Gothic and the Graveyard

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Ways of memorialising the dead have changed over the centuries, yet reflection on death, both of oneself and others, is a constant preoccupation. Often, this takes place at a graveside, where the presence of the memorial stone and the proximity of the corpse, juxtaposed with the unchanging and tranquil setting, elevate the mind to consider the eternal and sublime.[1] Such a scene is offered by the most famous 'graveyard' poem, Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' (c. 1745-50), which offers just such a combination, causing the poem to serve as a memorial to the poet as well as a memento mori for the reader. In Gray's poem corpses receive little mention, though they are implicitly at the heart of the poem; earlier poems such as Robert Blair's 'The Grave' (1743) and Edward Young's 'The Complaint, or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality' (1742) are more explicit concerning the fate of the body, contrasting it with the onward journey of the soul. Though the reflections the poets offer could occur elsewhere, location is crucial since the presence of the bodies of the dead reinforces the moral dimension of the work, a key element of graveyard poetry.

'Graveyard poetry' is a difficult label to use: while books on eighteenth-century poetry tend to list a few poets (always including Gray, Blair, Young and Thomas Parnell) and describe the features of graveyard poetry in the late eighteenth century, such definitions are of course problematic. This was certainly not a 'movement', though it might be described as a 'school', but even this suggests more coherence than the poets and poetry deserve, though as Mary Ellen Snodgrass points out, the 'graveyard poets' produce a 'recognizable canon' (2005: 161). More fruitfully, Eric Parisot offers a detailed taxonomy of the graveyard mode, suggesting that it is 'most productive to view eighteenth-century graveyard poetry as the culmination of a number of literary precedents', from *Hamlet* to Milton's 'Il Penseroso',

taking in funeral sermons and devotional literature on the way (2013: 2). Significantly, Parisot also offers a definition of graveyard poetry, in which 'Night, solitude and self-examination are […] key tropes […], but it is the accretion of these tropes into a specific consideration of death and mortality that is the essential characteristic of this poetic mode' (2013: 15). This characterisation of the mode is particularly significant given the dearth of criticism on the 'school' of the graveyard.

The concept that Gothic literature was influenced by graveyard poetry is entertained briefly by David Punter and Glennis Byron: '[I]t is also important to notice that as early as the 1740s we can trace the development of a form of poetry which was radically different from anything Pope advocated, and which came to be called "graveyard poetry". Graveyard poetry is significant here because it prefigures the Gothic novel in several ways and its emergence was sudden and dramatic' (2004: 10). Similarly, Andrew Smith mentions this concept, suggesting that the graveyard poets 'made a significant contribution to developing a Gothic ambience (by dwelling on feelings of loss), and provided an investigation into life and death that constituted peculiarly Gothic metaphysic' (2004: 52). Such discussions of graveyard poetry in relation to Gothic tend to be fleeting, however. This chapter will offer a brief exploration of the aesthetics and metaphysics which both forms share, and examine ways in which death is refigured from a warning to the living into a horror-fiction.

Derrida writes of the 'gift' of death in Western philosophy, arguing that the traditional theology of Christianity presents death as a gift to the living, both in the sense of the sacrifice of Christ so often commemorated on tombstones: 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live' (John 11:25), and in the way that this sense of an ending offers meaning to life by emphasising the individual's inescapable fate. With an emphasis on the mysticism inherent in human understanding of death, Derrida binds together the threads of the past (our historical understanding of death, which he

problematises), a present in which we must face our own death and take responsibility for it, and the unknowable future, the 'new experience of death' (1996: 6). One of Derrida's concerns is the self and its unique identity: the soul, the body:

> The sameness of the self, what remains irreplaceable in dying, only becomes what it is, in the sense of an identity as a relation of the self to itself, by means of this idea of mortality as irreplaceability. (1996: 45)

Derrida's arguments centre on the construction of the self, and what death as an event can mean to the living. His focus on selfhood in relation to death suggests that poets such as those of the graveyard school can be read as finding meaning in life, and a way of depicting their mortality (and ensuring their immortality) through death. Parisot posits that this self-awareness combines with the 'poetic methodology' of graveyard poetry to offer 'a particular aesthetic manoeuvre as a symptom of religious/poetic crisis', 'seek[ing] death and the dead as a source of poetic revelation' (2013: 81).

