

The contemporary Gothic: why we need it

My title suggests a rather straightforward enterprise: I want to account for the enormous popularity of the Gothic – both novels and films – since the Second World War. However, the title proposes more questions than it answers. First, what exactly counts as “the contemporary Gothic”? Since its inception in 1764, with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, the Gothic has always played with chronology, looking back to moments in an imaginary history, pining for a social stability that never existed, mourning a chivalry that belonged more to the fairy tale than to reality. And contemporary Gothic does not break with this tradition: Stephen King’s *IT* (1987) and Anne Rice’s vampire narratives (begun in the 1970s) weave in and out of the distant past in order to comment on the state of contemporary American culture, while other narratives foreground their reliance on prior, historically distant narratives. Peter Straub’s *Julia* (1975), Doris Lessing’s *The Fifth Child* (1988), and John Wyndham’s *The Midwich Cuckoos* (film version: *The Village of the Damned* [1960]) all feed off *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James, itself arguably a revision of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), a treatise on the education of two children at a country house. And as many contributors to this volume demonstrate, the central concerns of the classical Gothic are not that different from those of the contemporary Gothic: the dynamics of family, the limits of rationality and passion, the definition of statehood and citizenship, the cultural effects of technology. How, then, might we define a contemporary Gothic? For to think about the contemporary Gothic is to look into a triptych of mirrors in which images of the origin continually recede in a disappearing arc. We search for a genesis but find only ghostly manifestations.

Nor is the idea of origin the only problem here, for there is also the problem embedded in my title: why we need the contemporary Gothic. Certainly its popularity cannot be disputed – films like *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) take home Oscars, and Stephen King habitually tops the best-seller lists – but why are we driven to

consume these fictions? Is this craving something structural or social? Does it stem from our desire to see the political tyrant bested or the weak, deformed, or unfortunate (as in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* [1949]) scapegoated in a ritual purgation of blood? The Gothic has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history, but what is the relationship between these general social trends and particular individual psyche? When the children of *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) conjure Freddy Kruger in their dreams, are they expressing a personal nightmare about what lies beneath their consciousnesses, a social nightmare about how America treats its dispossessed, or some amorphous combination of the two? For that matter, do we need to see each child's Freddy Kruger as the same Freddy Kruger? The "we" who needs the Gothic is by no means a unified, homogeneous group. I do not necessarily need the same things you do. I do not necessarily take the same things from a Gothic narrative as do the others who have bought the book or the theatre ticket. Like the question of origin I addressed above, the basis of need and desire is not only a theme in Gothic narratives but a theoretical quandary for the spectators and readers who consume those narratives.

We can best address the question of audience need by placing the contemporary Gothic within a number of current anxieties – the ones we need it both to arouse and assuage. One of these anxieties, taken up by Stephen King is his nonfictional *Danse Macabre* (1982), is political and historical. He discusses at length the degree to which the Second World War, the Cold War, and the space race gave rise to particular kinds of horror in the 1940s and 1950s. Central to this horror is the fear of foreign otherness and monstrous invasion. We need only consider Ira Levin's *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971), or Stephen King's *The Tommyknockers* (1988) to see the connection between national purity and the fear of foreign invasion, be it from Germany, the Middle East, or outer space. Another anxiety, not unrelated to the first, is the technological explosion in the second half of the twentieth century. Advances in weaponry – both military and medical – have rendered our culture vulnerable to almost total destruction (as in Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* [1971] or King's *Firestarter* [1980] and *The Stand* [1978]) or have helped us conceive of superhuman beings unable to be destroyed (the cyborgs and animate machines of *2001: a Space Odyssey* [1968], the *Terminator* series [1984, 1991], or *Dark City* [1998]). Third, the rise of feminism, gay liberation, and African-American civil rights in the 1960s has assaulted the ideological supremacy of traditional values where straight white males ostensibly control the public sphere. In the midst of this onslaught comes a further blow to Euro-American culture: the heightened attack against Christian ideology and hierarchy as that which

should “naturally” define values and ethics in culture. The Satanism of *Rosemary’s Baby*, the continued cult worship of the Dracula figure in all his manifestations, and the popularity of anti-Christ figures from Damien Thorne of *The Omen* (novel, 1976; film, 1976) to Marilyn Manson all attest to the powerful threat (and attraction) posed by our culture’s increasing secularity. And regardless of whether one loathes the anti-Christian figure in these narratives or cheers him on, one cannot help but be impressed by the degree to which this “attack of the Gothic” has infiltrated our culture and fractured any ideologically “natural” state of personal or social well-being.

