

Agnieszka Łowczanin

University of Łódź

Convention, Repetition and Abjection: The Way of the Gothic

ABSTRACT

This paper employs Deleuze and Kristeva in an examination of certain Gothic conventions. It argues that repetition of these conventions—which endows Gothicism with formulaic coherence and consistence but might also lead to predictability and stylistic deadlock—is leavened by a novelty that Deleuze would categorize as literary “gift.” This particular kind of “gift” reveals itself in the fiction of successive Gothic writers on the level of plot and is applied to the repetition of the genre’s motifs and conventions. One convention, the supernatural, is affiliated with “the Other” in the early stages of the genre’s development and can often be seen as mapping the same territories as Kristeva’s abject. The lens of Kristeva’s abjection allows us to internalize the Other and thus to reexamine the Gothic self; it also allows us to broaden our understanding of the Gothic as a commentary on the political, the social and the domestic. Two early Gothic texts, Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and Lewis’s *The Monk*, are presented as examples of repetition of the Gothic convention of the abjected supernatural, Walpole’s story revealing horrors of a political nature, Lewis’s reshaping Gothic’s dynamics into a commentary on the social and the domestic.

ABSTRACT

Gothicism has survived in various guises for over three hundred years as a potent cultural form. Throughout this period its authors have managed to find a “scope within a narrow set of conventions narrowly defined” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 11) to retain its formulaic coherence and consistence while extending it beyond literature, thus demonstrating its plasticity and contributing to its generic hybridity. All this means that a reservoir of recognizable and repeatable features which have constituted the nature of Gothicism from its onset in the late eighteenth century is an effective combination holding a powerful aesthetic, emotional and intellectual appeal for its followers and audiences. Such repetition of well-defined and thus predictable elements could have easily turned them into nothing more than “rather hackneyed conventions and then into objects of satire” (Botting 45) and the genre would not continue to thrive if mere repetition governed the distribution of its “narrow set of conventions.”

In the introduction to *Difference and Repetition*, “Repetition and Difference” (1968, English translation 1994), Gilles Deleuze suggests that repetition is “a necessary and justified conduct only in relation to that which cannot be replaced,” because it concerns “non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities” (1). Applying Deleuze’s concepts to the field of literature helps us understand why, while remaining indispensable exponents of this recognizable and sustainable genre, not all manifestations of Gothicism end in pastiche and parody. Deleuze pins down something specific in repetition, namely, the principle of “theft and gift” and the transformation this implies: what is repeated becomes modified, and the repeated incorporates a necessary “gift” of novelty (1). For him,

[d]ifference is included in repetition by way of disguise. . . . This is why the variations . . . must not be understood on the basis of the still negative forms of opposition, reversal or overturning. The variations express, rather, the differential mechanisms which belong to the essence and origin of that which is repeated. (Deleuze 17)

Surveyed chronologically, Gothic fiction can be seen as subscribing to this principle in three different ways. Firstly, it has been applied to the repetition of its motifs. For example, Burkean obscurity is translated and focused into the motif of the veil in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), then repeated by M. G. Lewis, “stolen” and bestowed with new qualities in *The Monk* (1796). Secondly, the principle of “theft and gift” can be seen at work on the level of plot, as is the case in J. S. Le Fanu’s

“Carmilla” (1872), the pivotal assumptions of which are repeated and re-written by Bram Stoker in *Dracula* (1897). Thirdly, the Deleuzian principle operates on the level of what Kosofsky Sedgwick calls characteristic Gothic preoccupations, or conventions (9–10), like the supernatural. This emerges with the tangible Walpolean plumed helmet appearing in broad daylight in the courtyard of Otranto, which, though incomprehensible, is immediately identified by the domestic servants in the narrative, to then evolve into the evanescence of Radcliffe’s blurry shadows, unidentified, unearthly noises and intriguing mysteries, all plausibly explained at the end of her narratives. In successive Gothic fiction it proceeds to epitomize Otherness in the form of Shelley’s patched-up Monster, the product of the superhuman mind and inhuman solitary determination of Victor Frankenstein, to be later embodied in human-turned-subhuman vampires, the bodies of travellers that nocturnally return from the undiscovered country. And with the twentieth century’s new technologies and possibilities for adaptation, the principle of “theft and gift” begins to operate in a much more conspicuous manner as cinema has not only adapted but also spawned strings of responses to the original historical Gothic texts, creating a territory where Gothic motifs repeat, echo and cross-resonate in new and complex ways. It is only repetition thus understood, where “[t]he disguises and the variations, the masks and costumes” become “its integral and constituent parts” (Deleuze 16–17), that can ensure both the survival of the genre and the coherence of its conventions.

