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Diane Long Hoeveler

To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.-Susan Sontag

Passion has little to do with euphoria and everything to do with patience. It is not about feeling good. It is about endurance. Like patience, passion comes from the same Latin root: *pati*. It does not mean to flow with exuberance. It means to suffer.-Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 527

In 1816, Byron's Childe Harold bemoaned: "What deep wounds ever closed without a scar?/The heart's bleed longest, and but heal to wear/That which disfigures it" (III, 84), a fitting expression of the culture's fascination with psychic, emotional, and historical traumas. Felicia Hemans used these exact lines as an epigraph to her poem "The Indian City" in 1828, suggesting again the fascination with suffering that permeated the texts produced by this literary community. But by 1887 Friedrich Nietzsche was observing very much the same thing in his

On the Genealogy of Morals: "if something is to stay in the memory, it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory." Western culture has seemingly followed both Byron's observation and Nietzsche's admonition, for self-inflicted sources of suffering litter the history of our society, while a cult of masochism can be identified in more than just our religious institutions. Human beings appear to have a need to suffer, and concomitant with that need is the ancillary desire to record the wounding experiences in increasingly verbose and extravagant novels. I would contend that the gothic is one of the premier modern discourses of pain, and what it charts is what has hurt, and what has hurt is the process of becoming a secular society.

We would, I think, agree that religious wars largely shaped the major political and dynastic events of the Renaissance and early modern periods, and we have a tendency to take for granted that those struggles led to individualism, Protestantism, democracy, and the concomitant decline of the church's and the clergy's power and status. The rise of an Enlightenment ideology made possible the growth of capitalism, nationalism, and secularization, all of which privileged individualism, the private over the public display of spirituality, and the reading of the word itself rather than its interpretation by the priest. But to transform a society in this way, to move it from an oral to a print-based culture, to uproot traditional ways of doing and living and being could not have been easy or painless. Such an upheaval leaves behind marks, scars of modernization, and those scars are what the gothic sought to trace, preserve, and alleviate. Thus in the gothic we have monks who keep coming back from the dead, or nuns who turn out to be our mother, or peasants who are actually princes. History is a rough beast, with little respect for the props—like religion and class and gender—that we have erected to explain why life appears to have a certain shape or character. When history moves over these constructions, mowing them down, there is change, and sometimes this change is of a radical and painful nature. So literature like the gothic arises as an alternative theology, attempting to explain, soothe, and eradicate the pain of change by making sense of the wound, and it has its own series of sacred texts, we call them or at least Fred Frank calls them the "gothic pantheon."¹

But if the gothic is a theology, then what is its object of worship? It would seem that the modern individual—middle class, white, male, heterosexual, and capable of virtuous feelings and actions—is in fact the

new social and cultural divinity. It would appear, in fact, that as paradoxical as it might seem, we are actually talking about the triumph of secular humanism when we are talking about who survives in the gothic textual universe. But exactly how and why did such a construction emerge and how did the gothic collaborate in spreading the ideal of secular humanism? These are large questions, and in order to answer them it is necessary to address the subject of subjectivity itself, a topic that has always seemed to me to be circular or at best hopelessly self-referential. That is, human beings can think of themselves only as human subjects, although the definition of what exactly constitutes "human" has radically changed over the centuries, and for the last three hundred years or so it has included a fair amount of machine as well as animal imagery. I intend, however, to provide a brief overview of the construction of this particular modern and cultural subject and to suggest some key issues and texts in the development of bourgeois subjectivity in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century culture.

As Isaiah Berlin observed, what we now understand as the Romantic is an aesthetic rooted in the subjective (15). Dazzling displays of personality dominate the canonical works of the period as well as our discussions of these works. The individual on stage or on the page of literature, enacting a uniquely personal drama rather than a typological or formulaic one, seems in many ways to represent what we think of as the Romantic self. But as we all know, Romanticism has a stubborn open-endedness, and is not subject to normative definition; it cannot be generalized about much as we would like to be able to codify and limit its perimeters, if for no other reason than to make our own work easier.