The Gothic texts and films I have already mentioned circle around a particular nexus: the problem of assimilating these social anxieties (which I will momentarily discuss in terms of “trauma”) into a personal narrative that in some way connects the Gothic protagonist to the reader or spectator. What becomes most marked in the contemporary Gothic – and what distinguishes it from its ancestors – is the protagonists’ and the viewers’ compulsive return to certain fixations, obsessions, and blockages.¹ Consequently, the Gothic can be readily analyzed through the rhetoric of psychoanalysis, for many the twentieth century’s supreme interpreter of human compulsions and repressions. In both theory and clinical practice, psychoanalysis is primarily attributed to the work of Sigmund Freud, for whom the Gothic was a rich source of imagery and through whom the Gothic continues to be analyzed today.² Psychoanalysis provides us with a language for understanding the conflicted psyche of the patient whose life story (or “history”) is characterized by neurotic disturbances and epistemological blank spots. More often than not, such psychoanalytic accounts are intensely Gothic: “The Uncanny” (1919) and “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis” (1922),³ along with a number of Freud’s case studies, make the figure of the tyrannical father central to the protagonists’ Gothic experiences, as does Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796) or Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897); “On Narcissism: an Introduction” (1914) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) offer us purchase on the person in society looking for acceptance while at the same time remaining abject and individualized, a central problem in Gothic novels; and the phantasms generated by the Wolf Man or Dr. Schreber, like those experienced by the grieving subject in *Mourning and Melancholia*, cannot be dissociated from the Gothic ghost, the revenant who embodies and projects the subject’s psychic state.

But perhaps what is most central to the Gothic – be it classical or contemporary – is the very process of psychic life that for Freud defines the human condition. While the id finds its narrative expression in the insatiable drives of the desiring organism (Dean Koontz’s Bruno in *Whispers* [1981], the mutant child in the film *It’s Alive* [1974]), the superego takes monstrous form

in the ultrarational, cultured figures of Hannibal Lecter, Damien Thorne, or Anne Rice's blood-drinking literati. The battle for supremacy between the ravenous id and the controlling superego translates in myriad ways into the conflicts of the Gothic. Indeed, what makes the contemporary Gothic contemporary, I hope to show, is not merely the way Freudian dynamics underlie Gothic narratives (for this, uncannily, is also the condition of classical eighteenth-century Gothic), but how contemporary Gothic texts and films are intensely *aware* of this Freudian rhetoric and self-consciously *about* the longings and fears it describes. In other words, what makes the contemporary Gothic contemporary is that the Freudian machinery is more than a tool for discussing narrative; it is in large part the subject matter of the narrative itself. A major theme of the Gothic has always been interior life, as in the paranoid Gothic of William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) or James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), but the rise of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century has afforded Gothic writers a very particular configuration of this internal life. To the degree that the contemporary Gothic subject is the psychoanalytic subject (and vice versa), she/he becomes a/the field on which national, racial, and gender anxieties *configured like Freudian drives* get played out and symbolized over and over again.

The unconscious, Freud postulates, is born from the moment the child first encounters a prohibition or law against satisfying desires. In Freud's work, the most important desire is that of the (male) child to have uninterrupted access to his mother. The Oedipus complex arises, Freud suggests, when the boy wants to continue to use his mother as an uninterrupted source of pleasure and nourishment as well as the provider of the physical tactility that will ensure this safety. The father interrupts this infantile desire – what Freud calls “primary narcissism” – by prohibiting the child's continued desire for the mother. In the interests of fashioning the child's masculinity and his individuality, the father forces him to submit to the patriarchal law of finding his own other-sexed partner, thereby leaving the mother to return her affections to the father rather than lavishing them on the son. But, true to the Freudian schema, the child's desires for the mother, and his attendant aggression, hatred, and fear of the father, do not disappear. They are put away in a space where they are no longer socially visible (lest the child appear “queer”⁴) but where they structure the developing personality and help control what that child will come to desire, both socially and sexually. This is the key point to a Freudian understanding of the Gothic in general: as human beings, we are not free agents operating out of conscious will and self-knowledge. Rather, when our fantasies, dreams, and fears take on a nightmarish quality, it is because the unconscious is telling us what we *really*

want. And what we really want are those desires and objects that have been forbidden.

What makes the contemporary Gothic particularly contemporary in both its themes and reception, however, is that these unconscious desires center on the problem of a lost object, the most overriding basis of *our* need for the Gothic and almost everything else. That loss is usually material (parents, money, property, freedom to move around, a lover, or family member), but the materiality of that loss always has a psychological and symbolic dimension to it. When the Freudian father pries the son away from the mother and her breast, he is seen by the child to introduce a sense of *loss*, an absence that will then drive the child to try to fill the empty space that prohibition creates. In the psychoanalytic Gothic, we intensely desire the object that has been lost, or another object, person, or practice that might take its place, but we are aware at some level that this object carries with it the threat of punishment: the anger of the father, the breaking of the law, castration. When the desire for an object butts up against the prohibition against the fulfilling of that desire, the result is the contemporary human subject. Simply put, we *are* what we have become in response to the threat of violence from anything like the figure of the father. Furthermore, the mode in which the late modern subject most enacts this scene of prohibition – and the mode in which we as audience take it up – is the Gothic, itself a narrative of prohibitions, transgressions, and the processes of identity construction that occur within such tensions. Let us, then, consider first the themes of the contemporary Gothic before speculating on why we as an audience take it up with such relish.

