REVIEW ESSAY

Love/Slave

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When stories emerged that skater Tonya Harding and/or her entourage might be involved in the January 1994 attack on skater Nancy Kerrigan, Time Magazine commented, “a grimly familiar tale of random violence turned into something far more gothic” (24 Jan. 1994). The culture was at its ambiguous and fascinating work again, “marvelling at the spectacle” (52), processing violence into “the Gothic.”

The essence of “the Gothic” is intimacy; here violence is not random but orderly. Power and Suffering strive against one another, become one another, obliterate one another, and the specta-

The recent books under review in the essay are


tor, uncannily "at home," perversely consoled, plays any or all of the parts. Vividly gendered throughout its generic history, the Gothic in fiction figured the suffering of Power in the male, and the power of Suffering in the female, but even in its earliest eighteenth-century form another binary figure of intimacy could be discerned in Gothic forms, the master and the slave.

Sensitivity to this double figure in Gothic fictions, and the increasing integration of the writing of African Americans into the critical narrative of "the Gothic," is the hallmark of new thinking about this oldest of popular culture genres, a new thinking that reflects a sophisticated cross-pollination of postcolonialist and historicist with feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives. For, we are reminded, it was a slave-owning or -profiting society that wrote and avidly read Gothic romance in late-Enlightenment England and America, a society pondering in the dream life of its fictions the ordering shapes of its world—top and bottom, dominant and submissive, master and slave, male and female.

The Gothic stages an animated carceral spectacle with multiple vantage points, confining random violence in intimate orderings. The writer and the reader, the protagonist and antagonist, both see and see through prison bars everywhere (Milbank 111). Freedom or even identity itself may consist in bursting in, or in bursting out. Intimacy is violence and violence is made to seem the only intimacy, especially for the heroine whose traditional passivity attracts the competing violence of possessive lovers. Love=slave is everywhere encoded, "terror Gothic" to the suffering but desirous woman, "horror Gothic" to the evasive man.

In early critical taxonomy, "horror" and "terror" Gothic emerge as, respectively, "male" and "female" Gothic around the fictive formulas associated with the novels of Matthew Lewis and William Beckford on the one hand, and Ann Radcliffe on the other. The formulas initially seemed emotionally and politically gendered around the male writers' "stomach" for bloody dramas of retributive annihilation by preternatural forces, and Radcliffe's delicate-nerved and compromised return to a living world free of all supernatural visitants but those approved by the Church of England. Male writers' protagonists battled with/became gods and demons, claimed by the under/over world; female writers' protagonists struggled in a
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quite recognizable world of divinized or demonized patriarchs, striving to bear, name, and finally deconstruct their "terrors."

Two generations of careful contemplation of nineteenth-century Gothic has blurred that early distinction, however. Scholarship on the genre is careful to note at the heart of almost all classic Gothic texts two forms of struggle, one "heterosexual," one "homosocial." The "heterosexual" struggle is between a dominant and a submissive figure (usually, but not always male and female); the homosocial struggle is a possession battle between male titans, present even when the foreground of the narrative is claimed by the standard deadly heterosexual persecution Romance. And, inevitably, this scholarly contemplation of intimate violence in the Gothic between Power and Suffering, the irresistible force and the immovable object, has highlighted for critics the very similar structures used by more "mainstream" writers of popular fiction like Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne, even by the mothers and fathers of "realist" writing like Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James.

The centrality of the (real and "constructed") figure of woman, and of the colonized, to all current studies of cultural representation has in many ways "Gothicized" and "feminized" that study. We can see this tendency in four recent books on women, fiction, and the Gothic, books which continue and forward the main quarrel about the Gothic and its (and all) fictional formulas—to what degree, if at all, do these formulas of "containment" help us to subvert, or even to cure, the social confinements they diagnose so well?

