

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 02 | Spring 2006

Title	Sensationalism and Supersensibility: Eighteenth-Century Literary Terror Divided
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	02
Issue Date	Spring 2006
Publication Date	05/06/2006
Editors	Joe Hughes & Beth Schroeder

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Sensationalism and Supersensibility: Eighteenth-Century Literary Terror Divided

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Who is this Schiller? This convulser of the Heart? Did he write his tragedy amid the yelling of Fiends? ... Why have we ever called Milton sublime? (Coleridge, *Letters* 1:122).

Coleridge's reaction to the English translation of Schiller's *The Robbers* heralded nearly a decade of personal enthusiasm for the German that led to translations, imitations and poems in his honour. Schiller was, for Coleridge, the unparalleled artist of sublime terror. However, existing alongside sublime terror was a form about which Coleridge was scathing: the gothic novel. Among gothic writers - termed by Coleridge a "tribe of Horror & Mystery" (*Letters* 1:318) - the most objectionable was Matthew Lewis, savaged by Coleridge in a 1798 review of Lewis's scandalous novel *The Monk*. Schiller and Lewis thus present a polarity dividing Coleridge's judgement of literary terror. Although Coleridge's responses are in many ways linked to his own unique concerns, they also reflect the divided status of terror in the wider culture of the time. And if we want to understand this divided status, it is useful to turn to a characteristically Coleridgean question: is sensation transcended? This question has two distinct but related components: firstly, is the literary work addressed to higher faculties rather than the senses, and secondly, does the literary work itself depict a world with a supersensible realm?

With regards to *The Monk*, Coleridge answers the first question with an outraged negative. An idiom of sensation, physicality, physiology and the body dominates his review of the novel - it belongs to a genre of "powerful stimulants" used to excite the jaded public "appetite" (58). This use of language reflects Coleridge's core objection that Lewis wastes his genius on appealing to the senses, not higher faculties like intellectual and moral reason: the novel's "images of naked horror" are said to "shock the imagination...and mangle the feelings" (59). The visceral quality of *The Monk's* prose

(so different from the suspense-driven fiction of Radcliffe or Walpole) can be enlisted to substantiate Coleridge's charge:

By the side of three putrid half-corrupted bodies lay the sleeping beauty. A lively red, a forerunner of returning animation, had already spread itself over her sheets; and as wrapped in her shroud she reclined upon her funeral bier, she seemed to smile at the images of death around her. While he gazed upon their rotting bones and disgusting figures, who perhaps were once as sweet and lovely, Ambrosio thought upon Elvira, by him reduced to the same state (318).

The register of his prose does remain firmly aimed at thrilling the senses. The gruesome, visceral description is self-evident. However, the senses are also exercised by an erotic subtext: the voyeuristic portrait of the sleeping beauty given here is later amplified to the outright sexual – "these swelling breasts, round, full, and elastic!" (320). A thrillingly sensuous style thus reinforces the gothic monstrosity of the scene, whereby Ambrosio descends into a gloomy crypt to rape his bound female victim after murdering her mother. Although Coleridge does not cite it, it is surely behind the review's claim that Lewis had overstepped "the nice boundaries, beyond which terror and sympathy are deserted by the pleasurable emotions" (59).

It should be noted that Coleridge's review partakes in a wider eighteenth-century anti-novelistic discourse based around the senses and a bodily (rather than intellectual) appeal. E.J. Clery argues that novels were comprehended within the discourse of luxury: they were just another item to be consumed to stimulate an undiscerning sensory palate.¹ Among fears about excessive peacetime consumption of luxuries, she continues, the gendering of luxury as feminine translated concerns about women readers into a trope to express wider concerns about the effeminacy of consumer society. The most commonly invoked metaphor for fiction was drugs, and Clery shows how a model of addiction arose around reading. Women readers were said to consume one or more novels a day, and it

¹ E.J. Clery. *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 80-105.

was supposedly common to read the end first – overturning literary plot in the name of a stimulating fix. In short, literature was degraded to the state of commodified stimulant, and sensual gothic was the most potent commodity of all. Yet I would still hold that, at least in the case of Lewis's sensationalist style, Coleridge's prejudice has some justification in the text itself.

If we turn to the second question (does the work depict a world informed by the supersensible), then initially it would seem Coleridge could have little objection. Lewis unashamedly portrays the supernatural. Yet as the supernatural is subordinated to a sensationalist style, it seems to be voided at the very moment it is invoked. Most damagingly perhaps, sensationalism runs the risk of having no ethical content in totally bypassing moral reflection *en route* to the senses: can something read only for physiological stimulation have an ethical content? This renders the supersensible framework of *The Monk*, which is prominently religious - demons, wandering Jews, and so forth - suspiciously hollow. The reader wonders whether the Catholic setting is anything more substantial than exciting local colour.

