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CRITIQUING THE POETIC CREDO OF THE GOTHIC IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY GRAVEYARD POETRY

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Abstract

The Graveyard poetry which flourished roughly from the early to the middle of the eighteenth century espoused a distinct aesthetic creed that per se challenged the prevalent doctrines of the Neo-classicism and the Enlightenment rationalism. It dealt largely with the morbid aspects of grave and ruins, death and darkness, shadow and ghosts which not only looked forward to revive a Gothic past but also anticipated, by inspiring the myriad forms of terror in a godless world, Edmund Burke's radical idea of the 'sublime'. During the eighteenth century the meaning of the word 'Gothic' went through a thorough cultural evolution. While in the first half of the eighteenth century it denoted, pejoratively, the medieval and the non-classical, towards the middle of the century it appeared to epitomise the sublime, the Englishness and the supremacy of imagination and divine mysteries. This paper argues that the Graveyard poetry occupies a significant place in this evolutionary journey of the Gothic and in doing so it examines the crucial role this school of poetry played in prefiguring the emergence of the Gothic fiction later in the age.

Key-words: Enlightenment, Gothic, Graveyard poetry, Neo-classical, Sublime

Gothic cultural landscape of the Eighteenth century:

One of the most prominent cultural phenomena of the Eighteenth century happens to be its multifarious engagement with the Gothic- in art, architecture, politics and literature. The classical architectural pattern with its rigorous observance of beauty, harmony and proportion came to be challenged by the Gothic or medieval mode of architecture that usually revelled in excess and extravagance. Critical reception of this Gothic architecture underwent a thorough evolution towards the second half of the Eighteenth century which eventually turned out to be a pervasive artistic movement viz. the Gothic revival. Whereas critics like Neve, Joseph Addison or Alexander Gerard had insisted on the superiority of the classical form over the Gothic in the beginning of the century, Richard Hurd, Hugh Blair during the mid-eighteenth

century introduced an alternative aesthetic discourse upholding that the Gothic art evoked the sublime as opposed to beauty (Botting 30). Moreover, originating in the English soil the Gothic, in stark contrast with the Grecian or Italian art was immediately recognised as a purely English form and came to be associated with the English nationalism. As early as 1648 Nathaniel Bacon argued that the English laws were largely Gothic in origin and declared "Nor any nation upon earth shew so much of the ancient Gothique law as this island hath" (qtd. in Groom 48). Eighteenth century cultivated the ancient Gothic constitution as the foundation of English political idea about freedom, democracy and liberty (Groom 48). The debate about the common Gothic genealogies of the English and the Scots led to the Act of Union in 1707 and the Hanoverian succession to the English throne establishing the German dynasty in 1714 was publicly explained as "a declaration of Gothic majesty" (Groom 54). Nick Groom writes that "By the 1740s the claim that the British political system had Gothic foundations was a commonplace: 'It is to the Gothick Constitution that we owe our Parliaments, which are the Guardians of our Rights and Liberties'" (55). Evidently the Gothic spirit of liberty pervaded the literature of the age. On one hand there was a trend following Roger Ascham, Samuel Daniel and John Dryden to point out, often unsympathetically, the pollution of classical languages by the Gothic and on the other hand there were critics like Sir William Temple who wholeheartedly applauded the cultural influence of the Gothic for the scope of supernaturalism, the possibilities of imaginative freedom and for championing the Gothic chivalric codes which were acknowledged to be the root of modern society.

Inheritance of the tradition of Melancholy:

The poetic consciousness of the first half of the eighteenth century was preoccupied with, apart from medievalism, antiquarianism or supernaturalism, a queer penchant for melancholy and meditation, death and mortality, solitude and divinity. Over the centuries the kinship between poetry and melancholy, as evident in the Anglo Saxon elegiac poems or the Miltonic "L' Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" (1645), has been complex, dynamic and ambivalent. In the eighteenth century melancholy was considered not just a curse or affliction rather - as the book *Melancholy Experience in Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century* (2011) extensively argues - it was thought to be associated with creativity stimulated however by a sense of lack or loss which subsequently spurred the Graveyard spirit in poetry (85). John F Sena writes that "Probably more of the leading poets were melancholic in the eighteenth century than any other comparable span of English history" (qtd. in Ingram et al. 85). In deed melancholy engulfed the individual nature causing severe psychic distress in most of the leading poets of the age like Thomas Chatterton who is reported to have committed suicide and William Collins, Christopher Smart, William Cowper all of whom had to go through the ordeals of bedlam at critical juncture of their lives. Therefore not unexpectedly this era witnessed the

widespread popularity and publication of such meditative books as Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Thomas Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* (1908) and Thomas Browne's *Hydriotaphia or Urn Burial* (1658). Besides, a large number of poetry of the previous century dealing with the terror and anxiety of death, after life or the Day of Judgement like those of William Cartright (died in 1643), The Earl of Roscommon (c.1632-1684), John Norris (1657-1711), Thomas Flatman (1637-1688) et al also found enthusiastic readership during this age. Consequently with the advent of the first decade of the eighteenth century came into being poems like "The Choice" (1700), by John Pomfret, 'The Spleen' (1709) by Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea or Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717) which prefigured all the machinery of poetic melancholia later invoked by the Graveyard poets. The following lines from Robert Blair's poem "The Grave" evoke the essential spirit of Gothicism:

The Wind is up: Hark! How it howls! Methinks
Till now, I never heard a Sound so dreary
Doors creak, and Windows clap, and Night's foul Bird
Rook'd in the Spire screams loud: The gloomy Isles
Black-plaster'd and hung round with Shreds of 'Scutcheons
And tatter'd Coats of Arms, send back the Sound
Laden with heavier Airs, from the low Vaults
The Mansions of the Dead. Rous'd from their Slumbers
In grim Array the grisly Spectres rise,
Grin horrible, and obstinately sullen
Pass and repass, hush'd as the Foot of Night
Again! The Screech-Owl shrieks: Ungracious Sound!
I'll hear no more, it makes one's blood run chill. (32-4)

Philosophy of the Graveyard:

The tradition of the Graveyard poetry, also called the Churchyard poetry, is commonly agreed to have commenced with Thomas Parnell's "A Night Piece on Death" (1721) and is best represented by Robert Blair's "The Grave" (1743), Edward Young's "The Complaint or Night Thoughts on Life, Death and Immortality" (1742-5) and "Welcome Death!"(1743),William Taylor Collins's "Ode to Fear" (1741) and "Ode to Evening"(1746), Thomas Warton's "The Pleasures of Melancholy" (1747) and Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751). Devendra P Varma summarising the features of this poetry writes, "Common elements of this poetry are melancholy, subjective tone, vague longings, together with ghosts, chains, tombs, veils that fill the reader with terror and sound a note of mystery and other-worldliness" (27-28). Eric Parisot, however, suggests that the 'graveyard school' at

the broadest sense of the term also incorporates a considerable selection of contemporary prose conforming to the fashionable taste of mournful piety like Elizabeth Rowe's *Friendship in Death: In Twenty Letters from the Dead to the Living* (1728) and James Hervey's *Meditations among the Tombs* (1746) (174). The philosophy of the Graveyard is almost invariably obsessed with the sombre meditations upon the transience of human life, the imminence of death and the occasional consolation of Christian afterlife. Parisot goes on to point out that "Night, solitude, and self-examination are all key tropes of graveyard poetry, but it is their accretion into a specific consideration of death and mortality that is the essential characteristic of this poetic mode. More specifically, it is the author's subjective experience of death that is central to graveyard poetry" (187). Although death had already occupied a significant place in the eighteenth century theological debate, Lorna Clymer has marked the ways the graveyard school "altered the contemplative tradition of representing death metaphorically as two voyages- the first of the body to the grave, the second of the soul into everlasting life- by solely focusing on 'the first voyage almost to the exclusion of the second'" (qtd. in Parisot 175-176). The permeating images of death in the Graveyard poetry potentially threaten the eighteenth century rational mind with the idea of mortality without any overt portrayal of supernatural elements. E.J Clery in the essay "The Genesis of Gothic Fiction" explains this fact as "a critical balancing act: the differentiation between rational beliefs of Protestantism and irrational Catholicism was at stake" (Clery 28). Thus the Graveyard poetry presages the Gothic fiction in exploiting poetically the aesthetic possibilities of the supernatural.

The following lines from Edward Young's "Night Thoughts" (Night the First) express its typical concern with death: "Death! Great proprietor of all! 'Tis thine / To tread out Empire, and to quench the Stars" (Ingram, 100). In the same poem (The Last Night) the entire world has been compared to a grave.

> What is the World itself? Thy World? – a Grave!
> Where is the Dust that has not been alive?
> The spade, the Plough, disturb our Ancestors
> From human Mould we reap our daily Bread. (91-95)

Death is beyond the purview of knowledge provided by the Enlightenment. Robert Blair in "The Grave" writes-

> Soon, very soon, thy firmest Footing fails;
> And down dropp't into that darksome place
> Where nor Device, nor knowledge ever came. (294-6)

Death is something which is dearly welcomed.

