Allergic to Depths
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- Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin by Richard Davenport-Hines

All over the world, postgraduate students of English who might once have written on Wordsworth or Mrs Gaskell are now turning out theses on vampires, monsters, sadomasochism and mutilation. Most of this can be put down to Post-Modern faddishness, though vampires have a more venerable pedigree, as Richard Davenport-Hines notes in his agreeable romp through Gothic art from Salvator Rosa to Damien Hirst. Bram Stoker’s Dracula, now translated into over forty languages, has exerted an enduring fascination since its publication in 1897, with Dracula himself the most filmed fictional character after Sherlock Holmes. An English film, made in 1962, was responsible for five thousand fainting cases in cinemas, 75 per cent of them male. Women presumably see more blood than men, and men no doubt saw even less of it before they were allowed to be present at births. The late Romanian dictator Ceausescu decreed one of Dracula’s prototypes, Vlad the Impaler, a national hero, while 27 per cent of respondents to an American survey confessed to believing in vampires. There is a Santa Cruz Vampires Motor-Cycle and Scooter Club, and US vampires communicate by e-mail.

Post-Modernism’s obsession with the deviant, exotic and grotesque is partly an inheritance from Modernism itself. Modernism tends to find ordinary life tediously suburban, and sees the truth as disclosing itself only at an extreme. A tragic hero is anyone scooped off the 8.15 to Paddington and pushed to the limit. The acte gratuit, the existential gesture, the commitment sustained into death, the word to end all words, the one action which will fix your identity for all eternity: these are among Modernism’s myths of extremity, along with the belief that language itself is in so dismally inauthentic a state that only by purging or cramming or dislocating it will you force it to yield up its secrets. It is what one might call, after George Orwell’s 1984, the Room 101 syndrome: what Orwell’s protagonist says when a cageful of starved rats are about to burrow through his cheek and devour his tongue must undoubtedly be the truth. Since most of us who found ourselves in this situation would say anything at all, the strangeness of this doctrine should give us pause. Why should truth and extremity be thought to be bedfellows?

Part of the answer is that everyday life is now felt to be irredeemably alienated, so that only what violates or estranges it can be valid. For Post-Modern thought, the normative is inherently oppressive, as though there was something darkly autocratic about civil rights legislation or not spitting in the milk jug. Norms are just those aberrations we happen to endorse – in which case, since all aberrations are potential norms, they, too, ought to be suspect. And if consensus is the tyranny of the majority, as it seems to be for, say, Jean-François Lyotard, then there can be no radical consensus either. Since most purveyors of this wisdom pride themselves on their historicising cast of mind, it is ironic that they fail to see in it a reflection of the particular social conditions of modernity. For Samuel Johnson, it was the socially typical which was imaginatively enthralling, and aberration which was boring. Johnson had a proudly populist trust in the robustness of routine.
meanings, and saw language as embodying the common experience distilled from everyday practices. These days, it is not hard to find radicals who affirm the cause of the common people but dismiss their language as false consciousness. Post-Modern celebrations of the off-beat, marginal and minoritarian belong, among other more positive things, to an age in which the notion of a radical mass movement has become, not least for those too young to remember one, a contradiction in terms.

Davenport-Hines sees the Post-Modern as the latest resurgence of Gothic – a self-confirming case to some extent, since he tends to read the latter in terms of the former. But he has a point even so. The speech of American youth – *weird, gross, bizarre, wicked, scary* – is certainly the discourse of Gothic, which before Modernism arrived on the scene was the most resourceful antagonist of literary realism we could muster. Malevolent barons, lascivious monks, victimised virgins, shaggy ruins, mouldering dungeons: if these gaudy pieces of theatre hardly seem the stuff of high art, they nevertheless played their part in an extravagant critique of Enlightenment reason, not least from the standpoint of the women who represented that reason’s repressed underside. Gothic is the grotesque shadow thrown by its remorseless glare, the political unconscious of a middle-class society which has thrust its anxieties and persecutory fantasies into the safe keeping of its fiction. If we were to imagine that our daily social doings were all the time weaving a monstrously distorted subtext of themselves, an invisible verso to the recto of our waking life, then the guilt, horror and spectacular violence of Gothic might well be one place where this dreadful discourse could be uncovered.

