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From de Sade to Stephen King:
The Literary Aesthetics of Evil

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The European Enlightenment produced its own Other in the form of the popular genre of the Gothic novel, which enjoyed a great vogue in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, both in England and Germany. In England and America the genre has persisted to the present day, producing occasional lasting successes amidst the wealth of ephemera, whereas in German literature only E .T. A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* has achieved the same canonical status as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, first published in 1818. By virtue of a continuity maintained through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Gothic novel merges, in writing in English, into the contemporary horror industry in both film and fiction. Here I shall consider only its literary manifestations.

As an outgrowth of the Enlightenment, the genre presents a challenge to the sovereignty of reason and the ethical values that were assumed to be integral to it. In this sense it is a literature of transgression, but usually of tolerated or contained transgression. Thus, within the English Gothic tradition, the novels of Mrs Radcliffe reverse the breaking of the norms on which their popular success depended by providing a rational explanation of the apparently supernatural manifestations she initially evokes. M. G Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) takes the Gothic in the opposite direction by extending sexual transgressions into the supernatural sphere without any salving concession to rationality. In each case, the popular appeal of the writing derives from a pushing against or crossing rational or ethical barriers which the play of transgression — whether aborted or carried to full-term — has the effect of making visible and central to the reader's preoccupations.[1]

Joel Carroll, in his valuable study *The Philosophy of Horror*, divides the category of 'the monstrous', on which the aesthetics of evil are seen to depend, into two transgressional aspects: the 'impure' and the 'threatening'.[2] He derives the former category from the book by the anthropologist Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (1966). 'Impurity' is transgressive in the sense that it crosses or blurs the barriers between categories that cultural practice erects to keep areas of experience discrete from one another. This effect is obvious from common themes in horror fiction: vampires transgress the barrier between life and death and the biblical prohibition on consuming the blood of living creatures; the creation of the monster by Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel transgresses prohibitions on the treatment of dead bodies, since it is composed of parts of different corpses, and then, on its being awoken to life, through its crossing the barrier between the dead and the living in the wrong direction; the monstrous extraterres-

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trial beings invented by H. P. Lovecraft and imitated by his successors transgress the barriers between existing species, human and animal, as in his story *The Dunwich Horror.*

The category of the 'threatening' works by constituting the monstrous as, at the same time, evil, thus erecting a barrier which has on the 'good' side both the main human protagonists in the novel or story and the implicit reader as well. Wolfgang Iser has shown that fictional texts set up their own implicit reader in the form of a set of indications as to how the stories want to be read. The function of 'threatening' in the act of reading Gothic or horror fiction is to bring the reader as close as possible to the danger evoked, without having the distancing effect, which is essential to the experience of fictionality, collapse altogether. Paraphrasing the theorist Edward Bullough, Joel Carroll expounds the transgressive impulse of the 'threatening' as follows:

> In other words, a work of art seems best when it involves readers in it as completely as possible without their forgetting that it is a work of art and interacting with it as if it were reality. The person who flees the theatre unable to endure the terrors of *Psycho* and the person who [...] pulls out his pistol to shoot a film villain on the screen have both lost aesthetic distance.[3]

Having assigned the implicit reader to the area of the good and threatened, the narrative techniques of horror will bring the focus of the story as close to abolishing aesthetic distance as possible without the final transgression that would accomplish precisely this. In his illuminating handbook of the practice of contemporary horror fiction, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King relates an anecdote about the publisher's editing of his book *Salem's Lot* (1975), which he intended, among other things, as a form of 'literary homage' to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). One of the motifs he had taken over from the earlier work and developed was the association between rats and the presence of the Vampire:

> I decided I would let Barlow – my version of Count Dracula – also use the rats, and, to that end, I gave the town of Jerusalem's Lot an open dump, where there are lots of rats. I played on the presence of the rats several times in the first couple of hundred pages of the novel, and to this day I sometimes get letters asking if I just forgot about the rats, or tried to use them to create atmosphere or what. Actually, I used them to create a scene so revolting that my editor [...] suggested strongly that I remove it and substitute something else. After some grousing, I complied. [...] In the first draft manuscript [...], I had Jimmy go down the stairs and dis-

cover – too late – that Barlow had called all the rats from the dump to the cellar of Eva Miller's boarding house. [...] They attack Jimmy in their hundreds [...]. They are down his shirt, crawling in his hair, biting his neck and arms. When he opens his mouth to yell Mark a warning, one of them runs into his mouth and lodges there, squirming.[4]

The act of editorial censorship was clearly motivated by a nervousness that King's original version of the scene would produce an excess of horror so threatening as to cause a complete loss of aesthetic distance. The issue of excess will be further considered at a later point, but it is needful to establish at the outset that successful acts of reading horror fiction occupy a middle ground that lies between an identification so strong that we lose distance altogether and a refusal to continue the game of fictionality at all.

My choice of horror-fiction as an example of the literature of transgression stems in good measure from the fact that readers tend to deal with it in a less regimented way than they treat the literary canon, so that it enables us to explore encounters with fictionality that are less self-conscious than those that underlie the usual business of literary scholarship. Its consumption is primarily steered by maximising profit, so that you can now buy German translations of novels by sure-fire best sellers like Stephen King in the same months as the books first appear in English. This means professional literary translators are already working from the author's first proofs. My theme also prods us to ask the question: why need there be an aesthetics of evil in the first place?

I have no intention of trying to define evil, for my concern here is not with evil itself, but with the patterns that come into play when fiction evokes evil. Individual instances of evil can be very clear and tangible — comprehensive classifications of evil become subject to all the vagaries of mutating terminology and cultural relativism. I wish to disengage evil from its political use in the rhetoric of United States Presidents of the Republican persuasion and of religious fundamentalists, and to restore to it something of its taxonomic elusiveness. Thus, Paul Ricoeur, in his fine study entitled *The Symbolism of Evil*, comes down to sketching a typology of myths as they unfold through the histories and discourses of different social groups. After sketching four distinct cultural understandings of evil he concludes:

Thus our 'typology' ought not to be confined to an attempt at classification; we must go beyond the statics of classification to a dynamics that has as its task the discovery of the latent life of the myths and the play of their secret affinities. It is this dynamics that must prepare the way for a philosophic recapture of the myth.[5]

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A discussion of the aesthetics of evil within the framework of fictionality must also be dynamic in terms of its sensitivity to the vagaries of literary and social history. For modern horror-fiction becomes a popular genre at a time when one might least expect it, namely in the midst of the European Enlightenment. In 1762 Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* begins a literary fashion that, in a couple of decades, had spread to Germany and other European countries. In an essay published in 1773, John Aiken and Anna Barbauld questioned the pleasure readers gained from the Gothic Novel:

> But the apparent delight with which we dwell upon objects of pure terror, where our moral feelings are not in the least concerned, and no passion seems to be excited but the depressing one of fear, is a paradox of the heart much more difficult of solution.[6]

Puzzled they may have been. But their 'paradox of the heart' is a very elegant summation of one of the central principles of the aesthetics of evil. What we might well expect to terrify and depress us produces a kind of 'delight' instead, *if* the reader is engaged by the text in an effective manner. Nor do the millions of readers who devour contemporary horror fiction with delight feel driven to go out in large numbers and commit evil acts. On the contrary — Stephen King has exploited the yearning for such 'delight' from millions of law-abiding readers, and he maintains:

> Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece suit who resides within all of us. We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings... and let me further suggest that it is not the physical or mental aberration in itself which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order which these aberrations seem to imply [...] After all, when we discuss monstrosity, we are expressing our faith and belief in the norm and watching for the mutant. The writer of horror fiction is neither more nor less than an agent of the status quo.[7]

Admittedly, King seems at this point to have lost sight of one half of the fundamental 'paradox of the heart' on which the success of his genre is based. If his 'Republican' did not feel the seductive force of transgression, then the element of threat, which King, as a master of suspense, so excels at evoking, could hardly be as effective as it is. The 'reaffirmation of order' only becomes interesting in literature when the fiction has made us willing accomplices in a credible approach to chaos.

