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Emigration Gothic: A Scotswoman's Contribution to the New World

Summary

Ellen Ross (1816?–1892) emigrated from Scotland to Montreal at mid-century and wrote two Gothic novels, in one of which – *Violet Keith, An Autobiography* (1868) – she used the Canadian setting as a fantastic Gothic locale in which to explore areas of social and sexual transgression.

Drawing on earlier traditions of European Gothic, including Sir Walter Scott's mythologized Scottish landscape, and on an emerging North American genre of convent exposés, Ross's writing accommodates female protest, distances it from reality and allows its dissipation in conventional denouements. If female Gothic can be read as an analogue of realistic women's problems, then perhaps this analogy can be extended to encompass emigration and immigrant life. The paper analyzes Ross's motifs of loss, imprisonment, solitude, surveillance and deliverance and considers the possibility that Gothic motifs in her work both conceal and express features of the immigrant's psychic battle with the transition to the New World.

Keywords: female Gothic, Canadian immigration, Ellen Ross

Gotska emigracija: Prispevek Škotinje k novemu svetu

Povzetek

Ellen Ross (1816?–1892) je emigrirala iz Škotske v Montreal na sredini devetnajstega stoletja in tam napisala dva gotska romana. V romanu z naslovom *Violet Keith, avtobiografija* (1868) je uporabila kanadsko okolje za prizorišče gotskega dogajanja, v katerem se je lotila obravnave družbenih in spolnih prekoračitev.

Rossijino pisanje izhaja iz zgodnje tradicije evropske gotske književnosti, vštevši mitologizirano škotsko pokrajino Walterja Scotta, ter iz porajajoče se severnoameriške zvrsti svetohlinske čistosti, ki ustvarja plodna tla za žensko kljubovanje, odmik od stvarnosti in konvencionalnega razpleta. Če je mogoče brati žensko gotsko književnost v povezavi s stvarnimi problemi ženske, omenjena analogija zaobjema območje izseljenskega in priseljenskega življenja. Članek analizira Rossijine motive izgube, jetništva, samote, nadzora in osvoboditve ter se sprašuje, ali vsi ti motivi morda niso le odraz hkratnega prikrivanja in izražanja notranjega boja priseljenke s prehajanjem v območje novega sveta.

Ključne besede: ženska gotska književnost, priseljevanje v Kanado, Ellen Ross

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Scottish immigrants helped to create Canada and played a vital part in the development of trade and industry that fuelled Canadian expansion before and after Confederation (1867). This is the immigration story sanctioned by history and oral tradition – a well-known mythology featuring Scots hardihood, canniness and staunch Presbyterianism. The task of this paper is not to debunk this myth, but to explore one concurrent counter myth negotiating the contact between a Scottish immigrant and Canadian reality. In the Gothic novels of a mid-nineteenth-century emigrant, Ellen Ross, one finds a fantastic story of emigration, imprisonment and deliverance that lends itself to decoding in the light of the emigrant's experience.

The type of reading I will attempt here is based on the precedent set by the critics who read female Gothic as an analogue to the repressions and exclusions of real women's lives (Kate Ferguson Ellis, J. Fleenor). If such hidden tales can be told through the medium of the Gothic, then perhaps the story of other, more overt types of women's experience could be similarly encoded. While attending to metaphorical readings, this study will nevertheless begin by considering the possible historical basis of the heroine's negative emigrant experience. For if the Gothic sections of Ross's novel, *Violet Keith, An Autobiography*, are to be read in relation to real immigrant experience, then we must ask what that experience was like for women in the nineteenth century, and how they expressed their feelings about it.

Additionally, there is the question of the inspiration for the Gothic section of the novel. Some critics have assumed that the nunnery Gothic traces its lineage to other sensational anti-Catholic literature of the nineteenth century in North America. However, an examination of the main features of this type of writing suggests that this is not an adequate account of this novel's literary ancestry. *Violet Keith* is a type of Gothic that is not completely traceable to works such as *Awful Disclosures by Maria Monk, of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836) and its imitators; there is evidence to believe that some of the Gothic features relate instead to Sir Walter Scott's border Gothic.

My final contention, then, is that Ross, a Scottish emigrant, writes a form of Gothic closer to home models than to those of the New World, while using that form to express the experience of entering the New World. The known facts of the author's life are slim. Born Ellen Edith Alice McGregor, the author lived in Banff and Inverness before emigrating to Montreal in the early 1850s. Widowed, and with two children, Ellen Stalker remarried Alexander Ross of Inverness and bore two more children before the family's voyage to Canada. Since few have actually read *Violet Keith*, I will briefly sketch the plot's main events.

