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From the Selected Works of Steven Bruhm

November, 2006

Nightmare on Sesame Street: or, the Self-Possessed Child

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These days, when you leave the theatre after a fright-movie, you can't go home again – not because you've lost your innocence, as the adage suggests, but because you're afraid that your child will kill you. Children wielding knives, communing with ghosts, portending Satan or Armageddon: such is the stuff of Hollywood mega-marketing, as if it were tapping into our culture's imperative to bear children so that it might punish us for agreeing to comply. The Gothic has traditionally transferred the home, that mythical site of comfort and safety, into a fantastical and phantasmatic slaughterhouse, portraying it as a microcosm of the political, social, and religious tyrannies of (usually) fathers. This is no less true of today's Gothic, but now there seems to be a startling emphasis on *children* as the bearers of death – from Stephen King's novels to mainline media's 'kids who kill'.¹ The history of Gothic fiction has taught us that what we most love is also what we most fear, but why children? And why now, at the turn of a new millennium when hope should be in the wind? Why have the comforts of home (*heimlich*) been transformed into something frightening, strange, uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), and why do children lead the way to our envisioned destruction?

My preliminary answer: because the twentieth century has inherited – or invented – far too many contradictions in its theories about children. Let's begin with the most *heimlich*, the most grandfatherly, of these theorists, Benjamin Spock. In his now legendary book, *Baby and Child Care*, Spock asserts that people inevitably learn to parent from the way they were raised as children: 'We all end up at least somewhat like our parents, especially in the way we deal with our children.'² From this it follows that a loving, nurturing family is the best way to ensure a loving, nurturing child who, in Spock's vision, will grow up to be a loving, nurturing parent. A few pages later, though, Spock will undercut his utopianism by asking,

What happens if the child you've got differs from the kind of child you thought you wanted? . . . Some by nature seem active and outgoing, others are quiet and shy. Some are easy to raise and others are just plain difficult . . . Everybody knows that children are born with quite different temperaments. (*BCC*, 8)

Allowing that ancient nature/nurture contradiction to creep in here, Spock unconsciously suggests a major problem in the discursive matrices of childhood. Like many of his colleagues in the baby-manual business, he seems to imagine a child who is the product of its domestic environment while being at the same time a predetermined, already-programmed human being. By this standard, proper child-rearing is at once imperative and redundant; we must *form* the individual that at some level we believe already to be its own unique self.

Spock and other baby consultants are speaking to a specific cultural problem here, one that goes unacknowledged in their writing.³ Obviously, they draw on the legacy of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to whom they nostalgically look back in hopes of recuperating the 'innocent' child.⁴ This child is born with no internal dispositions, conflicts, or knowledges, but rather is infinitely malleable. Its susceptibility to experience offers infinite developmental possibilities. (By the same logic, this child elicits ominous warnings from critics worried about Internet pornography or sex and violence on television – anything that may destroy innocence through the pernicious power of representation. Because the child can be constructed, it can be corrupted at the same time, and so what a child 'learns' from the parent will be crucial in determining what kind of person that child will become.) But this fantastical child invites another contradiction: we live in a culture haunted by Freud, for whom the child is always defined by conflicts, desires, and aggressions, instinctual drives he located in the human being's animalistic 'id'. In our Freudian world, the spectre of childhood violence and sexuality emanates from the child itself in narratives as diverse as *Lolita* (1955), *Pretty Baby* (1978) and Spock's *Baby and Child Care Book*.⁵ Parenting becomes the challenge not only to lead and direct in the 'proper' and 'healthy' way, but also to recognise and negotiate that which seems to be innate, the child's specific interests and temperaments, its curiosities and its sense of body. If mishandled, these 'natural' instincts can foster a life-long sense of shame about the physical, emotional, and sexual self. Thus, a theory of innate innocence butts up against the natural presence of desire, of sexual curiosity and bodily expression. However, what might appear here to be a paradox is actually a dialectic: contemporary parenting models insist that children be granted some degree of sexual curiosity and knowledge but only so that *knowledge can be formed, manipulated, channelled into the proper*. That which is internal and perhaps 'innate' to the child must be brought out to be worked upon and directed. In our culture the child must be sexual but not too much, must be innocent but not too much.

If what is understood to be innate in the child's personality becomes the stuff upon which the parent works, then we might ask what happens to the idea of The Child during those moments when we invest most heavily in ideas of innocence and domestic happiness. What kind of relationships can we forge with children when we need them to be paradoxes: fully formed citizens of the state yet ciphers who can guarantee some ontological 'goodness' in humanity?⁶ I'd like to suggest that such questions drive the representation of children and parenting in the contemporary Gothic – that transhistorical register of cultural anxieties and repressed

ideas, especially ideas that relate to the bourgeois family. Since the end of World War II, North American and British culture has become obsessed with the representation of children, and especially children in the context of horror and Gothic violence. As the return of men from the war in Europe forced middle-class women out of the paid workforce and into the home, domestic space was re-animated to something resembling its former, nineteenth-century status of moral exemplum. It once again provided a model for national governance, for the transmission of morals, and for the proper division of gendered labour. And like the children of the previous century, these children were often fundamentally Good – Polyannas, Little Orphan Annies, Disney fabrications. If there was naughtiness here, it was the product of influential social forces brought to bear on children more sinned against than sinning.