Moreover, such 'reaffirmation of order' is, in fiction, usually a doubling effect. Since literary fiction perforce embodies an aesthetic ordering in itself, the counterpoint between these patterns and the evil or chaos rampaging through the story generates a delight in contrasts that is complementary to any relief we may feel when evil is defeated on the level of the plot. Tension between the progressive aesthetic ordering of narrative and the evocation of chaos in the thematics is transgressive; a consonance of the resolution of the plot towards order and the effect of a well-crafted ending reverses the process. Such aesthetic pleasure partly accounts for paperback editions or translations of writers like Thomas Harris, author of *The Silence of the Lambs*, selling in supermarkets and news-stands world-wide — as well as in bookshops and on the net.

To assert the undeniable fact that Gothic fiction originates in the context of the European Enlightenment is by no means to establish any single aetiology for its vogue. David Punter, in his study *The Literature of Terror*, sees it produced in direct response to an interaction of socio-economic factors with a collective bewilderment as the 'older "natural" ways' are supplanted by a 'middle-class dominated capitalist economy':

> The individual comes to see himself at the mercy of forces which in fundamental ways elude his understanding. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising to find the emergence of a literature whose key motifs are paranoia, manipulation and injustice, and whose central project is understanding the inexplicable, the taboo, the irrational."[8]

I find it very questionable to generalise from sweeping social changes to the fashions embraced by a publishing industry catering to a relatively small and educated public. It is all too pat and leaves out of account the fact that the Gothic fiction of the later eighteenth century was neither written nor read by peasants displaced from the land.

Indeed, one might argue just as well, with Rosemary Jackson, that the fantastic side of Gothic fiction, rather than expressing overt changes within a given society, instead has the function of allowing glimpses of what a given social order represses since it 'opens up, for a brief moment, on to illegality, on to that which is outside the 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.'[9]

In the early nineteenth century, the Marquis de Sade had his own answer to the problematic aetiology of the Gothic fashion:

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> This genre was the inevitable product of the revolutionary shocks with
> which the whole of Europe resounded. [...] the romantic novel was be-
> coming somewhat difficult to write, and merely monotonous to read:
> there was nobody left who had not experienced more misfortunes in four
> or five years than could be depicted in a century by literature's most
> famous novelists: it was necessary to call upon hell for aid in order to
> arouse interest, and to find in the land of fantasies what was common
> knowledge from historical observations of man in this age of iron.[10]

But the Gothic novel had blossomed in England long before any revolu-
tionary shocks were felt throughout Europe. Also, if we look for periods
when horror-fiction has come back into vogue since, then they tend to be
times of relative political stability — *not* the years when soldiers are dying
in their thousands in the trenches or civilian populations are extinguished
under a hail of bombs. The latest vogue for horror writing in the US arose
not during but just after the Vietnam war — at a time when many of the
values of Middle America had lost their immunity to being questioned. It is
worth recalling that de Sade offered this explanation under the impact of
the horrific events in France from the September of 1792 to the fall of
Robespierre in 1794 and subsequently his own impoverishment and
sufferings under the Directory.[11] He thus has a point when he suggests there
was little aesthetic profit to be got so soon from familiar, mundane evils,
such as the Terror and what occurred in its wake. Certainly, Matthew Lewis
had given the Gothic tradition a powerful, new stimulus in 1796 with his
novel *The Monk* which blended extravagant supernatural horror with themes
of sexual depredation and necrophilia — but more because he recognised
the commercial advantages of extending the genre in this direction than as
a reaction to events in France.