Coleridge's review attacks Lewis for precisely this reason, accusing him of misusing religious discourse in order to bolster his gothic supernaturalism, mixing "all that is most awfully true in religion with all that is most ridiculously absurd in superstition" (61). Modern critics tend to agree on the absence of religious content. Jack Voller reads the hollow statues and hidden spaces of the novel's convent as intimating a void at the heart of religious consolation.² Peter Brooks sees "a reassertion of magic, taboo, superstition" (252). I feel this is broadly correct, and also reflects a troubling lack of ethical structure to the narrative. The ending, although superficially moralistic in that the devil kills Ambrosio, is ambiguous given it revolves around the arbitrary breaking of a legal bond, and thus reflects the same self-voiding character of all Lewis's invocations of the religious supersensible. Moreover, the work does not insinuate the clear presence of a monotheistic, benevolent God to provide an ethical centre to the work. This, in turn, is mirrored by an ethically disengaged, arguably sadistic, narration; as David Punter writes: "Lewis, at all points, tries to be more cynical than his audience" (80).

² Jack G. Voller. *The Supernatural Sublime: The Metaphysics of Terror in Anglo-American Romanticism*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994. 65-70.

There is, therefore, a basis for Coleridge's charges. Lewis's style aims at the senses rather than the higher faculties, and the world he portrays, although nominally supernatural, is deeply ambiguous in being subordinated to sensationalism. These qualities have led modern critics to hail it as a radical embodiment of a sublime negativity.³ For Coleridge, however, such negativity was intolerable. If Lewis never really attempts to transcend sense (artistically unacceptable, stylistically deplorable and morally dangerous, for Coleridge), then it implies a sublime literature of terror would do exactly that. I believe this is precisely what we find in Coleridge's defence of Schiller's tragedy *The Robbers*.

Like many tragedies, the world that *The Robbers* depicts, I would argue, is ultimately overseen by a strong, supersensible, ethical order. This would have undoubtedly attracted Coleridge. *The Robbers*' English translator wrote in his preface: "Nor is there a human being, whose heart is in the slightest degree susceptible of virtuous emotions, that will not feel them roused into a flame" (xv). Of course, moral defences were routine, made even for *The Monk*. But when Schiller invokes the supersensible, it is not just for terror and sensation. The crimes in the play are just as harrowing as those in Lewis: the 'evil' brother Franz, wanting to usurp his father, plans to kill him by discovering how to drive him mad with terror and grief. When that fails, he resolves to imprison and starve him to death. As Karl, the 'good' brother, comments: "What are this world's laws? Mere knavery – a game with loaded dice...The bands of nature are dissolved" (176).

Yet transgression in Schiller provokes retribution within a coherent moral and religious context - precisely what is lacking in *The Monk*. As noted by Richard Koc, the play suggests the operations of providence through the uncanny appearance of "an old man...bent to the ground with sorrow" (188) in Franz's nightmares at the precise moment Karl frees their father. Karl himself claims to be an "Exterminating Angel" (168) and believing his robbers to be sanctified instruments of the 'invisible' moral order: "This day the invisible arm of a superior Power gives dignity to our vocation...employs you as his

³ For example, Voller, 61-88, and Elizabeth Napier. *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-Century Literary Form*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987. 112-30.

angels to execute his stern decrees" (178). This late providential moment is strongly contrasted to an earlier section of the play, where Karl mistakenly took the mantle of scourge, attempting to use his criminal position outside the law to correct social injustices. However, having seen the violent consequences, he repudiates this mission: "tis not for thee to wield the sword of the Most High! Behold thy first essay! – Here then I renounce the rash design" (89).

The presence of the father dominates this whole matter of true and false providence. Karl only joins the robbers after believing himself to be disowned and goes on to attack the institutions of social patriarchy. But when he confronts his mistake, he understands his rebellion against the patriarchal principle as alienation from God: "I alone the outcast – the prodigal son!" (110). Meanwhile, as we noted before, true providence is discovered in revenge sanctified by the paternal as a general principle comprehending both earthly and divine: both the brothers' biological father, and God. *The Robbers* thus presents a strong ethical order under the sign of the father. Although instituted within culture in terms of the Old Moor and civil government, these two empirical realities are symbolic reflections, within the play's rhetoric, authorised by the supersensible paternal: God. Ultimately Karl submits to both civil and divine patriarchies in giving himself up and restating his horror at his earlier life of crime. As Schiller himself wrote: "the lost one enters again within the pale of the law" (Schiller, "1781 Preface" par.11).