There are other parallels between Gothic and the Post-Modern, which Davenport-Hines rather too tersely notes. If schlock has always been part of Gothic culture, much of which is terrible in more senses than one, kitsch plays an equivalent role in Post-Modern art. Television soap opera, which supplies ‘shocks, facile emotional thrills and factitious intensity by manipulating stereotypical characters in mechanistic plots’, is for Davenport-Hines the very essence of Gothic. But the two currents are also akin in their campness, their self-conscious theatricality and over-the-top artifice. This book’s subtitle – ‘Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin’ – belongs to that genre. Davenport-Hines sees ‘Goths’ as in revolt against the stable, cohesive bourgeois self, celebrating human identity instead as ‘an improvised performance, discontinuous and incessantly redeveloped by stylised acts’. This is to read the Gothic too doctrinally through the lens of the Post-Modern, with Ann Radcliffe playing Kathy Acker; but the analogy is suggestive. Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* is convincingly read here as high camp.

But there are important differences, too. Gothic represents a ruined or fractured realism, excessive because its desire carries it beyond the ego and social convention; Post-Modern horror belongs to an epoch in which horror itself has become conventional, and so must be suitably self-ironising. It is the culture of an era too calloused and streetwise to be shocked, and so reaps its wry humour from the pointlessness of any such attempt. Gothic, by contrast, is funny in the way all excessive intensity is, as well as in the manner of an obscene joke. It allows us to indulge our repressed fantasies so unashamedly that we laugh at its very bare-facedness, quite independently of its content.
Any terror put into an accomplished enough artistic form becomes enjoyable, and so self-contradictory. To this extent, Gothic is sado-masochistic in its form as well as in much of its content. We take pleasure in being terrified, not least when the terrors in question are those of others. As Schopenhauer knew, we reap pleasure from fictional frights partly because we relish our own immunity to the injury they threaten, and thus, as Freud might have added, we allow Eros its momentary triumph over Thanatos. But since the death wish means that we are gratified by destruction in real life, the enjoyment we gain from horror stories is also a heightened version of how we react to real-life alarms. Like the Freudian unconscious, Gothic is at once intense and mechanical, a realm of noble passion full of creaking machinery, hamfisted gambits and crude stereotypes. It is a world of trompe l’oeil, in which bookshelves conceal instruments of torture and nothing is as it appears; but if it distrusts appearances it is also allergic to depths, preferring to stage emotion and externalise its conflicts.

Just as Freud unmasks the bourgeois family as a cockpit of lusts and loathings, so the Gothic novel turns that sacrosanct community into a nightmare of incest, greed and lethal antagonism. One does not need to stray too far beyond the domestic hearth to find skeletons in cupboards, murky inheritances and murderous violence. Burke wished to portray political society as a family: the Gothic writers reversed the analogy to devastating effect. Davenport-Hines recounts the story of the extraordinary Kingsborough family of Mitchelstown Castle in Ireland, whose history outstripped their ill-proportioned Gothic pile in grotesquerie and extravagance. One Kingsborough, having blown out the brains of his daughter’s seducer, chose to be tried in the Irish House of Lords, after his daughter had given birth to a still-born child and lost her sanity. Dressed in deep mourning for the man he had murdered, and standing under the poised axe of the executioner, Kingsborough was found not guilty by every peer there. His son George, having commanded his tenants to assemble in his hall to explain why they had failed to vote for him at an election, went mad before their eyes. Committed to the care of a mad-doctor, he ‘was unwilling to conform to any regulations, but ... could give an opinion on the value of cattle’. When it comes to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, of which the author of Dracula was himself a member, Gothic is largely a question – to quote another Irish Gothicist – of life imitating art. Mary Wollstonecraft was governess to the Kingsborough daughters for a while, and an under-cook called Claridge later opened a hotel in London. If the demonic, macabre stuff of Gothic proves alluring, it is partly because the devil has all the best tunes. But why? For traditional theology, virtue is a matter of energy and enjoyment, and evil mere deprivation. Evil may make a lot of noise, but the dust and heat it raises derive from an incapacity for life, which is why nobody could actually be in hell. To be damned must mean to be dead. All this, however, is bound to look different when the middle classes are in the ascendancy. Once virtue becomes the deadly dull stuff of thrift, prudence, temperance, submissiveness and sexual repression, the devil has much less trouble in drumming up a fan club. Satanism is in this sense just the flipside of suburbia. As John Carey has observed, the grotesque freaks who populate the fringes of a Dickens novel represent the sadistic vengeance which the text wreaks on its own decorous middle-class story-line. Nobody would ask Oliver Twist to dinner if they could hook Fagin instead. Samuel Richardson must have known that the saintly Clarissa was a bore, just as the creator of Emma Woodhouse must have seen that the virtuous Fanny
Price was hardly a bundle of fun; but both Richardson and Austen are challenging us to imagine how virtue, in such predatory social circumstances, could ever be anything else. The transgressions of Gothic are dependent on the sobrieties of realism, just as the ‘bad’ body of Gothic – monstrous, mutilated, libidinal – represents the guilty yearning of the ‘good’, sanitised body of the suburbs.

