

Introduction

The history of critical thought is the history of its aversions, and since the 1960's certain prevalent hostilities tend to mark the contemporaneity of criticism. One of the most obvious of these is a hostility to the authority invested by previous generations in myths of origin. There are many examples of this intellectual tendency; one which comes to hand is Jacques Derrida's re-reading of Freud's account of the origin of the moral law in *Totem and Taboo*. Morality originates, says Freud, codifying our own favourite explanation into a kind of anthropological fable, in a unique historical event, namely, the murder of the primal father by the sons, and in their subsequent reaction to the deed:

The earliest moral precepts and restrictions in primitive society have been explained by us as reactions to a deed which gave those who performed it the concept of 'crime'. They felt remorse for the deed and decided it should never be repeated and that its performance should bring no advantage. The creative sense of guilt still persists among us.¹

Derrida simply asks the destructive question: how, and why could the sons feel remorse if this event is *before* morality, *before* law?

The virus has been sown: immediate changes occur in the status of Freud's account. It is now impossible that anyone could have been present at this reported event, even though it is plain someone must have been. Derrida seizes gleefully upon Freud's fascinating note that it appears that none of the sons, in any case, was able to take the father's place; so the father is more powerful dead than alive. More alive, indeed, when dead. The moment of origin has become uncanny:

Event without event, pure event where nothing happens, the eventuality of an event both demands and annuls the relation of its fiction. Nothing new happens and yet this nothing new would instate the law, the two fundamental prohibitions of totemism, namely murder and incest. However, this pure and purely presumed event nevertheless marks an invisible rent in history.²

The reality of the historical referent is 'irremediably fissured' and the result is

¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, tr. James Strachey, in *The Origins of Religion*, Pelican Freud Library, 13 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 222.

² Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 199.

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that literature—ie the imaginary—makes its appearance at the very point of origin; as if the history of culture approximated to the plot of *Hamlet*:

It is the origin of literature at the same time as the origin of law—like the dead father, a story told, a spreading rumour, without author or end, but an ineluctable and unforgettable story. Whether or not it is fantastic, whether or not it has arisen from the imagination, even the transcendental imagination, and whether it states or silences the origin of the fantasy, this in no way diminishes the imperious necessity of what it tells, its law. This law is even more frightening and fantastic, *unheimlich* or uncanny, than if it emanated from pure reason, unless precisely the latter be linked to an unconscious fantastic.³

It is no accident that these remarks should be cast in the way that they are, because Derrida, as usual, has a specific rhetorical purpose: he seeks to allegorize his description of Kafka's parable *Before the Law* into a universal *aporia* about the origin and nature of literature. But it is symptomatic of contemporary thinking that this enormously influential critic should choose to employ the uncanny as a metonym for the myth of origins. Derrida's manoeuvre, derived from the Structuralists he opposed, reminds us of where we have been travelling in the recent past; the Gothic, thirty years ago a minority interest, has steadily shifted until one of its central concepts, the *Unheimlich*, itself already transformed from Freud's original understanding of it, has begun to look like the code of codes.

The impact of this contemporary hostility to the univocal power of the originating moment has, by an inevitable reflex, profoundly changed the study of the historical Gothic, a fact to which several of the papers gathered here below testify.

In the matter of origins, what we notice with Derrida is that supposed precursors or sources become themselves only retrospectively, as later practices modify the experience of previous readings. This suggests some further lines of thought. Peter Nicholls offers a discussion of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or 'belatedness' (usually translated as deferred action), which seems of much general relevance to the Gothic.⁴

³ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴ In an essay titled 'The Belated Postmodern: History, Phantoms, and Toni Morrison', to appear in Sue Vine, ed., *Psychoanalytic Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1994).

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At the age of one and a half the child [the Wolf Man, incidentally] receives an impression to which he is unable to react adequately: he is only able to understand it and to be moved by it when the impression is revived in him at the age of four: and only twenty years later, during the analysis, is he able to grasp with his conscious mental processes what was then going on in him.⁵

Deferred action is then, Nicholls reminds us, a product of 'the *excessive* character of the first event which requires a second event to release its traumatic force'.⁶ Thus the restructuring of the past in retrospect forms the past, in a reworking of the original site. It is not simply a question of remembering, retrospection, or recollection, because in some sense the past has not happened before, it happens only in the process of restructuring. Thus, '*nachträglichkeit* calls into question traditional notions of causality—the second event is presented now as the 'cause' of the first—and its retroactive logic refuses to accord ontological primacy to any originary moment'.⁷ In some sense at least, the first event becomes an effect of the second, and the effect of the present on the past is to cause a repetition within which something new is happening. The excess of the second event, or moment, is only explicable with regard to the first, and Nicholls quotes Lyotard on this collision of two temporalities, a first moment of shock without affect, and a second moment of affect without shock.⁸ So the idea of origin is called into question because assumptions of linear sequence and causality have to be renegotiated.

The Gothic was 'belated' from the beginning, a revisioning of past events experienced as trauma. Whether we want to speak of the remembering of the French Revolution, the dark shadows of the Jacobite haunting, or the religious and social turmoil out of which the modernity of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took its shape; to speak of an 'aesthetics of trauma' involving an apparent excess of affect makes perfect sense, and many of the contributors to this volume seem to be working along such lines, tracing the historical processes that are renegotiated by the gothic's spectacular acts of reprision (or misprision, as they may often seem).

