

Evil Writers: The Obsessive Effect of Gothic Writing

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Abstract

Writing, as any other form of creation, can be an addictive practice that leads to obsession and madness. Gothic fiction involves particularly high levels of ambivalence, which are sometimes translated by a curious similarity between hero and villain, and by a fatal attraction between victim and criminal. A possible identification between the writer and his villain is an important aspect of the ambiguity and transgressive power of gothic narratives.

The intention to give gothic fiction a high degree of reality, in order to produce strong emotions, has always been a central motive for many gothic writers. Gothic terrors can subvert and transgress social and moral values as well as any kind of aesthetic limits, but they are also paradoxically used to reaffirm those limits underlying their value. Horror fiction can become a warning against the dangers of transgression, presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form. However, many of the bestselling gothic novels can only produce a high level of alienation, extracting only a very superficial aesthetical pleasure from destruction. As Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* reminds us, the threat may not be a supernatural creature, but a text.

Key Words: Evil, Writer, Obsession, Gothic, Transgression, Danger.

To consider writing as an addictive practice, which leads to obsession and madness, is a point of view from which some gothic writers depart to reflect on the dangerous effects of the creative process, when it becomes a Faustian enterprise that exceeds all its reasonable limits. Gothic fiction involves high levels of ambivalence, which are sometimes translated by a curious similarity between hero and villain, and by a fatal attraction between victim and criminal. The villain is allowed some human features and may often be the victim of sinister forces beyond his control. Consequently, a possible identification between the writer and his villain is an important aspect of the ambiguity and transgressive power of gothic narratives. Author and villain can be different versions of the same figure: the outsider in a hostile and incomprehensible world, the self-portrait of the Romantic artist.

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Madness, we can find an expert in fantastic literature, Sutter Can, who is able to affect the mental state of his readers by the power of his writing, a special gift that any other author, such as Lovecraft and Stephen King can possess. Their novels can be an inspiration to create this evil writer. Jack Torrance in *The Shining*, Ben Mears in *Salem's Lot*, Thaddeus Beaumont in *The Dark Half* and Paul Sheldon in *Misery* can be good examples to illustrate the obsessions and existential crisis provoked by gothic writing. The language crisis from which they suffer makes them authors of two kinds of novels: the good ones and the *bestsellers*. The first type produces a fiction whose authenticity and cathartic power try to exorcise the anxieties and obsessions connected to literary and artistic creation. Writing can be dangerous, but can also be a confrontation with other dangers involved in the creation of a world which is far from being a safe place. In these novels the writer can be an author of evil, but he has a cathartic function, which Stephen King was able to clarify: "I and my fellow writers are absorbing and defusing all your fears and anxieties and insecurities and taking them upon ourselves. We're sitting in the darkness beyond the flickering warmth of your fire, cackling into our caldrons and spinning out our spider webs of words, all the time sucking the sickness from your minds and spewing it out into the night."¹

Gothic terrors can subvert and transgress social and moral values as well as any kind of aesthetic limits, but they are also paradoxically used to reaffirm those limits underlying their value. Gothic fiction can become a warning against the dangers of transgression, presenting them in their darkest and most threatening form. However, some of the bestselling gothic novels can only produce a high level of alienation, extracting only a very superficial aesthetical pleasure from destruction. In this sense, gothic writers can become real villains without any ethical responsibility or aesthetical honesty. As Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* reminds us, the threat may not be a supernatural creature, but a text. To denounce this danger implies an intellectual challenge, which contemporary gothic criticism should never refuse. In *Wickedness*, Mary Midgley alerts for this sense of responsibility, stating that:

From the earliest myths to the most recent novel, all writing (including comic writing) that is not fundamentally cheap and frivolous is meant to throw light on the difficulties of the human situation, and if, in tribute to arbitrary theories of aesthetics, we refuse to use that light, we sign up for death and darkness. Where the refusal extends to teaching students not to use it, the responsibility is particularly grave.²