One of the signatures of Gothicism and a source of magnetic pleasure for its readers, is the fear it engenders, augmented by an armoury of conventions referred to above. Fear, like no other passion, “robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning” and works towards the experience of terror, “the ruling principle of the sublime” (Burke 34). Though the positioning of the supernatural and consequences of its operation have, together with other staples of the genre, undergone considerable modification, in its early stages it was affiliated with the Other, defined not as an internal force disrupting identity, but externalized as a rupture threatening the safeguards of individual and communal existence. The eighteenth century was an era when, as Kristeva proposes, the Other had not yet collapsed, when “unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law” was still possible, and “Religion, Morality,” though “arbitrary, . . . unfailingly oppressive, . . . laboriously prevailing” (16), were still fiercely adhered to. In many respects Kristeva’s abject maps the historically evolving Gothic territories; the attributes of both are the Other, the ambiguous, the sublime, the transgressive, the terrifying. Looking at Gothic fiction through the lens of abjection allows us, on the one hand, to internalize the Other and thus re-examine the Gothic self, and on the other hand, because “the social

inscription of morality is central to her reading of the abject” (Miles 50), to read the literary Gothic self in a broader context, as a commentary on the political, the social and the domestic.

In the case of the first Gothic story, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which revolves around the theme of usurpation and domestic tyranny, abjection is most immediately associated on the level of plot with Manfred’s criminality and sleaziness. If abjection is “something rejected, from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object,” then, firstly, from the point of view of the reader, the abject translates into Manfred’s inherited transgression of the law, the crime of his forefathers which he did not commit, but must inadvertently adhere to in a premeditated, cunning and hypocritical way, bearing the posture of an “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady” ruler (Kristeva 4). For Kristeva, “the socialized appearance of the abject” (16) is one that “neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them” (15), and this is the territory allocated for Manfred, a descendant of the rebel. His ancestor, a wilful radical, was the one who denied morality, but he “who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law” (Kristeva 4). Manfred’s crime is inherited, he lives merely to retain what his ancestors had won by turning law aside, misleading and corrupting it. Secondly, however, from the point of view of Manfred, the abject seems to be situated within himself, within his very being, and is connected with the experience of fear that his usurpation will come to an end. To secure his identity, Manfred needs to consolidate a spurious lineage that his ancestors have constructed for him, and in this need he must fearlessly trample on human, social and divine rights. Unless he produces a male heir, his reign will collapse and end up the disjointed, historically fragmented, one-time revolt of an upstart. As a ruler Manfred knows he should be determined and fearless, yet, he dreads to admit to himself that he is not. He realizes, though does not comprehend, his own gradual disintegration, plunges into lapses of indeterminacy, silence and dream-like states, which, like the true abject, simultaneously beseech and pulverize him (Kristeva 5). Manfred’s fear of losing his supreme position in the state can be seen as his personal abject, “the impossible within” (Kristeva 5) that drives him into defiled, “unclean” measures to avert it. Manfred’s desperate actions to retain power, his thwarted attempt to marry his puny son to Isabella and his subsequent frustrated pursuit of her in the subterranean labyrinths in order to produce an heir, are consequences of the compulsion to ward off this abject within, to avoid, in Kristeva’s terms, “a real threat” that materializes and “ends up engulfing” him (4).