From the earliest studies, critics of the Gothic have concentrated on its presentation of peculiar "spaces." Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto (1765) provides the figure for the first full-length treatment of "female Gothic," Kate Ferguson Ellis's The Contested Castle. Alison Milbank's Daughters of the House continues Ellis's examination of the surprising activity of the woman assigned by culture to the interior spaces of domesticity. Milbank's book treats mainly male authors of the English nineteenth century, trying, with only moderate success, to "give a more positive turn to the seemingly reactionary presentations" of John Ruskin, Dickens, Wilkie Collins and Sheridan LeFanu among others (3). But Milbank's chapters on Dickens and Collins especially do show the enormous
complexity of the Gothic as a mode of dramatizing contestation for a prized space. The doorways and keyholes of Ruskin’s “separate spheres” of activity are scenes of constant “housebreaking” (14) for the writers Milbank studies, where thieves and adventurers break in (or out) to steal (or dwell in) the prized places of intimacy (the Queen’s Garden) or social power (the King’s House), where the vividly incarcerated submissive individual may in fact be male (Collins’s Armadale, Dickens’s Clennam), where the contesting female remakes the public space of work and social action in a feminine (Esther Summerson) or even feminist (Lucy Snowe) appropriation.

Yet none of the writers studied is able to “embrace the implications of the Gothic plot” fully (76): this is the common cry of critics, as if the Gothic plot itself—radical liberation, destruction of confinements—were imprisoned by writers too timid to keep their own doors open. Dickens, Milbank interestingly demonstrates, created two integrated spaces of private and public action in Great Expectations (1861): working class forge-within-a-home, and Satis House, a working manor farm turned brewery-within-a-home. But he figured his contemporary world helplessly and unforgettably in the separated office and home spaces of the schizophrenic Mr. Wemmick. Charlotte Brontë’s Lucy contests the unified castle of school-and-home with the Jesuitical female patriarch Mme. Beck and the Jesuit M. Paul, but she takes full possession of her own home-school only when the ship of heterosexual domesticity has sunk at the end of Villette (1853). Beauty and the Beast, Jacob and the Angel, Suffering and Power wrestle each other to an intimate draw, but when the morning comes, the narrative ends in the realist’s separation, or the Romantic’s Sublime, two visible spaces or one invisible one.

At the heart of the Gothic for Michelle A. Massé is that space called a scene—a seen space in which Power and Suffering wrestle in the gaze of a third, the primal scene, in fact, as Sigmund Freud reconstructs it, outside the bedroom in the world of activity where “a child is being beaten.” Sophisticated, provocative, learned, and passionate, In the Name of Love: Woman, Masochism and the Gothic examines a range of Gothic or Gothicized texts in the light of Freud’s depiction of the “beating fantasy,” striving not only to diagnose this
“genre of the dominated” (239) but also to “awaken” from it (9). Masse studies fictions from *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Monk* (1796) to Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1985) as repetitions of the ur-Gothic “arena” of domination/subordination, hoping for a time when we will have learned enough about the trauma which these repetitions stage to be able to walk away from the current arena where the choice seems to be between violent intimacy and solitary freedom.

The book begins with a careful survey of recent scholarship on (especially female) masochism, “the learned behavior of the oppressed” (45), scholarship which treads a thoughtful path between old condemnations and new celebrations, looking for the precise degree to which the masochist’s behavior may contain strategies for ego defense and even ego activity under social constraint—as well as, of course, more ambiguous and dangerous strategies for ego “transcendence.” This scholarship, and Masse’s, makes gingerly use of Freud’s evocative and evasive essay, “A child is being beaten” (1919). Here the analyst theorizes that his fantasizing women patients are “working through” the experience of encountering intimate Power in three stages: “my father is beating a child” becomes “my father is beating me” becomes “a child is being beaten.” “Working through” to the passive voice, the fantasist creates a third spectator-locus of activity and knowledge within the beater/beaten dyad, a locus ambiguously useful as it erases or elides the father and provides both scopophilic pleasure and a potentially fluid path to momentary identity either with beater or beaten.

Freud, as usual, tended to “naturalize” this process with regard to women. Massé and other feminists argue that though this learned behavior may be deeply ingrained in subordinated groups, and its compensations not to be let go without great effort, the work still to do is to move back through those stages, to be able to retrieve the active voice/vision: “I see Power beating Suffering. I see a man is beating a woman.”

