

The Postcolonial Gothic: Time and Death in Southern African Literature

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Summary

Typically, death, violence, evil (metaphysical or actual), madness, enclosure, doubling, dangerous sexuality, incest, archaicism, ruins, haunting, monsters, bats, rats, cats, eschatological religiosity and hyperbolically tawdry dark aesthetics come to mind when the word "Gothic" is used. In other words, the Gothic immediately conjures up Eurocentric or quasi-Eurocentric imagery. This makes perfect sense when one considers that Gothic sensibilities and art are far more likely to arise, and have arisen, within cold northern climes with medieval heritages than in sunny southern ones. Nevertheless, there is a Southern Gothic, and writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner produced more psychological and socially violent Gothic works than their European counterparts. My concern in this article is to explore the Southern Gothic of the USA in relation to key southern African texts in order to define what a southern African Gothic might resemble. What I discover is that the Gothic is not merely a fetishisation of the macabre and grotesque, social or aesthetic; it also involves the fantastic and sublime, often conveyed via a wry self-reflexivity in relation to time and mortality. Gothicism as a form of thanatophilia is invariably related to time and timelessness – different time scales that relativise human consciousness. I want to use the exploration and definition of the southern African Gothic to say something more generally about the Gothic in the postcolonial and the postcolonial in the Gothic. The argument that I want to make is twofold: (1) that southern African Gothicism, whilst in many ways undeveloped, conveys something of the transhistorical imagination that is vital to postcolonialism in general and (2) that alterity is approached by this Gothicism. Thus this paper attempts to restore the mythopoeic to southern African texts that were often analysed only via the materialistic and then to read that mythopoeic back into the sociohistorical and literary-critical context.

Opsomming

'n Mens dink tipies aan die dood, geweld, die bose (metafisies en werklik), kranksinnigheid, ingeslotenheid, verdubbeling, gevaarlike seksualiteit, bloedskande, argaisisme, ruïnes, die evokatiewe, monsters, vlermuise, rotte, katte, eskatologiese godsdienstigheid en hiperboliese opsigtelike donker estetiek wanneer die woord "Gotiese" ter sprake kom. Met ander woorde, die Gotiese roep dadelik Eurosentriese en kwasi-Eurosentriese beelde op. Dit maak heeltemal sin wanneer 'n mens in ag neem dat dit waarskynliker is dat Gotiese ontvanklikheid en kuns ontstaan, en

ontstaan het, in koue noordelike Streke met middeleeuse erfenisse as in sonnige suidelike streke. Nietemin is daar suidelike Gotiese literatuur en het skrywers soos Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy en William Faulkner meer psigologies en sosiaal gewelddadige Gotiese werke geskryf as hul Europese eweknieë. My doel in hierdie artikel is om die Suidelike Gotiese literatuur van die VSA in verband met belangrike Suider-Afrika tekste te verken ten einde te omskryf hoe 'n Suider-Afrika Gotiese literatuur moontlik kan lyk. Wat ek ontdek is dat die Gotiese nie slegs 'n fetisjisering van die makabere en groteske, sosiale of estetiese, is nie; maar ook die fantastiese en verhewe behels wat dikwels oorgedra word deur middel van 'n wrang selfrefleksiwiteit met betrekking tot tyd en sterflikheid. Die Gotiese, as 'n vorm van doodsvrees, hou sonder uitsondering verband met tyd en tydloosheid – verskillende tydskele wat menslike bewustheid relativeer. Ek wil die erkenning en omskrywing van Suider-Afrika Gotiese literatuur gebruik om iets meer algemeen te sê oor die Gotiese in die postkoloniale en die postkoloniale in die Gotiese. My argument is tweevoudig: (1) dat Suider-Afrika Gotiese literatuur, ongeag die feit dat dit onderontwikkel is, iets weergee van die transhistoriese verbeelding wat oor die algemeen onmisbaar is in die postkoloniale en (2) dat andersheid deur hierdie Gotiese benader word. Dus poog ek in hierdie referaat om die mitevormende in Suider-Afrika tekste, wat dikwels net deur middel van die materialistiese ontleed is, te herstel en om dan daardie mitevorming terug in die sosiohistoriese en literêr-kritiese konteks te lees.