Violet Keith and her brother are orphaned and left with only memories of a genteel French mother and her Bible, which on her deathbed she bade them cherish. The Bible's cover conceals documents that show the parents' marriage to be legal. Although the mother tries to signal to the

children the importance of what is concealed in the Bible's binding, Violet and her brother fail to understand. Only late in the novel does Violet, in re-covering her mother's gift, discover the hidden marriage documents.

After a boarding-school education, Violet becomes a governess in the household of the Scott family outside Edinburgh. She is sought in marriage by the family's eldest son, Robert. His father objects and Violet is driven from the house. She hears of an opportunity to teach in Canada, and takes ship. Following her friend Gertrude, Violet arrives at a convent school in Canada. Although the prioress is sympathetic, there is one nun who terrifies Violet, and soon the persecutions of that nun have transformed the convent into a prison. Violet ends up starving in a haunted dungeon, containing a dangerous pagan well, and escapes only as the convent burns down. Rescued by Robert, Violet uncovers the bible, finds the family documents and finally gets the family inheritance. Violet and Robert marry and make their home in Scotland.

Clearly, the change from Scotland to Canada is the catalyst for the change from a realistic, domestic story – a version of the familiar property restoration plot – to a tale of Gothic torture and imprisonment.

Before considering whether the nunnery experience in the novel can be a metaphorical analogue for immigrant experience, we must briefly consider to what extent if any it could be a more direct record of experience. After all, the novel is subtitled “An Autobiography.” What did happen, then, in mid-nineteenth century in Catholic convent schools in Montreal? In particular, what were the experiences of single female immigrant teachers? Could Violet's experience as a migrant teacher might be less fantastic than first appears?

First one must establish where these Canadian convents were located. Violet is imprisoned at a nunnery in “Algona,” Canada. This is an invented place, quite different in intent and effect from the real places named in the sensation literature. Although there are townships in Ontario's Renfrew County west of Ottawa called North and South Algona, it is unlikely that Ross envisioned an Ontario setting. The author seems to have distributed the geographical specifics in such a way as to dis-locate the reader.¹ Her Algona, “one of the first cities in Canada” (147), is reached by steamboat, two to three days travel from Montreal--her one definite place name. Neither Kingston nor Toronto, this might possibly be Ottawa. The urban setting and twin nunneries, however, almost mandate a Quebec setting, perhaps based on Ross's knowledge of Quebec City's Ursuline Convent School, or the Hotel-Dieu establishments of either Quebec City or Montreal.

Such convent schools did exist in Quebec City, Montreal and Ottawa. There is also evidence that single female immigrants were considered to be at risk. There were protests about conditions of immigration among single women, and some attempts to ameliorate conditions for this

1 There is also an obscure Gothic novel, *Don Algonah or the Sorceress of Montillo*, (1802) that Ross just might have had in mind. If Ross knew this title, then 'Algona' might have had the requisite Gothic atmosphere while also sounding appropriately Canadian. Other evidence from proper names hints at Ross's reading of forgotten Gothic novels: 'Poor sister Valleiry' from Violet Keith recalls *The Castle of St. Vallery* (1792).

category of emigrant worker. In 1879 Elsie von Koerber published a pamphlet called *Reception and Protection of Female Immigrants in Canada*, in which she speaks of “tales of shocking abuse of this special kind of emigration; the traffic, in fact, which is made with women as a purchasable merchandise” (Koerber 1879, 5). The pamphleteer’s concern was the vulnerability of unaccompanied female immigrants to prostitution – a moral danger rather than a physical one. Violet’s fears, therefore, may not belong entirely to the realm of the fantastic, although it is clear that at mid-century the main threat to any immigrant – male or female – was dying of cholera.

The real convent schools were more rational places than Violet’s St. Mary’s. For example, the 1883 prospectus for the Congregation of Notre Dame school for girls in Ottawa (one possible location for Ross’s Algona) reveals a place tolerant, if not actually secular. The school accepts young ladies of any denomination, and promises to exercise “no undue influence” (8) on the religious opinions of non-Catholic pupils. Good families sent their daughters to convent schools for snobbish reasons, not religious ones. Related to the “oldest educational establishment in Canada” founded by Margaret Bourgeois in 1656, the Ottawa establishment does, however, retain some conservative structures: correspondence is supervised, visiting is limited, students’ money is held by the Mother Superior, and the school uniform is black. Each of these details, so mundane in the cheery prose of the prospectus, is transformed into something sinister in the account of Violet’s imprisonment.