The locus of death, then – made concrete by its literal siting in the graveyard – provides a focal point where the poetic and the constructed self meet, uniting the rational and the sublime in contemplating the terrible and unknowable, and replacing the pre-Reformation prayers for the dead with contemplation of the hereafter. Familiar memento mori, including grave markers, depict the passing of time as life's enemy, but time is also crucial to the graveyard poet's conception of death. Taking Gray's 'Elegy' as an example, the poet, situated in the graveyard, looks outward to the world around him, and opens with an indication of the present time: 'The curfew tolls the knell of parting day' (l. 1), indicating both time, death and a sense of loss in the lexicon. With a subtle shift, the poem moves backwards in time to remember those who have died and are buried around the speaker, recalling small domestic details such as the 'blazing hearth' (l. 21) and the children welcoming home their returning father. This backward gaze is not only sentimental, though: it is absorbed in the aesthetics of

the poem, in the ‘ivy-mantled tower’ and the ‘yew-tree’s shade’ (ll. 9, 13). The concentration on the appearance of the graveyard is irretrievably mingled with the construction of historical pasts, both real and imagined, such as the ‘village-Hampden’ and ‘mute inglorious Milton’ (ll. 57, 59). The past, for Gray and others, is a way of re-imagining the future: of considering our own eventual fate, and the purpose of life, by considering those who have been forgotten. Only among the graves of the dead can we learn what our own future will be. The future is not uncertain, then, but clear:

> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave,
> Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave. (ll. 33-6)

The closing stanzas of the poem consolidate this moral, by shifting from the unnamed, unknown dead, to ‘thee’ (l. 93), who will one day join them. This is the future to which the poem looks, though unlike many others of its time it does not anticipate to the joys of Heaven until the very last line when the dead may rest in ‘The bosom of his Father and his God.’ (l. 128)

The preoccupation with the past as a way of enlightening and envisaging the future is one which is familiar from the Gothic novel. It is a truism of the genre that history, particularly a form of romanticised medieval past, provides a staple trope to which novelists from Walpole onward persistently return. Yet in, for example, Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), the distance in time and place allow Lewis to be extremely critical of rigid religious practices, an approach which cannot have escaped his readers. Ann Radcliffe’s novels, though set contemporaneously, are steeped in the past and in antiquated beliefs and behaviours, which permit her heroines a certain freedom of behaviour which can be read as subversive. The past, then, is a way of reading the present, and one which links Gothic to the

graveyard with a methodological approach. Moreover, as Clive Bloom points out, 'Its [Gothic] obsession is with death' (2010: 64). Exploring the past unavoidably confronts the dead, the processes of dying, and the future which may await us after death, subjects for theological and social debate. Early in the nineteenth century, William Godwin in his 'Essay on Sepulchres' (1809) explores methods of memorialising the dead, pointing out both the uselessness of the corpse and the contrasting desire of the living that their bodies be treated with respect. He explains that 'The dead body of a man, is reserved by the system of the universe to be the great example to us, of the degradation of our nature, and the humility of our origin.' (1993: 9-10)

The physical disintegration of the body and the trepidation of what awaits the soul is a preoccupation which is represented metaphorically in the first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Here, a gigantic helmet appears, killing the heir to Otranto. While the events of the story unfold concerning the future of the lineage of the ruling family, other parts of a giant knight are seen, including a foot and a sabre. While these supernatural manifestations are ludicrous, frightening the servants, they have a logical conclusion: they represent Alonso the Great, whose heir is the true lord of Otranto. Alonso is seen in his entirety in a portrait in the gallery and an effigy in the chapel: his body parts are thus reunited only in family history and in a place of worship. The metaphorical disintegration of the body of Alonso, representative of the literal decay of his body, serves to remind the living of his claim, since he was otherwise forgotten. The wholeness of the body in the church and gallery indicate the memorial that is lasting and more precious – that of lineage and of faith and eternal life – and remind the living that their immoral behaviour will ultimately fail them.