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The Gothic is a genre with which we are all familiar from its numerous European examples and dissemination via popular culture; we might regard it as the dark underbelly of culture in its characteristic concern with suffering and the repressed. This is apparent in the origin of the term “Goth” which derives from the name of the Germanic tribes invading Eastern and Western Europe between the third and fifth centuries and signifies the uncivilised, barbarian or ignorant (*OED*). For this very reason, that it is primarily concerned with suffering, repression and dark aesthetics, the Gothic is something of an embarrassment despite its being well known. Moreover, “barbarian” is the onomatopoeic ancient Greek term for the unintelligible “stammering” of the foreign, strange and uncouth, suggesting xenophobia, that cultures have often defined themselves in hierarchical superiority to others (*OED & Online Etymological Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com>). This coy ignoring of that which we would rather not acknowledge but which subtly defines us appears to be no less true of southern African culture, literature and its local reception than of the baroque European fantasies that dominate our understanding of the term Gothic. I argue that the Gothic has been prevalent in southern African literature, for what other genre could better convey the eldritch horrors of imperialism and apartheid and their aftermath? Starting with the *plaasroman*, particularly in *The Story of an African Farm* with its morbidly tragic ending, this tradition has been inherited by writers such as William Plomer,

Doris Lessing, J.M. Coetzee, Mike Nicol, Karel Schoeman, Etienne van Heerden, Anne Landsman, Damon Galgut, K. Sello Duiker, Dambudzo Marechera, Mia Couto, Bessie Head and Zakes Mda, amongst others. The Gothic is apparent in the deserted landscapes, alienated individuals, physical and/or psychic suffering and the aesthetics of violence and horror in texts by these writers. Yet the Gothic has not been critically explored in relation to this tradition, and a distinct embarrassment lurks around the mere mention of the term, apparently because it appears all too obviously aesthetic and not political or committed enough. Tony Morphet, for instance, argues against Mike Nicol's mythic Gothicism in *Horseman*, saying that "Ruritania – the Gothic world of imaginative fantasy ... is a world which has been specially constructed to display the chosen figure, Daupus. The aim was to find a way to evoke the spirit and the power of unmediated violence – the effect is sadly close to melodrama ... [a] sort of level sense is what is missing from *Horseman*" (Morphet 1997: 4-5). I want to suggest that this distaste for the dark, the popular, the melodramatic has resulted in an art and a criticism that takes itself rather seriously.

Having established that the Gothic is apparent in southern African literature, an analysis of the Gothic generally is required. I want to start by baldly stating that culture, especially "high art" culture, is dark. Because cultures of most kinds are so influenced by the archaic necessity of the "catharsis" of "demons", either momentary events or longer-term psychological traumas, as the natural world was a terrifying place for the naked monkey to live, it is often dark. Picasso said that the tribal creation of art is about exorcism. Gothic darkness is therefore ever-present in culture on the creation side, but it is also apparent in reception: audiences thrill to the sensational, terrifying, exciting, supernatural, bizarre. The darkness in culture in terms of both creation and reception assures the, ironically, somewhat spectral survival of the Gothic.

So what is the Gothic? Well, in a nutshell, it is a cultural form of thanatophilia, the love of death and the opposite of eros and biophilia, the irrational urge to cripple and/or extinguish life, that was named as a central human desire and motivator by Freud, but which was strangely unexplored by him. In Greek mythology, Thanatos, son of Nyx (goddess of the night) and the brother of Hypnos (sleep), supposedly resided in the lower world and was the personification of death. According to Freud's hypothesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the instincts of life, which are self-preservation and sex, are in conflict with the death instinct, the drive towards extinction and undifferentiation, which is more powerful than the pleasure principle, and explains the "repetition automatism" whereby sufferers mechanically repeat traumas. Thanatophilia in the Gothic typically manifests as the return of the repressed, the manifestation of repressed anxieties, Derrida's hauntology. For Derrida, the past never disappears but is always revenant, reappears, so as to stretch the present into the past and future: "Without this non-

contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who *are not there*, of those who are no longer or who are not yet *present and living*, what sense would there be to ask the questions “where?” “where tomorrow?” “whither?” (Derrida 1994: xix). To return to Freud, thanatophilia relativises the present moment; mortality haunts the present. In other words, there is no such thing as anachronism; the present is always bearing the past.