According to David Punter, the essential features of gothic fiction

are psychological: derangement, obsession, nightmare, and the eruption of the irrational. The ambiguous meanings of gothic fiction intervene to create a certain duplicity of its effects. Not only its authors are able to confront and exorcise the sources of terror by the cathartic effect of their narratives, but they can also be responsible for the desire for terror in their readers minds, inducing them to practice evil actions by following the same obsessive impulses they saw portrayed in some evil characters so realistically created by writers, who, perhaps, only wanted to objectify in their villains some of their own creative obsessions. This dangerous proximity between writer and his villains happens because the same identity crisis or obsession that takes a criminal to kill or to develop perverse behaviours is often originated from the same existential emptiness and anxiety that lead the author to write, experiencing sometimes the frustrations and the impossibility to fulfil his personal desires of power and fame by being unable to reach meaning through language. This feeling of dissatisfaction and impotence in face of the blank page is what leads the writer to try, so obsessively, to achieve perfection in his art, as the criminal also repeats his crimes to show high levels of competence in his performances. The anxiety and terror felt by the writer, in his moment of writing, can turn into evil and extreme attitudes, as Stephen King concluded in his famous novel *The Shining*. The play-writer Jack Torrance is possessed by an uncontrollable impulse to murder all his family, due to an enormous feeling of boredom and emptiness lived in the loneliness of the Overlook Hotel, from which he wants to escape writing a play and teaching his son how to write. King's interest in individuals who become victims of terror, by living deep existential crisis provoked by the use of language, is the reason he so often uses in his novels characters who are themselves writers. Representing King's self-reflection on his role as a writer, these characters try to exorcise the anxieties connected to the literary and artistic production, being a way for the author to reveal the act of writing in all its authenticity. He wants to warn us that writing can be dangerous by giving origin to a certain perverse impulse, inherent to the nature of speech. In *The Gothic Sublime*, Vijay Mishra clarifies this process: "Any idea that is in excess of language signifies the death of its own medium of representation, that is, of language itself. For speech is marked by a compulsion towards its own self-dissolution, its own nirvana, that narrative attempts to circumvent by prolonging through writing."³

In *The Dark Half*, George Stark is the personification of that impulse. Being a pseudonym of the writer Thad Beaumont, he acquires a life of his own and starts committing all the crimes described in his novels. The writer is thus threatened by a character born from his own literary creativity. His capacity for using language may be lost in a fight against a self-destructive force created inside language. So terrified as Dr. Jekyll, after discovering the perversity of his own creation, Thad becomes conscious of all

the dangers inherent to writing. If the irruption of George Stark showed him that “pen names can come to life and murder people,”⁴ he could also run the risk that his activity as a writer could turn against himself, being to him very harmful for provoking obsessions, fragmentation of personality, and a deep alienation in relation to others and to himself. As Stark represents Thad’s projection of this fear towards writing, he refers to him as a double - “I will call it my William Wilson complex”⁵ - who will have to be confronted in order to reach consciousness and authenticity, similarly to what happens in Poe’s short-story.

Relating the desire of writing to the terrible repressions produced by the act of writing itself, King creates his monsters as the result of repressed desires and fears that are equivalent to the desire for the unrepresentable, so common in the gothic sublime, which sometimes leads the imagination to a crisis. This creative paradox of gothic fiction has a positive effect, because it uses the confrontation with the fear of language or with the terror of writing, so that an author could surpass them and obtain a deeper consciousness of his human condition and of his role as a writer. As Thad Beaumont well knows about his “dark side,” George Stark, “words on paper made him, and words on paper are the only things that will get rid of him.”⁶ Consequently, Gothic transforms the aesthetics of sublime into an existential and psychological process, which is able to bring to consciousness the dark side of human psyche, so that it could be recognized as an integral part of its identity. Its essential cathartic function is once more described by Stephen King as a kind of exorcism. In *Danse Macabre*, he refers to gothic writing as a necessity of “lifting a trapdoor in the civilised forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath.”⁷

This cathartic effect is usually not only felt by the readers, but also by the author, who exorcises his most terrible demons through gothic writing. The most perverse characters have very often the power to dramatise their author’s creative crisis, whenever they become obsessive characters involved into some maniac purpose, but who also possess some criminal impulses that, apparently, keep them at a distance from the identity of their creator. Through this process, the gothic writer finds an indirect and metaphorical way to reflect on his own act of writing, transforming some of his stories into meta-fictions that develop efficient processes of self-reference.

Both in literature and in cinema, we can find several examples of these evil writers, showing that Stephen King is not alone in this reflection on the darkest side of creativity. The famous *Basic Instinct*, starring Sharon Stone, can be associated with many other psychological *thrillers*, such as *Secret Window*, with Johnny Depp, adapted from King’s novel *Secret Window*, *Secret Garden*. Burdened with a craft that is essentially uncinematic, writers in the movies are perennially blocked, broke, and

insane, simultaneously romanticised and ridiculed for their excesses, which allow a process of self-regarding and self-reflexivity, both from the reader's perspective, as in *Misery*, and from the writer's, as in *Dark Half* by George Romero.