I think the question of origins can best be answered from the paradoxi-
cal nature of the Enlightenment itself. The Gothic novel was just as much a
product of the Enlightenment as were those of de Sade's literary works that
he had published with no name on the title page and whose authorship he
strenuously denied. It is popular to quote, when considering the origins of
the Gothic genre, the illustration by Goya entitled 'The Sleep of Reason
Gives Birth to Monsters', for it is tempting to use this as an explanatory
model for the aesthetics of evil. Yet, I think it more accurate to say that it is
not the *sleep* of reason, but rather the incessant celebration of the sover-
eignty of reason by the European Enlightenment that produces, as counter-
phenomena, the vogue for horror-fiction, on the one hand, and, on the other,
the world of those writings of de Sade that were to become as infamous as
their author's early career.

The Enlightenment privileges one version of human nature above all others. In the popularity of the Gothic novel, as in the bizarre world created by de Sade, we have different forms of resistance to the arrogance implicit in mainstream Enlightenment thought. It is as if human nature were saying to a personified Reason: 'You turn me into a primarily rational, compassionate, civilised being at your own cost. I am not as simple as this. The monsters of our nightmares and the art that is derived from our nightmares will tell you so.'

In 1947, the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer drew attention to the self-enclosing tendencies of eighteenth-century European thought in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

> The conceptual apparatus determines the senses, even before perception occurs [...]. Intuitively, Kant foretold what Hollywood consciously put into practice: in the very process of production, images are pre-censored according to the norm of the understanding which will later govern their apprehension. [...] Even if the secret utopia in the concept of reason pointed, despite fortuitous distinctions between individuals, to their common interest, reason [...] serves to level down that same identical interest.[12]

Now, de Sade perceived very clearly these limitations of Enlightenment thinking. His relentless demonstration of human vileness in novels such as *Justine* and *Juliette* satirises the inadequacy of reason and morality to deal with the complexities of human nature. And yet he too —unwittingly — illustrates a common tautology of Enlightenment method: initial simplification; recognition and rejection of this; but then *re-simplification*. For de Sade is carried past the point of refuting the dogmas of reason to a stage where he sets up his own icons, be these 'sovereignty', 'excess', '*jouissance*' or 'crime' — all of which testify to the radically simplified structure of his oppositional version of human nature. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, Kant's concept of higher reason (*Vernunft*) is ambivalent in that it also contains the postulate of a mode of harmonious community: 'Reason as the transcendental, superindividual identity has implicit in it the idea of a free human coexistence in which individuals organise themselves to form a generalised subjectivity in which they annul the conflict between pure and empirical reason in the conscious solidarity of the whole.'[13]

De Sade's novel *Juliette ou les prospérités du vice*, which he published anonymously in 1797, is, despite its date of composition, very much a work of the *ancien régime* directed against the central values of the heyday of the eighteenth-century enlightenment. Indeed, it is one long drawn-out cel-

ebration of the transgression of these, using the discourse of reason common to de Sade's characters and what they reject to advance opposite conclusions about human nature. The Sadeian individual tends towards solipsism rather than any implicit community, and this is reflected even in the fates of those characters in the novel who make a fetish of transgression. Thus Clairwil and Juliette dispose of one of their fellow libertines by throwing her and her jewels and clothing into the crater of Vesuvius with no more compunction than the statement: 'the crime was accomplished, Nature was satisfied'.[14] Clairwil herself is to become the victim of Juliette, but before this occurs she is to have ample scope for celebrating transgression for its own sake in the frequent 'philosophical' passages that are interspersed among the orgies and massacres.

Thus Clairwil lectures her disciple Juliette on the consolations of crime, as an orthodox Enlightenment thinker might expound the consolations of philosophy:

> You cannot imagine, dear Juliette, what it means to grow old with crime; it puts down such terrible roots in us, it identifies itself so wholly with our existence that we end up living solely for its sake. Can you believe that I regret each instant in my life in which I have not filthied my self by committing acts of horror. I have no desire to do anything else; I would like all my thoughts to be bent on crime, and that my hands should instantly translate my thoughts into action. Oh! Juliette, how sweet is crime, how our minds take fire at the idea of crossing all those absurd barriers which hold men captive.[15]