Thus the child could serve a number of cultural functions at once. First, in the psychological and philosophical devastation brought about by the war, the child could heal. The beauties of its innocence offered us hope that someone could be immune to evil, hope even that all of us may have been born into a state prior to evil and social corruption (the legacy of John Locke and his project of replacing original sin with the tabula rasa). Second, such children could continually do cultural work as potent Cold-War weapons. As sites of innocence, they were vulnerable to foreign invasion. By promoting the sanctity of the child (the altar boy for the true priest, Family Values), normative American culture in the 1950s could incite outrage over the presence of the political, sexual, or ethnic other. Children were being invaded – by ideas of communism and atheism in the 1950s, by feminism and homosexuality in the 1960s and 1970s (not that any of these categories is so clearly defined) – and the product was terrifying. The product was the Gothic child.

As Stephen King has carefully anatomised, Gothic literature in general and Gothic children in particular have monstrously proliferated since the 1950s.⁷ Most interesting are the ways the Gothic deploys a putative childhood blankness to serve specific cultural ends. In the Gothic, as in Rousseau, that blankness announces a vulnerability to harm: indeed, children in the Gothic face a huge arsenal directed against them. Some are victimised by biological or technological innovation: in Ira Levin's *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), the boys are produced by mothers who have been implanted with Adolf Hitler's genetic material and then are placed in homes that mirror Hitler's childhood as closely as possible. We find this situation genetically cloned in the 1991 movie, *Omen IV: The Awakening*, where Damien Thorne's sperm has been posthumously planted in a woman's egg to produce a new race of satanic children.⁸ The xenophobic thrust of these narratives finds its counterpart in stories depicting the extra-terrestrial invasion of children: the kids of *The Midwich Cuckoos/Village of the Damned* (1957, 1960) are thought to be created by some cosmic ray (clearly coded as Soviet).⁹ That phenomenon remains with us, fuelled by the enormous popularity of *The X-Files* and mainline movies like *Progeny* (1998).¹⁰ Religion as well creates the possibility for external invasion, this time from Satan himself: he has either cast his seed everywhere, giving us *Rosemary's*

Baby (1967) and *The Omen* (1976), or he is setting up shop in children's bodies, as in *The Exorcist* (1971) or Kenneth McKenny's 1985 novel, *The Changeling*.¹¹ However, the twentieth century's fascination (always a Gothic one) with victimisation actually produces a panacea for the problem with which I opened this essay. A child's 'natural temperament' or 'disposition' to anything other than wide-eyed innocence is simply forgotten about. Any biological determinant of nastiness is a perversion or aberration; it has nothing to do with the 'natural' processes of copulation, conception, gestation, or birthing. Neither parental genetics nor parental child-rearing practices produce this Gothic child, and so adults are quite comfortably off the hook: our non-responsibility for juvenile evil absolves us from guilt, and our call to arms against a sea of foreign monsters assures us that we will fight for children/morality/god-and-nation until death.

But we can only wish that the popular contemporary Gothic were as comforting as the scenario I've just outlined. While the rise of the Gothic child in the 1950s and 1960s could mostly be pegged to the fear of foreign invasion, there were also domestic factors at play in the perceived corruption of the child. Parents too became possible suspects in the perverting of youth. As Phillip Wylie's *A Generation of Vipers* (1955) makes clear, the post-war return to an emphatically domestic space brought with it the perfidious force of 'momism', the situation in which the mother defines herself solely by her role as child-rearer. Her over-attention to her children, Wylie charged, produced in them a selfishness and helplessness; her boys (Wylie's chief concern) were becoming effeminate and weak, hardly the stuff of a national American character.¹² (One thinks here of Robert Bloch/Alfred Hitchcock's Norman Bates [1959/60] and the eponymous Willard [1971] as fitting examples; or Rhoda in *The Bad Seed* [1956], Bette Davis's brilliant Baby Jane Hudson [1961], or the children of *The Brood* [1979], who are the physical embodiment of their mother's hatred and rage.¹³) This momist poison – a canker in the very organ that, in the nineteenth century, determined the health of the national body – weakened the American character by attacking its masculine fitness; moreover, and for my purposes here, it also fuelled the explosion of the Gothic child in the 1970s.¹⁴ Already under duress, the middle-class family was especially vulnerable to the ideological attacks of feminism, civil rights, and gay liberation in the late 1960s. The 'other' was demanding a legitimate and legitimating space in American culture, and this demand, by women and queers in particular, further destabilised an already shaky family while intensifying a discourse of the family as the only refuge from the perils of liberation politics. In *The Exorcist*, Chris McNeil's feminism, her divorce, and her successful career are greatly to 'blame' for daughter Regan's demonic possession; indeed, Stephen King sees in Regan the voice of an entire counterculture, transforming the juvenile delinquency of the 1950s into the 'generation gap', social protest, and anti-Vietnam campaigns of the 1960s (*DM*, 169). Yet, Chris's decision at the end of the novel to return home with a newly infantilized Regan and to suspend her acting career champions the family over the hard-won gains of feminism and the youth movement. The revolutionary shift of oedipal identities in the 1960s produces a Gothic child while the return to a

reformulated (but clearly recognisable) family unit exorcises the demons that haunt the nation.

