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**From the Selected Works of Steven Bruhm**

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# Encrypted Identities

Steven Bruhm

# Introduction

## Encrypted Identities

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In Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, we discover, along with our beleaguered heroine, Eleanor, an inscription on the wall of the haunted mansion: 'HELP ELEANOR COME HOME'.<sup>1</sup> Later, in 1971, William Peter Blatty's Chris McNeil (of *The Exorcist*) will find another inscription – 'HELP ME' – written on the body of her demonically possessed child, Regan.<sup>2</sup> And in Stephen King's novel, *The Dark Half* (1989), the sometimes delusional writer Thad Beaumont experiences the horror of a series of murders committed by a fictional character that his writing had brought to life; connecting each of the murders to the others is a sentence written on the wall above the victim's body: 'THE SPARROWS ARE FLYING AGAIN'.<sup>3</sup> What we see here is a Gothic fixation with inscription of texts, one that goes back to the Gothic's eighteenth-century roots in Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and Charles Robert Maturin (whose *Melmoth the Wanderer* is driven by incomprehensible hieroglyphics and fragmented narratives). But as I have argued elsewhere, this fascination with texts, especially those focused on murder, violence, and possession, speaks to a larger concern in the Gothic aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> Given that the Gothic is obsessed by wordiness – confessions, secrets, rumours, explanations, sermons, tales within tales, and narratives whose very length often reaches monstrous proportions – the Gothic *performs* a fascination with language and with the phenomenology of loss. As Maggie Kilgour points out in *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, this overwhelming sense of loss is accompanied in the Gothic by the need to resurrect, to conjure up from the crypt the Gothic subject, the Gothic secret, and to inscribe that loss in a proliferation of language that borders on obsession-compulsion.<sup>5</sup>

It is that intensely productive tension between loss and writing that is the focus of this collection of essays. This special issue of *Gothic Studies* arises from the Fourth Biannual Conference of the International Gothic Association entitled 'Gothic Spirits ~ Gothic Flesh', which was held in Halifax in August 1999. While the purpose of the conference was to investigate new links between the figuring of spirit and of body in Gothic aesthetics, the essays chosen for this volume more

specifically focus on problems of textual generation when that which is being inscribed is at the same time encrypted: buried, hidden, lost from view. Each of the inscriptions which I quoted above refer to some hidden truth, some ghostly, haunted information that must be conjured, made into visible language, read. But such legibility only increases the horror within each novel, as it points even more forcefully to the presence of the supernatural, that which can never be captured in language.

To theorize this tension more fully, I want to refer here to Jodey Castricano's fascinating discussion of 'cryptomimesis' in the first essay of the issue. 'Cryptomimesis' is Castricano's neologism for the writing of the dead, a writing of the Other in which the preposition 'of' or 'for' performs a double meaning: the Gothic writes *about* the dead as its subject matter, but it also writes by *taking up the place of the dead*, the 'of' connoting the sense of 'by' or 'in the voice of'. While Castricano fruitfully reads this phenomenon in the deconstructive writings of Jacques Derrida (with a little help from Stephen King), I think we can extend its implications across a multitude of Gothic productions. This volume, then, is about writing Otherness, writing death, in a way that paradoxically makes present that which must remain absent – in other words, to create the identity of the encrypted dead while at the same time insuring that the other's identity remains encrypted, displaced by the representing agencies of language.