Edgar Allan Poe, one of the masters of Gothic fiction, called this thanatophilia the “perverse” by which he meant the desire of all beings to return to God. In *Eureka* we find Poe anticipated a “big bang” scientific theory prior to the scientists: our universe has spun from unity to diversity, that all of creation has been thrown into the unnatural condition of multi-form particulars. But Poe’s description is decidedly oriented to his own spirituality; for example, he states that all spiritual and material manifestations of the universe are but individuations emanating from the unity of the Godhead, and that these spiritual and material individuations “perversely” long for, and eventually return to, that divine unity, which Poe believed to be the “natural” condition of the universe. Upon reunification, God recreates the universe in another horrendous explosion, initiating the next expansion sequence. Poe called this compression and expansion of the universe the heartbeat of God. Poe believed that only in dissolution, in death, can the longing for unity imprinted on all matter and spirit be satisfied. Poe’s belief in the perverse caused him to transcend traditional morality, instead searching out this radical impulse, which he believed ruled the dark side of human behaviour.

So thanatophilia in the Gothic, and particularly in the fiction of Poe, issues in the characteristic return of the repressed in the guise of the living dead, the dead in life, phantoms, ghosts, spiritualism, vampires and other undead; in other words, with time and cyclicity. This Gothic thanatophilia allows us to experience death in a virtual form so that we are able to deal with thanatophobia via a kind of catharsis. Accepting the omnipotence of time, we are able to experience extinction, at least vicariously, and feel our mortality in all its devastating somatic force and socio-historical ramifications. In this sense the gothic is an offshoot of the death cults that arguably gave birth to Judeo-Christianity, concerned as these monotheisms are with death and resurrection. We might ask: what is the relevance of this thanatophilic culture to southern Africa? What is the southern African Gothic? What happens to the Gothic in the postcolonial? The argument that I want to make is twofold; that southern African Gothicism, similarly to its European and local forebears, is obsessed with time, indeed conveys something of the transhistorical imagination that is vital to postcolonialism generally, and secondly that this fascination with time allows an approach to alterity. One might also make the tangential point that the Gothic may not

be entirely inappropriate to Africa, given the traditional religion of ancestral worship on the continent.

Shear makes the point that the postcolonial Gothic goes at least as far back as insecurities about empire, landscape, race and exotic others in European literature:

One particularity actuated by the literary meiosis of the genre is the formulation of a distinct postcolonial Gothic. Again, the Gothic proved translatable; the literature of terror found a ready home amidst the subtext of European colonialism. Eventually, the traditional terrors that had captivated the British imagination gave way to a new locus of anxiety that played upon fears over the weakening Empire.

(Shear 2006: 74)

Shear cites Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* and H. Rider Haggard's *She* as the classic texts in this colonial Gothic, though I would add that Gothic themes of violence, domination, submission and haunting spectralities are present in a great deal of colonial literature. Postcolonialism has been at pains to point out that even apparently metropolitan texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Mansfield Park* have been haunted by colonial others. However, the precursor to the postcolonial Gothic is to be found not only in European forms but also in the Southern Gothic. The Southern Gothic was clearly a transculturation of the European Gothic in the fiction of Poe, Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner and Cormac McCarthy, and tended to be more psychologically and socially violent than its European counterpart. The Southern Gothic is perhaps most visually summarised by Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic*. This painting adapts Renaissance detail and Victorian portraiture to the American hinterland of Iowa, taking the Gothic architecture of the house, the blank expression on the faces of the farmer and his unmarried daughter (or is it his wife or another relative?), the gloomy colours, puritan clothes and the three-pronged pitchfork and making them resonate within a late colonial American setting during the time of the depression (the painting was first exhibited in 1930). There is a sense of moral/religious fundamentalism in this painting, a steely settler stoicism conveyed by the staring gaze of the characters, a sense of threat in the farmer's pose with the pitchfork blocking access to his female companion. Here European Gothic is put into a context of patriarchal colonialism, social violence, stoical repression and historical specificity, ridding it of its more ethereal aspects and transculturating it into a meditation on the relationship between suffering and context. This picture is archetypal for the Southern Gothic.