Of interest to me in this cultural shift is the effect it has on the construction of the child, especially within the Gothic. As I've just indicated, we see a marked change from the child invaded by the political other to the child invaded by the domestic non-other, by the people to whom the child is biologically and socially most connected. But that critique is hard to stomach if you happen to be at all invested in the idea of your family. And so what got produced along with the familial critique – perhaps because of it – was a tacit denial of that critique in favour of something much more palatable: the intrinsically rotten kid. Here, the evil child is not produced by Russia, science, religion, or the family because the evil child is not *produced* at all. Frank Davies' son in the 1974 film *It's Alive*, like Ben Lovatt in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1988), or even Cathy Ames from John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952), is malignant in the womb, long before any corrupting force has access to him.¹⁵ Here is no Rosemary's baby or Damien Thorne (*The Omen*) sired by Satan; no devil, Russian, Martian, or mother makes the child do anything. In fact, the etiology of these children is never discussed, almost as if juvenile malignancy were to be expected. For many Gothic children, evil essence precedes existence.¹⁶

Like the fantasy of foreign invasion, this innate evil absolves parents and professionals from the guilt of causality. For example, we can detect a startling elision of parental, physical, and supernatural responsibility in that most causal of Gothic narratives, *The Exorcist*. Throughout the novel and the film, William Peter Blatty is fixated on tracing Regan's unwanted behaviour back to its *source*, so that what is seen to be unnatural in her can be explained and eventually cured. This etiological quest takes predictable forms, depending on who is doing the questing, and rehearses that range of causal possibilities I discussed above. For the medical and psychiatric community, the cause is somatic: a lesion on the brain stemming from childhood illness. Or there is autosuggestion: Regan might have read or heard about demonic possession and absorbed it as a 'real' possibility. For Chris, Regan's aberrant behaviour comes from the trauma of her divorce and the guilt the child may feel about it. All these scientific and psychosexual explanations eventually give way to the one Blatty most vigorously promotes, demonic possession. Yet, despite his Jesuit agenda, Blatty undermines his own causality thesis. His stand-in, Father Damien Karras, a priest entrusted with getting Regan 'cured', continually finds all kinds of reasons why the possession theory doesn't work, even after he is committed to believing in it. All the telltale signs of possession have actual 'scientific' explanations that point to Regan's own innate talents rather than to her being possessed. Her ability to speak in Latin and German can be explained by telepathy, an abnormal ability to read minds but one which has scientifically documented history and is by no means evidence of anything supernatural. Stigmata, more evidence that a demon abides within, can result from the patient's affliction of her own skin (and that the stigmata in question – the words 'help me' appearing on Regan's abdomen – is in her own handwriting undermines the demon theory). Nor does Regan

necessarily commit the heinous crime of which she is suspected: twisting the head of Burke Dennings 180 degrees, a feat requiring superhuman strength. The head-twisting was possibly a freak side effect of Burke's fall out of Regan's bedroom window and down a long flight of stairs, a fall resulting from a push that any 12-year-old child could effect upon a drunken man. As for Regan's ability to turn her own head around to face behind her . . . well, if this proves demonic possession, then I'm afraid the contortionists in *Cirque du Soleil* require exorcisms too. My point in all these examples: rather than emphasise the danger of outside threats to the innocent contemporary child, these narratives create an interpretive *blankness* in the child that goes beyond some Lockean tabula rasa. We do not know causes, we can only see effects. But one thing is certain: the Gothic child is not an eternal Innocent waiting to be liberated from the forces of possession (somatic, domestic, political, metaphysical).¹⁷ The Gothic child is not a Child at all in the sense that it fits into any of our available discourses on the child-as-subject. And because of that illegibility, I shall argue momentarily, our culture is bent on killing children.

The binary opposition between innocence and possession/corruption – which I am suggesting is no opposition at all, but rather a dialectic – produces in contemporary culture a panic about who children are and what they know. The contemporary Gothic has a particular emotive force for us because it brings into high relief exactly what the child knows, or what the child may be suspected of knowing (by those of us who have read our Freud). Invariably, the Gothic child knows too much, and that knowledge makes us more than a little nervous. John Wyndham's 1957 novel *The Midwich Cuckoos* makes children terrifying on the grounds that their intelligence is far superior to that of adults and that they are hungry for more knowledge. (Interestingly, this novel sired two of its own Gothic children, the 1960 *Village of the Damned*, and John Carpenter's remake of that film in 1995.¹⁸ That this third version should appear in the midst of an almost maniacal child-protectionism points to the cultural fantasy of child-murder that lies just under the surface of our putative child-loving.¹⁹) Regan McNeil is supposed to know only about things like making presents for mommy out of *papier maché*, but she also knows about cunnilingus, masturbation, straight and queer sexual positions, maternal abandonment, and what priests get up to after hours. When Stephen King's Timmy Baterman and Gage Creed return from the eponymous Pet Sematary (1983), they are chock-full of *secrets*. Timmy comes back as 'some sort of all-knowing daemon' who '*knew things*', things like the fact that Alan Purinton's 'wife is fucking that man she works with down at the drugstore'; or that Jud Crandall has the unseemly habit of frequenting a whorehouse in Bangor.²⁰ The truth of these claims increases the horror of Gage Creed's pronouncement that Jud's dead wife Norma had been having affairs all their married life:

What a cheap slut she was. She fucked every one of your friends, Jud. She let them put it up her ass. That's how she liked it best. (*PS*, 381)

Elsewhere, that odd oedipal couple Lestat and Louis, from Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), realise with horror something that they had not suspected

of their 'daughter' Claudia: 'She knows! She's known for years what to do!'²¹ She knows about hunting, about feeding, about erotic desire. Like the other children who are not possessed by evil but just *are* evil, Claudia has received little training in the act of vampirism; the maternal Louis is too sentimental to teach her things. Her knowledge is a combination of instinct and embodiment, the two things we cannot protect our children from. Once again, Freud trumps Locke: the Gothic child is not only not blank, but the information buried in the layers of the unconscious *will* return from its grave to destroy the stability we enjoy.