One of the earlier proponents of the graveyard school, Parnell's 'A Night-Piece on Death' was published after Parnell's death in 1722 by Alexander Pope. This poem is often

credited with inspiring later Gothic novelists,[2] although this connection is rarely explored in detail, but it is clear why it is significant. Oliver Goldsmith commented that 'The Night Piece on Death deserves every praise, and I should suppose, with very little amendment, might be made to surpass all those night pieces and church-yard scenes that have since appeared' (1854: vol. 4, 143-4). Reading the poem provides a curiously intertextual effect: it is clear that Parnell is looking back to earlier poetic precedents, perhaps seeing himself as an inheritor of the traditions of Milton and Spenser, whose inventiveness and style he praises in his 'Preface to the Essay on the Different Stiles of Poetry' (1713). Yet it is not just their creativity in subject matter that he admires; the 'Night-Piece' clearly owes something in its language to Milton (looking particularly at the Latinate style with contracted words and grandiose descriptions with *Paradise Lost* and of course 'Il Penseroso' in mind) and in style and some motifs to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In looking backwards to his poetic predecessors, Parnell is conforming to what became a staple construct of Gothic: a desire for the past, its styles, its ideas and its aesthetics. Anna Barbauld, in her essay 'On the Pleasure Derived from Objects of Terror' (1773) also refers to Milton, 'who had a strong bias to these wildnesses of the imagination'. Barbauld writes that 'This is the pleasure constantly attached to the excitement of surprise from new and wonderful objects. A strange and unexpected event awakens the mind, and keeps it on the stretch; and where the agency of invisible beings is introduced, of forms unseen, and mightier far than we, our imagination, darting forth, explores with rapture the new world which is laid open to its view, and rejoices in the expansion of its powers. Passion and fancy cooperating elevate the soul to its highest pitch; and the pain of terror is lost in amazement.' (1773, online) This amazement is related to aspects of the supernatural, which in both graveyard poetry and Gothic novels relates to the Christian belief in life after death. Parnell's poem is, therefore, also a poem which looks forward: to death, and to Heaven. As David Fairer and Christine Gerrard point out, '…the

Night-Piece checks and even undercuts its own Gothic frisson. It is Death who reprimands foolish man for frightening himself with macabre phantasms. Death, for the enlightened Christian, is but a passage to Heaven. The poem thus moves steadily from images of darkness and entrapment to those of flight, transcendence and sublimity.' (2004: 66)

The poem begins with a 'wakeful night', lit only by a flickering flame. With a brief diversion to the glories of nature, the poem moves onto its real subject: the wisdom that we may learn in the graveyard, rather from scholars. The reader is advised to:

> … think, as softly-sad you tread
> Above the venerable Dead,
> Time was, like thee they Life possest,
> And Time shall be, that thou shalt Rest. (ll. 25-8)

The warning is not uncommon; memento mori paintings, containing skulls or hourglasses, for example, were still common in Europe during Parnell's lifetime, and earlier literary precedents include Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial, or a Brief Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk* (1658) and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying* (1650-1). These, however, are primarily prose works: the poetic form, aesthetics and, particularly, location of Parnell's work are what create a disjunction between his poem and earlier meditations on similar subjects. The poetic form focuses the reader's mind on the elegaic appropriation of death, accompanied by the aesthetic trappings of the graveyard: again the 'objects' of Gothic make an appearance; from graves and headstones, tombs and 'Arms, Angels, Epitaphs and Bones' (l. 42) we move to more fanciful items: the Shades, 'wrap'd with Shrouds', the Yew, the Charnel House, Ravens, Clocks, Sable Stoles, Cypress, Palls and Hearses, among others. But these aesthetics point to a deeper meaning; the horror of the 'peal of hollow groans' (l. 59) and the 'visionary crouds' (l. 50) of the dead are not there simply to provide a pleasurable frisson of terror, they are there to point to an eternal truth,

that ‘Death’s but a Path that must be trod, /If Man wou’d ever pass to God’ (ll. 67-8). Such phantoms and imaginings are of our own making, and can be dismissed by true faith.

