Gothic Nature

Gothic Nature II

How to Cite: Manwaring, K. (2021) HEAVY WEATHER: A Creative Intervention. *Gothic Nature*. 2, pp. 285-294. Available from: https://gothicnaturejournal.com/.
Published: March 2021

Peer Review:
All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a fully anonymised process.

Open Access: *Gothic Nature* is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Cover credit:

Model IV, 2017
Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask
(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),
Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax
21 x 25 x 12 in.
Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller
Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

Web Designer:

Michael Belcher

Creative Corner

HEAVY WEATHER: A Creative Intervention

Kevan Manwaring

'We are living in the Ecogothic: in a tailspinning world of geopolitical turmoil.
We exist in a state of perpetual pathetic fallacy…'

Introduction

My work exists at the fault-line of the creative and critical—I believe this is the place of optimum creative tension, a hot zone of potentiality. As with the extremophiles that flourish amid the black fumers along the Pacific 'Ring of Fire', remarkable, tenacious forms of creation can be discovered in such contested territory—and, I believe, some of the most daringly original (as the many excellent examples of the so-called 'New Nature Writing' testify: hybrid work that blends memoir, travel, and nature writing in resonant ways). In truth, the creative/critical divide is a false dichotomy, although one that is often enforced by the ubiquitous and often unchallenged term for the emergent discipline of 'Creative Writing'. Of course, the best creative writing, academically-speaking, is self-reflexive and fully cogniscent of the tradition and its innovations—it has either an accompanying critical reflection, or a built-in criticality, in conversation with itself and its literary precedents and peers. I have attempted to achieve the latter in the following piece (which was especially written for the launch symposium of *Gothic Nature I*) by deploying intertextuality, and a shift of voice and register, from first to third, subjective to objective, past to present—multiple frames to encourage the reader to re-perceive and re-assess, in the hope of creating a kind of cognitive assonance, one in which the reader forges the links and creates the meaning. In these dozen vignettes, I have adopted what Margaret Atwood called the 'Way of the Jackdaw', shamelessly pilthering shiny things to line my literary nest with: fragments of biography, personal experiences, quotations, arresting images, ideas, theories, and terms. In some ways, I see this as a form of literary recycling, or rather *up*cycling—nothing is wasted, everything can be repurposed, and find an extended shelf (after) life. The imperative to create something 'new' is eroded into a

recalibration of what already *is*. Perhaps the selection and juxtaposition are the original elements here? Or the blending of the auto/biographical? I shall leave the reader to decide. Certainly, in an age of extreme weather, the meteorological Gothic is an area that warrants further enquiry.

Storm Clouds Gather

It is early Spring in 1871, and after a hard day's toil in the City of Dreaming Spires, inflaming young minds with his brilliant, popular lectures (illustrated by his own scaled up drawings of natural wonders) John Ruskin, the first Slade Professor of Fine Art, walks back along the winding Isis to Abingdon, and as he does so he notices there is something wrong in the sky. An unnatural darkness has descended and a strong wind has set the budding foliage quivering on the bough. The heavens broiled with meteorological phenomenon the likes of which he had never beheld before, but over the coming months would see with increasing frequency: he deemed this effect a 'plague cloud'.

By his own constant and close observation, the pre-eminent art critic of his day, John Ruskin, witnessed over a period of forty years the dramatic shift in England's climate from the lucid skies and effulgent sunsets of his youth to an increasing prevalence of these 'plague clouds'—distinguished by their ability to abruptly blot out the sun: a thick pall carrying a 'wind of darkness', one that has a malignant, agitated quality, blowing from any and all directions, making the trees shake in intermittent bursts that can last for days, or be over in minutes. Describing one such effect in July 1871 while in Matlock Derbyshire, in 'the dismallest light I ever wrote', Ruskin noted how: 'It looks partly as if it were made of poisonous smoke; very possibly it may be: there are at least two hundred furnace chimneys in a square of two miles on every side of me'. But noting how it blows to and fro in unnatural fashion, he ruminates lugubriously that: 'It looks more to me as if were made of dead men's souls…' Reflecting on this in his lecture of 1884, 'The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century', he surmised he had in mind the human cost of the Franco-German campaign, then underway; a conflict that would, he feared, dig 'a moat flooded with the waters of death between the two nations for a century to come'. He broodily concluded that perhaps the ominous clouds were a sign of British imperial iniquity and a moral decay endemic to the age, citing the prophesy of Joel, 2: 10:

> ‘The light shall be darkened in the heavens thereof, and the stars shall withdraw their shining’.

