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The Marginality of the Gothic: A Reconsideration

ABSTRACT

It is commonly accepted that we discuss the Gothic in terms of the margin. These two seem to be inseparable and associating them appears “just natural.” However, in light of the contemporary critical debate on the ubiquity of the Gothic, the mode’s “natural” marginality might appear somewhat out of place. While the Gothic is still increasingly popular in popular culture, it has also become incredibly popular among literary scholars. In fact, it not only permeates the culture we live in, but it also appears to occupy a mainstream position in academia these days.

Viewing the Gothic as a notion shaped to a certain extent by the critic, this article investigates—and reconsiders—the persistence of the Gothic margin in contemporary critical discourse. Following Paul A. Bové’s consideration of the ways in which institutionalized criticism partakes in discourse, it sees contemporary Gothic criticism as at least potentially operating within discourse in Michel Foucault’s terms, and thus considers the possibility of the Gothic margin being in fact a critical construct, functional within the contemporary discourse of criticism. Hence, the article poses questions about the origin of Gothic marginality, the contemporary status of the Gothic margin and its potential functionality, and finally, possible results of the loss of the marginal status for the Gothic as a critical object. It seeks the answers by means of scrutinizing critical accounts, such as Fred Botting and Dale Townshend’s introduction to the *Critical Concepts* series on the Gothic, and by contrasting different attempts at (re)presenting the Gothic and its status. Finally, it considers the distinction between the past—the era of critical neglect—and the present—allegedly the times of the vindication of the Gothic. In so doing, it aims at determining whether and why the marginality of the Gothic could indeed turn out to be constructed by the critics.

ABSTRACT

Marginality and the Gothic can be easily paired. What could be more marginalized in the field of literature and critical studies than the low, popular genre termed Gothic fiction? And what could be more interested in the margins than the very same genre? The two appear so interlinked and interdependent that separating them would probably appear simply “unnatural.” Yet it has become a subject of contemporary critical debate that the Gothic has entered both the cultural and the critical mainstream. To give one example, in her introduction to the 2007 issue of *Gothic Studies* devoted to the Gothic in contemporary popular culture, Catherine Spooner pronounces our pop culture to be saturated with the Gothic—from Goths to the latest fashion shows, from computer games to *Jerry Springer*—and the Gothic to have finally made its way into academia, becoming “a burgeoning area of research” (1).

While Spooner sees the ubiquity of the Gothic as an indisputable fact, the opening article of the same issue by Alexandra Warwick problematizes this fact in a stimulating way. Warwick begins by addressing the nagging questions of why criticism is so fascinated with the Gothic that it seeks Gothic traces where one could justly claim there are none, and why contemporary culture is so crazy about being Gothic. She ascribes the contemporary success of “Gothickness” to the very nature of both contemporary (post-Derridean) critical practice and Western society (permeated by a quasi-psychoanalytical discourse) (7–10). Similarly to Spooner, Warwick contrasts the past and the present throughout the article: the times in which the Gothic was underestimated and neglected, or, in Warwick’s terms, properly marginal, and the era of its dominance in almost every sphere of culture. In the end, however, she comes close to stating that making the Gothic ubiquitous ultimately annihilates it, depriving it of any particular specificity (14).

Warwick’s observations are illuminating and important—both if we talk about the influence of Gothic studies on its object, and if we want to investigate the marginal status of the Gothic. Firstly, it appears that if we are to investigate the marginalization of Gothic fiction, then we are actually to investigate the past: the way in which the Gothic used to be treated as opposed to contemporary critical practice. Secondly, if it is not exactly the case that Warwick “mourns” the Gothic as it used to be—that is, occupying the margin—then at least she presents it in a way suggesting a loss. On the one hand, this loss is, obviously, the loss of the marginal status. Just as Warwick assumes that the contemporary Gothic celebrates the loss of the set of axioms through which repression once used to be enacted (social order, coherent psyche, sense of justice) (13), we may assume that

Gothic critics celebrate, rather than lament upon, the loss of the marginal status, itself a sign of repression. On the other hand, however, the loss indicated by the text is also the loss of the constitutive feature. If we choose, as Warwick does, to view the Gothic as characterized by voicing the unspeakable through representing it in coded, displaced forms; and if we observe, also as she does, that in contemporary Western culture the unspeakable is commonly spoken of and is the centre of attention, and the Gothic becomes only yet another stage for “the desire for trauma” to be fulfilled in full view (11–13); then we must notice that Gothic fiction no longer performs the role which so many contemporary critics give it credit for—that of staging the prohibited, silenced, explained away, or, simply, marginalized.

