Gothic Riffs
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Literary critics have long been puzzled by the gothic. Hyperbolic, sprawling, embarrassingly melodramatic and sentimental, ideologically bifurcated, the genre has been the unwanted stepchild of the romantic movement since its inception. For many years, in fact, the gothic was quietly ignored, tucked away like some odd family relation that was better off kept in an asylum. And when the gothic was brought into the light of day, dusted off, and scrutinized, critics were confused about exactly what they were examining. As Sade suggested, the gothic arose during a time of not simply political revolution, but of rapid intellectual, social, economic, and religious upheaval, and in many ways the new cultural practices of Sentimentality, melodrama, and gothic contained within themselves both their ostensible concerns—control over the anxieties produced by the forces of rapid change—as well as their opposites—rampant flirtation with and exploration of those fears. Foucault has observed on this issue that as a paranoid nineteenth-century middle-class imaginary attempted to control the challenges that it confronted, “these same dangers, at the same time, fascinated men’s imaginations and their desires. Morality dreams of exorcising them, but there is something in man which makes him dream of experiencing them, or at least approaching them and releasing their hallucinations” (1988, 207–8). The gothic became the genre par excellence of alternately approaching and then fleeing from the realities of living in the
world of the immanent. The gothic imaginary finally situates itself firmly on that cusp between the premodern and the modern, between endorsing a belief in the transcendent or the quotidian; as I have argued throughout, its subject matter consists, then, of various secularization scenarios presented to a populace that itself had not been able to choose definitively one worldview over the other and, indeed, never has.

Critics have traditionally explored the gothic worldview by focusing on its convoluted presentation of religion. For instance, one of the gothic’s earliest modern historians, J. M. S. Tompkins, did not know quite what to make of the genre’s use of religious themes. She recognized the anti-Catholic and anticlerical agendas of Radcliffe’s novels even while she noted that they used the Catholic picturesque in an attractive and “seductive” manner:

They are very conscious of the picturesque attractions of convents, vows of celibacy, confession and penance; they are seduced by the emotional possibilities of the situations that can be based on these usages; but they seldom fail to make it quite clear that they regard the usages as superstitious and irrational, and, if they did, there was not wanting a critic to blame this “attempt to gloss over the follies of popery, or to represent its absurdities as sacred.” (274; Tompkins quotes the Critical’s review [March 1792] of Mary Robinson’s Vancenza)

But while Tompkins concludes by seeing the demonization of Catholicism as motivated by the Protestant reading public’s attraction to the “lurid” (274), the devoutly Catholic Montague Summers (1880–1948) boldly pronounces that the gothic should be read as a nostalgically romantic “revival” of the supernatural beliefs of Catholicism: “There is no true romanticism apart from Catholic influence and feeling” (390).1 This attempt to situate the gothic clearly within the confines of a spiritual aesthetic does seem to have inspired the work of Devendra Varma, who claimed that the gothic took its impetus from a “new recognition of the heart’s emotions and a reassertion of the numinous,” as well as a craving for “other-worldly gratification” (1957, 210–11), and this sort of approach led to the “numinous” school of gothic criticism as practiced by G. Richard Thompson and S. L. Varnado during the 1980s. Indeed, apart from the dissertation of M. M. Tarr (1946), the genre’s actual investment in anti-Catholicism seems to have been largely ignored for at least two decades. It was not until 1960, for instance, that Leslie Fiedler was quite explicit about the religious ideologies of the gothic novel, declaring: “Like most other classic forms of the novel, the gothic romance is Protestant in its ethos; indeed, it is the most
blatantly anti-Catholic of all, projecting in its fables a consistent image of the Church as the Enemy.” Like Tompkins, though, Fiedler is also forced to admit that there is a fair amount of aesthetic ambivalence in the gothic’s presentation of religion: “Yet the gothic imagination feeds on what its principles abhor, the ritual and glitter, the politics and pageantry of the Roman Church” (138).

The “ritual and glitter” that Tompkins and Fiedler see as so seductive, however, can best be read not simply aesthetically, but historically and ideologically, as manifestations of the continuing presence of the uncanny traces of an older religion, while the anti-Catholic strain in so many of the texts is only one face of an ambivalently realized secularization process. More recently, Baldick and Mighall argue that it is necessary to situate the genre within its fuller “whiggish” context: its need to condemn “the twin yoke of feudal politics and papal deception, from which [Protestants] had still to emancipate themselves” (219):

Gothic novels were set in the Catholic south because, “without great violation of truth,” Gothic (that is, “medieval”) practices were believed still to prevail there. Such representations drew upon and reinforced the cultural identity of the middle-class Protestant readership, which could thrill to the scenes of political and religious persecution safe in the knowledge that they themselves had awoken from such historical nightmares. (219; internal quotation from Walter Scott)

