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Introduction

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The abhuman

A naked man was lying on the floor, his arms and legs stretched wide apart, and bound to pegs that had been hammered into the boards. The body was torn and mutilated in the most hideous fashion, scarred with the marks of red-hot irons, a shameful ruin of the human shape. But upon the middle of the body a fire of coals was smouldering; the flesh had been burnt through. The man was dead, but the smoke of his torment mounted still, a black vapour.

“The young man with spectacles,” said Mr. Dyson.

Arthur Machen, *The Three Imposters* (p. 353)¹

As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (p. 387)

The topic of this book is the ruination of the human subject. Such a ruination, figured in the most violent, absolute, and often repulsive terms, is practiced insistently, almost obsessively, in the pages of British Gothic fiction at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Or perhaps it would be more precise to say that the topic of this book is the ruination of traditional constructs of human identity that accompanied the modeling of new ones at the turn of the century. In place of a human body stable and integral (at least, liable to no worse than the ravages of time and disease), the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic offers the spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated; in place of the possibility of human transcendence, the prospect of an existence circumscribed within the realities of gross corporeality; in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is both fragmented and permeable. Within this genre one may witness the relentless destruction of “the human” and the unfolding in its stead of what I will call, to borrow an evocative term from supernaturalist author William Hope Hodgson, the “abhuman.”² The abhuman subject is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of

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becoming not-itself, becoming other. The prefix “ab-” signals a movement away from a site or condition, and thus a loss. But a movement away from is also a movement towards – towards a site or condition as yet unspecified – and thus entails both a threat and a promise.

The word “abhuman” may be seen as resonating with the psychoanalytic philosopher Julia Kristeva’s formulation of “abjection” in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Literally meaning “cast away” or “cast under, abased,” “abjection” is shaded by Kristeva to describe the ambivalent status of a human subject who, on the one hand, labors to maintain (the illusion of) an autonomous and discrete self-identity, responding to any threat to that self-conception with emphatic, sometimes violent, denial, and who on the other hand welcomes the event or confrontation that breaches the boundaries of the ego and casts the self down into the vertiginous pleasures of indifferenciation. To be thus “outcast” is to suffer an anxiety often nauseating in its intensity, but to embrace abjection is to experience *jouissance*.³ The *fin-de-siècle* Gothic is positioned within precisely such an ambivalence: convulsed by nostalgia for the “fully human” subject whose undoing it accomplishes so resolutely, and yet aroused by the prospect of a monstrous becoming. One may read its obsessive staging and restaging of the spectacle of abhumanness as a paralysis, a species of trauma, but one must also note the variety and sheer exuberance of the spectacle, as the human body collapses and is reshaped across an astonishing range of morphic possibilities: into slug-men, snake-women, ape-men, beast-people, octopus-seal-men, beetle-women, dog-men, fungus-people.

The last decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the reemergence of the Gothic as a significant literary form in Great Britain, after its virtual disappearance in the middle of the century. While certain broad narrative and thematic continuities link this form to the late eighteenth-century and Romantic Gothic novel, the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic rematerializes as a genre in many ways unrecognizable, transfigured, bespeaking an altered sensibility that resonates more closely with contemporary horrific representations than those generated at the far edge of the Enlightenment. More graphic than before, soliciting a more visceral readerly response than before, the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic manifests a new set of generic strategies, discussed below, which function maximally to enact the defamiliarization and violent reconstitution of the human subject.

In *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton argues that a new artistic mode, or a “significant development in literary form,” may

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evolve out of a “collective psychological demand” having its roots in some massive social or ideological shift within a culture (pp. 20–7). Such an approach seems especially appropriate to the analysis of popular genres, of like-minded and -structured texts produced in quantity and consumed by a wide-ranging audience, since the very popularity of a genre speaks for its efficacy in interpreting and refiguring unmanageable realities for its audience. Gothic in particular has been theorized as an instrumental genre, reemerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises.