The same poem says,

> Thrice welcome Death!
> That after many a painful bleeding Step
> Conducts us to our Home, and lands us safe
> On the long-wished for shore. (706-9)

Gothic Sublimity in the Graveyard Poetry:

David Punter in *The Literature of Terror* (1996) categorically claims that there is a "continuity of tone and feeling" between the graveyard poetry and the Gothic fiction (Punter 30). Graveyard poetry challenges the Enlightenment rationale of progress by communicating the terror and anxiety of death or mortality which, according to *The Longman Anthology of Gothic Verse* (2011) is considered to be "one of the inspirations behind Edmund Burke's aesthetic treatise *Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757)" (48). Burke's treatise formulates- as Andrew Smith suggests in his *Gothic Literature* (2007) - that death or more precisely the fear of death is the most prominent example of sublimity (11). Exploring the liaison between terror and sublimity, Burke identifies obscurity, power, privation, vastness and infinity to be the sources of the sublime. Smith describes that "Instead of the sublime leading us to a contemplation of our place in a world of natural majesty (the natural sublime) which implies the presence of a benign divine creator, he (Burke) claims that the sublime is a negative experience because it reinforces feelings of transience (our passing) and insignificance (our smallness) (11). Fred Botting has related the terror to the sense of awe and wonder associated with religious experience. He claims, "The awful obscurity of the settings of Graveyard poetry elevate the mind to ideas of wonder and divinity, while the similar settings of poems by Collins and the Wartons attribute a sacred, visionary and sublime power to the supernatural figures of ancient bards as well as to the wildness of nature" (39). However it was John Dennis (1658-1734) who reinvigorating Longinus's theorisation on the sublime as early as 1704 in his *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* argued that poetic diction was innately equipped with the power to produce sublime and that religious thoughts were the essential sources of the sublime (Irlam 520). Dennis writes, "never any passage had all these Marks [of sublimity] . . . unless it were religious" (520). So the Graveyard poetry consciously shared the aesthetic propositions of the sublime as debated widely during the age in texts like Dennis's the *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701), William Smith's notes to his translation of Longinus (1739), John Baillie's *Essay on the Sublime* (1747) and thereby anticipated Edmund Burke's radical treatise on the Sublime which is commonly thought to have laid down the psychological foundations of the Gothic (Sabor 166-167).

The following lines from Edward Young's "Night Thoughts" deconstruct the binary of light and darkness and prioritise the latter over the former.

Darkness has more divinity for me,

It strikes Thought inward, it drives back the Soul
To settle on Herself, our Point supreme! (V. 128-30)

Graveyard, Gothic and Romanticism:

Kenneth Clark has observed that "The Gothic novelists were the natural successors to the graveyard poets, and nearly all the paraphernalia of graveyard poetry . . . reappear in the novels" (qtd. in Varma 27). Graveyard poetry mournfully reflected on the architectural ruins especially tombs, grave and cemetery and "was obsessed by the sublimity of the past, how it dwarfed individual consciousness" (Groom 56). The recurring images of death and darkness, the supernatural figures and superstitious speculations which evoke intense feeling appealed to the imaginative faculty in a neoclassical age that emphasised imitation and morality. Edward Young, for instance, declared in his *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) that "We read Imitation with somewhat of his languor who listens to a twice told tale; our spirit rouze at an Original; that is a perfect stranger, and all throng to learn what news from a foreign land" (qtd. in Clery 57). This justification for originality acknowledged also by Burke was later echoed in the preface to the second edition of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story* which affirmed itself as "a new species of romance" (Botting 48). Graveyard poets harked back to the medieval age of Gothic barbarity which - they thought - had been conducive to the imaginative explorations necessary for poetic inspiration (Clery 55). Shakespeare and Spenser the two major "inheritors" of the tradition of medieval romance writing (Botting 35) were admired and often invoked in poetry by nearly all the Graveyard poets most notable among them being Thomas Warton and Joseph Warton. Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774-81) following Macpherson's *Ossian* poems (1762) and Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) participated in the antiquarian movement of the age and advocated in favour of the Arabian origin of the romance (Botting 36). Warton's *Observations on The Faerie Queen* (1754) is hailed as the "first published attempt to trace the progress of Gothic architecture in England" (Reynolds 88). Some graveyard poets like Thomas Gray and William Collins were well versed in folklore and mythology (Clery 57); Gray popularised the Pindaric ode which- Clery says- is "the most 'irregular' and thus 'sublime' of metrical forms" (Clery 57). Thus in many ways the Graveyard poetry eschewed the neoclassical constraints of the eighteenth century and invested in an alternative aesthetic of creativity, nature and human mind which looked forward to the romanticism. While the romantic poetry "embraced the subjectivity of the graveyard poets and the awful Burkean sublime" (Franklin 7), Romanticism itself, it is argued, "came into being partly in response and partly in reaction to this Gothic aesthetic: in fact some critics think they are two sides of the same coin" (2).

Conclusion:

The Graveyard poetry can effectively be read as the poetic manifestation of the aesthetic creed of the Gothic. It challenged the overarching rationality of the Enlightenment and transgressed the borders of empirical knowledge; it severed the neoclassical shackles of imitation and morality and kindled human imagination with the divine mystery and wonder; it resurrected the supernatural and superstitious world of Gothic medieval past and portrayed the picturesque sublimity of nocturnal gloom, ruinous architectures, funerary processionals, burial settings and phantasmal figures reviving the cult of memento mori. The Graveyard poetry synthesized the disparate cultural threads of Gothic revival during the first half of the eighteenth century and manoeuvred the ground for fruitful germination of the Gothic fiction which was to remarkably shape the spirit of literature for the next centuries.

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