By this definition, cryptomimesis paradoxically reifies loss by writing ghosts and spirits into being. It deploys language both to fill up a hole in the subject – a hole created by loss or death – and to create further loss, that which results from language's displacement of the lost object. To explore the range of meanings in a cryptomimetic Gothic, I have ordered the essays that follow into two sections. The first section deals mostly with meditations on the nature of identity and subjectivity, especially as it is encoded by that most Gothic of narratives, psychoanalysis. As Linda Jones argues in her essay on *Melmoth the Wanderer*, the phantasy of castration still remains a useful template for discussing male subjectivity and productivity, in that cultural production becomes a metonymic substitute for the fear of loss and of disempowerment. But, as Jones also makes clear, Freud's discussion of this castration shuttles back and forth between the symbolic or abstract (that which is other-worldly, supernatural, or metaphysical) and that which is centered in the body with its secular, material presence; Freud seems to pit the subject's Gothic spirit against its Gothic flesh in a way that privileges neither but instead allows Jones to locate a Gothic aesthetic at their interstices. For both Kathy Justice Gentile and David Punter, this shuttling between physical/psychological wholeness and the consciousness of loss, absence, and dismemberment is the very definition of the uncanny. The uncanny text is that which engages the self with its own materiality but which also abjects that material body – encrypts it – through writing. The purpose of such verbalizing is to attempt to stabilize what comes to be called the subject's 'identity', but uncanniness is precisely that which foregrounds ubiquitous loss, the loss of bodily wholeness, of a unified self, of stability.

Thus, the centralizing problem of this special issue of *Gothic Studies*: the spiri-

tual (or metaphysical) must depend upon the corporeal to make it speakable, to present it to our view; but at the same time the spiritual must repress the corporeal, elide or attack it, thereby rendering it absent. And to turn the screw further, the corporeal continually and inevitably gestures toward the spiritual (that which animates the body, that to which the body must always be seen to signify) even when that body is ideologically opposed to the spiritual, when that body insists on living a life of materialist empiricism or social realism rather than imaginative transcendence and re-creation. To flesh out this point, I want to define the following tension in the Gothic, at least insofar as the authors in this issue theorize it: the Gothic's often conservative and rationalist program – from Ann Radcliffe to Stephen King but by no means including all Gothic cultural productions – depends upon a divorcing of the mind from the body or, in religious and only somewhat dissimilar terms, the spirit from the flesh. Yet, that divorce of mind from body in the Gothic is not only a rationalist means of gaining control of a wayward flesh. It is also what often becomes the monstrous: villains who follow bloodlust without conscience (what William Hughes calls 'excess without remorse'); brilliant thinkers who disregard the bodies of themselves and others; grotesque distortions of the balanced, symmetrical, rationally conceived body, which David Punter foregrounds wonderfully in his essay here; the mutilation or mortification of the heroic Roman warrior ideal that was an icon of the French Revolution. These violences do not only mark a lapse of synergies between the spirit and the flesh; they also document in their excess the futility of the human subject's attempt to sublimely transcend the life of the body.

Such an emphasis on excess becomes a turning point in this volume of essays. In his reading of desire in *The Monk*, Barry Doyle disrupts the Freudian emphasis on Oedipal lack by spinning it through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. Emphasising the proliferation of desires over the vortex of lack, Doyle lucidly theorizes what, for me, is a crucial point of the Gothic: the way its aesthetic obsessively produces meaning even though its subjects (and, historically, many of its critics) see only compulsive repetition, return, the triumph of the death instinct. By situating Ambrosio within the paradoxes of lack and desire (a paradox that much recent psychoanalytic, feminist, and queer theory has sought to unravel),<sup>6</sup> Doyle not only ushers us into a more emphatically social consideration of the problems of cryptomimesis or writing the dead/Other, he also allows us to approach more clearly the relation between creation and loss. As with all the essays in the first section, loss is a kind of *revenge* in that the very recognition of loss (or even, some might say, the unconscious experience of loss) is itself an exercise of language- or image-making. However, the image or the word which is produced by loss and desire also generates loss and desire in that the word is never fully able to complete the subject's dismembered body or to lay his/her ghosts to rest. The Gothic subject is always a 'subject in excess', desiring more than signifying systems can provide.