He added, as a final gloss on this, the wry inversion of the famous epithet of the British Empire first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a fortnight prior to the 1884 lecture: ‘that the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, has become one on which he [now] never rises’.

Without realising it, Ruskin had become one of the very first prophets of the Anthropocene. The evidence was written large in the sky, for all to see who had the acuity of vision.

Man was changing nature.

Breaking Bad Weather

The fag-end of August, 2019, the Lake District, and we are struggling to pack away our tent in driving winds and lashing rain. The day before we had visited Brantwood, Ruskin’s handsome home overlooking the scalloped pewter of Coniston, and for the last week we had been camping at a site over Ullswater—but the vista of Wordsworthian grandeur was hard to appreciate that morning. While I had gone for a shower, the tent pole had snapped in the high winds, and my partner had reached personal saturation point, insisting we make a hasty retreat. We had planned to continue our holiday for a second week, travelling to the north west of Scotland, to stay in a remote croft, but severe weather warnings made us pull the plug. I had been on the trail of the Romantics, but bad weather follows them around like a Byronic reputation.

Dark and Stormy Nights

A fractal Levin-brand split the sky above Mont Blanc massif as though a vengeful deity had shattered the looking glass of its own creation. From their villa Percy, Mary, Claire, and trembling Willmouse beheld storms of elemental savagery. Rivetted, they watched the thunder-heads approach from the opposite side of the restless lake, performing their intensely dramatic Götterdämmerungs amid the dark, jagged peaks—peaks lit up like some secret laboratory where hazardous experiments in galvanism took place. The naked arclight quickly subsumed a profound

darkness—punctuated by flashes of surreal sunlight amid the prevailing penumbra. This weather of extreme contrasts seemed to dramatize some ancient feud out of which a new order of being would emerge.

June 1816 and the as yet unwed Percy Shelley and Mary Godwin, with their friend Claire Clairemont—Mary's step-sister—had joined Lord Byron and his physician Doctor Polidori at a villa overlooking Lake Geneva. The Alpine setting was the very epitome of the Romantic Sublime—a scintillating lake set in a dramatic backdrop of precipitous peaks, landscape that needs not the hyperbolic fancy of the artist—yet the weather was far from idyllic. 'It proved a wet, ungenial summer', Mary Shelley wrote later in the 1831 introduction of *Frankenstein,* 'and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house'. The last fourteen months had indeed been exceptionally inclement—the skies were perpetually overcast, winter lingered far into May, crops had failed, and much hardship endured—all due to the eruption of Mount Tambora in the Dutch East Indies the previous year. This volcanic cataclysm had been so violent it caused the almost immediate death of more than seventy thousand people, and had thrown up a hundred cubic kilometres of ash, rock, and vitrified particles into the Earth's atmosphere, dramatically effecting global rainfall, temperatures, air quality, and vegetative growth. A newspaper article from July 20th reported on the 'most melancholy news' of the 'extra-ordinary weather which afflicts nearly the whole of Europe'. 'The excessive abundance of rain has caused disasters almost everywhere…' it reported, and 'there is no longer any hope for agriculture'. The suffering caused by such a catastrophic event was almost unprecedented in human recorded history: disease, famine, riots, and mass fatalities across the globe. It was truly apocalyptic, like one of John Martin's paintings brought to life. Yet it proved most conducive to creativity, the very air seemed charged with ions of inspiration that summer. Percy said of poetry: '[It] is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it'. And Mary, comparing the genius of Thackeray with Fielding, likened the 'mere lambent sheet-lightning playing under the edge of the summer-cloud', in Fielding's bright, witty work, with Thackeray's 'serious genius', distinguished by 'the electric death-spark hid in [its] womb'. The convergence of such mighty talents—Byron, Shelley, Godwin, Polidori—by the shores of Lake Geneva was a lightning-field of genius, the collective voltage of which still illuminates minds to this day.

