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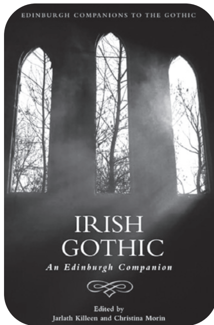

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THE LIVES AND AFTERLIVES OF IRISH GOTHIC

Since W. J. McCormack's trendsetting inquiry, in the early 1990s, into the paradoxes posed by the notion of a periodised canon of Irish Gothic writing, the idea that in Ireland a derivative or epigonic *tradition* of (Protestant) Gothic shadowed, in doppelgänger fashion, the first line of English Gothic descended from Horace Walpole's 1764 urtext has been nuanced and expanded, over the past three decades, into a discussion on a *mode* of Gothicity that does not so much bend, "in a fugitive and discontinuous manner,"[1] its established dispositif to accommodate specifically Irish socio-political concerns, as it fashions a distinctly inflected aesthetic that both reflects and resists nation-bound constructs. Jarlath Killeen and Christina Morin, leading scholars in the field of Irish Gothic studies and editors of the 2023 *Edinburgh Companion* that is the object of this review, show in their introduction to this collection that the partly published, partly archival literary corpus opening up for investigation today is much vaster than what McCormack believed to be a chiefly nineteenth-century "slender"[2] body of works authored by writers situated on the side of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in Ireland, from Regina Maria Roche, Sydney Owenson, and Charles Robert Maturin, to Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker.

While McCormack allowed for the possibility that the spectre of Irish Gothic had lingered in the writings of modernists W. B. Yeats and Elizabeth Bowen, Killeen and Morin propose a hauntological,[3] I would say, mode of reception for a literary phenomenon that tended to be understood as peripheral in the geocultural sense of a

"fringe," Celtic regional register positioned, as Declan Kiberd might say, "parabolically" in relation to England's more visible tradition.[4] If, as Killeen argues in his 2014 survey of *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction,* "the Gothic as a genre often behaves rather like the ghosts and phantoms that populate many of its canonical texts,"[5] it becomes the scholar's task to mind the symbolic debt owed to those spectral precedents – what Killeen sums up as "'proto-Gothic' genres and modes: martyrologies and horrific histories, anti-Catholic scatology, the sublime, antiquarianism, Graveyard Poetry"[6] – and acknowledge their significance for a much longer history of not just Irish Gothic,[7] but of English or, rather, European Gothic literature in general.[8] Holding a magnifying glass onto the fuzzy beginnings of Irish Gothic fiction may risk multiplying the plethora of precursor texts laying claim to chronological primacy, but it is an imperative, restitutive gesture nonetheless, not least because, as Killeen amply shows in his 2014 study, Irish Anglican writer Thomas Leland's *Longsword* (1762) antedated both Walpole's Gothic *Castle of Otranto* and Walter Scott's historical fictions.[9] As Christina Morin also demonstrates in her research on *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* (2018), this "overlap of fictional modes"[10] has the potential to unsettle caked concepts that the Gothic lost traction, in the late eighteenth century, having been sidetracked by the dilating panache of the realist historical novel.[11]

The chronology of Irish Gothic can, therefore, be extended not only backwards, to incorporate predecessor forms that reached provisional generic stability in the latter part of the eighteenth century,[12] but also forwards, well into the twenty-first century, as the *Edinburgh Companion* edited by Killeen and Morin proposes. Even though the architectonics of this volume rests, to some extent, on the more conservative scaffold of periodicity, with the first section being devoted to instantiations of the Gothic in the Irish prose and poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the criteria by which the remaining three sections seek to capture the versatility and heterogeneity of Irish Gothic range from considerations on its generic fluidity and mutability, or its political reactivity to questions of gender, to a much needed reflection on the mesh of theological and confessional purviews such writings bear witness to. Overall, there is a marked shift in the editors' approach to the muddled temporalities of Irish Gothic, as the introductory descent into its genealogies is carried out from the vantage point of a present post-Celtic Tiger moment that is rife with resurgences of Gothicity. Even though the chapters perhaps do not expand sufficiently on more established contemporary authors of Gothic fiction like John Banville, Claire Keegan, Seamus Deane and Patrick McCabe, there is a commendable alertness to a vigorously growing interest in Gothic tropes, moods and strategies of narrativity in the post-millennial works of novelists Joseph O'Connor, Dacre Stoker, Neil Jordan, Tana French, and Elizabeth Kostova, to name just a few. Informing some of the studies in this collection, this transhistorical engagement with the literary, cinematic, radio, or social media life and afterlife of the Gothic in Ireland is seconded by a realisation that what used to be regarded as the "literary expression of a peculiarly national form of divided subjectivity" is now "enduringly lodged in a transnational cultural consciousness."[13]