His first step to legitimize the urge to father a successor is to get rid of his wife, the barren, climacteric Hippolita. Perhaps to an English reader certain components of this arrangement—royal divorce sought for the sole purpose of securing male succession; Manfred’s rejection of a female relative, his words to Matilda: “Begone, I do not want a daughter” (Walpole 23); the sickly disposition of the royal prince—might bear an uncanny parallel with Henry VIII’s dismissal and divorce of Catherine of Aragon, his determination to father a son and the eventual feebleness of prince Edward. The profound consequences for the state, for its religion, its people and its alignment with Europe, are an object lesson on the interfolding of the personal and the political. Walpole seems to map the same interfolding through territory in his story. Three spheres are marked out in *Otranto*: the castle, a political and a private space; the monastery, a religious space; and the in-between land of the subterranean that connects the two, where Manfred pursues Isabella. The frustrated monarch’s words, “I will use the human means in my power for preserving my race; Isabella shall not escape me” (Walpole 26) suggest that he will not stop short of violent imposition to secure male descendancy. In this story, the underground deceptive labyrinth becomes the land of the abject: Manfred’s fear of the doom of his line causes him to become “[t]he traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist,” and drives him to perform actions that are “immoral, sinister, scheming and shady” (4)—this is precisely what Kristeva defines as abjection. Manfred’s pursuit of Isabella aims away from Otranto, that is, from the centre of power and home, from the throne and the bedroom, towards the church, and this is also Henry VIII’s trajectory: from personal and political towards religious consequences. But unlike Henry VIII, Manfred is a figure of ridicule, a roaring but ineffective ruler. He fails to implement his plan, and his last chance to secure a lasting order is lost. The reinstatement of the power of the rightful owner’s descendants—which comes to haunt Manfred in the form of a dismembered statue, a truly abject object for him—correlates with the final destruction of his edifice, Otranto, and of his genealogical line. The novel ends with the downfall of the first Gothic rebel and a return of the legitimate, previous order.

If, then, as Miles suggests, “one of the most powerful, and fundamental, determinants of the Gothic [is] the relation between the horrific and nationalism” (47), and if, as Colley proposes, “anti-Catholic animus” and “assertive,” “sometimes bigoted Protestantism” (xx, xxi) constituted eighteenth-century British national self-awareness, then perhaps we can read *The Castle of Otranto* as a journey back to the times of Catholic rule and as an enactment of a fantasy where this rule is restored on the level of the political, the national and the private. The novel’s ending envisions exactly

the possibility of such erasure of revolt, of return of Catholic legitimacy, here personified in Theodore, the rule descending directly, so to speak, from the loins of one of the church's fathers. From the point of view of eighteenth-century English Protestant supremacy, it is the rule of the abject, "the stuff of sectarian nightmares" (Miles 47), and in this sense the novel's abjection goes beyond the level of plot and dramatizes a possible threat to Protestant confidence in the late eighteenth century. The novel ends with a staple imagistic representation of Catholicism: the appearance of a saint amidst Bernini-like iconography. Alfonso emerges from the ruins of Otranto and, "accompanied by a clap of thunder," he ascends "solemnly towards heaven, where the clouds parting asunder, the form of saint Nicholas was seen; and receiving Alfonso's shade, they were soon wrapt from mortal eyes in a blaze of glory" (Walpole 113). The Other takes over and enforces the restoration of the ancient regime. Manfred and Hippolita take "on them the habit of religion in the neighbouring convents" (Walpole 115), which is hardly an ending ideologically pleasing to a Protestant eye.

I suggest that Walpole's novel ends with a vision of a state in which, against the grain of eighteenth-century Britain, "severance from the old paradigms" (Miles 54) does not take place. It may look like a cheer for the return of law and order, but when we subvert the traditional reading, the story becomes an enactment of Protestant horror at a near-miss by some Counter-Reformation nightmare that would erase the Glorious Revolution. It was, after all, written at a time when to many Britons "it seemed that the old popish enemy was still at the gates, more threatening than ever before" (Colley 25). It dramatizes the way in which abjection rooted on a fictional personal level resounds with consequences on a national level. In this sense the story partakes in the eighteenth-century emergence of nationalism and its ideologies, and contributes to a process Colley calls "the forging of the British nation" (1), a process endowing Britons with a singular identity to withstand what they saw as the militant Catholicism of Continental Europe (24).