Time was when the literary historian was obliged to portray Horace

⁵ *Pelican Freud Library*, 9, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 278, n 2.

⁶ Nicholls, *op cit*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 8.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the jews'*. Quoted by Nicholls, p. 13.

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Walpole as the absolute beginning of it all, the father of the Gothic novel (in fact, in the old literary history, the originator was always inconveniently early, a precursor, like Kierkegaard's Adam, unable to occupy a place in the history which he himself engendered); but no longer; now, the hoax, the scandal, of Walpole's counterfeit beginning has come under scrutiny from two different angles: one paper, from Emma Clery, throws light upon the duplicity of the discourses in the two Prefaces to *The Castle of Otranto*, showing how the formations of aesthetics are imbricated in contexts of economic transformation, and questioning our essentialist complacency about what the term 'Gothic' represents; while the complementary analysis, from Jerrold E. Hogle, treats these imbrications of discourse—the ghostly circulating values of the counterfeit—as continuous with their prior configurations in Renaissance culture, the author combining a structuralist sense of the sign with the New Historicist critique of power.

In both these studies, a critique of absolute points of origin is used to advance a new cultural interpretation of the eighteenth-century Gothic. The unique historicity of the moment is split and transformed into a series of ever-widening cultural perspectives. This sense of the scandal within the origin opens the way to new directions for future research. The sense of a reflex seems to be an enabling one: from the evidence below, scholars are not visibly locked into the *aporia* of post-structuralist thinking. In fact, the critique of the myth of origins implied in many of the papers sites itself in the context, not of an ahistorical aestheticism, nor of literary history *per se* at all, but of cultural space, in particular the space demanded or yielded by the discourses of religion and politics.

So, John Allen Stevenson re-historicizes and re-politicizes the Freudian uncanny in his analysis of the discourses of the marvellous and the Gothic in Fielding—showing a clear connection between the representation of ghosts and the responses of author, characters, and readers to Jacobitism—and offers us a new and convincing political interpretation of Partridge's notorious literal-mindedness about the ghost of Hamlet's father; Tim Marshall completely recontextualizes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, viewing the 1818 and 1831 texts in the context of the run-up to the 1832 Anatomy Act and the legislation concerning grave-robbing instituted in 1832; Richard Haslam politicizes the work of Maturin, viewing its horror as inextricably related to the author's theological polemics, a form of the 'Calvinist Sublime'; William Hughes, too, in an exploration of Bram Stoker's revisions to the text of *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, argues that Stoker had become concerned about his departures from orthodox

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Protestant doctrine about the Resurrection, even to the point of censoring his own text; Allan Lloyd Smith reads the spectre of the American Revolutionary War behind Irving's story of Rip Van Winkle; and Alison Milbank exposes another 'irremediable fissure' in the Sublime: concentrating on the Burkean tradition in the later Victorian Gothic of Le Fanu and Collins, she shows how the discourses which represent this elusive concept split its apparent unity and construct gender differences.

All of these investigations have a common point—they assume that the Gothic is not so much a literary genre as a broader cultural response, and as such is reducible neither to the purity of origins nor the purity of literary form. Purity of genre comes under scrutiny in Victor Sage's discussion of ambivalence in five gothic texts—he exposes the presence of laughter in a recurrent farce of mistaken identity lurking within certain extreme moments of horror in Radcliffe, Dickens, Le Fanu, Stoker, and Stephen King. Charles Crow investigates the intersection of gothic and naturalist fiction in London's *The Sea-Wolf*. And David Seed's study of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, while taking its departure point from Todorov, relocates the idea of readerly hesitation in the cultural metaphor for conspiratorial secrecy of the 'closed door'.

The notion of *nachträglichkeit*, or belatedness could be said to operate in the Gothic in a further sense as well, in the production of the uncanny and the explanation of hauntings as repetitions, or echoes of suppressed earlier events of the psyche's history: and in this context many other of the essays here included take their place: David Punter's study of the passions of Gothic as reencounters with the terrors or pleasures of the originary, infantile self; Francesca Orestano's account of the domestic horrors of the little-read American gothicist, John Neal; William Veeder's interpretation of the relations between form, psychoanalysis and gender in Washington Irving; and Ben Fisher's investigation of the psychoanalytical 'possibilities' of the Gothic in *Moby-Dick*. Edmund Cusick's study of Jungian archetypes in Stoker's fiction; Jochen Achilles on Sheridan Le Fanu's use of fantasy to express psychological necessities; Andrew Higson's study of 'the secret of female desire' in *The Innocents*, the film of *The Turn of the Screw*; all these might be subsumed within some such general frame as the concept of belatedness in the individual consciousness.

But not all of the essays in this collection could—or indeed should—be forced into relation with such reencounterings or restructurings of the past. The collection begins, and so this Introduction ends, with a blast from Maurice Levy, 'Gothic and the Critical Idiom', which takes issue with the 'blind ruthless

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chaotic proliferation of meaning' whereby the word has come to be applied so variously as to have lost much of its original force: his paper amusingly mourns the decline of the 'glorious epithet', which in its original sense at least, it has to be admitted, we in this conference and this collection have perhaps further exacerbated.

Allan Lloyd Smith

Victor Sage