It is ironic that, not only does de Sade's discourse mimic that of orthodox Enlightenment philosophy, but the Society of the Friends of Crime that figures in the novel is clearly modelled on a Masonic Lodge of the eighteenth century with its own statutes and an insistence that its orgies and debauches be conducted in a most orderly manner.[16]

The repetitiousness of the novel ultimately has the effect of an over-reinforcement of the containing, ordering effects of aesthetic form. This not only makes its 1260 pages a less than enthralling read, but stands in a strange antithesis to the ideals of transgression for its own sake which it relentlessly propounds, usually through Clairwil who serves as the author's mouthpiece:

> I should like [...] to find a crime whose effects might continue perpetually, even if I were to cease committing it, so that there would not be a single instant in my life – even in my sleep – when I was not the cause of

some havoc; and I wish that this havoc could extend beyond all proportion and bring universal corruption in its wake, or else such complete disorder that, well past the end of my own lifetime, its effects would still continue to be felt.[17]

Transgression may be posited as an absolute, but its literary realisation, repeated over so many hundreds of pages, becomes as tedious in its own way as orthodox Enlightenment moralising. This highlights one of the paradoxes of the aesthetics of evil, namely that the intention to transgress may have little to do with the effective evocation of transgression which is essential if the reader is to be engaged to the point where the collapse of aesthetic distance becomes a genuine threat. For all the sexual excesses, ordure and gore, de Sade's horrors are over-aestheticised, and no transgression comes close to threatening his obtrusive control over the narration.

As Stephen King has pointed out, the finest effects of horror fiction are produced, not by scenes of carnage, but by manipulating the reader's imagination:

It's what the mind sees that makes these stories quintessential tales of terror. It is the unpleasant speculation called to mind when the knocking on the door begins in the latter story [W. W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*] and the grief-stricken old woman rushes to answer it. Nothing is there but the wind when she finally throws the door open...[18]

The corollary of this is that horror-fiction bores us at its own peril. It must achieve and hold the engagement of readers because it is market-oriented. This results in a lot of stereotyped and formulaic writing, but it also produces some surprising and lasting successes, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which has now entered the literary canon, or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which has never been out of print since it was first published in 1897.

There are many ways of reading Mary Shelley's novel, first published in 1818, and I must limit myself here to sketching a few lines of interpretation. From the moment of its creation the monster is a living transgression, rejected in disgust by Victor Frankenstein, its creator. But never did a monster start out wanting more to be good than this unhappy creature. In the monster's autobiography, Shelley includes a travesty of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of positive self-realisation. The monster is driven into evil through its rejection by its creator and its subsequent rejections by such humans as it approaches in good faith. Now, Shelley *could* have made the monster evil from the outset, but, instead, she motivates its first murder as an act of

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revenge on its creator's family for all it has suffered. Its subsequent murders are then a response to Frankenstein's first promising to make his creature a female counterpart, then destroying the she-monster when it is only half-made. Towards the end of the novel, creator and monster come increasingly to resemble each other, and it is appropriate that both should die in the icy wastes that are emblematic of what binds them together.

While the rhetoric of the text maintains Victor Frankenstein as a point of identification for the reader, and hence as nominally 'good', in the various sub-texts a lot of echoing and mirroring takes place between Frankenstein and his creature to the point where they become two halves of the same self. Lovelessness, which is the dominant emotional climate of the end of the novel, is both destructive and absolute. Frankenstein becomes wholly obsessed with pursuing and killing his own creature, and, after *his* death, the creature is no less obsessed with burning itself alive. If we look for the origin of this lovelessness, we are plunged into a mass of ambiguity, since there is only so much that a novel published in the Britain of 1818 can say about sexual themes. We have to work back from the icy negativity in which the novel ends — and start asking questions.