Oedipal battles between parent and child are not new in the Gothic, to be sure; *Frankenstein* (1818) is just one progenitor of novels such as *The Exorcist*, *Pet Semetary* (1983) or *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). Even so, a novel such as Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) offers an especially textbook case of the oedipal conflict. The oedipal family – a trinity of daddy, mommy, child – is trapped in a remote hotel where the caretaker goes mad and tries to kill the son he thinks is a traitor to him. While the horror story of cabin fever is clear, Stephen King is too consciously Freudian to allow the plot to stay there: “Freud says that the subconscious never speaks to us in a literal language,” his protagonist Jack Torrance tells wife Wendy, “Only in symbols” (p. 264). Chief among these symbols is their son Danny's ability to read minds and to glimpse the future (a talent the novel calls “shining”). This ability is, among other things, a way of looking into his parents' minds to see what they are thinking. In fact, this very act of looking corresponds to a famous Freudian moment called “the primal scene.” In Freud's case study of the Wolf Man (1918), he postulated that his patient had seen his parents having sex *a tergo*, so that both parents' genitals were visible. The father

was deemed to have a penetrating and violently aggressive penis while the mother had lost her penis (the male child being unable to imagine that not all people have a penis as he does) to the violating father.

In both Freud and *The Shining*, this hypothesis gives the primal scene a special Gothic undertone. For the boy-child, it is a primary threat: the father has the penis and can remove someone else's. For Danny Torrance, in particular, it shrouds shining – that is, sexual knowing – in a pall of disgust, transgression, and prohibition. Likening his talent for shining to “peeking into [his parents'] bedroom and watching while they're doing the thing that makes babies” (p. 83),⁵ Danny also reads his father's mind to determine the level of paternal hatred toward him and his mother. In this primal shining, there is more than one lost object: mother and son lose phallic power *vis-à-vis* the father, and the family loses the bond that was supposed to keep them safe and close. It is small wonder, then, that when Danny begins to explore the Overlook Hotel and discovers/hallucinates its horrible ghosts – such as the dead woman in the bathtub – he does so out of a desire to heal the family: “Danny stepped into the bathroom and walked toward the tub dreamily, as if propelled from outside himself, as if . . . he would perhaps see something nice when he pulled the curtain back, something Daddy had forgotten or Mommy had lost, something that would make them both happy” (p. 217). Danny's desire to look – perhaps like ours, as desirous voyeurs of the Gothic – is ultimately the desire to find that which has been lost, that which will unify an otherwise fragmented subjectivity. And in Freud, as in King, it is the lost object (the penis) that constitutes the identity of the male: “normal” boys rigorously imitate masculine identity precisely because they fear the father will rob them of the marker of masculine entitlement, the penis, if they do not. Danny's, then, is a remarkably *contemporary* problem: whereas the original *Frankenstein* at least believed in the possibility of real fatherhood, real domesticity, and a real self, Danny is forced to operate in a psychological sphere where some crucial aspect of the self is always lost and must always be sought, but can never provide the happiness for which it is desired.

The contemporary Gothic, in other words, reveals the domestic scene in a world after Freud and the degree to which that domestic scene is predicated on loss. The ideology of family continues to circulate with as much atmospheric pressure as it did in the novels of Ann Radcliffe or Mary Shelley, but with a difference: whereas financial greed, religious tyranny, and incestuous privation interrupt the smooth workings of the eighteenth-century family (only to exhort the importance of the family as a concept), the contemporary Gothic registers the (Freudian) impossibility of familial harmony, an impossibility built into the domestic psyche as much as it is into domestic materiality. For in such a novel as *The Shining*, everybody hates a parent and

presumably the *wrong* parent. Wendy hates her mother and loves her father (as is the case with Susan Norton in *'Salem's Lot* [1975]); Jack hated his mother but respected his abusive father; and even Danny, whose suffering at the hands of his father we have just noted, "loved his mother but was his father's boy" (King, *Shining*, p. 54). So why this bond with the tyrannical father? Why is the mother, Wendy, reduced to a walking talking breast to whom Danny can periodically run for solace (rocking, cooing, the singing of lullabies) but who holds little other value in Danny's emotion economy? Why this change from the classical Gothic, where the male child also hated the tyrannical father but without the same psychological complications?

The reason is Freud. In the contemporary psychological schema, we desire not only the lost object but the approval of the tyrant who took that object from us. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) maps the path by which the rebel sons become their hated father by consuming his body after they have killed him. In order to kill the father and thus establish their own autonomy, they first have to assume the father's strength beforehand, a psychological incorporation of the father/tyrant that will later be ritualized in the consuming of his body and later cannibalistic rituals like it, ranging from the Holy Eucharist to Gothic vampirism. *The Shining*, similarly, documents Danny's vacillation between child and man, or between parental appendage and autonomous adult. Here he vacillates between being the child who fears the father figure and being a father figure himself: both Jack and Danny are male figures responsible for taking care of Wendy; both Jack and Danny shine; and both Jack and Danny are caretakers of a hotel, although in the end it is Danny who will excel over Jack by remembering what his father forgot (how to take care of the boiler). This becoming-father, then, is an act both of homage and of transgression: the son adores the father to the degree that he must kill him in order to *become* him. King and the contemporary Gothic thus write into the family romance Oscar Wilde's quite modern realization that we kill the thing we love. Horror, mutilation, and loss thus become more than shock effect; they constitute the very aesthetic that structures the human psyche in the twentieth century, connecting the Freudian vision of the human mind generally to the dynamics of Gothic villainy and victimization.