If there is a causality in any of this juvenile evil, it is in our reactions, our constructions, our insistence on explaining why our children are anything less than angelic. The Gothic child's (sexual) knowledge actually emerges from the very contradiction of what it means to parent. We want our children to be mature, self-reliant, intelligent, the brightest kids on the block. Indeed it would seem that the winsomely ornamental child of the nineteenth century was a mere aberration in western history: contemporary culture is much closer to the early moderns in its configuring children as miniature adults, except that now children's wishes, ideas, jurisprudence, and supposed reason are relentlessly solicited to make decisions about everything from family vacations to choice of stemware at dinner parties. But it is precisely this grown-upness that we most detest in our children – that is, if the contemporary Gothic is to be believed.²² The children of *The Midwich Cuckoos* and *Village of the Damned* sit at their school desks like attentive pupils (they are model children in this regard) but everyone knows that their knowledge exceeds that of adults. Louis Creed of *Pet Sematary* is in that ubiquitous parental (and especially paternal) bind of wanting what he most fears and fearing what he most wants for his child. Having suffered the accidental death of his son, Gage, Louis learns that internment in the Micmac burial ground behind the Pet Sematary resurrects corpses. But there's a catch: the raised dead often come back malignant and intellectually stunted. Louis fears that a renewed Gage may spend his life as a '*boy who eats with his fingers and stares blankly at images on the TV screen and who will never learn to write his own name*' (PS, 289) . . . in other words, he will become the over-achieving yuppie's definition of every *other* American kid in the late twentieth century. What he gets instead is a child wise beyond its years . . . and this is much worse. A TV-watching, illiterate couch-potato would at least have given Louis the satisfaction of knowing that his child would always remain somewhat innocent. Like Rousseau's Emile, Gage would be free of the corrupting influence of cultural signifiers (Emile because he is in nature rather than society, Gage because he'd be too stupid to pick up on anything). But as the contemporary Gothic – drawing on sources as early as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) – makes clear, the child cannot be kept innocent. Knowledge is inevitable; it is the imperative of culture generally and parenting specifically.

That imperative to impart our knowledge to our children breeds the Gothic in the following way: it links Locke and Rousseau with Freud and Benjamin Spock to form a history of child development as *imitation*, a modelling of behaviour and identity after the parent. This history – from Rousseau to Spock – implicitly

assumes that the child will imitate or identify with the best of what is thought and said by the parent – indeed, the parent is s/he who, for the most part, only thinks and says the best (at least this is the definition of the ‘good’ and ‘loving’ parent). But from the time Rousseau runs into the forest with Emile to the time Freud writes his chapter on Identification in *Group Psychology* (1921), we find an anxiety about exactly how that identification works: What will get identified with?²³ What structures of behavior and thought will be produced by that identification? How will the identified or incorporated subject-pieces of the role model intersect with the disposition, temperament, and talent of the child doing the identifying? Will the child turn out like Emile, a self-controlled, intelligent citizen who has incorporated all of the father’s best traits, or will it turn out like Regan McNeil, who seems to have identified with (a) her mother, who is independent and sceptical of religion; (b) Burke Dennings, who is foul-mouthed, racist, and sacrilegious; (c) Damien Karras’s mother, who exploits her son’s guilt to destroy his sense of self and his career? All of these characters are ‘in’ Regan; she has incorporated them all, and they all speak through her. Clearly the sense of horror in the narrative comes from adults recognising their own acculturated voices emerging from within the child. Parental identification may be the means by which we gleefully produce the healthy, balanced child (a narcissistic reflection of ourselves), but it also signals the degree to which we cannot control exactly what the child will identify with or incorporate. We as adults are the model for identification *precisely because* we know all those things the child is not supposed to know, and so identification becomes treacherous business: I want my child to incorporate models of intelligence, rationality, and generosity, but what if she also incorporates my sexual fantasies, my angers and aggressions, my pernicious ways of manipulating my peers? And what is even more worrisome to me is whether my child will incorporate much of what I understand to be ‘good’ in me – my respect for authority, my work-ethic, my liberality in matters sexual – and enact them in ways more in line with her own interests and investments, so that respect for authority becomes neo-Nazism, work-ethic becomes unchecked capitalism, and liberal sexuality becomes something I may call perversion. Ultimately, the problem with parental modelling, especially as it is expressed in the Gothic child, is that identifications rarely inscribe themselves on tabulae rasae. Rather, they intersect with, mesh, distort, and get distorted by that ‘temperament’ that Spock and science tell us is in the child at birth. The construction of the child may be ubiquitous but it is by no means stable or predictable in its effects.