In articulating a strong providential order, the play also establishes a nuanced understanding of freedom. This is where we may answer positively for Schiller in regards to the first of our opening questions: does the work engage the higher faculties? Karl sought freedom outside the law (and the patriarchal), but sees that freedom reverts to iron fatalism as he is caught in a web of lawless violence. It is with this in mind that Karl begins a powerful philosophical soliloquy on suicide, addressing the ghosts of his victims:

Your dying agonies, your black and strangled visages, your gaping wounds – these are but links of that eternal chain of destiny which bound me from my birth, unconscious bound me – which hung perhaps upon the humours of my nurse – my father's temperament, or my mother's blood (162-3).

He realises he has never been truly free. In the terms of Schiller's later aesthetics, he has merely tried to combat nature with his own wilfulness – "opposing force to force, by commanding nature, as nature yourself" (*Essays* 136). He laments a world of crushing empirical necessity where his parents' blood or temperament seal his destiny through physical cause and effect. But as Karl considers suicide in his soliloquy – "this liberty thou can't not take from me" (164) – he finds himself asserting an element of free subjectivity which stands over the sensible world. Even if we were to die, he muses: "this *self* remains; – this *self* within. – For all that is external, what has it of reality beyond that form and colour which the mind itself bestows? – I am myself my heaven or my hell" (163).

The soliloquy thus asserts a certain possibility of freedom against the physical: as the English preface puts it, "moral agency" against "the opposing principle of fatalism" (xi). It thus itself invokes the supersensible. However, my main point here is simply that this is, in typical *Sturm und Drang* fashion, a highly philosophical moment which engages the intellectual faculties. Whilst we can conceive of arguments against materialism which draw on the senses (Laurence Sterne's Yorick makes one such argument to himself in *A Sentimental Journey*), Karl's soliloquy engages the reader or spectator at a higher, intellectual level.⁴

There thus appears to be a strong opposition between these two texts. Where *The Monk* is morally and religiously ambiguous, Schiller asserts and explores a strong religiously articulated ethical order beyond the sensible and empirical. Where Lewis thrills and shocks the senses, the terrors of *The Robbers* are part of a complex intellectual work. With the moral and philosophical context of tragedy, and a constant commitment to rise above sense, no wonder Coleridge approved of Schiller as sublime.

Yet, Coleridge's enthusiasm for Schiller did not persist, chiefly influenced by the need to exorcise his own Jacobinical reputation. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge argues to understand the "true character" of *The Robbers* we must understand German drama as involving "mere cramps of weakness, and orgasms of sickly imagination on the

⁴ See Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey*. Ed. Ian Jack and Tim Parnell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 95.

part of the author, lowest provocation of torpid feeling on the part of the readers" (454, 455). The physiological anti-gothic vocabulary of 1798 reappears, and Schiller is assimilated to German horror. In short, Coleridge has answered negatively to the first our initial questions: now Schiller is considered as appealing to the senses, not the higher faculties. Coleridge provides this rejoinder so he can swiftly dismiss *The Robbers* as youthful folly on Schiller's part, saving the author for a less revolutionary tradition; yet here in the last section of my paper, I want to carry a gothic reading of *The Robbers* through, and consider the second question: is the supersensible order in the world of *The Robbers* as secure as initially thought? The gothic side of Schiller that will emerge is one that Coleridge appeared to sense in the *Biographia*, but did not engage in any detail.

To see *The Robbers* as gothic, when it is a play which so strongly presents the supersensible in its fictional world, is to see it haunted by what David Morris and others have called the Gothic sublime. In this, one sees not just the plunging, bleak failure to transcend sense, but also the inverse of transcendence. The unrepresentable ceases to be the supersensible or divine, and becomes linked with the unconscious. As Morris argues, the grotesque fictions and tropes of gothic can be read as the return of the repressed: "every uncanny figure or event is inevitably a substitute: the inexact double or surrogate of what we cannot know and cannot represent directly" (311). If the gothic is thus interpreted as a literature of terror based around the unconscious, then terror, far from exalting the subject as in the tradition of the sublime, serves to disturb it with the uncanny and its own hidden depths.

One uncanny disruption running prominently through *The Robbers* is the double: described by Freud as the projection of a split self. If we follow this, it poses an immediate challenge to our 'sublime' reading. Indeed, Schiller's sublimity as maintained by Coleridge during the 1790s depends on the clear moral contrast between Karl and Franz. Karl learns to obey the (supersensible) providential order, whereas Karl rebels against it and its earthly reflections such as his own father. However, such moral clarity is perhaps more characteristic of Coleridge's own Schillerian *Osorio* than it is of *The Robbers*. In fact, Karl and Franz (often played by the same actor) mirror and double each other in their morally ambiguous overreaching individualism. One critic who has pursued this line is Richard Koc:

Die Räuber, while exhibiting on the surface two sons' reactions to the father, represents on a symbolic level a complex psychological picture of one son's mind, as it reflects his ambivalent, self-contradictory feelings (91).