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If the Gothic has become devoid of what it constituted, then perhaps we should not be surprised that many contemporary Gothic texts, like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*—despite the call to give the contemporary Gothic deserved attention (Spooner 1)—are (still) said to be what eighteenth-century critics said contemporary Gothic productions were, namely “just romance.”¹ But the aim of this article is not to determine what is or what should be Gothic. Far from aiming at defining Gothic, this article attempts to view the marginal status of the Gothic through the lens of critical practice itself. In short, it treats the Gothic as a critical construct, a notion shaped to a certain extent by the critic elaborating on the status of Gothic fiction.

As James Watt observes with regard to early Gothic literature, every writer has his or her own agenda (6). Michel Foucault might say that different writers operate within different discourses, the discourses having their own agendas as well. Paul A. Bové, while elaborating on the notion of Foucault’s discourse, shows how criticism, especially if institutionalized, also operates within discourse, joining “in the general disciplinary project of producing and regulating the movement of knowledge” (3). Such a criticism introduces categories which shape a given mode of critical scrutiny and make it appear natural, commonsensical and obvious: “By obliging all to answer the ‘same’ questions,” questions which seem to be transparent and thus absolutely objective, discourse “homogenizes critical practice and declares ‘invalid’ whatever does not or cannot *operate* on its political and intellectual terrain” (Bové 5–6). As we have already said, the marginality of the Gothic appears just obvious—how could we negate it? But then it may be worthwhile posing the question whether such a marginality could be a construct, or a statement validated as true within contemporary critical

¹ Fred Botting discusses this film in *Gothic* (177–80). His analysis will be referred to later in the article.

discourse in which it is functional (Bové 9) for some underlying reasons, and thus having “the privilege of unnoticed power” (Bové 6).

The suggestion that the marginal status of the Gothic could be a construct, validated and functional within the discourse of contemporary critical practice, is tempting, for it appears striking that something so popular as the Gothic is still so strongly associated with the margin. In order to determine whether and why the marginality of the Gothic has been constructed by contemporary critics, we shall investigate a number of issues. First of all, it is necessary to establish the origin of the Gothic margin and investigate the question why literary critics should be so interested in a marginal form. Next, it is crucial to consider whether or not the Gothic is really no longer marginal these days. Finally, a compelling question is could the loss of marginal status result in the end of the Gothic? By referring to those issues and scrutinizing chosen critical readings, this article also responds to the call for “Gothic criticism that takes up self-analysis in terms of its own role in defining an increasingly malleable genre” (Rintoul 709).

THE ORIGINS OF THE GOTHIC MARGIN

As we have already noticed, the origins of the Gothic margin seem to be located in the past. As Jerrold E. Hogle and Andrew Smith point out, similarly to our own times, the late eighteenth century witnessed a blossoming exchange between the Gothic and the critics (2). But, at the same time, this very exchange did not mean that the Gothic was a mainstream form, but rather contributed to the Gothic’s marginal status. Similarly, the great popularity of the Gothic, boosted by the circulating library at that time, confirmed the genre’s/mode’s low status.

The Gothic did not become marginal suddenly, or at a fixed point in time; in a way, it has always been so due to a number of factors. In their “General Introduction” to the volumes of Routledge’s *Critical Concepts* series devoted to the Gothic, Fred Botting and Dale Townshend define Gothic fiction through its perceived marginalization and exclusion at the time of its rise. As they state, “Gothic”

was a term of critical abuse in contemporary reviews perturbed by the rise and rapid spread of a new species of fiction that refused neoclassical realistic and didactic aesthetic rules. . . . Hostile critical tones denounce the threat of fiction as endangering not only aesthetic values, but moral and social values as well: painting vice in attractive colours, romances encouraged readers to eschew the virtues of order and decency, of respect for social mores and familial duties, of chaste habits and disciplined, rational reflection. (1: 1)

Presented in this way, the Gothic should emerge as an arch-infamous invader of the mainstream and a threat to its pillars (neoclassicism, realism, didacticism and aesthetics).