Indeed, such ambivalence between the abusive parent and the desiring child is not limited to father-son dynamics. Although father and son constitute the usual scenario in Freud's phallically centered thinking, the Gothic provides equal opportunity for the monstrous mother as well. Famous girl stories in this vein include that of Carrie White and her mother in King's *Carrie* (1974) or Eleanor in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959); boy-centered versions appear in Norman Bates's relation to his mummified mummy in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960, based on the 1959 novel by Robert

Bloch) and the castrating mother of Daniel Mann's *Willard* (1972).⁶ A number of forces conspire to frame this contemporary mother. A narrative such as *The Exorcist*, for example, at least momentarily blames a child's demonic possession on her mother's feminism: Chris McNeil has left her husband, she supports herself and her daughter Regan through her successful acting career, and she has abandoned the usual religious and social codes of feminine propriety. For this she is punished, as a demon enters the body of her (maternally neglected) child. Moreover, Blatty's antifeminism resonates with another theory of the monstrous maternal, that of psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva. According to Kristeva, paternal prohibition is not the only reason the child must achieve distance from the mother. The child must "abject" the mother – discard or jettison the primal connection to her, deem her dangerous and suffocating – if she/he is to gain any autonomous subjectivity whatsoever. That thrown-off mother, at least in the child's fantasy, continually lures and seduces the child back to the primary bond where she/he is completely taken care of; in response, the child must demonize and reject her in order "to constitute [it]self and [its] culture" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 2).⁷ And because that act of abjecting "is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back into under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling" (ibid., p. 13), the mother is continually reinvented as monstrous but in a way the child incorporates as much as she/he abjects. Regan McNeil comes to embody Chris's sexual knowledge, her foul language, and her refusal to adhere to conventional social codes governing women; Carrie White becomes the murderous, vindictive mother/God she hates. We come then not to be mere victims of the lost object – the mother – but active agents in the expulsion of that mother. We are creatures of conflicted desires, locked in an uncanny push-me-pull-you that propels us toward the very objects we fear and to fear the very objects toward which we are propelled. We must bond with our parents, but not too much; we must distance ourselves from our parents, but not too much.

That the persecuted subject should escape persecution either by returning to the maternal breast or by becoming the parent she/he fears marks a problem in that subject's personal history, a problem central to the contemporary Gothic. According to Freud, the obsessive return to the nurturing, safe mother is a *regression*, one that arrests the individual's psychological development. But taking the path forward toward adulthood by no means guarantees a happy growth or linear progress. Adults such as Jack Torrance of *The Shining*, Thad Beaumont of *The Dark Half* (1989), Clarice Starling from Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), or Hannibal Lecter in Harris's sequel *Hannibal* (1999) are all to a great extent determined by the familial relations they experienced in childhood. At the level of

the parental, Jack Torrance remains subject to his father's abusive control (he *becomes* his father), while Carrie White adopts the brutal, punishing, destructive power of her mother – although it might be more accurate to say that Carrie becomes Margaret's punitive angry God, new England's cosmic Father. And as Gothic children threaten the role of the parent by consuming or incorporating that parent's power, we find in them intellects that soar beyond what children are supposed to have. See, for example, the children of *Village of the Damned*, whose intellects far surpass those of adults, a condition we also find in Regan McNeil of *The Exorcist* or Gage Creed and Timmy Bateman of King's *Pet Sematary* (1983). Our domestic lives are supposed to be governed by a logic of chronology – older and wiser parents care for and instruct their innocent and vulnerable offspring – but not in the Gothic. Psychological subject positions shift and float, rearranging and destabilizing the roles assumed to belong to each person in the domestic arrangement.

This disruption of domestic history is ultimately based on a fluidity in the Gothic protagonist's personal history; contemporary Gothic characters often utterly confuse their childhood experiences with their adult lives. This confusion results from the unconscious as Freud described it, a repository of prohibited desires, aggressions, and painful or terrifying experiences. As these psychological experiences mesh with the sense of loss that accompanies them (loss of parent, loss of security, loss of ego or stable sense of self), they set up echoes of childhood in the subject's later life. What was repressed thus returns to haunt our heroes with the vivid immediacy of the original moment. And it is this moment of return, seminally theorized by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, that highlights the key difference between the contemporary Gothic and its classical predecessors' understanding of personal and social history. In the late eighteenth-century Gothic of Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis, moments from the historical past (often appearing as spectral figures) haunt the heroes in order to proclaim some misdeed regarding property or domestic relations. It is often the project of those novels to expose ancient tyrannies, to foil the characters perpetuating them, and to return property and persons to their divinely ordained spheres. In so doing, the classical Gothic returns its society to a logic of historical progression. The contemporary Gothic, conversely, cannot sustain such a program, precisely because of its characters' psychological complications. With the ravages of the unconscious continually interrupting one's perception of the world, the protagonist of the contemporary Gothic often experiences history as mixed up, reversed, and caught in a simultaneity of past-present-future.⁸ History has made a promise – that one will grow from a fragile, vulnerable child to an autonomous, rational adult – but it is unable to keep that promise in the

twentieth century. It can only offer a future that is already suspended between present and past. While the Gothic may ostensibly plot the movement of chronological time, it really devastates any sense of linear progression that we might use to put together our “personal history.”