The Skies are Closed

Easter 2010 and Europe is in chaos. In March the Icelandic volcano of Eyjafjallajökull had erupted, sending up massive amounts of pyroclastic material into the jet-stream, which shut down European airspace for five days—resulting in the highest level of disruption since World War Two. I am in Pordenone, north-east Italy, and I am stuck. I had been teaching storytelling to English language students, watching in horror each day as the travel situation worsened. My Italian hostess had tried to help me cancel my flight and book a train instead, but the travel websites across the Continent were in meltdown. It was impossible to get through on the phone lines. There was no way of accessing clear information. The only way to book a ticket was to go down to the train station in person, which my hostess finally did, conducting the complicated negotiations on my behalf. As a guest outstaying his welcome I was starting to live up to the saying: *guests are like fish, they go off after three days*. Finally, my ticket was purchased. It was only to Paris—via a circuitous route—as it was nigh impossible to book anything all the way to Calais. As for ferries, forget it. I would just have to make my way there, by hook or by crook, and hope for the best—taking my chances with the masses attempting the same. The atmosphere at the travel interchanges I stopped at en route—Turin, Zurich, Paris—was like some kind of disaster movie: a panicked evacuation of mainland Europe. Was it so easy for civilisation to collapse? Passing through the Alps, tiny piedmont settlements only enduring under the special dispensation of vaster, older forces—surly, unpredictable gods of avalanche and sky—I realised what a house of cards it all was.

The Barometric Brontës

There was no possibility of taking a walk that day—at least, that is what her sister would say. It was *wuthering* up on the moor, the rain coming in edgeways, soaking one whole side of her body, despite the thick woollen cloak and dress. Yet Emily did not mind—she delighted in the wild exhilaration of it all. It made her feel alive, it made her feel *free*. They were all weather-vanes—Charlotte, Anne, even Branwell (when he wasn't nine sheets to the wind). She suspected even her father was. They each denied or ridiculed it in their own way—though she often caught her older sister looking at the clouds. Wasn't that a form of divination once? *Nephelomancy*, that was the word—although no doubt Mr Brontë would have called it something else. Now all those old wives' tales, the kind that she loved hearing Tabby share, were meant to have been swept away by the new science of *meteorology*—basically, modern cloud-scrying. Yet these same Royal Society

types had 'worked out' (from their hermetic, neutered laboratories and clinics), that a female body was especially susceptible to the fluctuations of the weather, and that this explained the hysteria and unpredictable mood swings endemic to her sex! It would seem more plausible that men's minds were susceptible to lunarism than a woman's menses. What rot they came out with, projecting their mothers and wives onto wild nature, or nature onto their mothers (or perhaps, more to the truth of it, their own 'feminine' shadow). For was not nature just as violent, just as cruel, and just as forceful as any man? Had they not seen that in recent years—the devastating effect of the blight; crop failure across Europe. The terrible cost of the potato famine in Ireland, which they felt keenly, descended from Hibernian stock. But if a woman's body was a barometer, what of it? All the better, so that she may be able to sense beyond herself, an omniscience that served well the hermaphrodite novelist. Beyond the false dichotomies of man and woman, mind and body, human and nature, the hybrid soul flourished, carrying its internal weather system along the way. The fallacy wasn't the mirroring of emotional states and meteorological phenomena; but the *separation* of them. There is no division: *The more I am; the moor am I.*

A Night in a Storm

It's June, 2019, and I'm up by the Lion Inn on the wiley, windy North Yorkshire Moors—the fourth highest pub in Britain—and it's blowing a hooley. Storm Miguel was wreaking havoc across the country, causing flooding and power outages. A town in Lincolnshire had had to be evacuated. And I had chosen this time to start Alfred Wainwright's Coast to Coast walk, camping along the way. All I had was a tiny 'coffin' tent to protect me from the elements. Customers of the Lion Inn looked at me in amused bafflement as I struggled to put it up in a corner of the beer garden, a low wall affording me tokenistic shelter. It was going to be a dark and stormy night, alright. I had walked twenty miles that day, and had arrived soaked in spirit, if not in body (though my outer layers were as slick as a seal-skin). Like a bedraggled dog I entered the pub, drip-drying by the roaring fire. I nursed a pint of splendid Old Peculier all evening, struggling to stay awake in the fuggy warmth, especially after a hot meal lay heavy in my belly. While I girded my loins for my night in the storm, I wrote a ghost story—the weather, after all, was extremely conducive to it. Finally, I plucked up the courage and went for it—making a dash for my tent. Briskly I zipped myself in, but not brisk enough to avoid a swathe of rain pattering my sleeping bag. Fortunately, it had a bivvy cover over it, giving me an extra layer of warmth and keeping it waterproof. Finally