The whole account, rich in negative connotation of “Gothic” of all sorts, from barbarous Goths to the French Revolution, is structured around the ways in which we can assume the concept of “Gothic” to denote things marginal and marginalized at the same time. True, the authors do point to the positive connotations of the Gothic Revival, and of the Goths (Botting and Townshend 1: 7–9). Similarly, they offer a broad account of how Hurd’s *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* reassess the term “Gothic” (1: 9–11). However, the overall assessment of early Gothic criticism seems aimed at showing how it considered the Gothic to be threatening the desired order of both literature and society. Botting and Townshend acknowledge the role of the Gothic in shaping aesthetic criticism and the novel, but emphasize this took place by negative definition; they unequivocally associate the Gothic with romance, the negative literary category inherent to the seventeenth-century aristocratic order, in the place of which the moralistic, didactic novel was introduced (1: 4–7). They point to common grounds for the Gothic and Romanticism, but emphasize the latter insisted on differentiation from the writing of sensationalism and stimulation, viewing such writing as an inferior, corrupting, “debased and debasing aesthetic mode” (1: 11–12), thus separating it “from aesthetics of nature, sublimity and the imagination, that, decades earlier established the very condition for [its] appearance” (1: 11), by making it subject to the familiar distinction between higher and popular forms of art, the elite and the mass, the spiritually and morally ennobling, and sick and granting the fulfilment of the basest appetites (1: 12).

For Botting and Townshend, there is a steady continuation of the marginalization of the Gothic from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century (1: 13–14). All in all, their account appears an exhaustive and illuminating one. It is also much in tune with the observations of numerous other critics on the marginalization of the Gothic by eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criticism.² As such, the account may be viewed as exemplary. If we consider it, however, from a broader historical perspective, it will prove partly incomplete.

Making a case against “the *hobgoblin-romance*,” the author of “On the Titles of Modern Novels” (1797) admits there were “writers of genius, who

² See e.g. the remarks on criticism of the aforementioned periods by Botting, *Gothic* (18), Kilgour (218), Hoggie and Smith (3–4), or Anne Williams considerations of the “critical myths” of the Gothic produced by realist and Romantic critics (6, 8).

102 have succeeded in the terrible” and “innumerable imitations,” dismissed as “fair game for ridicule” (E. 304). By contrast, Botting and Townshend’s “Gothic genre” or “romance” seems to be a thoroughly coherent category, whose general definition, somewhat strangely, is close to the definition of the margin of literature as such. They write for example that the Gothic functions within a paradigm where “more laudable forms of literary endeavour are constituted, defined and rendered knowable only through their difference from the inferior form of literary production that is the Gothic romance” (1: 13). What is strange here is the fact that the Gothic becomes a meta-touchstone for negative definition, the exclusive embodiment of “the inferior form of literary production.” The Gothic played a great part in the establishment of the categories of high and low culture; however, was Gothic fiction the only inferior form against which high art constituted itself? Undeniably, there was a time when Gothic productions dominated the market. But then, this fact should be given more attention.

Indeed, apart from “the writers of genius,” the end of the eighteenth century was familiar with their “imitations,” written on a scale incomparable to anything that had preceded the spread of literacy, proceeding industrialization and consumption, and the rise of the circulating library. Caught in the treadmill of market demands, Gothic texts indeed flooded the market. While Botting and Townshend do provide us with an array of reasons for the debasement of Gothic texts in terms of them disturbing the rules of proper composition and social order—they were immoral, idle, sensationalist, unrealistic, spoiling, endangering parental control, irrational, revolutionary, aesthetically corrupt, etc. (1: 1–4)—they fail to mention that those texts comprised both works which constitute the Gothic canon today and numerous other fictions whose production was based on repetitiveness and conventionality, constant reproduction and multiplication to quantify sales regardless of quality. Furthermore, they omit to add that the Gothic texts were also accessible to a newly extended reading public, not necessarily skilled in distinguishing what was “worth” reading from what was not—and that this could be viewed as an underlying factor contributing to the critical outrage.

As much as literary, political or social, the origins of the marginalization of the Gothic may be seen as economic. In a sense, in the eighteenth century, the previous three categories depended on the latter. Emma Clery convincingly illustrates the way in which, due to its close relation with commerce, Gothic fiction took part in the process of shaping the categories of good and bad literature, seeing “a draft version of the sociological opposition high art/popular culture” in Hugh Murray’s *Morality of Fiction* of early 1800s (Clery 151). Clery links the process with the emergence of consumerism and the circulating library, and the spreading practice of

adherence to popular taste to increase sales (135–40, 148–54): with the victory of the public's demands over "the legislation of writing from above" (135). Being one of the favourites of the Minerva Press, the Gothic is on the side of "bad readers produc[ing] bad writing produc[ing] bad readers" (151); and it is the emergence of this "bad writing" that pushes criticism to establish the categories of high versus popular (139).