Especially when viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis, then, the contemporary Gothic markedly registers a crisis in personal history: in the world depicted in such works, one is forced simultaneously to mourn the lost object (a parent, God, social order, lasting fulfillment through knowledge or sexual pleasure) and to *become* the object lost through identification or imitation. This history of repetition, I would argue, constitutes a sense of *trauma*, and it is finally through trauma that we can best understand the contemporary Gothic and why we crave it. Speaking of the Gothic as analogous to trauma, or even as the product and enactment of trauma, makes sense for a number of reasons. First, the Gothic itself is a narrative of trauma. Its protagonists usually experience some horrifying event that profoundly affects them, destroying (at least temporarily) the norms that structure their lives and identities. Images of haunting, destruction and death, obsessive return to the shattering moment, forgetfulness or unwanted epiphany (“you will remember what your father forgot,” Tony tells Danny Torrance [King, *Shining*, p. 420]) all define a Gothic aesthetic that is quite close to Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma and its corollary, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event . . . [T]he event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it.⁹

Caruth has in mind survivors of Auschwitz and Vietnam, but her descriptions also remind us of a number of protagonists of the contemporary Gothic. Peter Straub’s fictions habitually portray men (although *Julia* is an exception) who have endured some invasion, violation, or uncanny experience in younger life and have never comprehended the full effects of that experience. Sears James in *Ghost Story* (1979), the narrator of “The Juniper Tree” in *Houses Without Doors* (1991), and Tim Underhill in *Koko* (1988) and *The Throat* (1994) all return to earlier experiences and only gradually “assimilate” them, if at all.

Gothic horrors in these texts are the distortions, hallucinations, and nightmares that proceed from these experiences. Memories of that moment flash before the Gothic hero’s eyes only to be inaccessible minutes later: when

Dr. Louis Creed of *Pet Sematary* loses his first patient at his new job, his mind immediately “seemed to be wrapping those few moments in a protective film – sculpting, changing, disconnecting” (p. 77). Similarly, as he prepares to disinter his dead child Gage, Louis “realized he could not remember what his son had looked like . . . He could see [Gage’s features] but he could not integrate them into a coherent whole” (p. 334). The child-woman Claudia of *Interview with the Vampire* lives fully as a vampire but cannot recall the moment that made her one (unlike Lestat and Louis, who remember everything). *The Exorcist*’s Regan has experienced the “numbing” that characterizes the subject during trauma – Regan “herself” is inaccessible to herself, her mother, the doctors, and priests – and she remembers nothing of her experience after the exorcism. Time and again the contemporary Gothic presents us with traumatized heroes who have lost the very psychic structures that allow them access to their own experiences. As I have been suggesting, such narratives emphasize a lost object, that object being the self. Individual autonomy, unity of soul and ego, and personal investment in will and self-reliance have all been shattered by the forces of the social and the ravages of the unconscious upon the ego in contemporary existence. The self is shattered into pieces, the “many” rather than the “one” that defines a character like Regan McNeil, who now is “no *one*” (p. 325, emphasis added), but rather “quite a little group,” a “stunning little multitude” (p. 245).

That loss of wholeness, that destruction of the thing in favor of many things, so obsesses Gothic fiction in the later twentieth century that many such narratives are about the impossibility of narrative. Jack Torrance’s writer’s block (which Stanley Kubrick changes in his 1980 film to an obsessive repetition of the cliché “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”) is not unlike Catharine Holly’s inability to tell the story of Sebastian in Tennessee Williams’s southern Gothic play, *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958, adapted as a film in 1959). Eleanor in *The Haunting of Hill House* is unable to narrate the death of her mother, and so the story is told only fleetingly in the words appearing on the walls of the mansion. King’s *Pet Sematary* opens with a list of books written by people who have done important things in the world and follows with a list of people who attended the corpses of those famous authors but who have not written books or told their stories themselves. King concludes: “*Death is a mystery, and burial is a secret.*” Trauma collapses the ability to render experience in a narrative, as recent studies of concentration camp prisoners and child sexual abuse survivors are making very clear. Trauma destroys what Pierre Janet calls “narrative memory,” the ability to apply principles of coherence and analytical understanding to one’s life events.¹⁰ Indeed, *Pet Sematary* implicitly compares the temporality of trauma (a forgetting that is interrupted by unwilling remembering)

with the experience of a child learning a language: “babies make *all* the sounds the human voice box is capable of. . . They lose the capability as they learn English, and Louis wondered now (and not for the first time) if childhood was not more a period of forgetting than of learning” (p. 221). What Louis as adult will then come to “re-member” (his dead son Gage returned from the grave) is pretty horrific, but lest my analogy seem far-fetched, *The Exorcist* makes the same move and much more clearly. “Cryptomnesia: buried recollections of words and data” that Regan may have learned in early childhood come “to the surface with almost photographic fidelity” (p. 268), and by now no one needs to be reminded of what kind of verbal spectacle Regan makes of herself.

