Preface to the second edition

Much has changed since *Gothic Writing* was first published in 1993. During the 1980s, when this book was largely written, there did not seem to be a great deal of critical interest in the larger historical and theoretical questions posed by David Punter's seminal *The Literature of Terror*, a work which can be described, accurately I think, as the first properly cultural study of the Gothic.¹ *Gothic Writing* was an attempt to move the argument forward. Since its appearance, it has become clear that actually quite a few critics were mulling over the critical and cultural issues raised by Punter's book, as can be seen by the flood of recent monographs. 'Flood' is, of course, a loaded term, one that begs an important question: do these works reflect the ebb and flow of critical fashion, or do they constitute the stable beginnings of a new disciplinary area of critical work? In considering this question I have an obvious interest to declare, not least because, since the publication of *Gothic Writing*, I have become involved with *Gothic Studies*, a new journal launched on the premise that the Gothic does constitute a particularly fruitful, multi-disciplinary field of cultural investigation. My present sense of the field is that it is situated both at the margins and at the centre of 'English': at the margins, because the study of the Gothic is not primarily occupied with the best that has been thought and written, with those aesthetic concerns which constituted the canonisation on which traditional English studies were based; but at the centre, because it involves itself with those wider questions about the work of culture that have inspired much of what is innovative in English. Of course, there are many who would argue that English does not currently exhibit a centre or a margin – that it features, rather, dynamic flux, or terminal confusion, depending upon one's point of view. Whatever the case, it remains true to say that the best work in the Gothic has had to be methodologically inventive, as traditional disciplinary skills do not equip the critic with what he or she needs in

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order to secure a deeper purchase on the puzzling phenomenon we call the Gothic, the surprisingly stubborn and recurrent interest, best described, not simply as, say, the 'macabre', but as a vibrant dialect in the Western, cultural imagination.

All this by way of putting the re-publication of *Gothic Writing* into context. As our market research for *Gothic Studies* showed, the Gothic is now a common feature of university syllabuses throughout the English speaking world; Macmillan, Blackwells, Cambridge University Press, Manchester University Press, Routledge, the English Association and the MLA, have all published – or are in the process of so doing – support material, 'handbooks', for the study of the Gothic;² and amongst the 'flood', there have been a large number of excellent studies which have not just changed, but expanded the field. My assumption is that readers will want to know how *Gothic Writing* relates to this changed scene. The first purpose of this preface, then, is to sketch out how it does relate. Rather than a comprehensive description of the criticism that has appeared in the last seven years I shall restrict my references to those works having a bearing on the critical ground staked out by *Gothic Writing*, on what E. J. Clery and Maggie Kilgour have called (after Ian Watt) the 'rise' of the Gothic.³ An advantage of reviewing one's work retrospectively, in the context of a changing discipline, is that it provides an opportunity for observing issues, half-covered at the time, which have since been laid bare. I want to avail myself of this opportunity by pointing out some aspects of *Gothic Writing's* methodology which time has helped clarify. That is my second purpose; my third is to give a brief indication of the changes I have made to this new edition of *Gothic Writing*.

As Diane Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism* (1998), Anne Williams' *Art of Darkness* (1995), and E. J. Clery's *Gothic Women Writers* (2000) all demonstrate, feminist scholarship continues to make a significant contribution to the field of Gothic studies.⁴ But in terms of *Gothic Writing*, the relevant area of work has been the recent spate of historicist readings that have examined the emergence of the Gothic with a new particularity. E. J. Clery adopts a cultural materialist approach in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction* (1995); James Watt attempts to sketch out the generic and cultural heterogeneity of the literary-historical solecism we know as the 'Gothic novel' in *Contesting the Gothic* (1999); in *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction* (1999) Robert Mighall demonstrates how the Gothic's recurrent tropes were imbricated in the emerging disciplines of anthropology and medicine; Michael Gamer usefully reconsiders the important question of the relationship between the Gothic and Romanticism; in *Alien*