Most Gothic, from this perspective, starts its readers in stage three, passive/aggressively watching a beating scene, in charge of the scene but helpless to (wish to) halt its violent repetitions. Much Gothic is nevertheless useful in naming the dyad, Power/Suffering, beater/beaten, male/female, masterslave, and in establishing sub-
versive moments of endurance, resistance, subterranean powers within the Sufferer, lesson-validations for the female reader living in that courtship or marital Gothic space to which she returns when she closes the Gothic text. Most useful of all is the Gothic which presses its protagonist and reader beyond personal identification to see other women and subordinated persons in the grip of Power, see the framework of systemic violence ordering intimacy in cultures still clinging to subordination dyads.

Massé’s nuanced and engaged readings of English and American texts establish this analysis. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper (1899) becomes the prototype. Imprisoned in the medical discourse of her doctor husband, the narrating woman works through her passivity to a posture of ambiguous activity, self-incarcerated in a kind of enlightened madness, “achieving a dreadful freedom” (35). “Within a system that only she can understand, she gains autonomy,” disrupting her captor’s diagnosis by anticipating it, ironizing and covertly opposing his discourse by parroting it. Gilman’s exploitation of the flexible uses of tone in narration allow that narration to figure exactly “the impasse . . . between individual insight and unchanging social codes” (36).

In three longer chapters Massé explores three other narrative framings of male Power and female Suffering through the lens of the “beating triangle,” looking especially to the potential of spectatorship (narration) to open a way out of culture’s remorseless repetition or reversal of the beater/beaten dyad. A scholarly and passionate chapter on Pauline Reage’s The Story of O (1954) takes on some recent readings of Reage’s pornographic classic as mystic self-transcendence. While the novel rather compellingly “sells masochism by invoking religious systems” (145), Massé argues that the professionalized and neutralized third person narration allows for no real triangulation in scopophilic knowledge, no grounding of choice in the lyric or autobiographical voice, no subtlety of tone in the oscillating identification of self or reader with those who beat O.

A brilliant and scary reading of Daphne DuMaurier’s Rebecca (1938) follows the passivized lower-middle-class narrator from surveillance by the genteel classes and the flawed master of Manderley itself to detecting surveillance of the beating dyad of Maxim and his dead first wife, Rebecca. Continually transposed by the revelations
of the plot (Max married Rebecca, Rebecca cuckolded Max, Max shot Rebecca, Rebecca actually manipulated Max into murdering her) the beating dyad invites the narrator into rivalry and then identification with Rebecca as the dead wife’s position in the dyad changes. Keeping the secret of her lover/murderer in the end, the narrating second wife chooses overt Romantic identification with the fantasy Rebecca who loved Max utterly, covert identification with the real Rebecca who “beat” Max, progressing no further than her own more “Victorian” variant of the beater’s role.

Of classic Gothic texts only Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1848), argues Massé, offers a protagonist sufficiently skeptical of dominance to resist it both in her lover and in herself, sufficiently skilled in sublimating her energies in channels of work and art adjacent to heterosexual love to resist the equation of her love with her life, sufficiently enabled by her spectator’s role to perceive something of the “systemic” link not only between her experience and that of Rochester’s earlier “loves” but also between her experience and that of the “slaves” and “servants” who also exist, along with heterosexual “lovers,” in relationships of subordination to masters. An illuminating reading of Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* makes Massé’s final point: the protagonist, the latest in a four-generation series of wives owned and managed, like the property itself, by equally cloned husband-developers of a black middle-class suburb, cannot begin to take hold of her position in the beating dyad, let alone act to alter it, until the discovery of records and covert messages from the other beaten wives makes her the spectator of their accepted/resisted misery, then of her own, then of the system itself.