All of this together fashions a contemporary Gothic phenomenon. Words, the building blocks of stories, rise and fall in consciousness, constituting horrifying returns and traumatic suggestions. The very act of storytelling itself has the resonance of multiple traumas that we, like Louis Creed at the graveside, cannot integrate into a coherent whole. What gets left in this blank space where our narratives cannot be is, paradoxically, a massive production of other Gothic narratives. In the process of trauma shattering us from one into a “stunning little multitude,” we are forced to confront our demons, our worst fears about the agents and influences that might control and create us.

It is here, too, that we can see the link between the domestic anxieties we have been discussing and more far-flung social anxieties. The Gothic mother who must be abjected and the authoritative tyrannical father who must be overthrown are, according to psychoanalysis, parts of one’s self that must be feared because they define the self at the same time as they take one’s self-definition outside, to an other and perhaps to many outside versions of that other. The volatile status of otherness, it is true, has come to haunt the Gothic mode since the eighteenth century. But in the contemporary moment, that otherness is often framed by a psychoanalytic model of the psyche that includes a larger social vision full of phobias and prejudices about many types of “others.” Gothic plots such as *Ghost Story* or *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992) connect their *femmes fatales* to motherhood in general, meshing the need for abjection with a larger cultural misogyny and fear of too-powerful women. Same-sex bonding between men, which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, is the glue that cements capitalist relations in the west,¹¹ finds its Gothic counterpart in the homosexual panic of King’s Jack Torrance, Robert Bloch’s Norman Bates, or Peter Straub’s Peter Barnes.¹² And in our contemporary imagination, where homosexuality is also pedophilia in the eyes of many, narratives from King’s *Salem’s Lot*, King and Peter Straub’s *The Talisman* (1984) to Straub’s “The Juniper

Tree” and “Bunny Is Good Bread” (in *Magic Terror* [2000]) do more than tell a horror story about children’s victimization at the hands of a monster; they project the Gothic terror of our culture’s contemporary cult of child-worship.¹³ Why else would Louis Creed, looking at his sexually arousing wife, think that “she looked amazingly like [their daughter] Ellie . . . and Gage” (King, *Pet Sematary*, p. 187)? Then, too, can we read the racist representation of vampires as Mexican immigrants in John Carpenter’s 1998 film *Vampires* without seeing it as an up-to-date version of the fear of eastern Europeans in Stoker’s *Dracula*, which additionally indicates the fear of the unknown, “foreign” parts of ourselves, be they sexual or “spiritual”? Or might we see in the gypsy who curses Billy Halleck in Richard Bachman’s *Thinner* (1984), or in Dr. Rabbitfoot in Straub’s *Ghost Story*, the fear of the “magical” animism, where internal thought can suddenly become external object or action, a process which to Freud constitutes the infantile thinking we never completely forget?¹⁴ In the spaces left by many kinds of trauma, we rush in to supply all kinds of stories. We generate an industry of narrative fantasies that merge all too nicely with other social prejudices, and we do all of this to convince ourselves that the horror of consciousness is not ours, that it really comes from the outside.

Yet we have done so, in the end, without much psychological success. The Gothic continually confronts us with real, historical traumas that we in the west have created but that also continue to control how we think about ourselves as a nation (be it “America,” “Canada,” “Great Britain,” or some other country). Ira Levin’s *The Boys From Brazil* directly invokes the Jewish Holocaust, while *Carrie* at least briefly nods to the war in Vietnam, as if her personal trauma were somehow linked to America’s great social trauma of that time. Whatever metonymic affiliations Carrie might have with Vietnam, in fact, it makes her telekinetic power analogous to the nuclear bomb, thus providing us with some of the same Cold War anxieties we see in *Village of the Damned* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). *Pet Sematary* may be about the personal trauma of losing a child, but it is also about American colonization. The Micmac burial ground that lies beyond the pet cemetery exerts a malignant and ancient spiritual influence over the environs of Ludlow, Maine; the Wendigo who presides over this burial ground is the amoral nature god who returns to reclaim what Christianity has taken from the natives. Hence the parody of resurrection: what returns from the grave is not the Christ-child but a murderous demon, an aboriginal trickster figure who, in the Gothic imagination, has been transmogrified into a knife-wielding killer. Each of these social and national traumas was caused by human agency, yet they have rendered humans unable to tell any kind of complete story about them. Thus the Gothic renders them in fits and

starts, ghostly appearances and far-fetched fantasies, all attempting to reveal traumatic contradictions of the collective past that cannot be spoken.