Which brings us to the second half of this special issue. The 'subject in excess', which is paradoxically produced by repression (that is to say, desires are prolifer-

ated by and through repression), is, according to William Vaughn and the second group of essays, an ethical question. The relations between the self and itself so far discussed have been ostensibly intrasubjective, but cryptomimesis is also a drive to write the self/other that is by definition *intersubjective*, marked by and creating the social sphere in which ethics is acted out. To write the other in a Gothic mode is not only to draw upon spectres that may already be said to exist (in the familiar topoi of the ancient manor house, the quasi-medieval superstitious world of Catholicism, or the always already haunted absences of the American New World); it is also to create those spectres, to construct, in Terry Castle's words, the spectralization of the other, by which elements of culture are imbued with a haunted, supernatural presence where only materiality should be.<sup>7</sup> In this issue, for example, the easily recognizable social dynamics of high-school hell become transmogrified into tales of vampires, souls, and possession, as Kathleen McConnell explains, just as the extremely pragmatic, baldly hungry vampires within the Dracula tradition are re-invented as creatures somehow concerned more with Gothic spirits than with Gothic flesh, which is the true object of their desires, according to William Hughes. Similarly, the enforced repression of Italian-style opera, argues Anne Williams, produces a Gothic that continues to be haunted by operatic tropes so that the Gothic becomes 'spectralized' by the ghost of opera; and David Jarraway's queer adolescent boy deploys an irreconcilable dialogics of sameness (linguistically, the 'homo') and otherness (socially, the 'homo' more still), to rend the heart of the American national narrative with its investments in rationality, epistemology, and the policing of sexualities. In a queerly productive way, these essays all lay out the ways in which cryptomimetic, Gothic spaces are simultaneous spaces of being and of self-destruction, resulting in the creation and destruction of the social other.

Put another way, the second half of this issue asks the following questions: how does the subject's desire for difference – both in itself and in the other against whom it defines itself – predicate the social and the interrelational? How does the Gothic represent difference when that difference is itself contested? (For difference is necessary to ethical relations in the social world, yet difference must be enough of the same so as not to appear monstrous, queer, or socially catastrophic; one must continually reinvent oneself as other in order to remain different from others, to claim oneself as an individual.) Does the cryptomimetic desire to write the other – and thereby to resurrect it, to un-bury it – modify or represent the other in the social sphere? If so, how? And how do the instabilities of language which I discussed above further complicate or ambiguate the configuring of the other? Ethical questions to be sure, ones that, in the Gothic at any rate, circle around the entire structure of the cryptomimetic imaginary arguably at the heart of Western culture. What is the possibility of a social order (indeed, what is its *desirability*) if the subject is always constituted by, in Jarraway's words, 'divided allegiances of being'?<sup>8</sup>

The problem is of a social order founded on an otherness that must continually negotiate the same – and here we think of a tradition that extends at least as far

back as Shaftesbury and the Moral Sense Philosophers. Of course, this problem is ultimately an historical one. Logically, then, the hauntedness of writing marks the historical with Gothic vividness, indeed excess. Horace Walpole raises the point in the preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). His now famous Gothic staple – ‘*the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation*’<sup>9</sup> – encrypts the central problems of the Gothic and of the social in general: the problems of an ‘original’ sin whose source can never really be traced (for who is a father without having first been a son? Who is the ‘real’, original father?); the ubiquity of corruption which the subject can never hope to escape (as in the angry cosmos of Charles Robert Maturin and others); the problem of revolution (French, working-class, domestic, psychodynamic) in which the victim ineluctably becomes the tyrant.<sup>10</sup> Legacies and inheritances here take the form of manor estates, social structures of normative sexuality and gender roles, or, as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, William Hughes, and Michelle Massé all stress, the inheritance of language with its haunted epistemes and overdetermined, normalizing connotations. And these problems frame the central tensions of the issue you have before you: the very system of haunted, cryptomimetic language makes the individual and social episteme real (in the Foucauldian sense of constructing it, giving it form); yet it also keeps it from entering the Real (in the Lacanian sense of that which can never be articulated), which is before or beyond the Symbolic realm of language, the physical or psychological trauma. (And our most obvious example is the Columbine high-school massacre, whose absence to us is both recorded and created by the massively imaginative media reports that have become the ‘[un]real’ Columbine experience.) History, that *idée fixe* of the Gothic, is that which records the centrality of human experience at the same time that it renders that experience unknowable, cognizable only through the metonymic agencies of narrative.