'comfortable', if you could call it that on a thin mat on a high ride in a storm, I lay awake, listening to the sound of the wind and rain, which buffeted my tent like a ship in a squall. I felt incredibly vulnerable, and prayed that my flimsy shelter would withstand the tempest. I suspect it was only my presence inside it which stopped it from blowing away altogether. If I survived the night, at least it would make a good tale.

Buried Alive

1845 and Edgar Allen Poe publishes his *Tales of Terror*: feverishly written, claustrophobic narratives, with their frequent use of dungeons, graves, and premature burial—a trope he returned to again and again, as in the poem, 'Annabel Lee' *('And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side / Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride, / In her sepulchre there by the sea— / In her tomb by the side of the sea*) to compound this unhealthy obsession, Poe pens a story entitled 'The Premature Burial', published in 1850. Could Poe's opium habit have influenced their composition? The near-paralysis and death-like oblivion triggered by the dream of the poppy seems to be mirrored in these tales of 'life-in-death', and 'death-in-life', as indeed those fellow literary lotophagi Coleridge, De Quincey, and Beckford echo in their own work. Poe went on to write the first detective story: 'The Murder at the Rue Morgue'. Again, interred bodies. Poe's stories are like an ossuary made of words—innumerable memento mori line the bone-white pages. Could this smothering effect also be an aesthetic response to the heavily industrialised mid-to-late Nineteenth Century? The Piranesian cities and Bruegel-esque squalor? The belching fumes of the factories, the air sooty with the smoke from millions of hearths? A world being choked to death?

Saddleworth Moor is on Fire

It is July 2018 and a heatwave is blasting England. I am walking the Pennine Way—a 268 mile long-distance footpath running from Edale in Derbyshire to Kirk Yetholm, in the Scottish Borders. The heat is so intense I am having to set off at 5am to avoid the worst of it. The Pennine Way was once notorious for its bogs—the writer Alfred Wainwright had to be rescued from one. But the peat hag is dried out and the moorland is bone dry. It is hot, thirsty walking and I have to ration my water carefully. Streams have dwindled to stagnant pools surrounded by slabs of baking naked rock; or run blood-red. In the distance the smoke of Saddleworth Moors can be seen—it gets closer every day, and, if the wind changes direction, it could completely cut off the national trail. It is a

race against time—will I make it passed before it consumes my path, and perhaps me along with it? Some believe the fires were deliberately started—but a plastic bottle, thrown out of a car window, or an abandoned bar-b-que could have done for the moors just the same. After weeks of arid heat the moors are a tinderbox. Unlike the heather burning, which is a traditional agricultural practice, this is on a new scale—a fresher hell—but nowhere near as catastrophic as the wild fires that rage in California, claiming lives and properties. Cats on a hot tin roof, all we can do is keep moving.

The Count from the Carpathians

8th August, 1890: Bram Stoker takes a stroll down to the seafront at Whitby, where he is staying for a few days upon the recommendation of his friend, the actor Henry Irving. In a bookshop a tome from 1820 catches his eye, the memoirs of a chap called Wilkinson who describes the strange beliefs of the Wallachians—a sinister figure called Vlad Tepes, who was said to impale his enemies on wooden stakes, and was thought to have been a *vampire*. The local name for him is 'Dracula', meaning 'son of the dragon'. He makes a note of the name and date. This was perfect—just what he was looking for, for the story he was working on 'The Wampyre'. When his classic novel *Dracula* is published in 1897, Stoker sets the arrival of the Count to British soil as the 8th August—the day he discovered the book… In foul weather, the schooner Demeter, bringing the body of Dracula and several coffins of silver sand runs aground in Whitby bay, heralded by a fly-eating lunatic. A monstrous dog is seen to leap ashore and make its way inland.