One has to look almost two centuries earlier than when Ross was writing to find historical evidence of convent conditions approximating those Ross describes. In the mid-seventeenth century, for instance, the sisters of the Ursuline convent in Montreal received young Iroquois girls as slaves. Closer to Ross’s time, 3724 children died while in the care of the Grey Nuns of Montreal (1847). The rearing of foundlings was one of the chief functions of charitable convent institutions, but the death rate for foundlings was an unbelievable 87%. However, one must put this statistic into perspective; Montreal in general had a frighteningly high infant mortality rate even in 1869. Small children did die in the care of the nuns, but this does not make their establishments into the sinister places of torture that Ross depicts.

As for the happiness and satisfaction of immigrant female teachers, the evidence is partial and inconclusive. Immigration societies do record concerns for the safety and morality of female immigrants. Nothing, however suggests that convents were luring underpaid Scottish teachers to Montreal and using them as classroom slaves. Instead, we have the testimony of a contemporary immigrant teacher, Mrs. Simpson, giving the valedictory address to the graduating class of her own school in Montreal in 1863, who testifies that “. . . I, at all events, have been so happy in my professional career in Canada that I have lost all homesickness, and desire nothing better than to end my days in this my adopted country” (Simpson 1863). Testimony like this allows us to assume that Violet’s terrifying experience is pure fiction.

Since nothing from the historical record corroborates Violet’s story of starvation and entombment, then the lurid parts of her story (the insane nuns, the dungeon, the pagan well-spirit) are thus dependent on fictional precedent. The novel has been associated on

these grounds with pre-existing popular, anti-Catholic sensation literature. Headed by the notorious *Awful Disclosures by Maria Monk, of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery of Montreal* (1836), a stream of lurid revelations about convent life were published during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. An earlier example is *Lorette, The History of Louise, daughter of a Canadian Nun; exhibiting the interior of female convents* (New York, 1833), and one much closer to Ross's own time is Sarah J. Richardson's *Life in the Grey Nunnery of Montreal; an authentic narrative of the horrors, mysteries and cruelties of convent life* (Boston, 1858). The critic Jeffrey Wollock has placed *Violet Keith* firmly in this tradition (Wollock 1974, 85–6). However, Ross's novel differs from these earlier sensational accounts in several respects, in particular in the use of corroborative detail, the political subtext and the degree of anti-Catholic sentiment in the text.

The clearest difference between Ross's novel and the anti-Catholic literature concerns corroborative Canadian detail. The other accounts all make references to objective place names, topography and geographical features. All of them name the priests, and all depict details of the world outside the convent once the victims have escaped. The escape route and its concomitant deceitful landladies, boatmen and cart men play a prominent role in the scandal stories and in their polemics. Such details support each narrative's claim to authenticity. Sarah Richardson's nun, for instance, escapes to the real town of Ogdensburg, then to Albany. She crosses the national border between the United States and the Canadas. She meets French speaking people in her flight. There is the mandatory 'teepee and moccasins' scene – a tableau of Indian life that seems to signify authentic Canadian experience. In contrast, *Violet Keith* does not exist in the world of geographical and national facts. Ross does not invoke corroborative detail of religious or secular life outside the convent walls. The French nature of French Canada is established by three words: 'habitans' 'charrette' and 'tuque'. The rescued Violet even chooses to skip the teepee scene (*Violet Keith* 454). Her 'Canadian nunnery' could be anywhere; its description could easily have been written by someone who had never been in Canada at all. The same is not true of the Scottish part of the novel, where the detail of place names, boat schedules, embarkation and disembarkation points, local schools and churches testifies to someone who knows that region well. Since generalization is not an overall feature of Ross's narrative technique, its presence in the Canadian parts of the novel distances the work decisively from other convent narratives that claim to document evidence of the Catholic threat.