This new direction is visibly at work in the two studies included in the first part of

the companion, in which Christina Morin and Julia M. Wright retrieve "significant bodies of Irish Gothic"[14] fiction and, respectively, poetry from the oblivion to which they would have been consigned through conventional canonisation processes. By focusing on a swarm of Gothic romances published by the prominent yet infamous Minerva and other presses from the 1790s onwards, Morin brings to light how this "effulgent" set of novels produced by Regina Maria Roche, F. C. Patrick, Anna Milliken, or Anna Maria Mackenzie exceeded the canonical margins to which they were confined. In addition, Morin says, these were not feeble replications of a genre validated by metropolitan "revolutionary" writers like Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis, but exhibited a degree of self-reflexiveness and narrative complexity, as well as a fascinating dialogism and meta-, para- and intertextual experimentalism that stand as clear proof of their connection to the "lively culture of debate and exchange in which Irish writers engaged with contemporary discourse about authorship and literary value while also reflecting on issues such as the relationship between history and fiction, female education and national identity."[15] A less expected, because previously un-attempted undertaking – one might venture to think – is Julia M. Wright's interrogation into the non-existence of a "canon of Irish Gothic poetry."[16] Scholars reluctant to accept that some of the poems penned by Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Browning and Tennyson may be read as Gothic works might have difficulty reshuffling their historical bearings to look at Thomas Gray's graveyard poetry not as a precursor but as a "founding work of English Gothic,"[17] but Wright's view is actually consistent with the companion's transhistorical tenet of addressing the Gothic in its many permutations and transformations that volatilise rigid chronologies and, indeed, do justice to a mode that is mutable, versatile, cross-generic. Wright problematises the stereotype of a mimetic belatedness of the Irish poets William Drennan, James Orr, and Thomas Dermody in relation to Gray's elegiac lyrics and discusses, in convincing terms, a set of Irish tropes, from folklore superstition to the famine or carceral experiences, that are threaded through these innovative Gothic stances on death.[18]

The second part of this companion carries through this insightful discussion on the multi-generic forms that pave the way for Irish Gothic or are entangled in its prodigious generation of new strands in theatre, cinema, children's books, literature written in the Irish language, and environmentalist fiction. Christopher Morash opens this section with an examination of the "mercurial mode" of Irish drama,[19] which permits a simultaneous look at "three distinct iterations of the Gothic"[20] that have mingled concerns with life-in-death, torn temporality, and narrative excess: Marina Carr's 1990 *By the Bog of Cats…*, as an example of "in-yer-face" theatre, W. B. Yeats's 1938 *Purgatory*, as a sample of late modernist drama, and Charles Robert Maturin's 1816 *Bertram,* as a Romantic play. This analysis pushes for a thought-provoking correlation between the intense presentness of the dramatic performance and the way in which the historical present and past are crumpled in the "persistent trans-historical core of Gothic theatre – not least of Irish Gothic theatre," as Morash says.[21] Starting from a very precise definition of the key traits shared by