In short, it seems that we are caught in what Freud would call a repetition-compulsion, where we are compelled to consume the same stories (with minor variations), experience the same traumatic jolts, behold the same devastating sights. So, to return to the questions I asked at the beginning of this chapter, why are we so drawn to the Gothic? Who is this “we” that are craving it? We find ourselves compelled to accept more than one answer. Clearly, there is some kind of comfort associated with repetition, but what kind of theory explains that comfort? Walter Benjamin might suggest that such horror narratives confirm for us that we are spectators, safely distanced onlookers whose integrity is guaranteed by the dissolution of another. As Benjamin puts it, “What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about,”¹⁵ and the compulsive repetition of this hand-warming gives us the necessary assurance that the victim is not us. But the very seductiveness of Gothic fiction makes such a claim to being outside it impossible to sustain. We seem to want these fictions from the inside out; we crave them not for their distance but for their immediacy, for they make our hearts race, our blood pressure rise, our breathing become shallow and quick, and our stomachs roll. Like the traumatized subject, we physically roil when faced with a parade of uncontrollable and horrifying images that are strangely familiar, as uncanny as they are abject. We crave these “stimuli,” to use Caruth’s word, and we feel possessed by them. Indeed, as an individual reader or viewer, I may not *be* traumatized at the moment of reading, but I certainly join with the Gothic mode in *feeling like one who is traumatized*. Father Merrin of *The Exorcist* says of horror’s agent, “I think the demon’s target is not the possessed; it is us . . . the observers . . . every person in this house” (p. 369). So if the priests of *The Exorcist* can perform an exorcism on Regan, we need to consider that Gothic fiction in general can perform some kind of exorcism on us, the observers in this highly oedipal and traumatized house.

Perhaps the repetition compulsions underlying trauma can provide us with some insight. While both the Gothic and trauma are characterized by the inability to comprehend fully one’s experience and to filter that experience through what Pierre Janet has called “narrative memory,” they suggest more than the horrors of ineffability. Caruth argues that “trauma can make possible survival” by actually capitalizing on the distance one takes from the traumatic experience. We have already seen King’s Louis Creed respond to disaster by partially removing himself from the anxiety-inducing scene: a “protective film” disconnects him from the moment. Caruth provides an interesting take on this phenomenon. “[T]hrough the different modes therapeutic, literary, and pedagogical encounter,” she says,

trauma is not experienced as a mere repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment. The trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site . . . To listen to the crisis of a trauma . . . is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is *how to listen to departure*.¹⁶

One thinks here of Louis in Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, as he is compelled to tell the whole story of his life with Lestat as a means of displacing it into history and into a story that the listening boy eagerly wants to hear. According to Robert Jay Lifton, the subject shattered by trauma "struggles to put together the pieces, so to speak, of the psyche, and to balance the need to reconstitute oneself with the capacity to take in the experience."¹⁷ But as we know, to repeat is to visit the same place but with a difference: in repetition, we relive an event but the intervening distance of time and space means that the repetition cannot be perfect or authentic, that it can only produce the original experience differently. Moreover, repetition with a difference must usually be performed through literature and fiction. When Lifton was researching his 1986 book *The Nazi Doctors*, he found himself having nightmares that *he* was an Auschwitz prisoner. At some level, he endured the horror of the traumatized survivor, in that both he and the survivor had a distanced presence to the "real" experience. Narrative, not corporeal presence, engaged him in a shattering moment through which, as Elie Wiesel told him, he could only begin to write about the Holocaust. Lifton was lured into his research in much the same way Rice's interviewer is seduced – and in fact wants to live out – Louis's narrative account of vampirism. Says Lifton, "it's being a survivor by proxy, and the proxy's important" (p. 145).

Surviving by proxy: Lifton's phrase begins to explain why we crave the Gothic. We crave it because we *need* it. We need it because the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us – a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe – and that wrenching withdrawal, that traumatic experience, is vividly dramatized in the Gothic. We do not seek out one Gothic experience, read one novel, or see one movie, we hunt down many. We do not tell one story, we tell many, even as all of them are knitted together by those familiar, comforting, yet harrowing Gothic conventions. For our traumas, like Regan McNeil's demons, are legion: the tyranny of the lawgiving father, the necessity of abjecting the mother, the loss of history and a sense of pre-formed identity, and the shattering of faith in a world that can permit the Holocaust and genocide or reconstruct us as cyborgs or clone each of us into another self (the deepest anxiety in Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* [1988]). What better venue can there be for

working through our always vague sense of these traumas than a malleable form of fiction-making that cannot really grasp all its own foundations – indeed, that beholds fragments of them always receding into a distant past – just as we feel about ourselves in the west as we watch older ways of grounding our “natures” dissipate and disappear?