Why does Victor realise only in the moment that he awakes it to life that what he has made is genuinely hideous? Just where is what he calls 'my workshop of filthy creation'?[19] Is it in the marriage bed that Victor spends so much of his life avoiding, even to the extent of allowing the monster to murder Elizabeth, his own bride, on their wedding night — a murder in which Victor is virtually an accomplice? Was it in his parents' marriage bed, as a Freudian interpretation might have it? Is it in the bed in which women give birth and their children soon die, as Mary Shelley's biography suggests?[20]

The novel gives us no clear answers, only hints. As the reader's point of identification tends to shift back and forth between Victor Frankenstein and other figures, who are all *victims* of his disastrous act of creation, so issues of good and evil become increasingly blurred. The main character is set up to fail as a figure of simplistic goodness, and when he concludes 'I, not in deed, but in effect was the true murderer', we are perhaps inclined to believe him, both as regards the crime for which an innocent woman has just been executed and for the other murders to come.[21]

The artistic triumph of this work is to bring the reader close to the elusive incoherence of genuine evil, while retaining strong distancing effects, such as the multiple narrative perspective, in order not to leave us stranded in the desolation of the endless ice-sea in which both creator and creation find their deaths. In other words: the text takes its readers very close to chaos, but safeguards them by its embodiment of form. By the time Mary

Shelley wrote, the Gothic genre was half a century old and highly formulaic. Her lasting achievement was to restore to evil something of its real-life complexity. In this way, her text often seems to work against itself and gets into contradictions, but it becomes a great novel in the process.

Horror-fiction works for me best when it seems to be less than fully clear about what it is doing, in other words: when it transgresses its own explicit intentions. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* offers us in the figure of the vampire a credible icon of mindless evil, bent on destruction for its own sake throughout the ages. But the novel is just as clearly about conflicting attitudes towards sexuality in the Victorian England in which and for which it was written. The text constantly shifts between glimpses of sexuality as an irresistible charm and — supplying the socially proper corrective — intimacy and desire as a fatal contagion.[22] The final destruction of Dracula himself leaves all such sexual tensions unresolved. It is perhaps the author's inability or unwillingness to resolve these that keeps the novel so much alive today.

While we can interpret the sub-texts of sexuality in *Dracula* without having recourse to Freud, Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* seems to anticipate much of Freudian thinking by at least a decade, since the unacceptable, evil self emerges directly from within or beneath the bland social persona. But I maintain the work succeeds precisely because its *social* dimension does not quite jibe with its psychology. For it is also a subversive parable of a society based on denial, one in which the final evil is not any act of violence, but rather public scandal, the same society that was to applaud, ten years after Stevenson's story appeared, the judicial destruction of Oscar Wilde. Once more, we see the aesthetics of evil thrive on a certain conceptual confusion that is balanced by formal discipline. For Mr Hyde is presented to the reader with all the trappings of the 'unnatural'— and yet he is very like what Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, designates by the term '*homo natura*' — the 'terrible sub-text' underlying our civilised existence, but no less true for being terrible.[23]

Before moving on to the later decades of the twentieth century and Stephen King, one must pay homage to one of the great nobodies of twentieth-century fiction, H. P. Lovecraft. He wrote much of his best work in the late 20s and early 30s, but was so little appreciated in his lifetime that he had great trouble getting stories accepted by pulp magazines. Stephen King has amply acknowledged his debt to Lovecraft.[24] I would go further and say that without some of Lovecraft's innovations, the techniques of King and his colleagues, writing from the 1970s to the present day, are scarcely thinkable. What did Lovecraft do? He *thought* he had invented what he called 'cosmic fear' — evoking the insignificance of humanity when con-

fronted with monsters out of the intergalactic depths. What he in fact did was to show how horror-fiction could be integrated with the concoction of mythical worlds, and how 'cosmic fear' could be interlaced with all too human prejudices on the author's part. Lovecraft's less 'cosmic' emotions include a dread of sexuality in any form, a marked aversion to the mingling of races and a horror of the self's losing its firm contours and turning amorphous. One of his best stories, entitled *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, manages to blend the very influential ideas of the corruption of a whole community by an alien evil with that of the narration itself as the process of negative change. The latter effect means that the narrative perspective ends as a transgression of the limits by which it initially defines itself to the reader. This looks at first sight like faulty technique, of which there is a great deal in Lovecraft's stories, but in this case we have what Ricoeur might call an 'auto-infection' of the integrity of the narrative framework.[25] The result is one of Lovecraft's most memorable inventions, for the implicit reader's focus also crosses the divide between the nominally good and the undeniably monstrous.