In the pages that follow I will situate the *fin-de-siècle* revival of the Gothic, in its new avatar as a genre centrally concerned with the horrific re-making of the human subject, within a general anxiety about the nature of human identity permeating late-Victorian and Edwardian culture, an anxiety generated by scientific discourses, biological and sociomedical, which served to dismantle conventional notions of “the human” as radically as did the Gothic which arose in response to them. Evolutionism, criminal anthropology, degeneration theory, sexology, pre-Freudian psychology – all articulated new models of the human as abhuman, as bodily ambiguated or otherwise discontinuous in identity. The end-of-century Gothic is a genre thoroughly imbricated with biology and social medicine: sometimes borrowing conceptual remodelings of human physical identity, as it did from criminal anthropology; sometimes borrowing narrative remodelings of human heredity and culture, as it did from the interrelated discourses of evolutionism, degeneration, and entropy; sometimes borrowing spatial remodelings of the human subject, as it did from the psychologies of the unconscious.⁴

As I have formulated my argument thus far, the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic might appear as purely reactive, emerging within late-Victorian culture as a symptom of a general malaise occasioned by the sciences. The relationship between scientific and Gothic literary discourses is, however, far more complex than the formulation of genre-as-symptom would indicate. In the first place, without arguing a direct influence on the sciences by the Gothic, I will be attentive throughout this study to the “gothicity” of a range of scientific discourses, to rhetoric, modes of imaging, and narrative structures which reveal the surprising compatibility of empiricism and supernaturalism at this historical moment. The province of the nineteenth-century human sciences was after all very like that of the earlier Gothic novel: the pre-Victorian Gothic provided a

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space wherein to explore phenomena at the borders of human identity and culture – insanity, criminality, barbarity, sexual perversion – precisely those phenomena that would come under the purview of social medicine in later decades. A number of critics have pointed out the ways in which the earlier Gothic’s invention of a systematic discourse of the irrational was radically to complicate and reshape understandings of human subjectivity and the “realist” narrative forms increasingly concerned with the intricacies of human consciousness.⁵ Understanding scientific inquiry as a culturally embedded rather than disengaged activity, one may speculate on its indebtedness, however subtle, to a “Gothic sensibility” newly available in the nineteenth century, despite the relative attenuation of the genre for fifty years.

One must as well emphasize the sheerly disruptive force of such new concepts as natural selection, or the human unconscious. Pre-Freudian modelings of the unconscious, to take one example, increasingly revealed a human subject fractured by discontinuity and profoundly alienated from itself. The implications of Darwinism,⁶ to take another, were perceived as disastrous and traumatic – one might say “gothic” – by a majority of the population. Gothic fiction, working in the negative register of horror, brought this sense of trauma to vivid life, supernaturalizing both the specific content of scientific theories and scientific activity in general. In this sense it can be said to manage the anxieties engendered of scientific innovations by reframing these within the non-realistic, and thus more easily distanced, mode of gothicity.

The *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, however, did more than throw into relief and negotiate a crisis in the epistemology of human identity. For the Gothic served not only to manage anxieties about the shifting nature of “the human” but also to aggravate them. I mean this in no pejorative sense. A crucial strand of argument in this study identifies the Gothic as a *productive* genre: a highly speculative art form, one part of whose cultural work is the invention of new representational strategies by which to imagine human (or not-so-human) realities. Here it should be seen as in opportunistic relation to the sciences. To take one example, the Darwinian narrative of the evolution of species was a narrative within which any combination of morphic traits, any transfiguration of bodily form, was possible; species integrity was undone and remade according to the immediate, situational logic of adaptation to environment.⁷ Gothic plotting seized upon this logic as a device by which to generate a seemingly infinite procession of admixed embodiments – monstrous embodiments to be sure, but nonetheless appealing in their audacious

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refusal to acknowledge any limitations to bodily plasticity. Darwinism opened up a space wherein hitherto unthinkable morphic structures could emerge; the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic occupied that space and pried it open further, attempting to give shape to the unthinkable. That the Gothic frequently concluded by checking its own movement towards innovation – its vampires staked, its beetle-women squashed, its anthropophagous trees dynamited – need not, I think, argue against its role as a fundamentally speculative, even theoretical, genre.

Argument and method

Hysterical utterance has been theorized as a vatic discourse, one which expresses, in “ephemeral and enigmatic” bodily signs that “constitute a language only by analogy,” an alternate field of meaning that lies within the interstices of conventional symbolic structures, and thus points toward liberatory possibilities exceeding those allowed within the dominant cultural order.⁸ In a roughly parallel argument, Rosemary Jackson posits that fantastic literature “traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made ‘absent’” (*Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, p. 4). Though the fantastic exists in “parasitical” relation to the dominant cultural order, bringing into view the forces of disorder and non-meaning against which this order constitutes itself (p. 20), when the fantastic text refuses closure and leaves these forces in view it disrupts conventional meaning systems and makes room for new ones to emerge. Both arguments are intriguing, for both characterize “out-of-control” discourses as oppositional and highly productive, rather than merely symptomatic.