All these stories have the common purpose of discussing the question of the writer's double personality to which his creative activity seems to condemn him, giving evidence of the fact that his power to create and to imagine evil gives him more probabilities to yield to those destructive instincts that he so obsessively wants to create with the highest level of authenticity, proving he has a deep knowledge of the darkest side of human mind. This explains the relation of empathy between the writer and his villains, an identification that leads them to imitate one another, as Val McDermid's novel, *Killing the Shadows*, so well exemplifies. The plot centres on a serial killer whose actions seem to blur the line between fact and fiction, because his victims are thriller writers he imitates, whenever he kills them in the way they killed the victims in their books. Through this novel, McDermid expresses her awareness of the responsibility writers should have for whom they write, leading them to reflect on the effects of violent writing on people's minds. Consequently, we can conclude that neither readers nor writers are completely protected against these dangers, because there is no such thing as safe art. This is so especially if these artistic products are part of a culture which is so driven by obsession with celebrity that it makes celebrities out of serial killers. In *Haunted*, Chuck Palahniuk created a story about a group of people who accept to participate in a secret writer's retreat, because they want to become famous writers, and this obsessive purpose will lead them to do anything to get fame and fortune. An homage to horror stories, that reminds Lord Byron's *Villa Diodati* and *Frankenstein's* genesis, this is a fiction about the process of writing gothic fiction and also a satire of reality TV, where perverse behaviours associated with creative motives are totally exposed, showing the dark-side and all the horror of narcissism. Deeply believable and horrifyingly real, these 17 stories also contain Palahniuk's irony and provocative tone, which allow to reflect upon gothic writers' obsessive desire to represent terror with high degrees of authenticity and reality. The cover itself has a dark image that changes while the book is read. When the book is closed in darkness, the effect is that a scaring face appears before the reader. This so real effect, which every good horror story should create, was especially obtained by 'Guts,' one of the best known of these stories, because it was read by the author to his audiences in several promotion tours, and over 35 people fainted while listening to the readings.

As direct consequences of transforming fictional terrors into real terrors, these and other effects force us to reflect on the consequences of the special power which gothic writers have to transcend the frontiers between fact and fiction. The creative obsession from which the author departs,

feeling simultaneously great joy and terrible torment, is transmitted to the readers who are stimulated to reproduce, in the reality, all the terrors they lived in the world of fiction, to experience, with the same degree of intensity, the real risks the writer created. Sometimes they desire to imitate his creative power to gratify their own perverse needs for terror and violence, as Annie Wilkes, the obsessive reader in *Misery*, so well illustrates. This danger can be created by the process of writing itself, because writers can be often exposed to the excess. Defending that Gothic is the paradigm of all fiction and all textuality, in *Gothic Pathologies*, David Punter states:

Gothic is, on the whole, proliferative, it is not intrigued by the minimal: in its trajectory away from right reason and from the rule of law it does not choose to purify itself but rather to express itself with maximum – perhaps magnum – force, even if on many occasions this also involves considerable ineptitude. It tells stories, it tells stories within stories, it repeats itself, it forgets where it left off, it goes on and on; it ‘loses the place’. Endlessly it seeks for excess after excess, and does not draw a textual line under this.⁸

This close connection to the excess and the persistence in its representation implies a risk of losing the aesthetic distance to certain terrifying experiences and to the real sources of terror, especially in gothic fiction, because both writer and the reader have the same intention of extracting strong aesthetic emotions from every terrible event. Commenting on some readers’ desires for fear and their anxieties of experiencing real risks, in *Delights of Terror*, Terry Heller concludes:

Modern readers come to such works expecting some sort of a challenge; adult readers, I believe, though they may enjoy ‘The Man in the Bell’, prefer ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’, in part because it produces some measure of real risk. The pleasure of enduring and overcoming this anxiety of real risks, however small they may be, is greater than that of simply entering into the sufferings of the victim at second hand.⁹

The fact is that neither writers nor readers are free from their desires to satisfy negative pleasures, some irrational impulses that Freud explained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where he concluded that “the aim of all life is death”, because he suspected that instincts other than those of self-preservation operate in the ego, leading man to be impelled by unconscious desires of self-destruction, completely opposite to his life instincts. In “The Imp of Perverse,” Edgar Allan Poe reflected on these paradoxical tendencies to practice evil without motive. No other writer gave better expression to the consciousness of his own obsessions and the urgency to objectify them in his

characters, forever victims of their own recurrent and persistent thoughts that caused them so much anxiety and distress.

Like Poe, every gothic writer knows he can't be free from these paradoxical tendencies of the human behaviour. One of the main themes of gothic fiction is precisely this ambiguity, being the double one of its most interesting type of characters, in the tradition of Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. This duplicity can be transmitted to gothic writing itself, whenever the writer's intention to transcend himself, through the experience of the terrible, can induce him and their readers to self-destruction, which shows the paradox of the gothic sublime. Nothing is merely aesthetic or fictional, because there is always a mutual contamination between art and life. Reflecting on the high level of alienation that some aesthetic experiences could produce whenever they extract pleasure from violence or destruction, Walter Benjamin, in his *Illuminations*, concludes: "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order."¹⁰

Notes

¹ S King, 'The Playboy Interview', in *The Stephen King Companion*, Futura. London, 1991, p. 69.

² M Midgley, *Wickedness*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 200.

³ V Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p. 23.

⁴ King, *The Dark Half*, New English Library, London, 1990, p. 135.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 430.

⁷ King, *Danse Macabre*, Berkley Books, New York, 1981, p. 205.

⁸ D Punter, *Gothic Pathologies*, Macmillan, London, 1998, p. 9.

⁹ T Heller, *The Delights of Terror*, p. 42.

¹⁰ W Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, Schocken, New York, 1968, p. 242.

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