Gothic cultural forms, "the presence of the uncanny and the immanence of menace,"[22] Michael Patrick Gillespie's exploration of Irish films – from Mary McGuckian's *Words upon the Window Pane* (1994), Neil Jordan's adaptation of *The Butcher Boy* (1997), Rebecca Daly's *The Other Side of Sleep* (2011), and Lee Cronin's *The Hole in the Ground* (2019), to Ivan Kavanagh's *Tin Can Man* (2007), Aisling Walsh's *The Daisy Chain* (2008) and Margaret Corkery's *Eamon* (2009) – outlines a paroxysmal disintegration of individual and societal cohesiveness to the point where "Gothic cinema moves to embrace entropy to become anational."[23] This, Gillespie suggests, makes it possible to align these recent productions and their transnational focus on disrupted verities and shattered ontologies with European expressionist masterpieces such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). The body of artefacts regimented under the moniker "Irish Gothic" continues to be enhanced in the next study, in which Anne Markey diagrams the different uses of Gothic tropes – from enchantment to disciplining, or from terrifying to enlightening – in the literature written for children by several "authors with Irish backgrounds" from the late eighteenth to the twenty-first century: Mary Wollstonecraft, Lady Mount Cashell, Peter O'Leary and Claire Henessy.[24] Eóin Flannery's detects an environmentalist ethics and a stifled eco-politics in the writings of James Clarence Mangan and Eugene McCabe – with substantial incursions into the fungible landscapes of terror drawn by Yeats, J. G. Farrell, Elizabeth Bowen, and Claire Kilroy – and details the irredeemable "horrors of barrenness"[25] associated with the history of the Irish famines and the ghosted topographies of the Celtic Tiger economy.

While the second section ends with Jack Fennell's discussion on what used to be seen as the subversive permeation of Irish-language works by imported Gothic conventions but is increasingly recognised as the openness of contemporary Irish fiction to experiment with "Gothic as a king of linguistic set-dressing […] in which transnational genres are appropriated and made local,"[26] the third part revisits superseded assessments of the Gothic as a cultural arsenal that reinforces the Protestant-Catholic divide. Alison Milbank's excellent inquiry into the (inter)confessional exchanges housed in narratives authored by Protestant novelists Leland, Roche, Riddell, Edgeworth, Owenson, Maturin, Le Fanu, Stoker, and Bowen leads to the identification of an "ecumenical impulse" that underpins a "double gesture of repudiation and the parallel desire to recover a true link to the religious past,"[27] yet it is ultimately quite tempting to remark that it may also be the ecumenicity of the present moment that imparts a conciliatory view on past contestations, disputes and conflicts, to the extent that it becomes almost inevitable to see "reaching out through tropes of shared terror a hand of tentative friendship across denominational divides."[28] Jarlath Killeen's study on *Dracula* legitimises the Irishness of one of the quintessential Gothic narratives of all time first and foremost by revisiting the archival sources Stoker most likely consulted for his portrayal of the Transylvanian prince – for instance, John Foxe's anti-Catholic tract *Acts and Monuments* (1563), a "cherished text in many Irish Anglican households in the nineteenth century,"[29] and Lady Wilde's *Ancient*

Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland (1887). Killeen taps into the unavoidably Irish implications of the supernatural threat posed by the vampire in late Victorian society.[30] In a brilliantly articulated demonstration, the researcher sheds light on the possibility that the spectre of death haunting the vampire narrative stems not only from a collectively experienced trauma of the famine and spirituality crisis, but also from Stoker's individual concern with the "contagionism and miasmatism" that provided the theoretical backbone of Victorian thoughts on the propagation of plagues and diseases: "This wider context of a threatened loss of meaning and existential security," Killeen says, "in which debates about theodicy, natural disaster and providentialism shaped the public understanding of the crisis of faith, helps to clarify the ways in which Stoker's Irish life contributes to the novel."[31] Probing into some of the many elisions operated by accounts of an all-exclusive Protestant deployment of the Gothic, Sinéad Sturgeon outlines the transubstantiations generic conventions underwent in texts of a Catholic-oriented strand of Irish Gothic, which comprises, among others, the poems of Thomas Furlong, James Clarence Mangam, or John Banim.

The section with which this companion ends widens the focus of analysis by foregrounding the need for a gendered supplementation of the by now fluidified canon of Irish Gothic. The first of the three studies included here is written by Melissa Edmundson, who sheds light on the implications of the significant recourse to the otherworldly realm of mythology, legendry, and superstition in the texts of writers like Rosa Mulholland, Charlotte Riddell and Katharine Tynan, as well as on the possibility that the covert intent of this fascination with the macabre is to document the domestic "horrors of everyday life."[32] While in the last study, Sorcha de Brún highlights the aural spectrality and vulnerability of masculinity constructs in literary, cinematic and radio productions,[33] Ellen Scheible's discussion of physical trauma in the contemporary novels of Tana French, Emma Donoghue, and Sally Rooney unveils the realisation that "the Irish woman's body" maps "a loss inherent to present-day life that is no longer associated with colonial violence or the trenches of war but, instead, with financial decline and disaster."[34]