A danger to which such an analysis is prone is an assumption of too great a coherence on the part of the dominant cultural order. Jackson argues that such orders are “closed systems,” purveying “single, reductive ‘truths’” and upholding a “unitary vision.” Mainstream discourses, like the nineteenth-century realist novel, are said to partake of this univocality: “The fantastic exists as the inside, or underside, of realism, opposing the novel’s closed, monological forms with open, dialogical structures, as if the novel had given rise to its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection” (Jackson, p. 25).

In attempting to specify the Gothic’s relationship (both contestatory and highly imbricated) to dominant ideologies of human identity found within the nineteenth century, I have taken a cue from Mary Poovey’s *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*.

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Here Poovey argues against an understanding of ideologies as monolithic or invulnerable: they are instead contradictory formations, formations in process, characterized simultaneously by “apparent coherence and authenticity” and “internal instability and artificiality.” They are “both contested and always under construction . . . always open to revision, dispute, and the emergence of oppositional formations” (p. 3). Poovey focuses on salient points of stress and fracture within Victorian gender ideologies: what she calls “border cases,” which serve to expose not only “the artificiality of the binary logic that governed the Victorian symbolic economy” (p. 12), but also the historical contingency of the ideology in question. Very many recent studies have attended to precisely such border cases, emphasizing the “uneven,” if not utterly discontinuous and self-contradictory, nature of Victorian ideological formations.

Since my argument is in general concerned with the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic’s contestation of the meanings of human identity, it does assume that there was during the nineteenth century such a thing as a dominant understanding of the subject. But this is not to imply that human identity was uniformly and unproblematically conceived as unitary, discrete, and immutable. Critics like Nancy Armstrong and Regenia Gagnier have demonstrated the immense cultural labor required to produce and maintain that entity variously known as the liberal humanist subject, the modern bourgeois subject, and the autonomous individual, whose features include self-sufficiency, self-continuity, a complex yet self-contained interiority, and the potential for full self-knowledge.⁹

A crucial part of that cultural labor was the Victorian impulse toward scientific classification and a subsequent normalization of the possibilities – bodily, subjective, sexual – of human identity. But ideologies of normative sexual identity, to take one instance, were not only fluctuable, self-contradictory, and highly contested during the nineteenth century. The concept of a “self” whose essential nature was intimately linked to something called sexual identity was very much under construction during the period. Michel Foucault has demonstrated this famously in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where he also argues that hegemonic discourses *produce* the very oppositional possibilities they are designed to preempt.¹⁰ Thus Victorian *scientia sexualis*, in building up a profile of “the homosexual,” on the one hand served to stigmatize same-sex desires and erotic practices, but on the other made newly or differently available a homosexual ontology of sorts, which could be appropriated in any number of ways. Moreover, its elaboration of theories of a “third sex” would destabilize the very project sexology

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seemed to be embarked on: the consolidation of a model of human identity based on a rigidly binaristic understanding of male and female, masculine and feminine.¹¹ As Lawrence Birkin describes it, sexology undermined its own attempts to normativize sexuality by foregrounding the “multiplicity” of human sexual practices, and the “radically idiosyncratic character of desire itself.”¹²

In other words, I am positing the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic as a highly innovative genre which is at the same time deeply imbricated within its cultural moment. Jacques Derrida argues that there can be no such thing as absolute discursive originality in any case; even the most inventive of discourses borrows its “concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined” (“Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” p. 285). Understandings of human identity underwent a radical transfiguration at the *fin de siècle* as new modes of imaging and narrativizing the (ab)human subject became available. Those scientific disciplines like sexology, which sought to fix the meanings of human identity, were capable of fracturing it beyond recognition; the “heritage” they made available for discourses like the Gothic was sometimes “more or less coherent,” sometimes more or less in ruins. I will not go so far as to say that the sciences bodied forth a “shameful ruin of the human shape,” to recur to the Machen quote which began this chapter. That would be left for the Gothic to accomplish. This study will trace the outlines of this “shameful ruin,” and explore the vexing question of why and how the ruination of the human subject can afford such pleasure to those who witness it.

I have divided my argument into three sections, corresponding to three broad topical themes: “The Gothic Material World,” “Gothic Bodies,” and “Gothic Sexualities.” Part I theorizes the exemplary abhuman body – liminal, admixed, nauseating, abominable – represented by the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic in relation to materialist science and philosophy of the later nineteenth century and, retrospectively, the twentieth. Within a materialist reality, no transcendent meaningfulness anchors the chaotic fluctuability of the material universe. Matter is no longer subordinate to form, because attempts formally to classify matter, such as the attempt to stabilize the meanings of “human identity,” are provisional and stop-gap measures at best. Within such a reality, in other words, bodies are without integrity or stability; they are instead composite and changeful. Nothing is left but Things: forms rent from within by their own heterogeneity, and always in the process of becoming-Other. Part I both traces “Thing-ness” as a thematic

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preoccupation of the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, and considers the ontological and affective position of the reader asked to share this preoccupation.