The fear that our children know both what we desire they should know *and what we know they shouldn’t know* goes far beyond whether we want them to be brain surgeons or french-fry dispensers. It goes to the very core of what it means to be an adult and a parent. *The Omen’s* Damien Thorne comes into the world not simply to spread discord and to upset the baby-sitter but to replace his adopted father Jeremy as the American ambassador to London. By *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981), he is well on his way to being the father of the nation, the President.²⁴ It is one function of children, and not only Gothic children, to overthrow

their parents and to replace them in the matrices of power. What is at stake in this overthrow is what Freud described as an oedipal conflict resulting in the murder of the father, and the glorification and sacralisation of the dead father. In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud writes of the primal father who hordes females, keeping them from his sons. These sons eventually destroy their tyrant father and consume his body. Their cannibalising of him – an archaic forerunner of the Eucharist – enacts the kind of identification I just outlined: it endows them with his strength while ensuring his disappearance. The father then becomes Father, sacred and totemised, an object of adoration arising from what was an object of envy, fear, and loathing. In Gothic convention since Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the vicious competition between father (figure) and son is a major structuring device of the narrative. In classic Gothic, the protagonist is usually the son, the competition with the father constructing the anxiety of the son's role as son, his placement within the domestic economy, and his placement in history.

But it is less the psychology of the son that interests the contemporary Gothic I'm discussing than it is the psychology of the father. Freud's discussion of the murder and incorporation of the father – the identification with him – then proceeds to anatomise the son's ambivalent feelings of guilt and power, feelings that extend to the oedipal complex generally and to a father more symbolic than real. What would happen, though, if *Totem and Taboo* were re-written to consider in depth the father's subjective investments in this whole conflict? What if the primal father were less The Tyrant – as he is in, say, classic Gothic or contemporary abuse narratives – than the rounded, complex, nuanced male thinking about his place in a domestic sphere remoulded by the Women's Movement? Freud's narrative of the primal horde regularises history by plotting a linear trajectory where the old die off and the young rise to power, but the contemporary Gothic invites us to consider the problem *in reverse*. The narratives I'm considering have less to do with the child battling the parent than with the parent battling the child. The bundle of joy we have so carefully fostered – innocent yet possessed by our worldliness, blissfully naïve yet battered by our imperative that it know – is our monster child whom we, Victor Frankenstein-like, have constructed so as to be out of our control. Thus, we find an inversion of the psychoanalytic commonplace that sees the child's identity (its ego) as being incorporated from or stabilised by the Dead Father. Rather, one's offspring robs one of identity. This happens not just because the biological fact of replication takes elements of the parent's body and displaces them into an other, autonomous self, but because that other is at some level our potential murderer, s/he who would – and *will* – replace us in the position of authority. Baby-making – that which so often stands as the primary signifier of success in the heteronormative adult world – is really a Gothic usurpation of one's entitlements and privileges as father/Father or mother/Mother. What procreation joins together procreation tears asunder.

Doesn't this threat to identity, then, go a long way to explaining the fundamental fantasy of much contemporary Gothic: the killing of children? We may not like Freud's theory of the oedipal family – based as it is on conflict, usurpation,

prohibition and transgression – but as adults we are forced to maintain it, to protect it, and to police its borders. For it is our place in this oedipal family that authorises so many subject positions: (1) it guarantees the status of father, the giver of the law, the protector of order from the ubiquitous threat of chaos; (2) it guarantees the place of the mother, who either acts as the father's subjective complement in that she nurtures and protects their children (Anne Rice's Madeline or Lessing's Harriet), or identifies with the father as law-giver, the phallic mother who paradoxically teaches her children obedience through excessive demonstrations of power (Carrie White's mother Margaret or Annie Wilkes in *Misery*, Eva Galli in Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*); and, of course, (3) it guarantees the identity of the child, whose subjectivity Freud analyzed in *Totem and Taboo* and throughout his corpus. The oedipal command is implacable. It seduces us into sympathising with Rice's Lestat in the murder of seven-year-old Claudia. After all, her transgression of familial laws goes beyond domestic disobedience toward a breakdown of the social order: she has broken the first vampire commandment and has tried to kill Lestat, one of her own. From this oedipal position we also condone Louis Creed's final destruction of the 'Gage-thing' that returns from beyond the Pet Sematary: for too much of the novel Louis has been driven by a dangerous sentimentality that makes his child into what all children risk becoming in a child-loving culture, spoiled brats who will hurt others to get their own way (just like Thelma in Arthur Wise's *The Naughty Girls* [1972]).²⁵ Louis's murder of Gage returns him to the position of responsible father and keeper of order, avenger of the forefathers (Gage has just killed 'the man who should have been [Louis's] father' [PS, 15]) and the womenfolk (Gage has also just killed his mother Rachel and has besmirched the memory of surrogate grandmother Norma Crandall). Moreover, the murder marks Louis once again as the professional and responsible physician, a role in which he has invested much but whose cracks show early in the novel when his patient, Victor Pascow, dies of head injuries. Louis becomes competent again in an act that we must approve at the same time we condemn. And from the position of oedipal father we manufacture the bomb that Wyndham's Zellaby will carry into the schoolroom, the yawning hellmouth of those demonically intelligent children of Midwich.²⁶ Yes, there is much to cope with in the fantasies of the Gothic child: they not only shatter our identities as adults (and this is frightening enough) but they threaten the collapse of the social order that we bred them to maintain.