While there is no question that many of the period’s gothic texts conform to this pattern, there is also, as I have suggested throughout, a concurrent residue of looking backward to the era in which transcendent beliefs were unquestioned, where the “porous self” found itself still inhabiting the world of magic and anima, and where authority structures like the Church were unquestioned in their power. The desire to hold onto these lost traditions of the past with nostalgia (νόστος = nostos = returning home, and ἄλγος = algos = pain/longing), or with “the pain a sick person feels because he wishes to return to his native land, and fears never to see it again,” was only half of the ambivalent secularization story. The other half was, as we have seen, the need to embrace the agenda of immanence, the growing sense that we live in a world that can also be explained through science, reason, and controlled through individual efforts and responsibility. There would seem to be something of an impassable divide between these positions: either the gothic is seen as nostalgic and “romantic” in its invocation of transcendence and the trappings of supernaturalism, or it is viewed as a manifestation of Enlightenment values such as reason and
the “explained supernatural.” This “either/or” approach would be better served by being replaced by a “both/and” stance because of the contradictory nature and complexity of the issues that were being negotiated by these cultures.

To not recognize that cultural productions contain both strands, that is, nostalgia and reform, is to fail to recognize how easy it is to be haunted by that which we have supposedly left behind. To recall the Preface, it is as difficult to repudiate the power of past belief systems as it was for Orson to embrace Valentine and leave the forest home of his “bear” mother. Indeed, it would seem that one of history’s most vital lessons is that cultures require hundreds of years to absorb radical change into their social imaginaries, and the changes that western Europe underwent, moving from the world of Brueghel’s painting (see cover) to the “modern” society of the 1848 revolutions, were traumatic indeed. From the religious and intellectual upheavals that occurred during the reign of Henry VIII to the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, England entered the eighteenth century in the grip of both scientific rationalism and spiritual uncertainty and anxiety. France and Germany went through similar, although certainly not identical, reformations, revolutions, and transformations. As Maurice Lévy has observed, the 1688 Revolution by which the Protestant ascendancy was finally established was much more important for the development of the gothic than was the French Revolution because “in some sense the fantastic is a compensation that man provides for himself, at the level of the imagination, for what he has lost at the level of faith” (1968; qtd. Porte, 43). The gothic is not, however, a simple textual substitution for discredited religious beliefs for Lévy, but instead “a genuine expression of profound religious malaise” (1968; qtd. Porte, 43).

Hans Blumenberg (1920–1996) makes much the same point about the interrelation of religion, science, and psychoanalysis. For him, it was Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) who was able to define the connection between transcendence and immanence by focusing on the spiritual concept of immortality and human curiosity about the natural world manifested as “science”: curiosity was simply immortality that had come to understand itself; while for Freud, immortality was curiosity about understanding the mechanisms of the inner psychological world. The Feuerbachian vision, though, holds that the powers we attribute to God are actually our own human potentialities. Summarizing these positions, Peter Homans notes that “secularization is a process of individuation, and . . . religion is the primary or archetypal monument which constitutes and undergirds Western culture” (269).

The gothic arose at a time when this culture was attempting to school
itself in a variety of empiricist protocols and repudiate a long-standing system of “magical” beliefs, superstitions like ghosts, witches, the mysterious powers of saints, the Virgin Mary, confessions, bread and wine, and perhaps for the most radical, the existence of God and the soul itself. While Hogarth’s famous print *Credulity, Superstition, and Fanaticism* (1762) satirizes the notoriety of a number of contemporary superstitions (i.e., the case of Mary Toft who claimed to have given birth to rabbits, the popularity of the Cock-Lane ghost, the ghost of Mrs. Veal, and the drummer William

Figure 9: Frontispiece, M. E. L. D. L. Baron De Langon, *L’Hermite de la Tombe Mystérieuse, ou le Fantôme du Vieux Château*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1816). Courtesy Maurice Lévy
Drury), it also reveals that reforming Protestant sects were as invested in a variety of superstitions or, as Hume famously defined them, “enthusiasms,” as Catholicism had been (74).

Hogarth’s widely reprinted engraving represents one side of the secularized mind’s disdain for antiquated beliefs of the past, in this case Methodist enthusiasts, but it clearly does not represent the full range of the European imaginary, as witnessed by any number of popular and widespread gothic illustrations and performances that suggest that the purely scientific Enlightenment worldview was not a psychic space that everyone was quite so quick to embrace. Indeed, there were no talismans against that ultimate embodiment of the uncanny, our consciousness of our own eventual deaths, and it was this realization that emerged so clearly in the majority of gothic works (fig. 9).