While discussing eighteenth-century literary criticism, Douglas Lane Patey defines the "ideological functions" of a critic: "criticism, like literature itself, served as a forum for discussion of a wide range of social, political, and religious issues as critics sought to create, through the education of taste, a body of polite popular opinion in all these areas," especially where censorship was rigorous (5). True, the wrong taste may threaten the socio-political order—but in a sense, the very potential of not manifesting taste and learning may be considered as threatening as the content of particular works by unskilled writers. Moreover, this potential is made possible not so much by the spreading moral corruption, but by the rules of the market, which appears able to spread anything that sells well regardless of its quality, or affiliation with "taste." As Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall claim, partly dismissing Rosemary Jackson's view that fantastic modes have been muted by the critics as they subverted establishment ideals, "most critics who have scoffed at the Gothic have done so not in rearguard defence of some realist norm but in a genuine attempt to discriminate between good romances and bad romances" (210). Written to satisfy market demands—the rule of the market defined by "quantification, abstract equalization, the transformation of use into exchange-value, and instantaneous obsolescence . . . the replacement of qualitative distinctions of value by the absolute criterion of quantity" (McKeon 245)—numerous Gothic imitations fail by definition to abide by the rules of proper taste. Thus, the Gothic, so popular in the 1790s, is unavoidably connected with the phenomenon of which Patey writes while commenting on the spread of literacy, and the consequent multiplication of tastes as seen by Goldsmith:

there has emerged a large and diverse reading public . . . which has in turn helped to generate too many writers, too many, that is, of the wrong social alignments (lacking polite taste): "If tradesmen happen to want skill in conducting their own business, yet they are able to write a book; if mechanics want money, or ladies shame, they write books and solicit subscriptions." Thus the very extension of taste to a wide public damages taste. (27–28)

The lack of taste, as defined by the eighteenth-century critics, is what seems to have made the Gothic a popular and inferior form, in the first place.

104 | On the other hand, not all Gothic fictions were written for the Minerva Press and omitted to address the requirements set by the most notable critics; nonetheless, many of the Gothic classics produced by well-educated members of the elites were still criticized since, for various reasons, they did not conform to the rules of “proper” writing as set by criticism. If we consider solely the case of Walpole’s *Otranto*, we can see that what determined its reception were the rule of *incredulus odi* on the one hand, and the doctrine of *utile dulci* on the other (Clery 2, 27, 54, 59). While *Otranto* is “digestible” as a translation of a medieval manuscript, thus having some historical value, when it is revealed to be contemporary writing, it is attacked on the grounds of preaching superstition in the age of reason (Clery 54). Bearing in mind all the faults of the Gothic enumerated by Botting and Townshend, we could assume works such as *Otranto* were marginalized due to more or less consciously introduced subversive traits, traits that indeed transgressed and threatened the desired aesthetic, social and political boundaries. However, again it seems we should avoid generalization. On the one hand, indeed, we may observe how certain authors engaged in rejecting or subverting the mainstream. The sole line of Walpole’s first preface to *Otranto*, telling of the possibility that a Catholic priest used the spread of letters in medieval Italy to reverse “enlightenment” and popularize superstition, may be considered as overtly mocking critical canons in retrospection—with the second preface it becomes clear that Walpole, i.e. Muralto, with the help of “letters,” “spreads superstition” in the Enlightened eighteenth century (Clery 61–62). On the other hand, we could ask ourselves, for instance, if there is indeed that much propagation of revolution in Lewis’ *The Monk*.³

There may be another reason for the critics fearing the Gothic apart from its inherent real dangers of subversion, one which comes down to what Watt writes of “Monk” Lewis:

[though] the licentious “content” of certain works did provoke critical reaction . . . it is always hard to separate the condemnation of immorality from the unease about who precisely was doing the reading, and under what circumstances. . . . what was largely at stake in the negative reviews of *The Monk*, especially, was the regulation of cultural production itself. (83–84)

Or, which can be related to what Michael McKeon states on the modernist view of eighteenth-century critical emphasis put on morality:

³ For a corresponding discussion of *The Monk*, see Clery (156–71) and Watt (70–101).