Postcolonial artists have taken this Southern Gothic and further transculturated it into their own contexts and meanings. The poetry of Derek Walcott, Mongane Wally Serote and Dambudzo Marechera demonstrates how the Gothic can be used to show the darker side of contemporary

societies, transculturating the classic European Gothic themes of thanatophilia (death, the afterlife, evil and haunting). Thanatophilia becomes politically trenchant when its (evil) agents are not supernaturally ethereal. Postcolonial writing is often full of haunting after-images of colonial brutality as in the Atlantic ghost ships of Walcott's "Shabine Encounters the Middle Passage" (Walcott 1992: 112), Marechera's "Dead Guerillas Displayed to School Children" (Marechera 1992: 70), Serote's "City Johannesburg" (Serote 1972: 4-5), but it is also replete with the postcolonial realities of vampiric dictators sucking the blood of their nations, in Marechera's "Comrade Dracula Joins the Revolution: A Wedding of Minds?" (Marechera 1992: 191) for instance, as well as AIDS, poverty and psychosocial disease.

However, it would be a mistake to associate the postcolonial Gothic only with socio-political issues and socio-historical specificity. A classic example of the wider metaphysical themes apparent in the postcolonial Gothic would be the influence of Faulkner upon Walcott. What we find in Walcott's poetry, and indeed the writing of many other postcolonialists, most especially Márquez and Morrison, is the imagery of suspension, stranding, frozen decay, moments outside of time, lostness, in-betweenness, interstitiality, all located within socio-historical specificity. It is my contention that this imagery of suspension is not only the imagery of postcolonial diasporic hybrid identity, but that it is also the Gothic imagery of timelessness, the imagery of kingdoms rising and falling, all relativised by the monstrous master time which calls all beings and manifestations to death. What identity results from a sense of death and change? This identity is hybrid and suspended, never finalised. The postcolonial Gothic is not only historically located, but also transhistorical, relativising our socio-historical location by showing us the transience of all human kingdoms and empires, and thus providing glimpses of the transpersonal and enduring which can have affective ethical effects. Moreover, it is also relativising in the sense of opening the self up to the other and even to the otherness of the self. So the postcolonial Gothic is an aesthetic that links the psychological to the socio-historical and political in a peculiarly direct manner: art's catharsis is both personal and political because the ghosts of history are linked to self and other. Postcolonialism in its most utopian aspect then is well aware of the cliché that kingdoms rise and fall; indeed, its task is to explore the full profundity of that cliché and it perhaps does so most completely via the Gothic transhistorical. There are perhaps some precedents for postcolonialism's transhistorical sense of time. Eliade called the sense of sacred time that constitutes human religion *illud tempus*, Latin for "that time" or "time of origins" (Eliade 1959: 80). Bloch and Febvre's *longue durée* prioritised long-term historical structures over events. Heidegger's *Being and Time* argued that conscious being is determined by a sense of

temporality. But postcolonialism's transhistorical sweep uniquely politicises time in that it shows that time is the great leveller of injustice.

Angela Carter's short story collection *Black Venus* seems to me in many ways the quintessential postcolonial Gothic text despite, indeed perhaps because, it was written by a white Englishwoman. Carter made the point in her "Afterword to *Fireworks*" (1974) that her aim was to "deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious – mirrors; the externalised self; forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects", which is why she was influenced by the Gothic tales of Poe and Hoffman:

The Gothic tradition in which Poe writes grandly ignores the value systems of our institutions; it deals entirely with the profane. Its great themes are incest and cannibalism. Character and events are exaggerated beyond reality, to become symbols, ideas, passions. Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural – and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the world as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function – that of provoking unease.

(Carter 1996b: Appendix to *Burning Your Boats*)

This quasi-Freudian "incest and cannibalism" take on the Gothic would lead one to imagine that her work was psychoanalytical, apolitical and ahistorical in nature, and there is an element of that in this postcolonial version of the Gothic which does take a psychological and transhistorical view and is imbued with Carter's characteristic kodacolor imagery. However, this transhistorical psychology is always situated within a particular socio-historical context in Carter, and hence it has a sharp political bite. Carter is able to combine an overupholstered symbolism with a sardonic Cockney humour in her best fictions, the dry sardonicism serving to leaven the otherwise indigestibly rich imagery.