Another difference concerns the political subtext of the sensation literature. Escape is a common theme, and physical liberation from the convent is always equated with political liberty, and compared to the condition of the post-revolutionary United States. Each escaped nun (with the exception of Maria Monk) is the "imprisoned American female" and enacts in microcosm the Boston Tea Party, Washington crossing the Delaware and so on, culminating in the cry of 'Give me Liberty or Give me Death' in Sarah Richardson's account. Ross's *Violet Keith*, on the other hand, lacks this particular political gloss. Ross is not interested in the United States or its liberties. It is not that *Violet Keith* lacks political subtext – far from it. A strong motif of the work is the call for independence and responsibility for women, for changes in women's working

conditions and for improved education for young women. The narrator, for instance, laments women's lack of choices in a passage which despairingly paints women's subordination to others' needs as part of the "discipline of life" (*Violet Keith* 98). The authorial voice of this novel is far from indifferent to the social and material world. In contrast, its connection to the actual, North American political and social world of mid-century is tenuous.

Different also, is the heroine's attitude towards Roman Catholicism. The staunch Protestant faith of its heroine finally saves her, but in the middle Violet almost succumbs to the pervasive Mariolatry of the convent. She is filled alternately with excitement and dread, "a sort of intermittent fever of the mind, having its heats and chills, the former full of a fear I could not define" (307). One of the convent paintings, "of the blessed Virgin, her hands clasped, and her beautiful head bowed down" (322) reaches out to Violet. "It was so real, it seemed a living, breathing woman oppressed with sorrow for her dead. I have more than once felt an impulse to take my handkerchief and wipe off the tear which lay upon her cheek" (322). A fascination with Roman Catholicism in its maternal forms, especially as embodied in artistic representations of the Virgin Mary and in Sister St Angelo, the Prioress, tempers the anti-Catholicism, and shows that Violet is conflicted – both repulsed by and attracted to the imprisoning space of the convent. The attraction of the mother figures, not inexplicable in an orphan, is part of the Gothic secret that Violet conceals. This pro-Catholic subtext is downplayed by older traditions of the female Gothic, where the Church of Rome and its institutions tend to be identified with the patriarchal family and its rulers (Ellis 1989, 45–9). The role of the Gothic heroine is thus "to embody Protestant individualism . . ." (Ellis 1989, 48). Violet's secret fascination with Mariolatry disallows this polarity, without asserting a unified position.

It is even possible that the real Gothic secret of the book is the sexual nature of the attraction felt by the heroine for the all-female world of the convent and, in particular, for its benevolent Prioress, who is entombed along with Violet. This would be only one of several strands of sexual irregularity that appear during the course of the novel (an androgynous nun, a voyeur, a priest who may be a pederast) but which are never fully explained. The reader of *Violet Keith* might well expect that these various strands will culminate in one horrific act of taboo violation, as would be the pattern in the sensational anti-Catholic texts, but Ross plays a subtler game. The unvoiced realm of maternal fascination remains firmly in place, though displaced into the Gothic spaces of the text, and on to female figures encountered by Violet within them.

This secret fascination with the forbidden Catholicism is lacking in the sensation literature, where the female narrators have long renounced any attraction to veil or cloister. This element may, in contrast, represent an imported, Scottish component in Ross's novel. It is traceable to the Gothic motifs used by Sir Walter Scott in his novels, *The Monastery* (1820) and *The Abbot* (1820), in both of which Protestant triumph is preceded by considerable engagement with Catholic characters and rituals. We will consider later how Ross's brand of Gothic both follows and adapts Scott's pattern, as she shapes her material to fit the demands of New World fiction. What Ross takes from Scott is a pattern of motifs interweaving Catholic, Protestant and pagan beliefs and talismans.

Ross sends the reader to Scott in a section defending the reading of novels as a morally permissible activity:

“What! You have never read a novel; never read Sir Walter Scott’s novels?”

“No. I knew Sir Walter Scott as the historian of Napoleon, Swift, Dryden, and others, but as a novelist, no.”

“You have a rich field of enjoyment before you, “said she [Hariote Scott]: . . . How did it happen that you never saw a novel?”

“Mrs. Moodie did not approve of young people reading works of fiction, and never permitted such books to be in the house.”

“I dare say; I know that among Protestants those who are considered pious people look upon novel-reading as nearly allied to the sin against the Holy Ghost. I simply pity such people. “(50–1)

This intertextual special pleading was common in nineteenth-century Gothic and romantic novels, which sought to deflect criticism of their genres. Here it serves to link Ross’s novel with the Old World pattern of monastery Gothic, not the New World tradition of sensational nunnery polemic.