Modernity is accustomed to see in the eighteenth century an anomalous devotion to moral instruction, to the “didactic.” It is important to recognize, however, that this phenomenon represents not so much an increased investment in moral pedagogy as the coalescence of moral pedagogy as one among several categories of knowledge, rather than (as in the customary view) the purpose that superintends them all. The didactic was not simply endorsed at this time; it was constituted as the mode of ostentatiously explicit instruction out of the debris of an older system in which all knowledge had been tacitly and pervasively “didactic.” By the same token, contemporary anxiety about the effects of novels on impressionable readers signifies an increase not in the impulse toward social regulation and discursive discipline, but in the apprehension that customary (and highly effective) regulatory discourses were being enervated by social instability. (262–63)

105 What we have here is a statement that the eighteenth-century critics, more than policing particular forms of subversion, were primarily concerned with maintaining rules for producing and reading texts for fear of these rules being obliterated by new social conditions. This takes us back to the rule of the market and its consequences. The true subversive nature of the Gothic lies in the mode’s general affiliation with a newly emergent phenomenon of unsupervised reading, threatening with a vision of anybody being able to write anything with no regard for anyone—and hence, in the first place, the mode’s negative reception by critics aiming at “the regulation of cultural production.” We could venture as far as to say that it is the final lack of this regulation that will, all in all, lead Wordsworth to introduce a new way of experiencing excitement through literature in his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*—a way that runs counter to “the application of gross and violent stimulants” in the form of “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” manufactured for immediate gratification, and demanding little mental effort (248–49).

The impact of spreading commerce, market demands and commoditization of writing on the perception of the Gothic is an important factor if we take into consideration the origins of the marginal status of Gothic fiction. The Gothic was indeed marginal because it was popular, and it was popular because it “pandered to the basest of appetites and motives” (Botting and Townshend 1: 12). But in doing so, the mode not necessarily anticipated Freud’s forbidden passions. Omitting to acknowledge the aspect of its marginalization connected with the fear of unregulated, value-deficient reading and writing limits the understanding of the Gothic’s status to the terms of subversion (of established literary and social norms) and repression (enacted by the critics). If we do not see the

Gothic as a part (substantial, but still a part) of a wider phenomenon of the constitution of the literary margin as encompassing “bad” (and only then subversive) writing, we create an impression that the Gothic equals the margin equals the popular, their definitions merged into one, and is basically preoccupied with haunting the established social/political/moral norms with what is to be repressed by a given order. In this way, the Gothic becomes inseparable from the margin, and defines the margin and itself in terms of subversion, “an underground, an underclass, an unconscious, a locus of uncomfortable exclusion that . . . continues to return” (Botting and Townshend 2: 12). Thus it may be treated, by definition, as a valuable repository of “productive negatives that remain objects of criticism” (Botting and Townshend 2: 13).

ON THE GOTHIC MARGIN

We could pose the question if the image of the marginal Gothic as presented by Botting and Townshend is already a construct in a way. On the one hand, the account is exhaustive and does justice to various issues. On the other, it limits the parameters within which the Gothic used to function, as a result of which Gothic fiction actually may seem somewhat more important than once was the case.

A similar observation is made by a number of critics—in the first place, with regard to the psychoanalytical readings of Gothic fiction. Viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis, the Gothic margin is defined in terms of “the individually or culturally repressed” (Warwick 10), and thus should explain both the individual and culture.⁴ Interestingly, in this way the Gothic becomes important because it represents the repressed, and as Baldick and Mighall remark, in a somewhat ironic tone, the assumption that the Gothic was once “victimized,” vindicates it nowadays (210). What Mighall finds of particular importance while discussing psychoanalytical readings of Victorian Gothic is that they de-contextualize the text—the critic identifies with the character of the villain as the one who brings liberation from Victorian repression—thus, in the case of, for example, Dracula, the villain proves a counterpart of the modern critic, as he or she brings “sexual liberation, the basis for our own modernity and enlightenment” (278). Consequently, what makes a vampire, rather than a Victorian, close to us is the privileged position that our own culture grants to what is repressed. If this is the case, the conflation of the Gothic, the marginal and the subversive may indeed underlie the contemporary mainstream status

⁴ For a brief discussion of the problematic status of psychoanalytical readings, see Warwick (9–10).

of the Gothic among critics and scholars; thus, the Gothic margin may turn out to be a functional construct in contemporary critical discourse. All in all, subversion, transgression, the unconscious, repression of desire and infantile drives are all habitually located on the margin. So is women's and class liberation. All of them are habitually identified as the domain of the Gothic. Apart from that, they are generally associated with the excluded from the dominant order. As Botting remarks elsewhere, the excluded is as telling and as significant as what is celebrated by a given culture, and thus proves worthy of the attention of the critic ("Preface" 3).