In her exploration of British nationalism, Colley notes that eighteenth-century "Britons reminded themselves of their embattled Protestantism in what often seems a wearily repetitive fashion, precisely because they had good cause to feel uncertain about its security and about their own" (23–24). Gothic fiction at that time seems exactly one of the territories where this repetition of the endorsement of Protestant ideologies and repudiation of Catholic Otherness was enacted. If the Deleuzian principle of "theft and gift" can be seen as operating in the repetition of the genre's paradigms, then the novel which "steals" the national theme and continues to forge Protestant identity through transgressive representations of Continental monastic hypocrisy, through ridicule of the excesses

of Catholic iconographic idolatry is M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*. Written in the decade that rippled in response to the Revolution just across the English Channel, to both its enlightenment and its horrors, the novel plays out what can be read as anti-Catholic national themes but inscribes them with the "gift" of novelty. Lewis subscribes to national discourse initiated, as the whole genre, by Walpole, but treats it as a springboard that allows him to explore the personal and social, rather than political, dimensions. By destabilizing the archetypal representations of female bodies, of femininity, chastity and motherhood in Catholic iconography, by enacting the fiendish consequences of institutional hierarchy and the dictum of obligatory celibacy, Lewis takes the thwarted potential of Walpole's subterranean scenes, which seem bashful in comparison, into a full realization of their bodily capacity.

Imagistically, where Walpole's novel ends, Lewis's starts. After "a clap of thunder" shakes the castle of Otranto to its foundations, the earth rocks, the walls fall with "a mighty force," Alfonso appears "dilated to an immense magnitude" in the centre of the ruins (Walpole 112). In *The Monk's* first chapter Lorenzo has a dream in which "a loud burst of thunder" causes the church to crumble, and the gigantic form of an "Unknown" snatches Antonia, his wife-to-be. She escapes, minus her robe. Among harmonious voices, and a "wing of brilliant splendour" which "spread itself from either of Antonia's arms," she is received into the glory, "composed of rays of dazzling brightness" (Lewis 28). This moment strikes one as another almost surreal pastiche of Baroque popish imagery, yet here Antonia's nudity plays out an ambivalence in the religious representation and meaning of the body. On the one hand, we have ridicule of Catholic extravagance; on the other hand, something else, a hint at the political force that had just implemented its eradication across the Channel, a proper de-Christianization that we can infer from the allusion to the tripartite motto of the Revolution. When the Monster appears before the altar, he bears an inscription on his forehead "Pride! Lust! Inhumanity!" (Lewis 28) which clearly apes the atheistic strain of "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité.*"

As has been said, the Deleuzean "gift" element in the treatment of the abject can be seen in the way it enriches a Walpolean personal-cum-politicized agenda with the spheres of the unspoken and the hidden, whereas the horrors of the abject are expressed in *The Monk's* preoccupation with the female body. The novel starts with an exposure of the ambivalence inscribed in the treatment of the body in Christianity, here expressed as a political comment on quintessential Catholic otherness: celibacy and imagistic idolatry. The image of the Madonna inspires in the monk Ambrosio indefinable sensations that confuse religious adoration with sexual arousal. When his sexual appetite is satisfied by contact with the Madonna-like

Matilda—herself a hybrid, a woman who disguises herself as a man, who has posed for the portrait of the Madonna, and who in the end laughs in the face of a Christian deity and succumbs to the Devil’s will—Ambrosio does not hesitate to commune with everything abjection stands for. He slides into incoherence and away from his monastic vows, and once he explores satisfactorily the territory of defilement, transgression and hypocrisy, the realm of the abject, there is no stopping him. To satisfy his desire for his sister Antonia, he kills his own mother and signs a pact with the Devil.