Violet Keith, like other North American Gothic writing, does “recycle” (Griffin 2001, 159) certain standard elements of the fictional cloistered experience – innocent young woman, duplicitous priest, hostile older nun – but it adds prominent elements that are particularly reminiscent of Scott’s *The Monastery*. For instance, a secret book around which Catholic-Protestant conflict swirls haunts the centre of each work. *The Monastery* features a ‘black book’ (a copy of the scriptures in English – a heretical possession in the 16th century), which is a family possession and a mother’s only legacy. Like Violet Keith’s mother, Scott’s Lady Avenel passes on to the next generation a secret cached inside a Bible. The impetus of the plot is to discover what “mystery is wrapt in it”. Through many hidings and revealings and a trial by fire, this bible takes on near-magical powers. In Violet’s case, her tattered bible holds the actual power of conferring gentility, through the marriage license concealed in its binding – literally ‘wrapt’ in the bible. In both novels, the book is a maternal legacy and a source of both power and division within a family (brother is divided from brother in *The Monastery*). Each book also becomes a source of reunification for deserving members of the family.

In a further striking echo, both Ross’s and Scott’s novels feature pre-Christian spirits associated with water, as well as visits to mysterious underground spaces. Also similar in *The Monastery* is the clash between Protestant and Catholic systems, despite the fact that Scott’s novel remains almost completely outside the monastic building. Scott’s historical setting (the novel’s events take place somewhere between 1550 and 1575) dictates the co-existence of Catholics and Protestants in the Border regions, but Scott has deliberately chosen a plot that hinges on doctrinal differences, and ultimately on the conversion of key characters to Protestantism. Through the agency of the black book, Halbert Glendinning is anointed as hero, because he alone is unafraid either of its Christian message or of the pre-Christian demon that guards the Avenel family honour.

Scott's haunted locales (those manifesting and concealing the Gothic secret of the text) are all external – glen, pool, river, and waterfall. His family demon rises from a natural spring, and leads the hero, not into a dungeon, but into a grotto or natural cavern. The landscape Gothic of Scott is thus rife with the sublime. It is difficult to believe that Ross hadn't read *The Monastery*, for all these motifs are echoed in *Violet Keith*, where they have been re-incorporated into a monastic space – St. Mary's of Algona (the monastery in Scott's novel is also called St Mary's).

Scott's Gothic is rooted in ethnography, philology, and local history; its fantastic events are tempered by the structure of research into the costume, custom, superstition, and artifacts of the Borders. Ross borrows the motifs, but has no such ethnographic grounding. It's not that Quebec lacked an eventful pre-history: there was plenty of highly-coloured historical and legendary material about the early Jesuit and Ursuline missions in the Canadas.² However, Ross's narrative becomes a-historical as soon as Violet embarks for the New World. We have the irony, therefore, that Ross's Gothic which had available to it a wilderness landscape of undeniable awfulness and sublimity, turns its back on that landscape and re-inters a version of Scott's Gothic in a man-made architectural space owing more to literary precedent than to any realistic experience of external Canadian surroundings.³

If Ross's Gothic discourse, based on Scott's Gothic sublime, denies the Canadian landscape, it does, nevertheless, echo the discourse of early women pioneers in Ontario who wrote of their settler experience. If we stop thinking of Violet, in European literary terms, as a Gothic victim, and consider her instead, in New World terms, as an immigrant to the still undeveloped area of the pre-Confederation Canadas, then her bizarre convent experience can be seen as a displaced version of the female settler narrative. The immigration guide and the slightly different settler narrative became the best known genres to arise out of nineteenth-century Canada, typified by Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) and Catharine Parr Traill's *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836), and by the much less familiar *Canada: why we live in it and why we like it* by Mrs. Edward Copleston (1861).

In reading the Gothic ordeal as an analogy of the kind of settler immigrant experience, one is taking certain retrospective liberties with the text. Nevertheless, there are hints that legitimate this kind of interpretation. To begin with, the novel situates its actors in an overtly imperial world. In Ross's fiction (including *The Wreck of the White Bear*, 1870), characters move from one part of the British empire to the other. Army families are common (Ross's own was an army family), and regiments do duty in India and the Canadas. Indian connections both trading (the East India company) and military are mentioned, while other characters go out to plantations in the West Indies. Back at home, the dockyards of Leith and Glasgow, with ships leaving for all parts of the world, seem an unlikely launching place for a Gothic tale, but it is one of this novel's peculiarities that it keeps one eye firmly on Canada as the favored emigration outlet that it actually was for Scots. In short, Ross's fiction evokes a tangible nineteenth-century experience of Britain as the hub of an empire whose existence conferred mobility even on lower-class subjects.