As we have noticed at the beginning of the article, the Gothic is nowadays hardly marginal, both in popular culture, in which it has never been so, and in academia. But the content of the Gothic text remains defined in terms of the margin. On the one hand, it seems that Gothic critics, starting with David Punter, have done their best to elevate the Gothic from the level of "literary curiosity" or "popular trash" (Spooner 1). Punter, right from the start of his discussion of the Gothic's origins, in the arch-famous *The Literature of Terror* (1980), commits himself to renegotiating the status of the Gothic and dealing away with its stigma of popular fiction.⁵ As Baldick and Mighall state, he provides the Gothic with "high Romantic credentials" (214). However, the vindication for the interest in the Gothic results from changes within the critical circles themselves rather than from seeing Gothic fiction as high art. The character of these changes transpires for instance from Maggie Kilgour's justification for contemporary interest in the Gothic, namely the interest in social conditions and context that the Gothic may reveal (221). Similarly, the character of these changes can be traced in Punter's dissatisfaction with the application of Freudian and Marxist theories only to realist fiction (ix). Obviously, the orientation towards socio-psychological studies of cultural context contributed to "challenging the hierarchies of literary value and widening the horizons of critical study to include other forms of writing and address different cultural and historical issues," which, as Botting writes, "moved Gothic texts from previously marginalized sites" (*Gothic* 17). What seems to trigger moving the Gothic from the margin to the mainstream is our own drive

⁵ The Gothic's alliance with high art and good literature are discussed on a twofold level here. First, quoting figures and analyzing the structure and financial possibilities of the eighteenth-century readership, Punter comes to the conclusion, first, that the costs of obtaining the top Gothic novels would be too high for the lower classes of society, and second, that they were clearly written for the learned public (the bourgeoisie) (24–25). Then, on the literary level, Punter points out the allegiances of the Gothic with the Richardsonian novel, sentimentalism and graveyard poetry, all four, as he sees them, allied against the strictly rationalist, conservative and anti-emotional premises of the Enlightenment (27–33).

towards determining our cultural origins—if we accept Hogle’s view that the Gothic is an “archival location,” a repository of “betwixt-and-between conditions” (301) into which the middle class abjects (in Kristeva’s terms) its anxieties and contradictions in the process of forming “a distinct sense of identity” (297), then we can find the Gothic an abundant source of information on how contemporary middle-class identity came into being.

Defining its significance in socio-psychological terms ultimately removes the Gothic from the sphere of critical margin, making it a domain of cultural significance. Simultaneously, if we consider Hogle’s understanding of the role of the Gothic as a space of cultural abjection, we can see the Gothic still stands for the marginal, and, peculiarly, its literary marginalization is maintained in spite of its entrance into the critical mainstream. In fact, the condition of the margin is what determines the significance of the Gothic. Gothic fiction should be studied—because it illuminates culture by uncovering what culture rejects. The same sort of statement can be found in Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*; here, the fantastic unveils the frames of the dominant order as it

points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests, for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to . . . that which is outside dominant value systems. The fantastic traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent. (4)

This is what Botting voices while stating that the cultural margin is as illuminating as the mainstream—studying the margin enables one to fully comprehend “the newly dominant order” as it familiarizes one with the “produced, policed and maintained . . . antitheses, opposites enabling the distinction and discrimination of [the order’s] own values and anxieties” (“Preface” 3).

Summing up, the Gothic is still defined by the contemporary critic/scholar as marginal, the margin being seen in the first place as the sphere of exclusion, repression and abjection; simultaneously, the Gothic is being seen as vital, since it allows us to better comprehend the mainstream—the dominant order, or socio-political system. But why is such comprehension vital? We may point to an interesting parallel between the importance of the margin and Warwick’s observations on the contemporary status of trauma. Warwick poses that “contemporary culture *wants* to have trauma, [which] is induced, predicted and enacted, persistently rehearsed even when it is not actually present” (11). In quasi-psychoanalytical therapy, trauma is a necessary component, a condition *sine qua non* for human wholeness, without comprehending and internalizing which one cannot

fully become oneself. Encompassing the unspeakable and repressed, trauma must necessarily be processed (11–13). The same goes for the margin, itself the trauma of society/culture, as it encompasses all that threatens the superficial unity of the socio-cultural self. Nowadays, it seems to be widely assumed that this self cannot be fully comprehended, and cannot properly claim to constitute a whole, if it does not deal with what it has repressed, rejected or abjected.