However, the truly abject territory in this novel, the space of rape, filth and birth, cadavers, rot and blood, is enacted when Lewis returns to the spatial schemata set out by Walpole, that is, to the dungeons. A Walpolean labyrinth of procreant pursuit transforms here into a tomb, a land of murder, incest and travesty of parturition. In Lewis’s visually rich, elaborately choreographed novel, where especially female bodies subscribe to culturally endorsed sartorial expectations and formulas, this underground territory, invisible to the world, cancels society’s expectations of obligatory feminine beauty. When the pregnant Agnes wakes up in impenetrable darkness on a bier in a vault, her only contact with reality is through touch and smell. The suffocating aroma drives her towards the door, but her hand rests on something soft, which, to her disgust and consternation, in spite “of its putridity, and the worms which preyed upon it” (Lewis 403), is recognizable as the rotting head of one of the nuns who had died some months before. When her eyes grow accustomed to the sepulchral darkness, she sees that her body is covered with a linen cloth, strewn with faded flowers: she has been entombed, together with her enwombed baby. Lewis makes Agnes experience the fakery of her own death, puts her “at the border of [her] condition as a living being.” Alive, she is made to enact being her own “corpse, the most sickening of wastes” (Kristeva 4).

Amid the stench of corpses, Agnes gives birth, but fails to sustain her child and it soon, too, becomes a mass of putridity, a loathsome and disgusting object with whom she refuses to part, an instance of “death infecting life” (Kristeva 4): “[o]ften have I at waking found my fingers ringed with the long worms, which bred in the corrupted flesh of my infant” (Lewis 413). Holding on to the remains of her child, Agnes communes with the abject, but in doing so she holds on to the only identity that is left for her in the self-annulling territory of the vaults, that of a mother and a lover, both roles now gone. According to Kristeva, “[i]t is . . . not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” (4). Agnes’s identity and individuality are shaken to their foundations; as a social being she is wiped out, and when she realizes this plunge from social summits to non-existence, she doubts the reality of her situation:

That the Duke de Medina's Niece, that the destined Bride of the Marquis de las Cisternas, One bred up in affluence, related to the noblest families in Spain, . . . that She should in one moment become a Captive . . . reduced to support life with the coarsest aliments, appeared a change so sudden and incredible, that I believed myself the sport of some frightful vision. (Lewis 411)

And yet Agnes, not Antonia, depicted as the symmetrical model of classical beauty, is the one who survives. Agnes walks out of her own tomb, wretched, pale, half-naked, a miserable object in tattered rags with the rotting remains of her child clasped in her convulsed and shivering arms. In the end it is she who marries her paramour; Antonia's fate is to be brutally raped by her own brother—thus does *The Monk* trouble and invert certain traditional models of femininity. “Femaleness and fallenness,” as Gilbert and Gubar would have it, may be “essentially synonymous” (234) in Lewis's text, but they are not synonymous with inadequacy and weakness.

Both *Otranto* and *The Monk* deal with lawlessness and usurpation of power; both use the territory of the abject to play out transgression, to enhance the borderline between the morally accepted and the illegitimate. But whereas *Otranto* centres around political power, *The Monk* moves towards the exploration of power afforded by privilege and blind religious reverence. Both novels use female bodies to communicate their messages, and in both of them, because of their often flamboyant tone and narratorial detachment, these messages can be surprising, and seldom self-evident. Walpole presents the threat of Catholicism victorious. His Manfred turns out to be as weak as his puny son when he yields, his identity crushed by the power of legitimacy. His fear of failure and loss, which materializes itself in the enactment of the prophecy, destroys him and nothing remains but to depart the political arena, enfeebled and defeated. Ambrosio does even worse. Tortured physically, he is swallowed by death and eternal damnation. Only Agnes and Matilda leave behind the territory of the abject, to emerge triumphant. The grit in their femininity, by which they survive, is the “gift” of the new Gothic dynamics that later works will repeat and enrich.

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