In other words, Gothicism's obsession with death, just like postcolonialism's obsession with the transience of empires, casts a dark light onto the socio-historical present, relativising and defamiliarising it and thus prompting the desire for freedom in its subjects and/or readers. Whilst the Gothic can be the most baroque, stentorian and po-facedly serious of genres, there is also an element of burlesque about it, an element of self-satire that prompts self-reflexive freedom. Carter suggests this in her biographical story of the young life of Edgar Allan Poe who has revelations of the impermanence of human structures whilst watching his mother play Ophelia in their travelling theatre's performance of *Hamlet*:

Having, at an impressionable age, seen with his own eyes the nature of the mystery of the castle – that all its horrors are so much painted cardboard and yet they terrify you ... the round-eyed baby saw that Ophelia could, if necessary, die twice nightly ... but up she would pop at curtain-call having shaken the dust off her graveclothes and touched up her eye make-up, to

curtsy with the rest of the resurrected immortals, all of whom, even Prince Hamlet himself, turned out, in the end, to be just as undead as she.

(*BV*: 38)¹

Taking this awareness that art is about a self-conscious relativising and defamiliarising of the present to create that transhistorical consciousness that promotes freedom and the quest for freedom against oppressive regimes, Carter shows how art is vital in the colony. This is apparent in the story “Our Lady of the Massacre”, which is a reverse Pocahontas story featuring a white prostitute who rediscovers her dignity when she “goes native” with the Algonquin tribe in seventeenth-century Virginia. The contrast between the hypocritical violent materialism of the settler culture and the peaceful “Indian” communalism makes her return to English culture impossible; she is an exile forever having tasted an authentic non-imperialist culture. This was to be one of Carter’s primary themes, the permanent exile of the feminine and authentic from colonial imperialist culture. Indeed, whilst Gothicism can be violently macho, particularly in narratives of violence and vampirism, it can also be darkly feminine, dwelling in cobwebbed feyness, the gently illusory, the plangent madness of subtle hauntings, for instance. Gothicism has the potential to balance the masculine and feminine in its androgynous otherworldliness, something that Carter was at pains to emphasise.

The eponymous title story of *Black Venus* develops this gendered theme through Jeanne Duval, the “Venus noire” mistress of Baudelaire, whose origins are as shady as her skin is dusky. Carter’s postcolonial satire is nowhere more biting than in her critique of imperial indifference towards its territories and subjects: “Where she came from is a problem; books suggest Mauritius, in the Indian ocean, or Santo Domingo, in the Caribbean, take your pick of two different sides of the world. (Her *pays d’origine* of less importance than it would have been had she been a wine)” (*BV*: 7). Indeed, the role of women as the primary other has been instrumental in the formation of postcolonialism, given that women were regularly sidelined in the quest for independent sovereignty. “Black Venus” shows us how the black woman is othered within imperial culture, being reduced to a subaltern sexual object without a voice, without a say in the role she is expected to play. Her role is simply to be the black/blank screen upon which the cynical urban sophisticate, Baudelaire, projects his exoticist fantasies of her as a muse:

[N]evertheless, she will sometimes lob the butt of her cheroot in the fire and be persuaded to take off her clothes and dance for Daddy who, she will grudgingly admit when pressed, is a good Daddy, buys her pretties, allocates

1. *BV* refers to *Black Venus* (Carter 1996a) here and in all subsequent references.

her the occasional lump of hashish, keeps her off the streets This dance, which he wanted her to perform so much and had especially devised for her, consisted of a series of voluptuous poses one following another; private-room-in-a-bordello stuff but tasteful, he preferred her to undulate rhythmically rather than jump about and shake a leg. He liked her to put on all her bangles and beads when she did her dance, she dressed up in a set of clanking jewellery he'd given her, paste, nothing she could sell or she'd have sold it. Meanwhile, she hummed a Creole melody, she liked the ones with ribald words about what the shoemaker's wife did at Mardi Gras or the size of some fisherman's legendary tool but Daddy paid no attention to what song his siren sang, he fixed his quick, bright, dark eyes upon her decorated skin as if, sucker, authentically entranced Although his regard made her luminous, his shadow made her blacker than she was, his shadow would eclipse her entirely.

(BV: 3-4)

Like Sylvia Plath's daddy, Baudelaire is a dominating sadistic patriarch who determines exactly how his exotic ebony muse should entertain him; indeed, he does not care "what song his siren sang" underneath her "decorated skin". This section of the story has clearly been inspired by Baudelaire's "Les Bijoux" from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (translated rather well by Roy Campbell amongst many others) in which the emasculated narrator watches entranced by the performance of his animalised "tiger" and "swan" as she dances naked but for her "sonorous jewels" ("bijoux sonores"); of course, he is really entranced by his exotic projections, by his own shadow. As Carter notes in her seminal study of the Marquis de Sade, *The Sadeian Woman*, "[w]here desire is a function of the act rather than the act a function of desire, desire loses its troubling otherness; it ceases to be a movement outwards from the self" (Carter 2000: 146). This animalising/naturalising exotic projection is repeated in "Le Serpent qui Danse" and developed in "Parfum Exotique" in which the lover is a metonymy for a beach island idyll in a bohemian version of a Club Med holiday (according to Carter's endnote the other "Black Venus" poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* include "La Chevelure", "Le Chat", "Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne" and "Sed non Satiata").