There is another way of explaining the importance of studying the margin—namely, through the lens of liberation from repression, the same which, as Warwick states, is celebrated by the contemporary Gothic. Botting hints at this when he states that, with the social, political and sexual liberation that took place in the twentieth century, criticism also liberated itself from the imposed canons and rules of literary evaluation (“Preface” 4). We could take this one step further by remarking that critical liberation not only parallels the broader socio-political one, but also, unavoidably, participates in it. If Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical critics see the Gothic as expressing “class violence and anxiety, female oppression and rage, sexual repression and freedom” (Botting, “Preface” 4), then their readings function within the paradigm of repression and liberation, normalization and subversion, and thus the value of the Gothic is construed in terms of its contesting the imposed norm, opening the path for subversion and unveiling mechanisms of repression. This becomes more visible if we consider Jackson:

Fantasies are never ideologically “innocent” texts. The tradition of Gothic fiction . . . in many ways reinforces a bourgeois ideology. Many of its best known texts reveal a strong degree of social and class prejudice and it goes without saying, perhaps, that they are heavily misogynistic. Yet the drive of their narratives is towards a “fantastic” realm, an imaginary area, preceding the “sexed” identity of the subject and so introducing repressed female energies and absent unities. Especially in the vampire myth, the attempt to *negate* cultural order by *reversing* the Oedipal stage constitutes a violent countercultural thrust which then provokes further establishment of repression to defeat, or castrate, such a thrust. The centre of the fantastic text tries to break with repression, yet is inevitably constrained by its surrounding frame. (122)

Interestingly, while Foucault writes on the contemporary attitude towards sexual liberation, he links it with the broadly accepted, though debunked by the evidence, “myth” that the Victorian era was the era of repression, which silenced sex and pushed it into the furthest margin of society (3–5). He also considers twentieth-century wide-spread attempts at restoring sex to a more central status as being aimed at liberation from

the alleged Victorian repression, a conscious rebellion against “the oppressive power”:

If sex is repressed . . . than the mere fact one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays. (6)

We can say that speaking of the margin, as much as speaking of sex or of trauma—all three representing the repressed—may be seen in terms of liberating oneself, and, subsequently, of celebrating one’s liberation. Hence, speaking of the ways in which the Gothic “threatened,” unveiled or subverted the imposed order by giving voice to the repressed is also a way of liberation. However, just as the “repressive hypothesis” raises serious doubts (Foucault 10), so seeing the Gothic as reflecting repression and struggling to overcome it may have its dangers. In the first place, it is our culture that is obsessed with speaking of repression and liberation—and not necessarily the Gothic of the past.

Botting points to this danger as he states that reading the Gothic as offering some liberation is a kind of reading in which elements repressed in the text become “manifestations of critical assumptions themselves” (“Preface” 4–5). In a similar vein, Robert Miles warns that Marxist, psychoanalytical and feminist methods of scrutiny invite the danger of de-historicizing a Gothic text by projecting on it contemporary concerns (3). According to Markman Ellis, psychoanalysis fails to properly explain the Gothic, as it imposes its own conclusions on the text (14). Finally, Baldick and Mighall overtly denounce “Gothic Criticism” on the grounds of its reinventing the Gothic “in the image of its own projected intellectual goals of psychological ‘depth’ and political ‘subversion’” (209). In their account, subversion, transgression and liberation are imposed on the Gothic text to confirm the presumptions of the critic and contribute to the critic’s own cause—thus, the Gothic becomes ultimately rewritten, its defining parameters blurred and changed. Criticism is seen not as analyzing a body of fiction but congratulating itself, “on behalf of progressive modern opinion, upon its liberation from the dungeons of Victorian sexual repression or social hierarchy” (Baldick and Mighall 210); it becomes an “instance of the . . . campaign against nineteenth-century literary realism and its alleged ideological backwardness” (210).