Although the suddenly awakened victim grasps a sword in his defense, the terrified look in his eyes conveys the fact that he knows his struggle will be fruitless. In some ways this illustration reverses Goya’s *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (fig. 1 in the Introduction), because what it suggests is that, whether we are sleeping or waking, we will all finally be confronted by our inescapable uncanny double, the very thing-ness of death, or what Slavoj Žižek calls “the forbidden domain of the Thing” from which all human beings recoil (1991, 25). *L’Hermite* also conveys one of the central points that Freud makes in “The Uncanny.” One may continue to dream of one’s dead parents as alive and well because the unconscious mind refuses to accept their deaths, and so it was out of those returns every night to the land of the living dead that human beings created the transcendent realm: ghosts, totemic ancestors in disguise so that sometimes when they appear we can recognize them as our parents (as Hamlet did) and sometimes we cannot. Dreams express our unconscious and irrational beliefs, that is, that there is no death, and so in a variety of ways gothic textuality and performativity explored both the latent and manifest content of that dream: that death could be negotiated with somehow, through religion, or politics, or science, or finally fantasy-formations of all these ideologies. The rationalist may claim that only savages or the uneducated (i.e., Catholics or Protestant enthusiasts) continue to believe in primitive and animistic superstitions such as ghosts or demons, but for Freud as well as the majority of gothic authors, all human beings are irrational in their attempts to continue to believe on some level in the specters that they visit nightly in their dreams.

So cue the master trope: Death. Recent critics like Baldick and Mighall (211–21) bemoan the recourse to death as the final explanatory paradigm in so much gothic criticism, but as this examination of “gothic riffs” indi-
cates, death would appear to be the ultimate embodiment of the uncanny, that aspect of our environment that we cannot control through the use of charms, omens, or some sort of magic or a simple secularized belief in “human flourishing.” For Freud, the uncanny is located in the residue of an “infantile belief,” and in fact the most infantile of beliefs is in our own immortality. Ghosts and all the other paraphernalia of supernaturalism employed through the gothic arose because the ego cannot grasp the fact of its own eventual extinction. Like the startled man in *L’Hermite* (fig. 9) who may or may not be dreaming, all of us will ultimately find death standing at the end of our beds, beckoning us to join him. Consumers of the popular and performative gothic needed to confront and at the same time repress, contain, or deny (like Baldick and Mighall) their realization that death was the ultimate uncanny visitant that no scientific advance would ever eradicate. Writing in 1759, Adam Smith actually anticipated Freud when he declared that ghosts are the natural offspring of sensibility, taking “their origin from . . . natural sympathy with the imaginary resentment of the slain” (289).

But it is less sympathy with the already dead than anxiety about our own fates that motivates so much of the ambivalent secularizing process of the gothic imaginary. This was a culture in which science had successfully provided many answers to questions that had been mysterious or inexplicable in the past, but the Enlightenment project could not explain the ultimate conundrum: how to live with the knowledge of our own eventual demise. That question, as Freud and more recently Ernest Becker have shown, haunts the psyche to such an extent that there is no escape from it except through repression, rationalization, and finally demonization of others who threaten the “death-denying” ideologies that we have created to repress our knowledge of death. The gothic aesthetic arose when the plausibility and explanatory force of magic and superstitious beliefs declined and no clearly consistent or satisfactorily definitive system arose to answer the questions and anxieties that inevitably continued to persist. In its repetitive recourse to unresolved spiritual issues, the gothic mediates immanence and transcendence, present and past, living and dead, Protestant and Catholic, modern and antiquated. In fact, in some ways it is possible to view the entire European gothic corpus as a “cryptic space,” an aesthetic and uncanny “archive” in the Derridaean sense: “If there is no archive without consignation in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpres- sion, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition . . . remains indissociable from the death drive” (11–12; emphasis in original). And recognizing the persistence of performative gothic “riffs” is
another way of talking about those repetitions and textual recourses to the uncanniness of death.

There is a danger in reading human consciousness as universal, similar across time and space, and certainly it has been politically incorrect to do so for many years. But bear with me: textual evidence produced by the gothic imaginary forces us to consider the possibility of a universal tendency to cower in the face of death. The population of Europe in 1800 appears at least imaginatively to be not so radically different from the inhabitants of Northumbria of whom Bede (?672–735) writes. As Bede recorded, King Edwin and his tribe were converted to Christianity because the missionary Paulinus was able to provide a plausible answer when asked by Coifi, the chief Druidic priest, two simple questions: where were we before we were born and where do we go after we die?\(^5\) The gothic emerged and flourished not so much as a religious explanation that provided definitive answers to these questions, but as one complex and contradictory textual response to the free-floating anxieties that occurred when the lower and middle classes of Europe were expected to participate in a rationalistic, scientific culture that they did not yet fully understand or trust.\(^6\) It is perhaps not far-fetched to claim that the gothic continues to prosper today because many of the same anxieties continue to exist; indeed, they always will.