So Carter's stories are not only a critique of a sycophantic respect for the patriarchal European literary canon, not only a critique of the empty sophistry of modernism which is solely interested in selfish affect, not only a critique of the patriarchal overdetermination of the feminine as merely fleshy entertainment but also a critique of the colonial triple inscription of the black feminine as exotic other. The postcolonial must peel off these three palimpsestic skins in order for woman to be released from imperial bondage and restored to individuation within history. Carter's linguistic trope for this unpeeling is the oxymoronic dialectic of "Black" and "Venus" which pressurises the Eurocentric associations of each term and invokes the spectre of "The Hottentot Venus", Saartjie Baartman, who, like Duval, was

also historically obliterated by the Euromasculinist voice. This involves the transculturation of the colonial Gothic; Jeanne Duval must be freed from enclosure in the “nocturnal vault” (“Je t’adore à l’égal de la voûte nocturne”) of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in order to have a new, different life. When Baudelaire dies she returns to her native Martinique where she dispenses “to the most privileged of the colonial administration, at a not excessive price, the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis” (BV: 13-14). She has decided that there is indeed no “distinction ... between dancing naked in front of *one* man who paid and dancing naked in front of a group of men who paid” (BV: 4) and is thus able to wrest some degree of freedom from her colonial imprisonment.

Carter’s story uses the exoticist appropriation of the black woman by the European poet to relativise the canon and its imperial code. Jeanne Duval is

[r]obbed of the bronze gateway of Benin; of the iron beasts of the Amazons of the court of the King of Dahomey; of the esoteric wisdom of the great university of Timbuktu Of those savannahs where men wrestle with leopards she knew not one jot. The splendid continent to which her skin allied her had been excised from her memory. She had been deprived of history, she was the pure child of the colony. The colony – white, imperious – had fathered her.

(BV: 8)

So the postcolonial Gothic has to invent a new kind of history and sense of time that has a more significant role for the black woman than a mere exotic supplement and it does this by exploring the otherness that colonialism created, particularly female otherness. Carter’s utilisation of the Gothic here conjoins the socio-historically specific and political with the mythopoeic.

It seems to me that one South African text that utilises and develops the Gothic mode in just such an exploration of alterity is Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), though there is a long history of the Gothic in South African literature that might include Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* and Plomer’s *Turbott Wolfe* as classic examples. This novel, as with so many of Coetzee’s works, was received by South African audiences and critics as quixotically, even irresponsibly, allegorical and abstract within the flammable context of late apartheid. Indeed, I am tempted to go so far as to suggest that the realist and historical materialist lenses to which such works were submitted could only result in these kinds of ethically prescriptive readings. The text refuses the appropriation of the other, the indigenous “barbarians”, by Empire, showing instead their inaccessibility to imperial discourse. This inaccessibility is dramatised by the attempts of a bureaucrat in the imperial administration, a certain frontier magistrate, to ameliorate the suffering inflicted by Empire upon the “barbarians”. Coetzee’s Gothic is a heady mix of a philosophical meditation on suffering, the suffering inflicted

by Modernity and Empire, and of the possibilities for opposition to and escape from this system and the suffering it inflicts. Our magistrate discovers that his conscience is tortured by complicity with tyranny:

Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll, whom with his tapering fingernails, his mauve handkerchiefs, his slender feet and soft shoes I keep imagining back in the capital he is so obviously impatient for, murmuring to his friends in theatre corridors between the acts. (On the other hand, who am I to assert my distance from him? I drink with him, I eat with him, I show him the sights, I afford him every assistance as his letter of commission requests, and more. The Empire does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duty.)