So far, we have answered all but one of the questions posed at the beginning of this article. The Gothic is still seen as marginal and we may point to the potential functionality of its marginal status. If we see the

margin exclusively in terms of subversion and repression, then scrutinizing it becomes a matter for our own liberation. Of course, we cannot state that the Gothic has nothing to do with subversion—there are texts in whose case denying they are aimed at contesting the socio-political norms would amount to an act of fakery. However, the marginalization of the Gothic does not stem exclusively from the attempts of the critics to silence what counters the establishment norms. If the agenda of contemporary criticism encompasses, in certain circles, vindicating the repressed, the agenda of the criticism of the past not necessarily encompasses already what could be called repression. Thus, the contemporary readings of the Gothic of the past are in danger of constructing new Gothic narratives, in fact. Hence, the Gothic margin as the margin of the repressed appears to be, all in all, at least partly a discursive construct.

THE DEATH OF THE GOTHIC MARGIN

The final question that we posed at the outset was whether the lack of marginal status amounts to the lack of the constitutive feature of the Gothic, and thus the end of the mode. If yes, then the partial artificiality of the Gothic margin should be confirmed. As it appears, not all Gothic fiction has always been aimed at subversion and giving voice to the repressed. A large part of it was aimed primarily at imitation of popular motives and increased sales. Some canonical Gothic authors did not aim at contesting the stance of criticism—for example, Reeve, according to Watt, “was concerned both to define her work against the bathos and frivolity of *Otranto* and to exploit the affective power and exemplary potential of prose fiction” (47). Nowadays, many Gothic texts appear perfectly mainstream, abiding by the rules of the market and threatening little subversion, for instance Coppola’s *Dracula*. It is with Coppola’s *Dracula* that, Botting announces, the Gothic dies, deprived of what constituted it, beginning with excess and transgression (*Gothic* 180).

According to Botting, Coppola turns a tale of transgression, horror and final climatic expulsion of evil into a mere “sentimental romance” (*Gothic* 178). Here, *Dracula* is less otherworldly than human, less of a threat to proper patriarchal relations and gender roles than a husband whose only aim is to be reunited with his wife, and there is no purifying climax that could restore the patriarchal *status quo*, only a merciful final blow from a loved woman (Botting, *Gothic* 177–79). Instead of representing a properly marginal figure, the vampire turns out to be more domesticated than we would expect. No revision of norms seems to be offered. Thus, what is actually announced, and mourned, is not the death of the Gothic, or of the vampire, but the death of Gothic marginality itself.

Paradoxically, we might wonder if Coppola's version of the Dracula myth is indeed that domesticated. In one sense, it is. As Botting notices, the film's images of blood cells constitute a strong allusion to blood disease, and the fear of AIDS in the 1990s can be easily linked to the fear of syphilis in the 1890s; in evoking this fear, the film seems to parallel the novel (*Gothic* 177). However, if the novel is read, in the vein of Christopher Craft, as saturated with homosexuality, and seen as expelling the threat of gender inversion but only after entertaining the promise of sexual liberation, then the film is strangely silent—in the age of AIDS, it risks not a word about homosexual relations. But in another sense, Coppola's *Dracula* does unsettle the fixed order—the Victorian one. While for Craft the female characters in the novel are but the Count's surrogates, vessels for male desire (268), in the film it is a woman with a double identity who becomes the main character and the trigger for the plot: Mina, or Countess Dracula. What is more, this two-fold figure is liberated enough to fully subvert the male plot. If in the novel women are only a pretext for patriarchy to reassert itself, in the film patriarchy has little role to play. It does exterminate Lucy—but in the end all the men, including Dracula, are saved by a woman. It is Mina who has enough liberty to embrace and internalize the vampire, turning upon a kiss from Harker's wife, whom she is, into the Count's wife, whom she is as well. Thus, the story turns out to be one of individual (female) trauma and integration. In contrast to Lucy from the novel, Mina grants herself the promiscuity that is sanctioned (she has both Harker and Dracula), and though, at the end, it seems one husband must go for the other to fully become one, it is the woman who has the power to put the men in their proper place. There is no need for a climax. The *status quo* has been subverted permanently, there is nothing to restore. Of course, the new order is our own—one in which the Victorian repression has been dealt with.

If we consider Coppola's film from such a perspective, we can see that it is saturated with revision as well. But somehow this revision passes unnoticed. Perhaps it is because we want to see the Gothic as always subverting and transgressing, and not as showing the repressed liberated, or disclosing subversion to be the new centre, the new order. Or perhaps because viewing the Gothic as such remains outside our critical discourse, and so cannot be validated. The Gothic margin dies, taking with it a certain vision—or construct—of the Gothic. But its ghost is a true Gothic ghost, haunting the Gothic that remains.


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