To begin, it seems necessary to cite Friedrich Schlegel, who stated that human beings are characterized by a "terrible unsatisfied desire to soar into infinity, a feverish longing to break through the narrow bonds of individuality" (qtd Berlin 15). And yet it is also necessary to cite Chateaubriand, who claimed that his greatest delight was "to speak everlastingly of myself." We are, I think, at the crux of the invention of the individual. There is on one hand a desire to escape individuality, which can be seen in Keats, for instance, who dreams of merging into a nightingale's song or the figures on an ancient urn, or in Shelley, who seeks obliteration of the solipsistic psyche by union with his epipsyche, an idealized and feminized version of himself. But on the other hand it is clear that individual rights, the battle cry of the revolutionary spirit, was sweeping America and Europe, and

such a spirit demanded nations composed not of amorphous or interchangeable members of classes, but of unique individuals, each bringing their particular talents to the increasingly specialized capitalistic community. This need to nurture the separate and unique individual was complicated by platonic residue, however, the belief that none of us is whole apart from merger with another.

One interesting and succinct example of this dilemma can be seen in William Godwin's political gothic novel *Caleb Williams* when Caleb describes himself: "Solitude, separation, banishment! These are words often in the mouths of human beings, but few men, except myself, have felt the full latitude of their meaning. The pride of philosophy has taught us to treat man as an individual. He is no such thing. He holds, necessarily, indispensably, to his species. He is like those twin-births, that have two heads indeed, and four hands; but, if you attempt to detach them from each other, they are inevitably subjected to miserable and lingering destruction." The reference to "twin births with two heads," is of course a reference to the theory of androgyny put forward in Plato's *Symposium*, a work that Godwin's future son-in-law Percy Shelley would translate because it was such an influence on his own vision of the necessary flight from individuality. In short, egoism is condemned among the Romantics, and yet there can be no individuality without the ego, the solitary psyche.

One could give many examples of this central conundrum, but let me cite Jorge Louis Borges, who has written on this issue as much as any recent author. In an early essay titled "The Nothingness of Personality," Borges introduced his intention to "tear down the exceptional preeminence now generally awarded to the self.... I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without metaphysical foundation or visceral reality." As an early postmodernist, Borges asserts that "there is no whole self ... [while the person] who defines personal identity as the private possession of some depository of memories is mistaken." Further, he goes on to blast every theory on which individuality is based: states of mind, experiences, will, ideas, intentions, the emotions, the body, the soul. There is only, for Borges, the "provisional, the episodic, the present, the circumstantial."

The Gothic genre has traditionally been read as but one minor transmutation of the larger Romantic ethos, or more accurately as the dark underside of the more optimistic tendencies in Romanticism. The gothic

also presents the invention of the individual, but the gothic subjectivity is informed by a distinctly different epistemology from the ones advanced by Keats, for instance, or Shelley. For example, as anyone who has read Plato against Aristotle knows, the body and spirit split has been central to the evolution of notions of human subjectivity, while issues of inside/outside, interiority/alterity, and emotions/actions have functioned as the dominant bifurcations in any philosophical attempt to understand human perception, identity, fragmentation, or what we might today recognize as the phenomenons of psychic introjection or projection. An alliance between interiority and agency, inwardness and action, becomes, for instance, in Shakespeare the dichotomy between "seeming" and "being." Being able to read human beings as if they were books, the whole appearance versus reality motif in literature as well as in philosophical treatises, became a crucial concern as early modern society struggled with class upheaval and a new level of social, economic, and cultural fluidity.

Later, there were, as Sidonie Smith has shown, two interdependent histories of subjectivity operating during the nineteenth century, both of which have implications for understanding the ideological formation of the gothic genre (Smith 5-7). The first of these was what was known as "universal subjectivity," emerging out of Enlightenment beliefs in the self as unitary, reasonable, and located somewhere above and beyond the body. Middle and upper-class males, white and heterosexual, were the putative norm that was defined and codified by universal subjectivity, while all others were, of course, "others." The second strand, therefore, was "embodied subjectivity," based on the notion that body was primary and actually determined one's destiny. Women, people of color, and the lower classes were exemplars of embodied subjectivity because their sex, race, and economic status determined who and what they could be and become. Agency was not really possible for embodied subjects because their choices were already determined for them by the social roles they were born to fulfill (wife, mother, servant, slave).