2 Consider, for instance, the Filles de Roi, who had a decidedly Gothic fate. Between 1663 and 1673 these young women were recruited in France and sent under royal sponsorship to settle in New France and marry the wife-less male population. See Choquette.

3 Description of the interior of the convent is lavish: paintings, candlesticks, stained-glass windows, floral offerings and the altar (*Violet Keith* 322–3).

Moreover, Ross drops a broad hint about the emigration subtext by having Violet thrown out of a Scottish home where the family name is Scott – perhaps just an unoriginal choice, or, more likely subtle confirmation of Violet’s exile from the home of Scotland. After this banishment, her experience in many ways replicates the historical one of any would-be emigrant. She gets advice from one who has gone before, the experienced Miss Watson:

“Put off that sad face of yours,” said my companion, giving me a shake as she spoke. “Canada is in reality to us governesses not further off than London; were we in the latter we could only come home to see our friends at the year’s end, and we would have to work for half the sum you are to receive; if you tire of Canada you can come back next year, pay your passage, and have fifty pounds in your pocket to live on for a year, if you wish to do so. Going to a convent in Canada is part of the romance of governess life; . . .” (218).

This advice dwells on two salient details of Canadian emigration: distance and money. The crucial temptation for many real emigrants must have been the promise of higher earnings in the colonies. The major drawback must certainly have been the impassability of the North Atlantic. Real immigrants such as Moodie and Traill never made it home again. Only Miss Watson’s final remark concerning the romance of governess life points to the fictional function of Violet’s coming trip.

Despite this reassurance, Violet experiences the sense of loss and anxiety that we find in other accounts by female immigrants. Mrs. Edward Copleston reported “feelings of anxiety and despondency” at departure, mostly owing to “circumstances over which we had no control” (Copleston 1861, 7). The move across the Atlantic is accompanied by a sense of psychic displacement. This happens despite the fact that Violet, like many real immigrants, is going to join someone she knows.

The personal connection does not prevent her suffering from the loneliness that replicates a common immigrant experience: “Our own loneliness struck me painfully,” wrote one real immigrant. “Our family group looked so genuinely green and forlorn. . .” (Copleston 1861, 7–8). Of life in the bush, Moodie writes, “Man finds himself with God – alone” (Moodie 1852, 28); “The homesickness was sore upon me, and all my solitary hours were spent in tears” (Moodie 1852, 89). Even her sister, the normally cheerful Catharine Parr Traill speaks of being “buried in the solitude of the Canadian woods” (Traill 1836, 29). For Violet and Gertrude, convent life releases them from one kind of solitude, only to deliver them into another.

Accompanying the convent solitude and in apparent contradiction to it, is the experience of surveillance, what one critic calls “the pervasive Catholic spying and deceit” (Griffin 2001, 160). Violet is constantly watched in the convent. The masculine nun, Sister Agatha, dogs her footsteps and listens at doors. Violet must hide everything she cherishes on her person, for all possessions are subject to search. Even the body of the immigrant is not inevitably a site of privacy. This is a frequent refrain in the immigrant accounts too. Susannah Moodie documents the discomfort of setting up housekeeping under the direct and critical gaze of lower-class neighbours: “There is no

such thing as privacy in this country” (Moodie 1852, 80). The business of being observed was directly connected to the different class structure of the New World. It was not just being watched, but how and by whom that made it uncomfortable. The problem is connected to the gentility that was the reason for emigration in the first place. Many came, like Moodie, to maintain a social place, but found themselves in new conditions where the lowest had the right to criticize even the most ladylike. Inevitably the definition of the lady would change in the New World, but in the meantime, English immigrants like Mrs. Edward Copleston complained that as new settlers they were “objects of great curiosity” (48), constantly subject to the stares of the lower class inhabitants.

Violet’s surveillance is doubly uncomfortable because she is spied on by Sister Agatha, the masculine nun who is described at some length:

I had seen this nun before once or twice, and felt an instinctive dread of her, which I could neither account for or shake off. She was a tall, dark, hard-featured woman, with a sullen, defiant look; she seemed to me as if she was always plotting mischief. She entered the ward in which the Prioress and I were occupied, walking with great strides and a heavy step more like a man than a woman . . . (366).

Dark in complexion, Spanish speaking, coarse of manner and rumored to be from the ‘south,’ Sister Agatha compounds many features of otherness, but is accepted as the guardian of the convent’s religious purity. To be watched by her is to be under surveillance by another gender, race, religion, class and nationality. The psychic discomfort of this mirrors the conditions complained of by the Ontario settlers, Traill, Moodie and Copleston.