As we confront this underlying terror of our times, after all, the Gothic provides us a guarantee of life even in the face of so much death. Who is more alive than Regan when she is hurling a priest across the room? Who is more alive than Carrie when she is incinerating her graduating class? Who is more alive than I when I am thoroughly gripped by a horror story that actually changes my physiological condition as I read or watch? But the pleasantly terrifying thing may be that this life, this consciousness of being alive, is constantly shadowed by previous and imminent breakage and dissolution. Contemporary life constantly reminds us that we are moving toward death, or at least obsolescence, and that life we must continually strive to hold together. Paradoxically, we need the consistent consciousness of death provided by the Gothic in order to understand and want that life. This realization brings us back to the quandaries with which this chapter began: the problem of delimiting and thus anchoring both the “Gothic” and the “contemporary Gothic.” But now we see why those problems still bedevil us. The Gothic’s basic investment in ravaging history and fragmenting the past meshes with our own investments now as we attempt to reinvent history as a way of healing the perpetual loss in modern existence. “We” do this, moreover, as a western civilization shattered by personal and social traumas, yet “we” do not exist except as a collection of individual psyches whose personal histories are inflected by social history but not completely determined by it. We want *our* life and *our* death, and in that vacillation between wanting life and capitulating to destruction, we keep needing the Gothic to give shape to our contradiction. By now we have become like an Anne Rice vampire or a Stephen King family man: we crave presence, we crave departure, we *crave*.¹⁸

NOTES

- 1 This pattern becomes especially apparent in the course of King’s *Danse Macabre* and Skal’s *The Monster Show*.
- 2 For a more complete discussion of Freud’s relation to the construction of the Gothic, and vice versa, see Fred Botting, “The Gothic Production of the Unconscious” in Glennis Byron and David Punter, eds., *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography* (London: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 11–36.
- 3 In addition to the works by Freud in the guide to further reading below, see the following: “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis (The ‘Wolf Man’)” (1914)

in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1955–61), xvii, 1–122; “Group Psychology and an Analysis of the Ego” (1921) in *Standard Edition*, xviii, 67–143; “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915), trans. Joan Rivière, in *Standard Edition*, xiv, 237–58; “On Narcissism: an Introduction” (1915) trans. C. M. Baines, in *Standard Edition*, xiv, 67–102; “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Auto-biographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides) (Schreber)” (1910) in *Standard Edition*, xii, 1–82; and “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis” (1922), trans. E. Glover, in *Standard Edition*, xix, 67–105.

- 4 In my use of the term *queer* here, I am thinking specifically of the Freudian explanation for male homosexuality. In his essay “On Narcissism: an Introduction” Freud theorizes that the proto-homosexual male child refuses to break the connection with the mother in time to develop “normal” relations. The result, Freud suggests, is that the child takes up the identity or subject-position of the mother and seeks a love object whom he can love the way his mother loved him. In this sense, Freud sees male homosexual desire as “narcissistic,” in that the homosexual supposedly seeks himself in a love object.
- 5 For other textual connections between shining and various forms of the primal scene, see Stephen King, *The Shining* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 201, 297, and 303.
- 6 The mother, however, need not be a castrating bitch in order to produce a Gothic effect. Sometimes the horror is “caused” by her strong sense of love that becomes overindulgence. See for example Robert Aldrich’s film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) or Mervyn LeRoy’s *The Bad Seed* (1956).
- 7 For a more complete analysis of maternal rejection and its relation to the Gothic, see Steven Bruhm, “The Gothic in a Culture of Narcissism” in *Reflecting Narcissus: a Queer Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 144–73.
- 8 This “history” is perhaps best allegorized in Danny Torrance’s imaginary friend Tony. With hair like Danny’s mother and a facial structure like his father, Tony is “the Daniel Anthony Torrance that would someday be – . . . a halfling caught between father and son, a ghost of both, a fusion” (King, *Shining*, p. 420). He seems to suggest a history that is not one, a future tense that is completely infected by the past.
- 9 Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).
- 10 For a discussion of Janet’s thought, see Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma” in *Trauma*, ed. Caruth, pp. 158–82. For more on the problem of storytelling and trauma, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 11 See Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), especially chapters 5 and 6, for a powerful treatment of the homosocial bond in the Gothic.
- 12 For a more complete discussion of Gothic misogyny and contemporary homosexual panic, see Bruhm, “Gothic in a Culture of Narcissism.”
- 13 The most intelligent books to date on child-worship and its manifestations in contemporary culture are both by James Kincaid – *Child-Loving: the Erotic Child*

- and Victorian Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and *Erotic Innocence: the Culture Of Child Molesting* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
- 14 See chapters 2 and 3 of Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, for his explanation of animism and totemism, as well as their relation to the demonic.
- 15 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 101. In Steven Bruhm, *Gothic Bodies: the Politics of Pain in Romantic Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) I make a similar argument about the late eighteenth-century Gothic and its functions within the discourse of sentimentality and moral sense philosophy.
- 16 Caruth, "Trauma and Experience," p. 10.
- 17 Caruth, "An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton" in *Trauma*, p. 137.
- 18 I want to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for financial assistance in the preparation of this chapter.