielle Lord — *Fortress* (1980) and *Tooth and Claw* (1983). And one of the most delightful parodies of Australian Gothic was written by Coral Lansbury in *Ringarra: A Gothic Novel* (1985).

Another prolific author in this vein is Elizabeth Jolley, whose novels have championed a voice for feminist Gothic in Australia. Quirky, eerie, even domestic in a perverse way, Jolley challenges the notion of the traditional “heroine” of Gothic fiction, producing a long line of aged and frequently crippled figures whose selfish, at times even nasty dispositions, make them at once extremely human, and oddly endearing. In novels such as *Milk and Honey* (1984) and *The Well* (1986) she re-views the familiar Australian landscape, making it uncanny through her skewed and comically perverse observations. In much of her work Jolley uses a Gothic mode to explore women’s sexuality, concentrating on how the female body is made abject by patriarchy. Her

strangely erotic texts deliberately “pervert” the orthodox, suggesting new possibilities for female expression, even though she is careful to define the price which is exacted for such transgressions.

Just as earlier migrants — Marcus Clarke, for example — saw the Gothic’s potential for subversion, so many contemporary migrant writers have used it to speak their sense of exclusion and dislocation, as well as to comment on the condition of disjunction produced in a country which devalues non-Anglo-Celtic experience. For writers like Rosa Cappiello and Ania Walwicz, the Gothic manifests itself in their work as a type of scatological and linguistic excess. Rosa Cappiello’s *Oh Lucky Country* offers an extended catalogue of vaginal diseases, or proclaims at length on micturition, introducing alternate though undeniable “realities” into the dominant, antiseptic, discourse of White Australia. Ania Walwicz’s prose/poetry is written in a frenetic non-standard English which flouts grammatical orthodoxy and troubles the categories of genre. Walwicz gothicises a basic experience — such as the bursting of a pipe — to recreate the sheer terror which voicelessness can generate.

In Antigone Kefala’s *The Island*, the author *reverses* the characteristic positive perception of Anglo-Celtic restraint by highlighting the absurd dimension of such valued qualities. In one passage the narrator notes that Australian men can only show emotion while playing sport. At other times they are entirely inarticulate, trailing the iron chains of their Protestant up-bringing across “wet corridors in the semi-darkness of the stained glass windows and into the cafeteria where they stayed at the tables mute as statues”. East European migrants are traditionally represented as loud and excessive, and yet *simultaneously* as incomprehensible and inarticulate. They are, like the orientalisised Transylvanians of old, an inscrutable Gothic presence. Here Kefala uses stock Gothic iconography to reverse such prejudices.

If it is true that the Gothic has been useful for helping to establish a local Australian voice, it has also functioned as a silencing discourse for some, such as the Aboriginal people of Australia. It is not surprising that Aboriginal writers have tended not to use the Gothic mode since it has generally represented for them a disabling, rather than an enabling discourse. In obvious terms, the Aboriginal peoples were themselves constructed as the monstrous figures haunting the Australian landscape, spectres more frightening than any European demon, because they represented a

physical threat to settlers and to theories of enlightenment which believed in the civilising presence of Whites.

Charles Tompson's poem "Black Town" (1824), modelled on Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village", is an elegy written to lament the demise of a ten-year-old settlement which had been set up to "civilise" the Australian Aborigines — the children of the "lost empire" whose perceptions are clouded by "Superstition's mists". The Aborigines proved themselves unable to break "the Gothic chain" of their heritage by not embracing the ill-suited farming technology of the colonisers, and by rejecting their religious propaganda. In Charles Harpur's long Gothic poem, "The Creek of the Four Graves" (1853) the Aborigines are located as the evil darkness — "Hell's worst fiends" — who threaten White expansion. It is a representation that is repeated in numerous poems and novels.

Aborigines also posed a greater threat to the very fiction of *terra nullius*, the obscene construction in British law which made Australia "a land owned by no one", and therefore a place which could be claimed for the Crown (a conceit only recently overturned by the Australian High Court through the Native Title Act of 1993, more popularly known as the "Mabo" decision). The Aboriginal presence in itself unsettled — to use the full measure of the pun — the course of Empire. In that respect, then, Aborigines had to be obliterated or absorbed through assimilation policies. It is strange indeed, given the voraciousness of the European appetite, that it should be the Aborigines who were constructed as savage, monstrous and insatiable. In *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), Australia's most prolific Aboriginal writer, Mudrooroo, makes this very point. Indeed, he gothicises the notion of the invasion by referring to the British as *num* — literally *ghosts* which haunt Aboriginal land.

Tracey Moffat uses the Gothic mode to rewrite White Australian readings of Aboriginality in two of her films including her most recent feature-length *Bedevil* (a series of three loosely connected ghost stories). In some respects, Tracey Moffat's films can be read within the framework of resistance film making, resistance both to general types of racism, but also to white forms of representation. One of the objectives of her work is to interrogate the very *forms* of film making and representation — painting, film, song, genre — and to dislodge the traditional power which is vested in both the mode and the viewer. In *Night Cries* (1990) she expands on and re-

writes Charles Chauvel's 1955 film *Jedda*, a film about the dangers of assimilation. Moffat's *Night Cries* explores the horrific effects of assimilation, by centring on the main character Jedda, and on her adoptive white mother Sarah McMann, but set 40 years in the future.

The title is written in a traditional Gothic script which makes ironic the pointed subtitle: *A Rural Tragedy*. As with Patrick White's work, Moffat's films make clear how the everyday, the commonplace, can be the stuff of Gothic. The domestic — the sound of the music box that is fractured by the crack of a whip, the evening meal scraped across a plate by the fractured hand of an elderly woman — is truly Gothic. The set is deliberately artificial, there is no dialogue, and the soundtrack is harsh and grating. McMann is enfeebled and crippled, a metaphor for White culture perhaps; Jedda is middle aged, impatient in her role as caretaker, and yet devastated too when her adoptive mother dies. In a spare, uncompromising film, Moffat at once reverses the viewer's sense of the positive effects of assimilation, and brilliantly mis/uses the conventions of the Gothic to disorient and to make clear that the predatory monster — the Gothic terror — is white social policy.

Genre, of course, is comforting. It establishes order even in the midst of disorder. Genre speaks of a legacy, of a heritage, of certainty. Perhaps what is most exhilarating about the Gothic mode, and what has made it so enduring, is that unlike many other literary forms, it has been at its most exciting when least obeyed — which is ironic given that the mode is frequently dismissed for being formulaic. The history of the Gothic in Australia is the story of change and adaptation. Gothic fiction, after all, was not incorporated or exported wholesale. Rather, it was modified and grew to accommodate the climate, literary and otherwise. It is significant that Patrick White's "Australian Writer" suggests as much in *The Eye of the Storm* when he obliquely dismisses the romanticism of Stendhal to explain "how he was adapting the Gothic novel to local conditions". It is a modification which continues still.

*Gerry Turcotte
English Studies,
University of Wollongong, Australia*