There's another twist: the father I have just described always recognises the flaws in his presumably pristine little one and he knows exactly what he, the hero, must do about it. He is far too sure of himself, far too aware of his self-imposed duties, even though – because? – his identity is under attack. The contemporary Gothic redresses this sureness; it attacks adult self-identity on multiple fronts. The Gothic child is certainly our fantasy projection of 'real' children and the problematic investments in them we have talked ourselves into over the last two hundred years. But the discourse of the 'Gothic child' also intersects nicely with another discourse we have fabricated of late, the discourse of 'the child within'. Stemming from a romanticism inaugurated by Rousseau and William Wordsworth, 'the child

within' has moved in the last few decades from a site of embarrassment (who before the 1980s would have pined to return to immaturity, to be psychologically infantilized?) to one of desire, even covetousness (the child within holding *the* privileged role of psychological insight, domestic bliss, even world peace). No reader of this essay will need to be lectured on the attractive comforts of this self-authorising panacea for all ills, but, as both David Skal (*MS*, 303) and Mark Edmundson (*NMS*, 98–102) note, the Gothic makes the child within as richly problematic as it makes the child without.²⁷ As we have seen throughout this essay, the Rousseauistic innocent that is The Child in our mythology is also the Freudian child, always already corrupted, always already corruptible. To discover that child, then, is to return to that place where innocence and corruption exist, not in opposition but in symbiosis: innocence is only knowable by those who are already corrupted; we can only know innocence by being corrupted, by seeing innocence lost, by knowing innocence, then, as the *product* of corruption. Innocence and corruption are not opposites; each makes the other possible. In the contemporary Gothic – and in postmodern philosophy generally – childhood innocence exists 'prior' to corruption but corruption is the only means by which we can recognise and name that innocence. Thus, we attempt to recapture that innocence by 'healing' or eradicating the very corruption that structures it. To find our innocence we must destroy it; we return to the child within in order to kill it.²⁸

Narratives of killing the child within abound: *The Shining's* Jack Torrance (1977) arguably has as the real object of his murderous lust not the members of his family but himself, the child who could never appease the harsh masculinist demands of his own father. Louis Creed of *Pet Sematary* is more than once infantilised as the surrogate son of Jud Crandall, and his murdering of Gage is in many respects an attempt to vindicate this father whom his own son has killed. And much of Eleanor's haunting in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) is motivated by the dead mother's desire to bring her child back to her, a return that necessitates the death of her daughter.²⁹ But the most intelligent narrative I know to investigate the tensions between the innocent and the corrupted child within is Peter Straub's 'The Juniper Tree', from his 1990 collection, *Houses Without Doors*.³⁰ A homage to Tennessee Williams, the story recounts the childhood experiences of a now-adult writer who used to visit a seedy movie theatre where he was repeatedly sexually molested.³¹ The paedophile Jimmy tries to earn the boy's love and trust as a way of keeping access open. Jimmy eventually disappears, afraid that the boy has reported him to the police, but the effects of the experience remain. The narrator recounts for us his understanding of the experience of movie theatres – not only the coerced sex but also the pleasure of movies themselves – and muses on how these experiences contributed to his identity as a novelist. Among other things, we get the sense of writing as a kind of therapy: it is his way of working through his early experience, of either healing or killing the child within (I for one am not sure which), and of reconciling himself to his child's-life-turned-Gothic.

This abuse narrative is a story we've heard many times: we find it in '*Salem's Lot* (1975), *Interview with the Vampire*, and Peter Straub's later retelling of the story as

'Bunny Is Good Bread' (2000).³² We find it on the evening news, splattered across the pages of investigative journalism, or as part of the required curriculum of developmental psychology texts, social work programs, and self-help books. It is a story we can trade on in our fight to protect our children from sex and to imprison anyone we might suspect of having paedophilic desire (and I stress the word *desire* here, for often no crude *act* is necessary to imprison or destroy someone).³³ But because it is a Gothic story, it resists the very assumptions that drive its moralising narrative. The narrator of 'The Juniper Tree' betrays all the symptoms of early childhood trauma – depression, suicidal thoughts, sense of failure, shame – but those feelings are hardly paralysing or destructive. Indeed, they make him a writer. At a conference he is asked to give advice to someone who wants to write. His response: 'Go to a lot of movies' ('JT', 109). While sexual molestation may have shattered his 'child within' and destroyed his sense of 'self', it does so in a way closer to Leo Bersani or Judith Butler's sense of self than that of contemporary psychology or popular media. In Bersani (1986) and Butler (1993), as in post-structuralist theory generally, the shattering of the ego, its stability and its boundaries, is a way past the self-protectiveness and phobia of the bourgeois subject.³⁴ It is a way into 'otherness' that can liberate, rather than paralyse, a polymorphous self. As Julia Kristeva has argued (1991), that foray into otherness is most profoundly achieved through the act of *writing*.³⁵ Writing, she says, is an expression of the protected inner self that actually projects that self outside into language. That language is, by definition, not the self, even though it is the laying bare of that self. Moreover, the self-made-language opens itself up to another person's act of reading or interpreting so that the writing self and the reading self become indistinguishable. This act Kristeva, Bersani, and Butler all call *desire*, the process by which a shattered ego must necessarily seek that which is outside it, other than it. By this logic, the shattering of the ego (even through child molesting?) can have as many salubrious effects as it has negative ones.