If one looks closely at Violet’s reasons for emigration, they are congruent with the economic-social motives of most real emigrants to Canada. First there is economic necessity; without any proof of inheritance rights, Violet must support herself in one of the ways sanctioned for gentlewomen – she must teach or be a governess. Then there is the impossibility of proving gentility without the papers concealed in her Bible. What sends her across the Atlantic is not flight from a tyrannical Mr. Scott, but the need for social class maintenance and repair, so common to nineteenth-century British emigrants. She comes in order to remain a lady, but ironically has had the means to do this with her the whole time: the all-important Bible. This will be the common discovery of all genteel immigrants, who will find themselves in a new system where what makes a ‘lady’ is increasingly redefined in the direction of intrinsic moral qualities. Thus, although her flight appears pure plot device, its Gothic structure replicates the system of social and economic expectations in which many emigrants were caught.

Then there is Violet’s experience of imprisonment. Should there be any doubt that this is an exaggerated version of negative immigrant experience, some words from Mrs. Copleston will serve to correct the picture:

I could afford to admire the noble forest at a distance, but when the possibility of my being *imprisoned in its vast depths for the remainder of my life* was mooted, I *shrank from such an ordeal* (Copleston 1861, 60; my emphasis).

Moodie, too, spoke of the Ontario wilderness in terms of a “dark prison” (Moodie 1852, 163) from which she had little hope of deliverance:

At that period my love for Canada was a feeling very nearly allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell – his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave (Moodie 1852, 135).

These passages raise an interesting question: were settlers writing like Gothic novelists, or was it the other way around? Traill and Copleston also use the trope of burial alive to describe their immigrant experience. The likelihood is that both female forms of expression – settler narrative and Gothic novel – rely on biblical rhetoric as an acceptable avenue for women’s expression of excessive emotion. Sections of the Bible such as the Psalms set patterns of lamentation for loss and abandonment as well as for rejoicing and deliverance. Ultimately Copleston did face her ordeal: despite recording feelings of suffocation in her earliest week in Toronto (Copleston 1851, 65), she persevered to become an immigrant success story – someone glad to call Canada home.

In contrast, Violet is placed in an actual dungeon, the nunnery’s crypt. Her cell contains a deep well haunted by an evil spirit; she is tempted with meager, salty rations while being deprived of drinking water, and all this occurs in a place ostensibly of female refuge. Ross has previously given Violet a premonition of this experience in the form of a dream:

I was lying in a deep dungeon, dug in the bowels of the earth, surrounded by thick darkness such as might be felt. I was confined there for some offence, of which I was quite guiltless; and it was darkness evermore, and days and months passed away, and was still there, surrounded by that black darkness; only once in a long time a faint ray of light came from above, and a mysterious hand let down a pitcher of water and a morsel of bread. (*Violet Keith* 116).

Violet’s nightmare uses the imagery of the Christian mystic, enabling several metaphorical readings of the later dungeon ordeal. It is likely that this interpretation of the dungeon as a mystic dark night of the soul was the preferred one for the Victorian audience, reading as they were from a context steeped in the rhetoric of piety.

In contrast, I am arguing here that Ross’s convent and its dungeon form a complex example of that Gothic “inner space” that Cynthia Griffin Wolff reads exclusively as a metaphoric locus for exploring the “dilemmas of female sexuality” (Wolff 1983, 208). I want to broaden the tenor of the metaphor to include the female immigrant’s condition and thus to elucidate Ross’s point about the emigration system and women’s participation in it. By dwelling on the stories of other convent inmates, Ross calls attention to the duplicity of institutions that exist ostensibly to provide refuge for victimized women, but in practice serve to imprison them and to suppress their stories. Two nuns’ stories illustrate how convents as well as emigration systems can lure women in.

The story of “Poor Sister Valleiry” (433) is relatively benign: she entered the convent with a broken heart. In compensation for worldly losses, the convent offers a life of “self-denying benevolence” (212). From this perspective, the convent is a place of healing. However, little actual healing is depicted, and long before her dungeon experience, Violet has come to view the convent as a limbo, where wounds are kept open and emotional maturation postponed:

I had become convinced . . . that the ideas I had formerly entertained of the happiness and tranquility enjoyed there were entirely fallacious. . . . I had learned that gossiping arrogance and avarice were rife here as in the world, and I well knew there were breaking hearts wearing out a hapless existence that bitterly regretted the irrevocable step they had taken (402).

