The detailed critical focus on the Gothic in the last twenty years or so has enriched our understanding of the way that writers from 1764 to the Victorian era responded to each other’s work and refigured the possibilities of the form. By the 1790s critics began to register the emergence of this “new style of romance” with distinct and recognizable characteristics. So-called “recipe satires” seized upon the widespread repetition of certain generic givens, and reduced the Gothic to a series of ingredients of effects. Several contemporary literary critics (among others, especially Maggie Kilgour) also argue that the fragmented and “spectral” genre of the Gothic is best approached through its typical features (identifying as the most prominent - the hero, villain, heroine, setting, atmosphere and plot). Martina Mikulová in her BA thesis has also endeavoured to identify the so-called “Gothic elements” which two of the Brontë sisters (namely, Charlotte and Emily) have utilised in their novels Jane Eyre, Villette and Wuthering Heights.

I consider the choice of texts as relevant and, I think, substantiated. The thesis is well-formulated, presented in adequate style, and logically structured into three major chapters (Setting, Characters, Supernatural – as the three major identifying features of the so-called Gothic). The three novels are then closely analysed under the three headings. Such a method does indeed produce a sensible analysis of the texts; nevertheless, the result does not fully manage to present the intricate inter-communications between the novels of the two Victorian (Romantic) novelists and the genre of the Gothic. The approach to the Gothic is perhaps rather too generalizing – more attention needs to be paid to the difference in the function of the above mentioned elements.

For example, if we take nature as a key factor: How did women writers respond to the gendering of the sublime as a masculinized experience of empowerment, and of the beautiful as a feminized experience of nurturing and sensuous love? Gothic novelists and the Brontë sisters all exploited landscape in their writing as both metaphor and metonymy. The representation of the sublime took two distinct, but related forms.

One group of writers (female Gothic, esp. Radcliffe) accepted this identification. They equated masculine sublime with tyranny and usurpation; the landscape functioned in a double way: as an environment in which human cruelty can flourish (and can also move into the homes of the vulnerable females). On the other hand, Radcliffe also presented a more positive sublime. Whereas Burke had insisted that the experience of the sublime originates in fear and is aroused by the instinct for self-preservation, and then mounts from astonishment to a recognition of divine order, Radcliffe can be said to anticipate Wordsworth (and Coleridge?) in suggesting that one can reach this consciousness of the power and glory of divine creation without fear and trembling (Emily and Ellena Rosalba respond to Alpine scenery with pleasure and “fill [the heart] with the certainty of a present God” (The Mysteries of Udolpho, 28). This experience of the divine elevates the perceiving self to a sense of her own integrity. Moreover, Radcliffe (in contrast to Wordsworth) presents this self-esteem as leading to an appreciation of the equal value and dignity of other people (note how the shared appreciation of Emily and Valancourt keeps the heroine’s love alive). Thus, the Radcliffean sublime enables the women who experience it to affect a mental escape from the tyrannical order.
The second approach to the feminine sublime is located in those women writers who actually lived in areas explicitly celebrated as sublime. For them, sublime landscapes are home scenery, blissful childhood memory. Again, for these writers the experience of nature is not an overwhelming power but a flowing out, and ecstatic experience of co-participation (unlike as e.g. for Wordsworth, where the experience of the sublime entails isolation and a struggle for domination.)

My long exposition above necessarily results in a question: How does Ms Mikulová see the two writers responding to the distinction of the beautiful vs. the sublime (in the gendered terms and in relation to the Romantic re-inscribing of the Burkean concept)? And, on a larger scale, how are the “Gothic elements” in the analysed novels coloured by the influence of the Romantic (Gothic) tradition?

A more obvious question is related to the type of narration. How does the form of the discussed novels create (contribute to) to the characterization of the “characters”? (Not only in terms of narrative person, but, e.g. how narrative obscures details and creates a sense of “self” – esp. Lucy Snow?)

The characterisation of Heathcliff in terms of a capitalist individualist or Byronic hero per se all seem rather inadequate. The literary antecedents of this character, who starts as a lover of freedom and turns out to function as an oppressor must be numerous. Could you comment more on this issue?

Further point of inquiry are:
- the doubling of heroes/heroines (Rochester/StJohn Rivers, Lucy/Paulina/ginevra etc.) and its relation to the notion of “doubles” in the Gothic

- the world of Villette (and Villette, the city) is a world of houses – but in many of these spaces Lucy feels alien (including the whole issue of her access to language, and inability to communicate on her own terms with M. Paul), which could be said to produce the Freudian feeling of the unheimliche. Can we have more comments on this issue?

- also, more could be made of the rather dreamlike, perhaps surrealist, episode of Lucy’s wandering through the town under the influence of opium when everything becomes “a land of enchantment” – i.e. magic? This episode implies that the “supernatural” in Victorian (?) Gothic need not necessarily mean only “the supernatural”, but rather an exploration of the states of mind at the brink of mental disorder, a new reading of reality, or the world of (Romantic?) Imagination.

I recommend the thesis for defence with the preliminary mark of very good (velmi dobře).

V Praze dne 18.6.2013

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