Karl becomes the side of the son haunted by fatherly authority, obsessed by exaggerated patriarchal images like Caesar, and agonised by the thought he has been disowned. Franz, conversely, fabricates Karl's death, and thus symbolically eliminates this side of his conscience. Franz negates patriarchal values with the slippery logic of a Shakespearian villain:

He is your father! He gave you life...so let him be sacred to you!
 Another cunning conclusion! I should like to know *why* he made me?
 Not out of love for me surely, since there was no *me* to love? (trans. Lamport, 34)

Yet ironically, although perhaps what psychoanalysis would lead us to expect, each brother is mirrored by the other. Although Franz rebels against blood-ties and the father, his sole aim is to put himself in the father's position (to become the father and the head of familial domains) through usurpation. Conversely, Karl's attacks on society bear the marks of redirected violence, and his robber life might be read as an outlet for tangled feelings – guilt, rage, love – about his father as the principle and manifestation of authority.

Koc, like most German scholars, uses the 1781 text. However, the revised ending of 1782 (used by the English translator) is particularly interesting within the context of such a reading. Franz is brought before Karl and put to trial. During the course of the scene, Karl accuses Franz –“Thou hast made me chief of these murderers” (202). This is literally true in terms of the plot. But from a more symbolic perspective, it could be seen as recognition that his own Franciscan side drove his rebellion against society. Indeed, the earlier text obliquely attests to their fundamental oneness in declaring: “*two men such as I would destroy the whole moral order of creation*” (trans. Lamport, 159). When Franz is imprisoned and Karl proceeds to give himself finally over to the authorities, we detect the classic pattern of Freudian normalisation: repression followed by obedience to the super-ego and social norms.

However, whilst this resolution might seem to mirror a Coleridgean transcendental or sublime reading – which also ended in resolution under the law, and indeed the father – it does of course imply an entirely different view of subjectivity from that sublimely free self mentioned in Karl's soliloquy. From a psychoanalytical perspective, law is not a supersensible principle, but rather an interdiction placed across the unconscious. The subject is not exalted but divided by the law; divided from its desires by repression. And this is a troubling but prominent motif early in the play, where civil values are shown to conceal their opposites. "They fulminate against covetousness, and they have slaughtered Peru for the sake of golden brooches", Karl rails as he lists the faults of church, empire and civil government (trans. Lamport 89). As critics have pointed out, in simply reintegrating Karl to society, Schiller leaves untouched all the social injustices the play has previously uncovered.⁵ The familial and theological reconciliations do something to efface this political and social aspect, but it remains problematic. This would be a point where the gothic side of Schiller is in conflict with the sublime side.

Indeed, it is not only that individual agents of the law are hypocrites - *The Robbers'* critique of church and state exposes the institutions of society itself as displaying the same pattern of repression. They may not be openly violent, but they manifest a plurality of surrogates for violence. How different is society from the cabal of bandits? An implicit similarity connects how the letter of civil law allows the poor to suffer despite pretences of justice, and how the letter of criminal oaths demands that Amalia, Karl's lover, must be sacrificed, although the economy of this sacrifice is so obviously perverse. If we argue Karl submits to social norms by repressing his inner Franz, we see those norms themselves are in turn divided by a structure of repressed violence.

In fact, what Karl does earlier in the play, especially when he confronts the envoys of the law, is to expose that society works on the methods of a Franz, despite espousing the values of a Karl. As James Mackintosh put it in his famous response to Burke: "The massacres of war, and the murders committed by the sword of justice, are disguised by the solemnities which invest them" (174). Thus, following the hint in the *Biographia* and reading Schiller's gothic threatens to totally overturn the transcendence of an ethically

⁵⁵ David Pugh, *Schiller's Early Dramas: A Critical History*. Rochester: Camden House, 2000. 144-58.

and religiously centered sublime reading. More generally, it suggests the division between gothic and sublime is, perhaps, untenable and that terror – however institutionalised as a form of the sublime – is always menaced by negativity.

I would like to end by noting that the play recapitulates in a strange fashion Coleridge's own progress from utopian pantisocracy to conservatism. Coleridge once, like Karl, believed that society had to be rebuilt from outside, and that civic norms contained a hypocritical, barely repressed violence: "Property is Power and equal Property equal Power. A Poor Man is necessarily more or less a slave" (*Lectures 1795* 126). I have argued the hasty return to the pale of the law engineered by Schiller in *The Robbers* is problematic because of the play's own powerful social critique. If one has already exposed the law as illegitimate, then that illegitimacy cannot simply be erased even if the law is reasserted as the moral centre of one's world. One can only speculate whether Coleridge saw in *The Robbers* a complicating of his own return to the pale in abandoning radicalism. On the other hand, in coming to terms with French revolutionary terror, it is perhaps no surprise that Coleridge (and indeed Mackintosh and many others) took the route of *The Robbers* - of beating a gradual but firm retreat to lawfulness as it stood.

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