Another convent inmate who, like the Canadian immigrant, cannot depart is the novice Emma, who entered the convent at fourteen and lost her wits ten months later when confined in a haunted dungeon (*Violet Keith* 435–6). Emma’s is the test case for Violet’s: her grisly fate threatens to prefigure the heroine’s unless the cycle of silencing and imprisonment is broken: “Would you like to become such an one as the first Emma?” threatens Sister Agatha. This old tragedy haunts the convent in the person of Emma herself, who still lives despite eighty-six years as a “raving maniac” (347). Emma embodies the unspoken function of the convent: to arrest the female will and mind from puberty (Emma’s presumable stage at 14) to centenary – her age at death. Ross stresses the close link between Emma and the convent itself by inserting (and fulfilling) a legend “that on the day of Emma’s death, the convent of St. Brides would fall to the ground . . .” (437). Both stories establish that the convent is built on a basic hypocrisy, that, promising refuge, it produces instead torture, isolation, surveillance, imprisonment and a choice of madness or death – of these being exaggerated features of the realistic experience of settler life as described by earlier writers.

The Catholic Church’s right to exist in the colony is also called in question when the dungeon experience reveals to Violet the foundations upon which the actual and sacral structures rely. What Violet discovers in the dungeon is that the Christian structure is built upon a pagan foundation “some terrible deed of darkness was done there by heathen hands in the days of the early Christian settlement” (435). Ross may be evoking an event of 1661–2, when a chaplain of the Ursuline monastery in Montreal was killed and allegedly eaten by the Iroquois (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). The ‘Eaten Missionary’ is perhaps the root of the fascination in all the anti-Catholic tracts with the eating habits of nuns. In some cases the taboo violation at the heart of the convent concerns food – the nuns are eating babies, eating novices or, more mundanely, eating meat when they should not. Ross’s narrative eschews these exaggerations from the anti-Catholic literature, while preserving the motif as a trope covering more interesting issues. Violet refuses the salty meat that will create thirst and drive her towards death in the haunted dungeon well. She cannot, however, avoid being herself swallowed up, as were the settlers in the Canadian wilderness. Like Jonah, she is disgorged, but not before she has seen in the dungeon the truth about the body into which she was so nearly subsumed.

The great horror of the experience at the convent, finally, is that the whole structure is founded upon blood spilled long ago in a monstrous parody of the mass. The Gothic structure, like the

structure of any immigrant's life, is built over an abyss of past violence and wrong. Significantly, Violet is strongly tempted to fall into the pagan well that holds the basal evil of the institution: this is just one hint of the extent to which Violet is self-imprisoned, self-deluded. Like other, real emigrants, she came willingly – “We were not compelled to emigrate,” confesses Moodie (194) – and has participated in the maintenance of the very systems of Catholic hypocrisy, on one level, and immigrant mythology, on the other, that entrap her.

One of the subtleties of Ross's *Violet Keith* is its suggestion that the Gothic horrors of the convent are not all that different from life in the patriarchal home in Scotland. The cynical Miss Watson who counsels emigration also points out this disturbing fact. At home a woman's gentility is preserved by selling the woman's body in marriage (the mercenary nature of this transaction is clearer in Ross's other novel *The Wreck of the White Bear*). In Canada gentility can be purchased at the price of accepting both the spatial displacement of the body and the violent displacement of original races and creeds.

Thus, although *Violet Keith* is short of the factual, new-world landscape details that one might expect in an emigration account, one can argue that Ross's Canadian nunnery is a Gothic structure that both expresses and conceals Ross's own conflicted feelings about immigrant life in the colony. This author has her heroine enter a space both geographical and psychological. In its combination of isolation, oppression, imprisonment and surveillance, it can represent those aspects of the New World experience most unpleasant to the female immigrant, and made even less palatable by the fact of voluntary participation. Both Violet and the average immigrant actively sought the transition to the New World, and both find that their own desires take monstrous form and threaten their lives before delivering them. Violet's miraculous escape from the burned convent perhaps expresses the dearest wish of many emigrants to return 'home,' just as Violet does to Scotland. Like many nineteenth-century novels by women, *Violet Keith* contains both protest and this measure of acquiescence to conventional wish-fulfillment. The subversive prescriptions of immigration Gothic inhabit the Gothic spaces of the text, echo the rhetoric of female immigrant writing and may even indicate an implicit discomfort with the initial violence on which the project of New World colonialism was premised.

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