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Nation (1997) Cannon Schmitt initiates a discussion of the much overlooked issue of nationalism and the Gothic; while Jacqueline Howards *The Gothic Novel: A Bakhtinian Approach* (1994) complements what *Gothic Writing* has to say about the carnivalesque.⁵ What these studies have in common is a desire to catch the Gothic's contemporary inflections, thus placing Gothic works in their cultural and historical context. As such they largely turn their faces against the powerful Freudian paradigm of the unconscious, and 'uncanny', which had previously been so influential.⁶

The lament I made at the end of *Gothic Writing*, about the paucity of sophisticated literary histories of the Gothic, is no longer relevant. *Gothic Writing* was, it is now clear, part of a general reassessment of the Gothic. It shares the broadly historicist agenda of the works I have mentioned; but in at least one respect it remains, if only for the moment, unique: I refer to its Foucauldian methodology.⁷ While many of the critics mentioned above invoke Foucault – including Gamer, Hoeveler, Schmitt, and Mighall – none do so in a systematic fashion.⁸

What is the significance of this difference? I can best explain by referring to a point recently made by Clifford Siskin.⁹ According to Siskin, Roland Barthes' essay, the 'Death of the Author', has regularly been confused with Foucault's 'What is an Author?', with unfortunate results. Foucault's point is not the Barthesian one that making a fetish of the author forecloses on a text's possible meanings; it is that an analysis which is organized around the concept of the author produces very different results from one that focuses on, say, genre. Foucault is not saying that an author-centred analysis is not valid; but he is saying that it comes at the cost of the non-author-centred analyses one accordingly does not make. Although *Gothic Writing* gives a number of writers special prominence, it is not an author-centred study; it is, rather, discourse-centred.

It is because *Gothic Writing* is discourse-centred that one might think it unique within its particular field; for the same reason, one might also think it odd. When I wrote *Gothic Writing* a central question regarding the relationship between Foucault's body of thought and literature was not sufficiently clear to me; but neither was it, I believe, entirely clear to others. What is problematic about this relationship can be put in a deceptively simple question: is imaginative literature discursive? I can illustrate the force of this question by referring to a debate that occurred in the pages of *New Literary History* in 1995, between John Bender and Dorrit Cohn.¹⁰ The exchange was sparked off by Cohn's review of Bender's *Imagining the Penitentiary*, a systematically Foucauldian study of the interconnections between the

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eighteenth-century novel and penal discourses. Bender's basic argument was that free indirect discourse was discursive, not just in the linguistic, but also in the Foucauldian sense. Critics accept that free indirect discourse (or FID) emerges in the novel towards the end of the eighteenth century. Bender's argument turns on a congruence between FID and Jeremy Bentham's theory of the Panopticon, which Bentham imagined at around the same time as novelists developed FID. In the Panopticon, the prisoners believe they are alone, but are closely watched; enjoy the illusion of autonomy within their cell, but are secretly subject to surveillance. Just so with FID in the novel: characters appear to achieve autonomy through FID, but are in reality controlled by the consciousness that imagines them. Benders thesis is that this congruence between the discourse of carcerality, and the fictional technique, is discursive in the Foucauldian sense. That is, just as the way Bentham imagines the knowing of prisoners witnesses a conjunction of knowledge and power, so, too, do the modes in which novelists come to know their characters. Cohn, an expert in the traditional meanings of FID, objected on the grounds that the way a novelist knows his or her characters could not be discursive in a Foucauldian sense. Cohn's argument was that in Foucault's system, power had to obtain on the same 'ontological plane'; in other words, the relationships Foucault imagines between warder/prisoner; doctor/patient; lawyer/criminal are fundamentally different from those between a real entity (a novelist) and an imaginary one (the novelists character).¹¹ However, Bender is entitled to reply that FID is discursive in the sense that it reproduces a model of knowing present elsewhere in the culture, and that the reception of this model of knowing by the reader is not fundamentally different from, for instance, a woman reading a nineteenth-century treatise on hysteria, which Foucault clearly does see as a discursive act. Even so, Cohn does have a simple, powerful point: in the case of the warder and the prisoner, the flow of power is easy to chart. But how do you chart the flow of power when the same relationship between warder and prisoner is described in a novel, when it is depicted in a virtual space, rather than acted in a real one? And if one cannot chart the flow of power, a discursive methodology becomes of limited use; more to the point, the event one is describing, ceases to be, in any meaningful, Foucauldian sense, discursive. Hence the question: is imaginative literature discursive? Both Cohn and Bender agree that this was a question Foucault unfortunately left unanswered.