Releasing Irish Gothic, in its manifold senses as a tradition, a genre or a mode, from obsolete charges of peripheralism, the *Edinburgh Companion* edited by Killeen and Morin will prove very useful to students and scholars wishing to uncover the obstinate endurance of the aesthetic of pleasurable fear in Irish culture. Moving past psychologising or allegorising readings of trauma and divisiveness that prevailed in twentieth-century scholarship, the studies included in this collection are bound to broaden the scholarly ambit through inaugural engagements with "the new bibliographic (re)discoveries of the past ten to twenty years"[35] and will very likely breathe additional life into what is now a very fertile research field.

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Notes

1. W. J. McCormack, "Irish Gothic and After (1820-1945," in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. II, edited by Seamus Deane, Derry, Field Day Publications, 1991, p. 831. The perspective on Gothicity as a *mode* that seeps through other aesthetic formations – what McCormack calls Gothic's "promiscuous" entanglement with "other literary subgenres" (p. 833) – is endorsed by Richard Haslam in "Irish Gothic," in Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, London and New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 83-94.

2. McCormack, *op. cit.,* p. 833.

3. Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York and London, Routledge, 1994, p. 9. The title of Killeen and Morin's introduction, "Exorcising the Dead, Summoning the Living," conveys a Derridean perspective on the ways in which not only do key canonical Irish Gothic texts of the past continue to abide in the present, issuing forth, as the editors say, "countless adaptations, translations, new media treatments and material culture derivations," but they also muster a genealogical retracing of the diffuse generic forms that predated the development of a Gothic aesthetic in the Irish novel, in Jarlath Killeen and Christina Morin (eds.), *Irish Gothic. An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, p. 2. Given the spatial limitations of this review, references to the chapters of this companion, which is listed in the Bibliography, will be given in the endnotes.

4. Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 217.

5. Jarlath Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction. History, Origins, Theories*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 18.

6. Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction*, p. 174.

7. Killeen pushes the narrative of Irish Gothic beginnings further back into the past, locating, in the intense political turbulence of the mid-seventeenth century rebellion, the roots of a rhetoric of violence that subsequently corrals representations of Ireland in the Gothic writings of Anglican authors, in *Gothic Ireland. Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century,* Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 12.

8. As Morin and Gillespie imply in their introduction to *Irish Gothics. Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions, 1760-1890*, Houndmills, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, p. 10.

9. Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction*, pp. 171-182.
10. Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760-1829*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, p. 27.
11. An opinion expressed, among others, by McCormack, *op. cit.*, p. 831.
12. Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction*, p. 16.
13. Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 17.
15. Christina Morin, "'Quitting the Plain and Useful Path of History and Fact': Early Irish Gothic and the Literary Marketplace," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
16. Julia M. Wright, "'How Mute Their Tongues': Irish Gothic Poetry in the Nineteenth Century," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
17. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
18. *Ibidem*, pp. 58-59.
19. Christopher Morash, "'A Dead, Living, Murdered Man': Staging the Irish Gothic," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
20. *Ibidem,* pp. 66-67.
21. *Ibidem,* p. 79.
22. Michael Patrick Gillespie, "Gothic Forms in Irish Cinema," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
23. *Ibidem,* p. 84.
24. Anne Markey, "Gothic Fiction and Irish Children's Literature," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
25. Eóin Flannery, "Irish Ecogothic," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
26. Jack Fennell, "Gothic Fiction in the Irish Language," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
27. Alison Milbank, "Protestant Gothic," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 157.
28. *Ibidem,* p. 171.
29. Jarlath Killeen, "Bram Stoker, *Dracula* and the Irish Dimension," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 176.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 182.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 187.
32. Melissa Edmundson, "Irish Women Writers and the Supernatural," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 227.
33. Sorcha de Brún, "Foreign Bodies, Irish Voices: Gothic Masculinities in Irish Literature, Film and Radio Drama," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
34. Ellen Scheible, "Reflection, Anxiety and the Feminised Body: Contemporary Irish Gothic," in Killeen and Morin, *op. cit.*, p. 233.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 4.