Naylor’s Willa Nedeed burns down the contested castle of her love/slavery ordeal, as did the protagonists’ doubles in *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre*; this long line of burning mansions reminds us, says Massé, “that the fall of one Gothic house is not the end of Gothic barbarity” (250), especially given the fact that in each of these cases where the beater has been bested, the resisting burner burns to death. Something further, and healthier, than this first step out of the Gothic arena is in order. Massé looks to forms of “utopian alterity” (240) for this: the subversion of the artist, the enabling fantasies of “Gothic rescuers” (273) in women’s detective novels and of new-world builders in feminist science fiction. But another model stands closer to hand, argues Kari J. Winter in *Subjects of
Winter reminds us that the figurative and even legal association of the status of slaves with that of women goes back centuries before African and African-American slavery, and that we must not simply collapse the important differences between the subordination of white women and the subordination of black women and men. These differences are crucial, and narratives, especially those written by black women, often distinguish carefully between the experience of the frying pan of slavery and the fire of marriage, or vice versa. “Freedom” had to mean something a little different to Frederick Douglass, whose wife, daughter, and supporters kept his castle while he fought the good fight outside, than it did to Mrs. Chloe Spear, a freed ex-slave and washerwoman who washed her family’s clothes along with her customers’, and had to save money secretly to buy the home she wanted for her family, only to discover that officially her husband had to own the house (65).

Using “slave narrative” both as it comes direct from Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs and other ex-slaves, and as it is fictionalized by African-American writers like Harriet Wilson and Toni Morrison, Winter writes arrestingly of the connections and distinctions between these two sanctioned and “popular” genres of social and racial subordination. Like the Gothic, the slave narrative often chronicled an awakening or escape from one prison or repressive social code into another; like the Gothic, the slave narrative chronicled prodigies of inventive individual subversion of the reigning dominance patterns. Though both narrative genres were avidly read, both were trammelled by those genre-expectations often affixed to the subliterary: work in the genre would be fragile, casual, ephemeral, in the service of pragmatic functions—the satisfaction of a supposed female readership’s appetite for fantasy, the supplying of vivid eyewitness “evidence” in a moral/legal case pending before the nation.

It was a convention of the Gothic that the testimony it contained was “found” or “edited” or “retold” by a cooler head or in a later cooler mode, a convention of the slave narration that it would need a (white) editor’s preface or a translator’s mediation between witness and audience. Thus both inside the story and in its narrativity,
"both genres seethe with anger against the would-be playwrights who attempted to dictate the scripts of their lives," determining for the reader not only what the witnesses could say but what they could appear to know (83).

Tamar Heller's forceful and illuminating treatment of the work of Wilkie Collins strengthens our appreciation of the complex element of class in the dramas of subordination portrayed in the Gothic. Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic begins with an excellent short summary of scholarship on the Gothic, then situates Collins's major Gothic and detective novels, The Woman in White (1860) and The Moonstone (1868), in the context of his earlier writings, which directly figured the class and gender anxieties associated with the early Victorian crisis of literary authority. Collins was a man striving to recoup his dead father's ideology of "professionalism" through a literary genre awash in feminine practitioners and predecessors and protofeminist domestic revolt, and pitched to an enlarging middle- and lower-class readership ambiguously interested in class rebellion, class mobility, and class stability.

In his continuing evocation of "class fear," Collins like other Gothic and sensation novelists, Heller notes acutely, was not necessarily as "subversive" as he is often called, both by his conservative contemporaries and our feminist contemporaries (87-88). His novels may write in again the women's voices erased from his initial work, a memoir of his father. But Basil (1852) shrinks from its own picture of a sister who guides/guards the male protagonist's writing after he frees it from paternal dominance. And both The Woman in White and The Moonstone award narration to women's and class- or race-alienated men's voices only to place narrative direction in the end safely in the hands of a middle-class male professional. Heller's chapter on The Woman in White, connecting Collins's written homage to his painter father with the eventual narratological mastery of Walter Hartright, the drawing master and son of a drawing master, is especially penetrating.

Collins tested the limits of his political consciousness in the exoticism of The Woman in White's revolutionary Italian Brotherhood and The Moonstone's Indian resistance to Imperial theft. Both resistance groups are seen conveniently to self-destroy, erase themselves, the one through Italian fraternal murder, the other against a
history of Hindu/Moslem conflict. But the narratives link their dark purposes with the sexuality of the “dark” female protagonists, Marian Halcombe and Rachel Verinder. “The psychosexual and historical readings have yet to be fully integrated” (144), says Heller of The Moonstone. This integration is the general work of 1990s theory in all literary genres. Her work and Winter’s from one side of the spectrum and Michelle Massé’s from the other side, are excellent examples of this integrative enterprise.

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