The gothic genre, as well as what I would call the gothic *Zeitgeist*, arises at precisely the time that upper-class white males felt increasingly under siege by middle and lower class men, women's rights, political unrest, and the rapid economic and social transformations of their society. Originally a socially and politically conservative genre, the gothic originates in the mind of someone like Horace Walpole, a white upper-class

aristocratic subject haunted by his own sexual otherness.² So what began as a genre ostensibly based in the humanistic myth of the universal and privileged subject, actually fissured to focus instead on the dark others that were buried within that partial and inherently false subject. The gothic, in other words, is haunted by the bifurcation that plagued definitions of the self, as well as attitudes toward the body, agency, sex, class, and race. All of these avatars of indeterminacy were to appear on the margins of the major gothic texts in increasingly anxious formations. Thus *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) positions the politically dispossessed hero on the margins, only to redeem him—in a sort of manic act of guilt—as the rightful heir by the conclusion of the novel. Such an optimistic ending was not possible by the time Matthew Lewis was writing, and in addition to dispossessed and rightful heroes, devilish women and black slaves begin to appear within the gothic to complicate and challenge the upper-class white male's status and power in society. By the time *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) were written, full-scale anxiety about a stable, universal-masculine subjectivity had taken hold. The anxious, bifurcated and jeopardized male figure reached his final nineteenth-century shape(s) in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897), both texts suffused with dread and anxiety toward a masculine body no longer under rational control of the masculine mind.

In contrast to the male gothic tradition, the Female Gothic was an attempt by middleclass women authors to distance themselves from the discourse of embodied subjectivity and to embrace instead the tradition of universal subjectivity. Thus there is in the majority of Female Gothic texts a railing against the physical body and an endorsement instead of the life of the mind, reason, spirit, and the intellect. From the childless heroines of Ann Radcliffe to the loathing of the body that emerges in *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Mathilda* (comp 1820), female gothic heroines repress their sexual desires and subject themselves to male authority structures in a desperate bid for masculine approval and social acceptance. I would argue that white, bourgeois heterosexual women writers created their new socially acceptable identities by rejecting, even scapegoating women of color, as well as women who were of the lower class or of questionable sexual orientation (thus Wollstonecraft's *Maria* [1798] depicts the murder of lower class pregnant women, while her *Mary* [1788] focuses on the maid's death in an uncanny, fetishistic manner).

Charlotte Dacre's *Zolfoya* (1806) rewrites Lewis's *Monk* (1796), this time arranging for the devil to come to earth in a black servant's body.³

There is a pronounced fascination with black men and women in the gothic universe, but it is not a fascination that many of these people of color survive. John Fawcett and Samuel Arnold's *Obi, or the Three-Fingered Jack* (1800) presents a mutilated slave rebel who is finally captured and decapitated, his head triumphantly displayed on stage at the conclusion of the play,⁴ while the "dark" women in Brontë's *oeuvre*, most noticeably Bertha Rochester, do not survive to find happy endings in these textual universes. Scapegoating the other becomes a dominant cultural strategy employed by white women writers who seek protection by aligning themselves with white male heterosexual postures, thus defusing whatever suspicion or anger white men may harbor towards them. Within the female gothic universe, any deviance from the masculinely proscribed world of Enlightenment, secular values is marked as deviant and deserving of punishment, nay eradication. Sexual licentiousness, dueling, cruelty to animals, adultery, eating or drinking to excess, and public displays of emotions are coded by Radcliffe, Dacre, Austen, the Brontës, Mary Shelley, Joanna Baillie and other middle class women writers as behaviors not to be practiced, let alone condoned by normative bourgeois Britons.