(W: 6)²

To my mind this is one of the best examples of the Gothic in full flight in southern African literature for the truth of pain that the magistrate protagonist discovers is an abject one. Moreover, although he initially rejects the sophistry of the Dracula-like dandyish appearance of the bearer of that truth, he admits his complicity with the colonel. Here we have a typically Gothic psychological self-reflexivity: one can reject the dark truth, one can reject the dark appearance of that truth, but if one does one is unlikely to own the darkness and complicities within oneself and hence that darkness is liable to come knocking repeatedly. To put this in Freudian and Kristevan terms, if we deny the death instinct then any threat or displeasure will be experienced as a fundamental attack, forcing us back into an infantile paranoid-schizoid defensiveness. Thus the magistrate, despite momentarily recognising his own complicity in this situation, refuses to accept either an external threat or his own darkness, dismissing them as hysteria (echoing the critique of Freud):

Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequences of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe.

(W: 8)

Our sceptical modern doubting Thomas undoubtedly has a point about “white” paranoia here, but he is echoing his prior rejection of art as

2. W refers to *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Coetzee 1980) here and in all subsequent references.

catharsis, and denying his own complicity with Empire. Because he rejects the lesson of humility, even abjection, that culture could teach him if he were less empiricist, less in denial, he is condemned to learn this lesson in everyday life via the barbarian girl he takes to. In time he comes to abject himself before her in the biblical ritual of washing her feet (*W*: 28), attempting to make reparation for his denied guilt which will also prompt his quixotic rebellion against the empire and its stooges.

Here we see the irony of the Gothic. At once profound yet hysterical in its melodrama, it nevertheless contains cathartic potential for those darker aspects of life and death that cannot be ignored. If these aspects are ignored, they tend not to disappear but to boomerang. The magistrate has to learn that complicity is not a sustainable position, that there is incommensurability and choice and responsibility in life, that “liberal” fence-sitting is only appropriate for so long in certain situations. He has to learn that he has tried to keep death and the fear of death at a distance via avoidance and distraction. Indeed, death-avoidance or thanatophobia, whether literal in the sense of survival strategies, or ideological in the sense of immortality strategies, is life-defining. Taking some cognisance of his and responsibility for his own behaviour, he attempts to promulgate a defence for the barbarians, but it is gestural, and again he brackets his complicity and hypocrisy in the usual Gothic self-ironising manner:

In the past I have encouraged commerce but forbidden payment in money. I have also tried to keep the taverns closed to them. Above all I do not want to see a parasite settlement grow up on the fringes of the town populated with beggars and vagrants enslaved to strong drink. It always pained me in the old days to see these people fall victim to the guile of shopkeepers, exchanging their goods for trinkets, lying drunk in the gutter, and confirming thereby the settlers’ litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid. Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration. (I say this who now keep a barbarian girl for my bed!)

(*W*: 38)

Keeping the barbarian girl for his bed drives him toward a recognition of the otherness of the other, a recognition that his distance from the other is not something he needs to overcome via violence:

But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!

(*W*: 43)

This then inevitably leads him from the woman to the land and its denizens, to a sense of how transient his Empire is:

We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire – our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all. We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients.

(W: 51)

Here we see the transhistorical in the grand sweep of history which will surely destroy this "Empire", so much flotsam and jetsam on time's tide; the barbarian perspective has been proved correct because it is an ecological perspective outside of human constructions of time: "There are old folk alive among them who remember their parents telling them about this oasis as it once was: a well-shaded place by the side of the lake with plenty of grazing even in winter. That is how they still talk about it, perhaps how they still *see* it, as though not one spadeful of earth had been turned or one brick laid on top of another" (W: 51). The barbarians know that the colonisers are poisoning the lake, and that their crops must inevitably wither, causing them to leave; in other words, the barbarian perspective is one close to a trans-historical geological time. Indeed, the transhistorical is often an ecological sense of time that is cyclical and repetitive rather than linear and relates to the death, rebirth and undead motifs of Gothicism.

Coetzee has long evinced a fascination with "an intuition of an alternative time, a time cutting through the quotidian" (Coetzee 1992: 198) which is particularly apparent in an article titled "Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka's 'The Burrow' (1981) (Coetzee 1992: 210-232)". What Coetzee finds in Kafka's story is an iterative cyclical time that syncopates the "time conventions of fictional realism (which rest on a Newtonian metaphysics) but also with the conception embedded in ... the tense-system of his language" (p. 328). However, these cyclical repetitions become entropic when there is "the inability to learn from past failure [which] is a reflection of the fact that the iterations are not ordered: none of them being earlier in time than any other, no iteration encompasses a memory of an earlier one" (p. 218). A postcolonial transhistorical time is precisely that time that has a memory, that is learning from past failure, that is syncopating linear realism but not falling into iterative historical repetition that is outside imperialism. The transhistorical and the transnational suggest escape, transcendence, but also interconnection. The transhistorical imagination attempts to escape linear clock time, and in so doing ranges across historical time periods engaging in comparison, evaluation and creation.