Part II situates the Gothic's making-abhuman of the human body within a range of evolutionist discourses: Darwinism, criminal anthropology, and degeneration theory. Besides positing a too intimate continuity between humans and the "lower" species, Darwinism described the natural order as a disorder, within which species identity was characterized by admixture and flux rather than integrity and fixity. Similarly, the Gothic represents human bodies as between species: always-already in a state of indifferentiation, or undergoing metamorphoses into a bizarre assortment of human/not-human configurations. The Gothic also mapped out alternate trajectories of evolution than the one set forth by Darwin, imagining monstrous modifications of known species, or the emergence of horrific new ones, in accordance with the logics of specific ecosystems.

Whereas the Darwinian narrative was a non-telic one, governed by natural processes that worked in no particular direction and towards no particular end, the nineteenth-century imagination was preoccupied with the prospect of the reversal of evolution, insofar as this was understood as a synonym for "progress." Of relevance here are the sociomedical discourses of degeneration theory and criminal anthropology. The former described the disastrous effects of the inheritance of undesirable traits within a familial line and, more alarmingly, the cumulative effects of social contamination, which could launch a nation into a downward spiral into barbarity and chaos. The latter focused on a human liability to atavism or reversion, used to explain the predilection of certain individuals for criminal behaviors. I discuss these as "gothic" versions of evolutionism – discourses that emphasized the potential indifferentiation and changeability of the human species – as well as considering them in relation to the literature.

Part III discusses the Gothic's participation in the ongoing debates over the nature of human sexuality. Despite attempts to stabilize the shifting meanings of human identity by a rigidification of gender roles, the late-Victorian period was one verging on "sexual anarchy," to use Elaine Showalter's evocative phrase.¹³ Not only was Victorian gender ideology a site of internal contradiction (for example, identifying women as dangerously defined by their bodies on the one hand and ethereal, essentially disembodied creatures on the other), it was also a site of contestation on a number of social and discursive fronts. The Gothic seemed at times to reinforce normative sexuality by representing such

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behaviors as aggressive femininity and homosexuality as monstrous and abhorrent. But even within this register (a fundamentally anxious one), the Gothic served to multiply, and thus destabilize, the meanings of sexuality. Here it can be seen as analogous to the emergent discipline of sexology, which could only identify a normative sexuality by itemizing the numerous instances of “perversion” against which it was defined. Gothic plotting, working to invert and more radically admix gender and sexual attributes within a variety of abhuman bodies, unfixed the binarism of sexual difference, exploding the construct of “the human” from within.

My readings of the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic are necessarily filtered through the lens of the twentieth-century theorists who have shaped my own thinking. It is indeed unlikely that the genre’s preoccupation with abhumanness would have been thrown so sharply into relief for me without benefit of a variety of recent insights – structuralist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytical, postmodernist – into human symbolic orders and the liminal entities which trouble them. This preoccupation *did* exist nonetheless: the end-of-century Gothic explored the parameters of abhuman, or even “posthuman,” identities in terms surprisingly compatible with those of many theorists closer to our own *fin de siècle* than the last.¹⁴

Thus in considering late-Victorian representations of the abhuman I have drawn freely from such models as Mary Douglas’ account of abomination, or Kristeva’s of abjection, which among other things work to account for the seemingly excessive affect which liminal entities can elicit. This is not to imply that twentieth-century theorists are in any way supra-historical authorities on the historically specific materials under consideration here. But they do provide useful and provocative lines of departure. Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, for instance, describes a human subject who struggles both to engage with, and disengage itself from, the inescapable fact of its own materiality. Within the Kristevan scenario this sometimes anguished ambivalence about the prospect of human embodiedness is set forth as universal, the inevitable product of infantile experience. But one may historicize the *Essay on Abjection* itself by placing it on a continuum with other anguished responses to the particular brand of materialism that arose in the nineteenth century. Or to put it in somewhat different terms, Kristeva’s revisionist psychoanalytical model of the subject (liminally human, fragmented, Thing-like, convulsed with symptoms) could not have been conceived without benefit of *fin-de-siècle* models of the abhuman subject drawn from both pre- or proto-Freudian psychology and a constellation of evolutionist discourses. Or to put it in different terms still, a