If we examine the gothic as one possible extended historical document, a series of texts that trace for us the passage of cultural, social, religious, and economic change, then I think we can see that it both reflects those changes—puts them up in front of its contemporary readers as well as us for public scrutiny—while at the same time it effected change by accomplishing the cultural work that ideology strives to do. By reading gothic texts, the British public allowed itself to vicariously and bloodlessly experience the French Revolution, for these texts kill the father, smash the power of a corrupt clergy, and establish the hegemony of the young Protestant capitalist. Nineteenth-century British subjects never made the move to actually remove their king, although certainly they had cause (as periodic bouts of insanity do tend to impede one's ability to rule a country). Instead they were content to settle for the vicarious and sublimated experience of reading about revolution in place of experiencing it. So the gothic subject who is created in gothic texts is a surrogate for the reader, a hero or heroine who undergoes what the bourgeois Briton did not want to subject himself to—real action, real blood,

real guillotines. The consumer of British gothics was content instead to luxuriate in playacting the revolution from a safe distance, preferably in a soft chair and with a comforting fire blazing in the background.

My claim, then, is that literary characters are not simply embodiments of attitudes toward life or moral philosophies writ large as morality lessons; they are also constructs on which we project our very real historical fears, sexual anxieties, and racial and class prejudices. But just as authors struggle to create characters who will speak to the very intense and gothic issues confronting their culture, so do we as human beings read ourselves back into the experiences of these characters. We are actors in our lives just as they are acting for our amusement on stage or the pages of a text. We can recall here W. H. Auden's observation that "only animals who are below civilization and the angels who are beyond it can be sincere. Human beings are, necessarily, actors who cannot become something before they have first pretended to be it; and they can be divided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane who know they are acting and the mad who do not" (Auden 395). Let us assume, however, that the majority of Britons were sane actors engaged in that most perilous performance, becoming modern. Their society needed to accomplish the same work that the French clumsily and bloodily performed with a guillotine and some very funny looking hats. The British had already killed one king, and they did not, I think, want to relive that particular nightmare again. They instead chose this time around to experience the revolution by reading about the horrific actions of corrupt monks who deserved to be eradicated so that endangered middle class innocents would be safe in the newly emerging century. And when they were not reading, they were packing the theaters that staged adaptations of gothic novels, complete with ghosts on stage and all manner of pyrotechnics, smoke and mirrors, designed to convince the populace that revolution could be contained with the controlled borders of ideology.⁵

In addition to revolution, however, the gothic enacts a religious hysteria that is characterized by guilt, confessions, and imprisonments within abbey or castle walls. The killing of Catholicism in England took more than two hundred years, and the gothic charts that murder in all its convoluted moves. Killing the king becomes in the gothic the killing of a corrupt duke or monk, while the rationality so highly prized by Protestant individualism and Enlightenment ideology moves to center stage, creating a new cultural ideal that chastised idolatry, superstition,

hierarchy, and popery in all its forms. But one would hardly characterize the gothic as an Enlightenment genre. In fact, it is much more common to see in the gothic a series of ambivalent gestures, conflicted and contradictory poses, authors who mixed piety with equal parts of political and social hypocrisy. And it is just this neurotic and self-serving hypocrisy in its major characters that emerges in so many gothic texts. *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* springs to mind, with its series of split subjects, most notably Robert Colwin and his demonic doppelganger Gil-Martin. Colwin's madness is brought on by a belief in an extreme antinomianism that stressed that salvation could only be found through grace alone and that therefore God's elect were above all moral laws. Religious hypocrisy affects not merely this one household, but all of Scottish society, suggests Hogg, who takes great pleasure in depicting characters who are fissured by the conflict between what their irrational religion expects and what their secular society demands. Thus the mother is a pious adulteress and the hero a catatonic tennis player. Religion becomes the master signifier of deviancy within this particular gothic novel, as the wound being exposed is the necessary but painful cultural and social shift from a religiously inflected society to a secular one.