20th January, 2017: After an election campaign heavily influenced by Steve Bannon's Breitbart news and Russian fake news bots, bankrupt property tycoon, reality TV host, and self-confessed 'pussy-grabber' Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States of America. It rains heavily. The Count from the East is here, heralded by his servant.

The Heroine Emerges

20th August, 2018: a 15-year-old school girl begins her Climate Strike outside the Swedish parliament: enter stage left our young heroine, Greta Thunberg, taking on the mad barons in their crumbling castles of Capitalism, the plague of economic vampirism that must be exorcised from the world. At first she sits alone, but her gesture goes viral and soon she is joined by dozens, then

hundreds, then thousands—countless fellow school children around the world. She must stand up to the Doctor Jekylls and Dorian Greys of the world stage—the politicians and business leaders who say one thing and do another. With her autistic clarity and intelligence she cuts through their spin-doctoring and greenwashing, and tells it like it is—pointing out that the Emperor is naked. This young heroine isn't going to be a passive victim.

There is No Planet B

Summer, 2019: Huge swathes of the Arctic are on fire: in Greenland, Siberia, and Alaska, the boreal forest has been burning at a rate unseen for a thousand years. Between 1st June and 22nd July 100 mega-tonnes of Carbon Dioxide are released into the atmosphere, more than the annual carbon emissions of a small country, say Belgium. The unprecedented heatwave of June and July has migrated north—and caused innumerable wildfires, setting fire to the precious habitat of the peat, where a vast amount of methane is locked in. The melting taiga is releasing anthrax-ridden animal remains from the permafrost. Summer is coming to the frozen north and the White Walkers are waking up. The Greenland ice sheet loses 11 billion tonnes in a single day, and has shrunk more in the last month than the annual average from 2002 until the present. If the whole of the Greenland ice sheet was to melt, global sea levels would rise by approximately twenty-three feet, causing major coastal flooding and devastating millions of lives. The United Nations declared that we have only eleven years to prevent irreversible ecological damage to the Earth. Yet even now, there are Climate Deniers, some of whom parrot Trump who declares that it's all a 'Chinese hoax'—to sabotage economic progress in the West. Yet more and more are waking up to the new normal of Climate Chaos. Plastic, which has infiltrated every facet of the food-chain, including our own bodies, is now on everyone's radar. Dramatic wild cat protests using non-violent direct action by Extinction Rebellion gain a lot of media attention. In Easter they manage to close down five bridges in the centre of London. Then in June they take over Oxford Circus with a pink boat painted with the legend: Tell the Truth. And the eerie street theatre of the Red Rebel Brigade creates many photo opportunities, drawing upon the striking iconography of the Gothic—the sublime terror becoming the actualised horror of our current environmental crisis. We are living in the Ecogothic: in a tailspinning world of geopolitical turmoil. We exist in a state of perpetual pathetic fallacy…

After the Storm

After holing up for a couple of days until Storm Miguel passes, the skies start to clear, and I resume my long Coast to Coast walk, heading west to St Bees. By now I am in the Yorkshire Dales. The millstone grit turns to limestone, and the dry-stone walls glint in the sun, shards like shears cutting the grey fleece of the clouds. Swaledale unfolds before me, a winding river valley buttressed by meadows lozenged with ancient enclosures. In the distance the Cumbrian mountains can be glimpsed—enticing me with their promise of the Sublime. I look forward to the Lakes, to walking in Wordsworth country, but for now I hitch up my heavy pack and focus on one step at a time.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Kevan Manwaring (University of Winchester) is a writer, editor, and lecturer in creative writing. His research focuses on the intersection between Fantasy, folklore, and place. He is a guest editor for *Revenant: critical and creative studies of the supernatural.* His articles have appeared in *Writing in Practice*, *New Writing*, *Axon*, and *TEXT*. His books include *The Long Woman* (2004); *The Bardic Handbook* (2006)*; Oxfordshire Folk Tales* (2012)*; Northamptonshire Folk Tales* (2013)*; Desiring Dragons: creative, imagination and the writer's quest* (2014); *Ballad Tales* (2017); *The Knowing* (2020); and *Heavy Weather: tempestuous tales for stranger climes* (2021). He is a Fellow of Hawthornden, The Eccles Centre (British Library) and the Higher Education Academy. He blogs and tweets as the Bardic Academic.