Gothic Writing constantly moves in and out of this problem. On the one hand it assembles materials which are straightforwardly

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discursive in Foucauldian terms, on genius, sublimity, national origins, and so on; but on the other it focuses on how these materials fare in fiction's virtual spaces. *Gothic Writing* employs a variety of terms to indicate the unpredictable flow of power in these imaginary domains: 'on edge'; 'turn'; 'transgress'; 'subvert'; 'belated'; and 'the carnivalesque'. I also use the phrase 'crossed with discourse' to indicate that a textual segment partakes both of the purely discursive, and the discursive within the frame of fiction. Hence, too, the tension between what I called the 'Gothic aesthetic' (basically, the discursive construction of an idealised Gothic-ness) and its textual expressions, where it tended to unravel. My point was not that Gothic writing was 'subversive', in the usual meaning of that phrase, but that the accustomed vectors of power that obtained in discursive acts occurring on the same 'ontological plane' outside the text, frequently exhibited symptoms of reversal within it. The final vision of Gothic writing that emerged from the book was that it was a multi-generic occasion whereby the discursive construction of the human subject was imaginatively disassembled, re-assembled, and generally re-figured.

Gothic Writing, then, stands both with, and against, the historicist readings that have come to dominate the field over the last seven years: 'with', because it too endeavours to be more precise about the Gothic's historic inflections; 'against', because of its militant eschewal of the biographical, of the kind of analysis that arises out of a consideration of the text's authorial origins (and in this respect against even much of my own later work). I am not saying that the historicist readings I have mentioned were tightly author-centred; I mean rather that they engage in the kind of materialist approach where the 'facts' of the historical record – including the record of the author's life – are material to interpretation. *Gothic Writing* rigorously excludes consideration of the author-function from its field of operations. To recur back to Clifford Siskin's comments on Barthes and Foucault, the point is not that one way is inherently superior to another; nor even that both are valid; but that in remaining author-centred we sacrifice the possibility of other kinds of interpretation that may (or may not) tell us important things about our culture, including, perhaps, why the pull of the author-function remains so powerful within it.

In preparing *Gothic Writing* for its second edition I have resisted the temptation to tamper unduly, and have let the book remain true to itself as a Foucauldian exploration of the Gothic. I have made a few minor alterations, the most substantial of which has been the removal of numerous quotation marks, especially around such terms as

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'ideology', 'popular literature', 'nation', 'nature'. In a discursive approach, the historical shadings of meaning are highly significant; indeed, for the Foucauldian, all words may be said to carry imaginary quotation marks with them, signifying that present meanings cannot be taken for granted, and that in each locution, a substantive history may be at issue. In the first edition, I tried instinctively (certainly not consciously) to signal this through the liberal use of quotation marks – as I now see, a quixotic, and distracting, tic. In the second edition I have restricted quotation marks to actual quotations; to 'signifiera' (where such indications are appropriate); or to occasions where the semantic history is particularly problematic. The next most substantial change was the alteration of a few sentences on the *Mysteries of Udolpho* which were not as precise as they needed to be. I have left the rest unaltered, apart from the odd word which I have changed for the sake of greater clarity.

Robert Miles