I have read and loved gothic texts for many years, long before it was critically fashionable to read or take them seriously. And I consider myself in good company when I muse on the fact that Foucault as well as De Sade were also aficionados of the gothic. The genre, quite simply, appeals to those who believe that the act of understanding culture can be found by consuming books, and that we can actually see history being written before our eyes if we only know that its messages are etched in pain. There was a terrific amount of guilt and angst circulating during the early Romantic period—guilt for what had to be exterminated before a new society could be brought to life, angst and toxic nostalgia for the passing of an old world order. The gothic charts the death of the old world of Catholicism, communalism, feudalism, and the rise in its place of the Protestant subject, individual, modern, secular. If Foucault is correct and power defines itself and spreads in culture through discourse systems, then the gothic became a powerful and popular discourse system because it spoke in the voice of the proto-secularist, the humanist, the white bourgeois rational voice that advocated modernism. The gothic's double, then, would have to be Sentimentality, which arose almost at exactly the same time and as a retort, an alternative discourse-system that

has been characterized as "neo-Catholic dolorism."⁶ Whether Britain could survive the process of secularization and modernization without a bloody revolution was in doubt until 1832, when the issue was settled without question. There would be no political upheaval in England as there was in virtually every nation on the continent, only more novels about the dire consequences of political upheaval—Bronte's *Shirley* (1849) and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) are two of the most well-known.

Modern subjects would henceforth locate their subjectivity not in religion, politics, economics, or social class. The British subject who emerged by the end of the nineteenth century was someone who acted out of the constraints placed on the gendered construction of his or her body. Control of the body with all its concomitant issues—fertility, wellness, aging, and death—these became the new issues on which the modern individual based his or her identity. Male subjectivity could no longer be located above and beyond the body if there was in fact no soul, and there could be no soul if there was no longer a universal belief in a supernatural religion. Men, in other words, became like women; they were feminized in their reduction to the merciless demands of the physical, decaying, corruptible body. *Dracula* as well as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) represent the final and late Romantic explorations of gothic subjectivity. In a society that no longer holds out the comforts that accrue from a belief in immortality, death becomes the ultimate gothic nightmare, the unimaginable abyss into which one descends, a state that the subject cannot imagine because none of us can imagine ourselves dead, none of us can accept complete and personal non-being. To stave off the horror of such a notion, gothic texts were written to soothe us with parables about the horrors of eternal life or everlasting youth. *Dracula* presents eternal life in a blood-filled body as a diseased and horrific possibility, while *Dorian Gray* attempts to present eternal youth and beauty as a curse: a lie, a perversion. When subjectivity no longer could be positioned in a spiritual, internal, bodiless realm, then the body itself, the external and mortal ontological being, became the final gothic reality for both men and women. And then the real revolution had occurred.

Notes

1. Fred Frank's website, *The Sickly Taper* [<http://www.toolcity.net/~ffrank/Index.html>], includes his omnibus bibliography entitled "The Gothic Pantheon." The authors included are the canonical members of the Gothic genre: Walpole, Beckford, Lewis, Radcliffe, and Maturin.
2. Walpole's sexual preferences, as well as those of Matthew Lewis, were the subject of gossip during their lifetimes, although both men led closeted lives that have only recently been discussed by their biographers. See D. L. Macdonald, *Monk Lewis: A Critical Biography* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000), and George Haggerty, "Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis," *Studies in the Novel* 18 (1986), 341-52.
3. I have explored all of these novels at greater length in my book *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Femininity from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1998).
4. *Obi, or the Three-Fingered Jack* was performed at the 2000 NASSR conference (September 14, 2000) at Arizona State University by a cast of performers who were supplemented intermittently by scholars who commented on the plot, music, and genre conventions of the work. This fascinating performance was perceptively reviewed by Catherine Burroughs in *ERR* 12(2001), 381-89.
5. Gothic drama has been explored in a number of works, most notably Jeffrey Cox's two books *Seven Gothic Dramas: 1789-1825* and *In the Shadow of Romance: Romantic Tragic Drama in Germany, England, and France*, as well as the recent special issue devoted to Gothic drama in *Gothic Studies* 3 (2001).
6. In her *History of Tears*, Anne Vincent-Buffault uses the term "neo-Catholic dolorism" to explain the prevalence of tears in sentimental French novels, poems, and dramas: "The experience of true suffering was close to the 'there is no reality but tears' of Pierre Simon Ballanche, which was accompanied by an intimate and secret perception of a personal experience of truth which belonged to neo-Catholic dolorism" (107). The focus of my new work is on applying the concept of "neo-Catholic dolorism" to the sentimental works written by British women writers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century period.

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