In 'The Juniper Tree', then, Straub makes a startling move. By re-valuing our cultural 'truths' about child molesting, he kills the child within as a way of enabling the narrator's connections to others, connections made through writing. His advice to 'go to a lot of movies' actually endows the opposite experiences of pleasure and pain with the same function: in both watching movies and enduring molestation, the narrator moves outside of himself. He destroys – or suffers the destruction of – an ego in a way that makes him productive, articulate, and (Kristeva might say) loving. The child within becomes a 'loved object of sacrifice' in a way that makes the narrative complicit with Jimmy the molester.³⁶ But what is even more startling is how Straub's story makes the narrator himself complicit in the destruction of the child. By the end of the story we are given a heart-rending description of the effects of trauma: the narrator is physically paralysed, needs to vomit, indeed, 'I thought I was having a stroke' ('JT', 107). But this alleged *effect* of molestation is actually a reconstruction of the experience of molestation, delivered by an adult whose *recounting* of the event differs from his *memory* of the event: his child speaks in a somewhat different voice. Coerced sexual experience may be

traumatic for a six-year-old child, but what are we to do with a line like, 'I am certain of only one thing: tomorrow I am again going to see my newest, scariest, most interesting friend [that is, Jimmy at the theatre]' ('JT', 93)? Or this one: 'I suddenly realized that part of me was glad to be in this place, and I shocked myself with the knowledge that all morning I had been looking forward to this moment as much as I had been dreading it' ('JT', 101). The narrator-adult who claims periodically to have forgotten what happened in the movie theatre is quite at odds with the narrator-child who gives us explicit description, description including sexual pleasure with the offending adult. It is that narrator-child who is under attack. The part of the speaker that had anticipated the pleasure of sex is the part that gets killed off – not (only) by Jimmy but (also) by the narrator himself. It is the part of him that cannot be made to square with the current doctrine that children must have no sexuality; it is the part of him that must be killed . . . or else Gothicized into a Regan MacNeil, a Gage Creed, or a Claudia. Most important, it is the part of the narrator that cannot reconcile himself to sexual pleasure *with another man*, a pleasure that seems to ignore (or be heightened by) age and power differential. For this child desires pleasure, a sexual *jouissance* that shatters the self in the scary but exciting ('interesting') act of sex.

Thus, killing the child within – or rather, killing the scary parts of the child while nurturing others – creates an elaborate apparatus of memory and storytelling that veers away from some possible threats that that child may make to our position in contemporary culture. That apparatus scores deep lines on our psyche. The narrator's ostensible pleasure in going to see a lot of movies is in watching his favourite actor, Alan Ladd, in films noir. Now, it would take a heart of stone to read of this obsession without suspecting forbidden (queer) attraction: the narrator watches Ladd in *Chicago Observer* every afternoon, staying for the repeat showing; he adores Ladd's beauty, masculinity, and physicality; Ladd visits him in dreams and sits on his bed with him. And most important, Ladd is often compared to Jimmy who 'looked like Alan Ladd's twin brother' ('JT', 101): both have dirty-blond hair, both have a certain handsomeness, both rob their love interests of identity by replacing it with their own. The greatest pleasure of going to a lot of movies may be the pleasure of identifying with the beautiful and virile male – and I should note that, when the narrator-child looks in the mirror he once sees the face of Jimmy looking back at him, just as when he looks at the movie screen he fantasizes Alan Ladd looking back at him. But it is also the pleasure of having that forbidden figure seduce you and engage you in fantasies that are often as much erotic as they are fictional. Like those paternal figures in the contemporary Gothic – Jack Torrance, the Louis of *Pet Sematary* and of *Interview with the Vampire* – we adore our child, and our child within, so much that s/he must be killed for the horrifying eros s/he may generate in us – an eros paedophilic, homophilic, yet intuitive and inexorable. To the degree that the Freudian child is the very child who founded us in our status as adults, we can only recognize and continually repress the fact that that child is our father or our mother, and has taught us more about sexuality than we can endure. The sexual child, the Gothic child, is not the fallen child; rather, it is the

open fault-line on the landscape of our fantasies, fantasies that must endow our (inner) children with a sexuality we need to constitute ourselves yet to destroy in our 'children.'

Notes

I want to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial assistance in the preparation of this essay.

- 1 I do not have space to list all the literature on murderous children, so I'll content myself with the major mouthpiece of American popular culture, *Time*. See the 19 September 1994 issue and its lurid cover with the words, 'Juvenile Justice In America: So Young to Kill, So Young to Die.'
- 2 Benjamin Spock and Stephen J. Parker, *Dr Spock's Baby and Child Care* (Toronto: Dutton, 1998), p. 2. Subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, prefixed with the abbreviation *BCC*.
- 3 See in particular Barbara Coloroso, *Kids are Worth It!* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1995); and Penelope Leach, *Your Baby & Child From Birth to Age Five* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
- 4 For the most famous documents in this history, see John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (New York: Everyman, 1911).
- 5 Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (New York: Vintage, 1997); and *Pretty Baby*, dir. Louis Malle, Paramount Studios, 1978, videocassette.
- 6 For a more complete discussion of the child as a metonym for statehood, see Lauren Berlant's chapter, 'Live Sex Acts', in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 55–81.
- 7 See Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1983). Subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, prefixed with the abbreviation *DM*.
- 8 *Omen IV: The Awakening*, dirs Jorge Montesi and Dominique Othenin-Gerard, Twentieth Century Fox, 1991, videocassette.
- 9 John Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957); and *Village of the Damned*, dir. Wolf Rilla, MGM, 1960, videocassette.
- 10 Chris Carter, *The X-Files* (Fox); and *Progeny*, dir. Brian Yuzna, Sterling Home Entertainment, 1998, videocassette.
- 11 Kenneth McKenney, *The Changeling* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).
- 12 Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart, 1955).
- 13 *Willard*, dir. Daniel Mann, Prism Entertainment, 1971, videocassette; *The Bad Seed*, dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Warner, 1956, videocassette; *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, dir. Robert Alritch, Warner Brothers, 1962, videocassette; and *The Brood*, dir. David Cronenberg, Canadian Film Development Corporation: 1979, videocassette.
- 14 David J. Skal explores one line of thinking about mothers here that I do not have time to elaborate. Skal attributes the rise of Gothic children in the 1960s to the 'widespread ambivalence and anxiety over sex and reproduction' engendered by the birth-control pill (*The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* [New York: Faber and Faber, 1993], p. 293. Subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, prefixed with the abbreviation *MS*.) Skal argues