Where Lovecraft fails and his disciple Stephen King succeeds overwhelmingly is in winning the reader's engagement. It is hard to engage emotionally with most of Lovecraft's writing — unless one happens to be a white, racist, Anglo male who detests sex and has a morbid fear of turning into a blob of cosmic jelly. Stephen King, on the other hand, is perhaps the best writer about childhood in English since L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. Because King's characters have believable childhoods, we are prepared to go with them as they do battle with cosmic monstrosities that are straight out of Lovecraft. His blockbuster novel *It*, over a thousand pages in length, still sells well in supermarkets, in part because its human protagonists confront the monster twice — once as a gang of kids called 'The Losers' and then as adults with lives barely holding together. Since Stephen King also excels in doing backgrounds from small-town Middle America, the thousand pages fly by as the corruption that — quite literally — underlies the whole community of Derry, Maine, is evoked with virtuosic technique. The counterpointing of present and past, the elegance of the plotting and, above all, the text's sure grasp on the reader's engagement — such skill shows us that the basic aesthetics of literary evil lie in creating the illusion of containing the uncontainable.

By way of summary, let us go back to the paradox stated when Gothic novels first became fashionable. Readers seek out fictions they know in advance will try to produce in them terror, or even disgust, because they also know there is some 'delight' to be had from a close encounter with the monstrous on the printed page. Recognising this, however, does not help

us explain why some horror fiction becomes dated and loses its readership, whereas some novels, like *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, live on and continue to create ripples and echoes in fiction and in other cultural media centuries after their first popular success. So how do we distinguish the great horror novel from the formulaic pot-boiler? I have already floated the idea that horror-fiction is most effective when it seems less than fully aware of what it is doing, or when it ostensibly tells *one* story but in reality tells others which may stand in no logical relationship to the obvious goal of the plot – indeed which, like the sexual themes in *Dracula*, require patient decoding.

Another way of saying this is that the best horror fiction not merely fulfils the genre-based expectations of a particular readership in its social context, but confuses or contradicts these as well. Thus, conceptual dissonances are produced which unsettle the reader just as much as the discovery that, despite all the crucifixes and the garlic, that old vampire has been at it again.

In this way, we arrive at my own thesis which is that the aesthetics of evil are most effective when the transgressions of social and psychological norms *within* the story are echoed or mimicked by transgressions of the reader's expectations. These will *not* cohere to a conceptual whole on a first reading. Rather, they set up resonances that continue to disturb us even after the monster has been destroyed, the vampire has copped a fatal dose of sunlight, and normality has — to all intents and purposes — been restored. We delight in works that produce such resonances because we feel evil to be complex and elusive, and we know it is very hard to confront it directly with our understanding — either in society or within ourselves. We want to be taken close to it in the safe world of structured fictions, but we also want to be reminded that all liberating endings are ultimately a sham — because evil is incommensurable, and it never really goes away. Thus we can say that the ostensible goal of many horror novels is to act out the erasure of the unacceptable, the undesired, within ourselves and in society, through the defeat of its objective correlatives in fiction: the murderers, the aliens, the living dead. But there remains — in the best horror-fiction — an uneasy awareness that the victory of the good is in some sense illusory. What Freud called the return of the repressed is really a slow carousel, not a once-off apparition.

