

LE DÉPARTEMENT D'ÉTUDES ANGLAISES,
UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL PRESENTS

Université 
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PROF. CYNTHIA SUGARS
(University of Ottawa)

Phantom Nation : English-Canadian Literature and Gothic Self-Inscription

Attempts to articulate ideas about a “Canadian” literature were concurrent with the rise of the Gothic in Europe in the 18th and early 19th centuries. This paper will trace a distinctive reworking of the British Gothic tradition in English Canada that is characterized by a summoning of the Gothic for its vitalizing rather than unsettling potential. From the beginnings of literary critical expression in Canada, one finds two accounts of Gothic absence: on the one hand, accounts of the failure of Gothic expression in Canada (what might also be described as the attested absence of ghosts); on the other hand, a claim that the Gothic was an outmoded primitive form which would be replaced in the colonies by civility, rationalism, and order. The two streams converge in that both look to the Gothic as a regrettable absence, whose function is to infuse cultural depth and resonance into an evolving culture that was sorely in need of antiquity and national legitimation. Authors’ self-conscious invocations (and rejections) of a British Gothic tradition led to a reimagining of a specifically Canadian Gothic that utilizes the genre as a form of cultural sustenance and settler substantiation. This tradition is marked by what I term “Gothic desire,” which manifests itself as an invocation of the Gothic as not only desirable, but also comforting and culturally sustaining. This approach continues to be evident in many Canadian postcolonial texts that ground the possibility of belonging in a sense of uncanny homeliness. These texts ultimately use the uncanny as a way of claiming “here” as “home,” seeking to create homemade legends that will provide an illusion of antiquity, origin, and memory.



Scene from F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*, 1922

Cynthia Sugars is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Ottawa. She is the author of numerous essays on Canadian literature, and is the editor of *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism* (2004); *Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature* (2004); and *Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic* (2009). She has recently co-edited a new anthology of Canadian literature with Laura Moss, published by Pearson/Penguin in 2009.

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