that, on the one hand, oral contraception allowed women sexual freedom since they could now largely control pregnancy, while on the other the Pill removed from women the one major argument for refusing intercourse – the fear of pregnancy. Thus, children would come to occupy a rather tortured place in the ideologies of women's liberation. Moreover, he notes, the primitive state of chemical technology often resulted in horrific birth defects – thalidomide being the most notorious case – making the 'monster children' of the Gothic a cultural manifestation of the problem.

- 15 *It's Alive*, dir. Larry Cohen, Warner, 1974, videocassette; Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (London: Flamingo, 1988); and John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Bantam, 1962).
- 16 For Stephen King, that essence has a particularly biological foundation. King reads in animal-transformation narratives like *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*, and perhaps even *The Exorcist*, as a teen's anxiety about puberty and its effects – in particular, facial blemishes, which mean so much more to teens than do Russian invasions and paedophiles (*DM*, p. 45).
- 17 One apt description of Regan's experiences can be found in Ellis Hanson, 'Knowing Children: Desire and Interpretation in *The Exorcist*', Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (eds), *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 107–36. Hanson notes the convenience with which Regan forgets all of her sexual knowledge and aggression by the end of the film, but then, upon seeing Father Dyer's collar, she inexplicably kisses him before hopping into the car and driving off the set. As Hanson notes, 'For a moment, she seems to have forgotten that she forgot' the whole possession (p. 134), which suggests that there is some intrinsic, available knowledge of the experience with 'demons.' In other words, the 'cured' child is not cured at all, but continues to embody what we would exorcise.
- 18 *Village of the Damned*, dir. John Carpenter, Universal Studios, 1995, videocassette.
- 19 For more on this, see James R. Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 20 Stephen King, *Pet Semetary* (Toronto: Signet, 1983), pp. 288, 271. Subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, prefixed with the abbreviation *PS*.
- 21 Anne Rice, *Interview with the Vampire* (New York: Ballantine, 1976), p. 106. For a more complete discussion of Claudia, see my 'Gothic Sexualities', in Anna Powell and Andrew Smith (eds), *Teaching the Gothic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 93–106.
- 22 One example that I have not taken up here, but Mark Edmundson has, is Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). For Edmundson, the film presents us with the 1960s ideology of 'being yourself' taken to its logical extreme. *Massacre*, he argues, is Woodstock without the optimism. See *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadoomasochism and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 105. Subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, prefixed with the abbreviation *NMS*.
- 23 Sigmund Freud, 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' (1921), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 18, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 67–143.
- 24 *The Final Conflict (The Omen III)*, dir. Graham Baker, Twentieth Century Fox, 1981.
- 25 Arthur Wise, *The Naughty Girls* (New York: Playboy Paperbacks, 1980).
- 26 For a contemporary version of the school child from hell, see Kathleen McConnell's

- essay, 'Chaos at the Mouth of Hell: Why the Columbine High School Massacre had Repercussions for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Gothic Studies*, 2/1 (2000), 119–35.
- 27 While Edmundson does take on the Inner Child movement and note its sillinesses, he does argue a therapeutic usefulness for the project. Needless to say, my take on this discourse is slightly more suspicious than his.
- 28 For a theoretical investigation on the notion of killing one's inner child, see Serge Leclair, *A Child is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, trans. Marie-Claude Hays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 29 Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Toronto: Penguin, 1984).
- 30 Peter Straub, 'The Juniper Tree', in *Houses Without Doors* (Toronto: Signet, 1991), pp. 75–116. Subsequent references are to this edition. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the body of the text, prefixed with the abbreviation 'JT'. A version of this discussion appears in Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, 'Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children,' the introduction of *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, pp. xxvii–xxx.
- 31 I have in mind Williams's stories, 'Hard Candy' and 'The Mysteries of the Joy Rio'. For complete texts of these stories, see Williams, *Collected Stories* (New York: Ballantine, 1985).
- 32 Peter Straub, 'Bunny is Good Bread' in *Magic Terror: Seven Tales* (New York: Random House, 2000), pp. 98–153.
- 33 For an example of this, see the opening of Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
- 34 Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 64–6; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 113.
- 35 Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 17.
- 36 This phrase is Leo Bersani's. See 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 197–222, at p. 222.

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