I stress we do not need the whole apparatus of Freudian theory to understand horror fiction. The disguised evil can be much more simple and mundane than the luxuriant myths of psychoanalysis. Stephen King has given us two accounts of his career: *Danse Macabre*, first published in 1981, and, in 2000, a book called *On Writing*. In the second he is very frank about his past alcoholism and drug-addiction; in the first it does not get a mention. In

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the later account, he tells of his discovery that the human monster in his own novel *Misery* was an objectification of his addictions. Recounting his battle to resolve to seek help, he says: 'what finally decided me was Annie Wilkes, the psycho nurse in *Misery*. Annie was coke, Annie was booze, and I decided I was tired of being Annie's pet writer.'[26]

King's insight did *not* come while he was writing the novel, and I doubt any reader who had not known the author personally could have got it from the text. Fiction disguises, just as fiction mediates. Effective horror-fiction allows us to come close to what is hardest to confront in the clear light of reason — but it does not resolve the confrontation. Rather, it taunts us with glimpses, unsettles us with resonances, confuses us by doing several things at once. It usually returns us to normality, but the best horror-fiction leaves us with the feeling that this return is not a genuine homecoming at all, and that normality is, in its own complacent way, as fantastic as the monsters themselves.

Notes

1. For the conceptual framework of 'transgression' which underlies the following discussion, cf. 'Michel Foucault, A Preface to Transgression', trans. by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon in *Religion and Culture. Michel Foucault*, ed. Jeremy R. Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999): 'Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage [...] The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows.' Foucault's essay originally appeared in the journal *Critique* in 1963.
2. Joel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (London and New York: Routledge: 1990) passim.
3. Ibid., p. 3.
4. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre*, 3rd ed., (New York: Berkley, 1983), p. 26f.
5. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. by Emerson Buchanan, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 174.
6. Quoted in: Edith Birkhead, *The Tale of Terror. A Study of the Gothic Romance*, (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), p. 24.
7. *Danse Macabre*, p. 30
8. David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, (New York: Longmans, 1980), p. 19.
9. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, (London/New York: Methuen, 1981), p. 4.
10. Quoted in: *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 34.
11. Cf. Maurice Lever, *Marquis de Sade. A Biography*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer,

(London 1993), pp. 452-523.

12. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans, by John Cumming, (New York 1979), p. 84.

13. Ibid.

14. Sade, *Œuvres III*, ed. Michel Delon and Jean Deprun, (Paris 1998), p. 1104 [Author's translation].

15. Ibid, p. 1047f. [Author's translation].

16. Ibid., pp. 563–569.

17. Ibid., p. 650 [Author's translation].

18. *Danse Macabre,* p. 22.

19. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* or *The Modern Prometheus*. The 1818 Text, ed. Marilyn Butler, (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

20. I have elsewhere explored the emotional dynamics of the Frankenstein family; cf. Anthony Stephens, 'Frankenstein und Pygmalion', in: *Pygmalion. Die Geschichte des Mythos in der abendländischen Kultur*, ed. Mathias Mayer and Gerhard Neumann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 1997), pp. 531–553.

21. *Frankenstein*, p. 72.

22. Cf. *The Symbolism of Evil*, p. 156: 'This schema of infection [...] signifies that seduction *from the outside* is ultimately an affection of the self by the self, an auto-infection, by which the act of binding oneself is transformed into the act of being bound. It is evident that the symbol of enslavement is a necessary step for this taking up of the symbol of defilement into the experience of the servile will; it is by thinking of the yielding of myself to slavery and the reign over myself of the power of evil as identical that I discover the profound significance of a tarnishing of freedom.'

23. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in drei Bänden*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Munich: Hanser, 1966), vol. 2, Jenseits von Gut und Böse, § 229: 'ber wir Einsiedler und Murmeltiere, wir haben uns längst in aller Heimlichkeit eines Einsiedler-Gewissens überredet [...] daß auch unter solcher schmeichlerischen Farbe und Übermalung der schreckliche Grundtext *homo natura* wieder herauserkannt werden muß.'

24. *Danse Macabre*, p. 63 and 96f.

25. See above note 22.

26. Stephen King, *On Writing* (London 2000), p. 109.