A further parallel between the Gothic and the Post-Modern, though one which this study seems not to notice, lies in their political ambiguity. Davenport-Hines points out that Gothic fiction ‘is nothing if not hostile to progressive hopes’; for all its delight in excess and inversion, it is notably nervous of political upheaval. As he perceptively remarks, Gothic architecture evoked ideas of feudal hierarchy and stability which a good deal of Gothic literature took pains to subvert. But Gothic writing is more a revolution of the subject than a transformation of society, and much the same could be said of the politics of Post-Modernism. Much Gothic literature is sexually audacious for its time, and so, if the word ‘audacious’ still had any meaning, would a lot of Post-Modernist culture be. But in both cases, sexuality can come to stand in for other political conflicts, in a process of displacement which is of interest to the psychoanalytical theory that reinvented sexuality for our time. In the case of late 18th-century Gothic novelists like ‘Monk’ Lewis and Ann Radcliffe, this was largely because of a conservative stance towards the revolutionary events of their day, whereas for the Post-Modernists it is largely because there seem to be no revolutionary events around. If working-class militancy is dead, Marxism discredited and revolutionary nationalism on its uppers, then the field of sexuality can provide the forms of power-struggle, symbolism and solidarity which are less and less available elsewhere, along with a greater chance of political gains.

Gothic, as this book recognises, is all about power and domination: the fiction of the Brontë sisters, in which there is hardly a human relationship that does not involve a sadomasochistic power-struggle, is Gothic in just this sense. The Gothic is one of the first great imaginative ventures into what we would nowadays call sexual politics, boldly pursuing the business of power into the very folds and crevices of human subjectivity. To this extent, Foucault is a thoroughly Gothic theorist. But like a good deal of Post-Modern thought, the sexual radicalism of Gothic doesn’t imply a revolutionary politics in general. If sadomasochism can unmask sexuality as a political affair, it can also urge the delights of deference. Not every ‘Goth’ was a Sade (a social revolutionary to whom this book devotes some fascinating pages).

This is clear enough from Davenport-Hines’s inclusion among his Goths of Alexander Pope, the Earl of Shaftesbury and the architect William Kent. The dominant culture of 18th-century England was not averse to a spot of wild irregularity, not least when it came to gardening. Or indeed to the heroic couplet, which combines symmetry with freedom, the regular tapping of the metre with the curvings and flexings of the speaking voice. The sublime, an aesthetic notion much touted by Post-Modernists as subversive, becomes in Burke’s hands the intimidatory aura by which political authority secures our compliance. English ideology has always been canny enough to incorporate a fair amount of fancy and freewheeling, of that stubborn contingency which resists the high-rationalist schemes of the inhuman French.
Even so, quite what Pope, Kent and Shaftesbury are doing in a study of Gothic is a question worth raising. Davenport-Hines’s Goths are an oddly assorted bunch, including among others Goya, Piranesi, Fuseli, William Shenstone, Byron, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Evelyn Waugh, Poppy Z. Brite and David Lynch. ‘Gothic’ is no doubt as variable in definition as it is in quality, but one can’t avoid the sense of a certain arbitrariness of selection. It is not so much that any obvious authors have been left out; it is rather that there are a few queer-looking gatecrashers, along with some unpredictable swerving between art-forms. One of the greatest accounts of Gothic, Ruskin’s essay ‘The Nature of Gothic’, is passed over in silence. Nor does Davenport-Hines seem to spend much time actually thinking about his subject. A brief theoretical prologue, which concludes rather rashly with a flourish about the undying ‘Gothic imagination’, is followed for the most part by plot summaries and potted histories. Pitched adroitly in style between academia and the general reader, Gothic stitches together the topics of women, sexuality, the body, mystery, sensationalism and enigma. In today’s cultural climate, it is hard to see how it could fail to win a wide readership – just what it was surely constructed to achieve.