One might parallel this approach to that of Ann Radcliffe in her Gothic novels, and in her essay, ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’ (1826). In her essay Radcliffe emphasises that the truly supernatural character is that of the writer, rather than the text. She says: ‘I am speaking of the only real witch – the witch of the poet; and all our notions and feelings connected with terror accord with his’. She suggests that an explanation of the spectral is beyond human comprehension, saying ‘If I cannot explain this, take it as a mystery of the human mind’ (1826, online). This accords with Freud’s notion that the spectral is the repressed which resurfaces as something uncanny, related to the mind and to personal perception, and therefore that ghosts, be they of familiar figures, or the shrouded anonymous corpses of Parnell’s poem, have psychological as well as aesthetic, literary purposes. Though the spectres in Radcliffe’s novels tend to have rational explanations, the mystery which surrounds them remains, and in her essay she makes clear that not only is the supernatural a mystery, and should be accepted as such, but it is a mystery which relates to the mind; that is, it is the projections of the minds of readers that are significant, rather than the potential workings of the spectral world itself. The existence of spirits in this world and the next is irrelevant here; Radcliffe’s essay hints at the ideas outlined by Defoe in *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions (1727)*, that the spirit world is within the mind of the spirit-seer, and reflects their psychology. More specifically, this psychological approach points to the idea that the ghost-seer’s visions reflect personal belief: the grave is less fearful to the believer.

Gothic literature therefore occupies a precise poetic relation to the poetry of mortality. For example, a reflective atmosphere of melancholy prevails in the novels of Ann Radcliffe, particularly relating to bereaved heroines such as Emily St Aubert in *The Mysteries of*

Udolpho (1794). Radcliffe draws on poetry both as epigraphs and within the text to evoke a mood of sublime contemplation which frequently draws on the surrounding landscape. The melancholy poetry which Radcliffe uses in her novels as epigraphs to set the scene offers one way back to the graveyard from Gothic novels; often a melancholy scene indeed. In *The Italian* (1797), Volume II chapter IV opens with an example of this:

> Along the roofs sounds the low peal of Death,
> And Conscience trembles to the boding note;
> She views his dim form floating o'er the aisles
> She hears mysterious murmurs in the air… (1998: 171)

Here, the sound and sight of Death approaching is what pricks the conscience; the parallels with the thematic structure of Parnell's poem are clear. Though the 'sound' and 'dim form' of death may be imaginary, its effect is nonetheless potent, causing the conscience to tremble. This sign of fear is, of course, the fear of God, of retribution for lifetime sins which must be addressed before death. Though this fragment appears to be set in a church rather than a churchyard, and it is death himself rather than corpses which appear, the trope of using poetic form to present the living with a reminder of death is the same. In fact, what is lacking in the majority of poetic fragments in Radcliffe's novels is the optimism of life after death which Parnell and Gray, among others, use to conclude their graveyard meditations. Yet both for the graveyard poets with their ultimate focus on the sublime and the hope of Heaven, and for Radcliffe with her spectres which are explained away, the atmosphere of death and decay is not dispelled, since it is so strongly evocative, so emotionally charged, and in many ways so pleasurably unpleasant, as well as necessary to remind the reader that their focus should be not on the decay of the body, but the heavenly future which awaits them. The Gothic, like the graveyard, is ultimately about the terrors and bondages of the world; Parnell dismisses these

fears as ‘A few, and evil Years’ (l. 86), reminding us that the future holds freedom and hope in the closing lines of his poem:

> …when their Chains are cast aside
> See the glad Scene unfolding wide
> Clap the glad wing and tow’r away
> And mingle with the Blaze of Day. (ll. 87-90)

Such instances are perhaps shadowed by the more graphic memento mori which infamously features as *Udolpho*’s cliff-hanger, in which Emily believes that her mother’s body is hidden behind a black veil deep in the castle. Radcliffe’s novels have been criticised for ‘explaining away’ the supernatural, and even the rotting corpse memento mori behind the veil is proved to be made of wax. Yet Radcliffe offers a distinct position in relation to the supernatural; like Parnell, her ghosts are of human creation, and offer both characters and readers a way to understand life and death. Terry Castle posits that the division of the world into homely and uncanny (in itself a troublesome proposition), and the division of the book into Gothic and domestic, is common in criticism of Gothic, and echoes the too-comfortable binaries of living and dead. This distinction, she argues in *The Female Thermometer*, is not present in Radcliffe’s work due to her unifying use of spectral language, and it is therefore in the domestic scenes where memories of the dead take over Radcliffe’s characters. The result of this is that ‘the supernatural is not so much explained […] as it is displaced’ into the ‘everyday’ (1995: 124). This highlights a striking disjunction between the poetry of the graveyard and the spectres of the Gothic: in poems such as Parnell’s, the horrors of the decaying bodies and the spectres of death are confined to their appropriate place, in the graveyard. In the novels of Radcliffe and other Gothic writers, these spectres come out of the graveyard and enter the home, threatening the domestic centre. When Emily finds the waxen

corpse in *Udolpho*, it is in a recess behind a veil in the castle. The description of it is intended to frighten:

> Beyond, appeared a corpse, stretched on a kind of low couch, which was crimsoned with human blood, as was the floor beneath. The features, deformed by death, were ghastly and horrible, and more than one livid wound appeared in the face. (1980: 341)

It is no wonder that Emily fainted. Moreover, even when, towards the end of the novel, the mystery of the corpse is explained, the horror is intentionally not diminished; in some ways it is added to, with mention of 'the habiliments of the grave' and 'the face … partly decayed and disfigured by worms' (1980: 341). The explanation, that it was created as a penance for an ancestor who had in some unspecified way offended the church, seems to undermine its significance both as a Christian reminder of death and as an object of fear in the novel, but it remains an aspect of the aesthetics of Gothic as well as a reminder of the graveyard.

Two further corpses, in some ways resembling each other, are notable in early Gothic fiction. Both are described in their putrefying state, and as such serve as memento mori, but despite their similarities they occupy distinctive spaces in the text. The first is the child of Agnes in *The Monk*. Agnes' heart-rending story is that she has fallen pregnant out of wedlock, whilst residing in a nunnery against her will. When the eponymous monk, Ambrosio, discovers her secret, he informs the Prioress, who orders that Agnes be locked away in a room beneath the nunnery and left to die. When Agnes begs for mercy for her unborn child, the response she receives is unbending:

> 'Dare you plead for the product of your shame? … Expect no mercy from me either for yourself, or Brat! Rather pray, that Death may seize you before you produce it; Or if it must see the light, that its eyes may immediately be closed again for ever!' (1998: 410)

This and other speeches by the Prioress indicate an emphasis on suffering and bodily death as a means of purification of the soul, offering access to salvation. Her crimes can only be expiated by mortification, a concept which is an intrinsic element of the novel's deep mistrust of Catholicism. Agnes's punishment resembles a living death, immured in a crypt and left without food or light to die; she is placed upon a 'wicker Couch' which would ultimately 'convey me to my grave', and she rests her hand upon 'something soft': 'What was my disgust, my consternation! In spite of its putridity, and the worms which preyed upon it, I perceived a corrupted human head' (1998: 402-3). Such memento mori chasten Agnes, whose light-hearted ways vanish forever, though she survives her incarceration. The most macabre element of her experience, however, is the fate of her child, which died a few hours after birth. Agnes describes her refusal to give up the corpse:

> It soon became a mass of putridity, and to every eye was a loathsome and disgusting Object; to every eye, but a Mother's. In vain did human feelings bid me recoil from this emblem of mortality with repugnance: … I endeavoured to retrace its features through the livid corruption… (1998: 413)

The child is Agnes's memento mori, and the greatest part of her punishment; this moment in the novel manifests the charnel-house atmosphere of graveyard poetry. In 'The Grave', Blair notes those who are mourned in the graveyard, including

> …the child
> Of a span long, that never saw the sun,
> Nor press'd the nipple, strangled in life's porch (ll. 517-20).

The child, the poet notes, dies just as all others do. Yet the death of a child is particularly significant, causing a particularly poignant reflection on the brevity of life and the necessity of salvation.[3] The focus on the infant's corrupted body provides a graveyard reflection on the transformation from living, loved being to object of disgust, taking place in *The Monk* in

what should have been Agnes's tomb. Moreover, the transformation of the once-beautiful Agnes herself into a near-corpse underlines – or perhaps undermines – Mario Praz's argument that 'to such an extent were Beauty and Death looked upon as sisters […] that they became fused into a sort of two-faced herm, filled with corruption and melancholy' (1970: 31). As Agnes's beauty is transformed to the point of death, so her soul is also transformed as the corruption of the body manifests itself.

A similar scene appears in Charles Robert Maturin's novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Here, the graveyard trope of the proximity of the mouldering body, again of an infant, prompts a reflection on future deaths. Isidora, Melmoth's wife, is imprisoned by the Inquisition, along with their child, who is to be taken from her and brought up in a convent. When the officers arrive to remove the child, she gives them instead the corpse of her daughter, which she had been nursing in her arms: 'Around the throat of the miserable infant, born amid agony, and nursed in a dungeon, there was a black mark […] deemed […] the fearful effect of maternal despair.' This death is quickly followed by Isidora's, and in her dying breath she asks, 'Paradise! *Will he be there?*' (2000: 593) Her preoccupation is not her own death, but the ultimate destination of her husband's soul.

These examples of disintegrating bodies and departing souls may seem removed from the context of graveyard poetry, but the melodramatic depictions of death and emphasis on the brevity of life indicate their status as a reminder of death. Though in the case of both *The Monk* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* the gruesome depiction can in part be attributed to the strain of 'horror Gothic' which Ann Radcliffe deplored, designed to provoke a physical reaction in the reader, it is not only these aesthetic attributes which are significant, but the beliefs towards which they gesture. Gothic fiction absorbed much of the graveyard atmosphere of earlier poetry, which is manifest in its aesthetics, but as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986: 140-67), the aesthetics

on which the genre depends for its atmosphere are also indicative of what lies beneath: we ignore the aesthetics at a cost, because they are all a writer can really offer; the meaning, which the reader can fill in, often depends on a complex web of allusions, history, social contexts and religion. This is especially true of the relationship between the widely-read, popular graveyard poetry and the later, even more widespread Gothic. Both, in their different forms, remind the living that 'the paths of glory lead but to the grave'.

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[1] Such ways of remembering the dead, and how rituals associated with death and burial have fluctuated alongside changing beliefs (such as the Reformation) are explored by Carl Watkin (2013).

[2] For example, Patrick Bridgwater suggests that ‘the Gothic state of mind goes back, via the cult of Spenser and Milton, to the second quarter of the eighteenth century (Parnell, Young,

Blair and Gray)' and alludes to the relationship between Ann Radcliffe's work, the 'Night-Piece', and the paintings of Caravaggio and Salvator Rosa (2013: 506).

[3] It is worth noting, though, that it is probable at that period that an unbaptised child would not have been considered a likely candidate for salvation.