This brings us back to the issue with which I began my remarks: the delineation of a theory of Gothic language. In various ways and through various methodological lenses, the authors explore the strategies by which the language of the Gothic becomes a metonymic sign of absence and loss. What is lost is the stable centre of knowledge, a reliable and reifiable episteme; but, by the very logic of trope itself, this Gothic language works overtime to come at the thing which it cannot speak or about which it must speak too much. By pointing toward the absence at the centre of both the self and the social, it engages its reader in excess, an excess of sound and fury that does not signify nothing, but signifies in ways that are uncontrollable, unpredictable. Thus the Gothic is, in its subject matters, its characters, *and its audiences*, an undelimitable network of engagements, investments, and cathexes. Always the question is: who will read what text in what way? For example, how will Dylan Klebold take up the signifiers of his favorite TV show or video game? How will Anne Rice or Poppy Z. Brite take up the materiality of the Nietzschean *Dracula*? How will Jim Grimsley’s Nathan take up the allegorical myths of adolescent/queer America? And at the same time, this undelimitable network of engagements constructs an equally undelimitable network of perverse, distressing,

and pleasurable readerly identifications. To what degree do we pleurably take on and become Darryl Van Horne of Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*? And what are we to do, as Michelle Massé asks, with a Gothic text that invites (coerces?) us to identify with the position of the dominant in a sadomasochistic culture where victims are not consensual, are not safe? The cryptomimetic impulse of the Gothic – and especially the Gothic culture that is the West of the late twentieth century – revels in constructing and engaging our sympathies, even (or especially) when those sympathies are being manipulated in a way contrary to what we might tentatively call authorial intention. The cryptomimetic impulse makes such an enterprise inevitable and relentless, even though at the same time it masks its orientation toward difference and the other. And so we are still cryptically haunted by the questions that rattled the Jacobin novelists of the 1790s: what are the mechanics of an ethical sympathy as it is produced and manipulated by texts? What exactly is gained by writing loss, and what is lost by writing to excess? And of course, what social ends does all of this serve?<sup>11</sup>

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#### Notes

- 1 Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 146. The inscription is allegedly made by the ghost of Eleanor's mother who is wooing her daughter back into the house.
- 2 William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (New York: Penguin, 1971), p. 329.
- 3 Stephen King, *The Dark Half* (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 78 and *passim*.
- 4 See Steven Bruhm, 'On Stephen King's Phallus, or The Postmodern Gothic', *Narrative* 14.1 (1996), 55–73.
- 5 Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 6 And the key text for this attempt to make lack productive remains, for me at least, Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 7 Terry Castle, 'The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*', in Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown, eds, *The New Eighteenth Century* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
- 8 I should note here that Jarraway uses this phrase to modify 'adolescence' as a particular age category and not the social in general. However, given the Gothic's notorious reputation as a juvenile aesthetic, the trope of adolescence may be a rich and apt one that scholars of the Gothic may want to consider reclaiming as an epistemological starting point. An excellent place to begin such an exploration would be with David Punter's *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, The Body and The Law* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), esp. pp. 6–7.
- 9 Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto, Three Gothic Novels*, ed. Peter Fairclough, intro. Mario Praz (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 41; emphasis retained.
- 10 For a discussion of revolution and its confusion of victim and tyrant, see Ronald Paulson, *Representation of Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). Paulson is particularly interested in how the two definitions of 'revolution' –

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that which is a break from the past and that which is a total circular return to the past – is figured in the Gothic representations of the French Revolution.

- 11 For a fuller discussion of the problem of sympathy in English Jacobin novelists, and in the Gothic in general, see my *Gothic Bodies: The Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

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