Coetzee seems to be suggesting that the awareness of otherness leads towards a sense of the precise history of the present and thence a sense of

the transhistorical, and finally to responsibility in the now. The barbarian is akin to Spivak's "subaltern", a transhistorical space/time outside of modernity and thus appropriately conveyed by Gothic elements and imagery:

What has made it impossible to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation.

(W: 133)

In other words, death and the sense of mortality and change cast a dark light onto the human world, a dark light that relativises the historical time of Empire and the "images of disaster". Empire needs to make people fearful enough to believe in that historical time. We should remember here that the magistrate is incarcerated and tortured for his attempts to care for the barbarians, and fears for his life. Coetzee's text may appear to indulge in the Gothic depiction of disgust and horror that fetishises violence, that is unable to tear its eyes away from the scene of abjection, but in fact the descriptions of violence are short and restrained in order to move the reader away from such fetishisation and towards a consciousness of death. Moreover, Coetzee, to the extent that he utilises a Kristevan abjection, is true to Kristeva's sense in *The Powers of Horror* that abjection is sublime in the sense of being both a crushing annihilation and also a necromantic zone of strange newness, infantile abundance in a reminiscence of the infant's unity with the mother in the pre-Oedipal stage. Death is an occult zone that constitutes a perpetual challenge to culture and appropriation, for all we know of death is the fear and dark loss it leaves behind. Death and loss can be rationalised, but that does not erase the experience of it, nor temper the feeling. Death is precisely that which cannot be understood, that which is not amenable to rational analysis. Thus whilst death is often used expediently by people, it remains beyond the reach of expediencies; it is an unanswerable question, and our attempts to understand it are mere rhetoric.

Thus Coetzee suggests that cultural understandings of death reveal those cultures most starkly, but also that death remains impervious to appropriations, and embodies a perpetual newness and otherness. The Magistrate protagonist wanted to live in this transhistorical space/time of newness and otherness, he wanted to die to his old self, but was only partly able to do so because of his complicity with the Empire which continues to reign. So it is not only that the Gothic imagery of Empire torturers and bureaucrats leads

him to a transhistorical anti-imperialism, but the Gothic is also his self-reflexive realisation of his complicity with this imperialism. "I think: 'I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?'" (W: 154)

However, having cited this one example of a particularly sophisticated self-reflexive Gothicism in South African literature, it has to be said that this is a fairly isolated example. Gothicism, horror, terror abound in southern African writing, but little of it is fully self-reflexive in the way that Coetzee's text is. Moreover, for all of its ethical commitment and linguistic genius, Coetzee's text remains terse, spare and clipped; this is a minimalist Gothicism, arguably appropriate to a southern African context. Thus, despite this example, we have not really seen a Gothicism which ridicules itself; there is little of vaudeville in this literature. That the element of self-reflexive ridicule can be central to the Gothic is evident in Baudelaire's comments on Poe: "The ardour with which he throws himself into the grotesque for the love of the grotesque, and into the horrible for the love of the horrible, is clear proof of the sincerity of his work, and the inner harmony between the man and the poet" (W: 186), and for many commentators this is the crucial element of the Gothic. Donald, for instance, comments that

[l]ike the sublime, the Gothic attempts to provoke awe and terror. Like the uncanny, its principal themes are death and the supernatural: this may be one way in which it provides a bridge between Burke and Freud. What the Gothic *adds* – especially through the absurdity and excess of its paraphernalia – is a new relationship to representation. By heightening the artificiality of its supernatural elements, claims David Morris, the Gothic sublime ... foreshadows Freud's view that terror does not depend on a belief in the reality of what frightens us ... [the Gothic] employs representation as a means of expressing and of evoking what cannot be represented (in this case, the materials of the unconscious).

(Donald 1989: 241)

The Gothic is a form or genre which can be exoticist in its desire, which sometimes makes a camp display of its frisson at the transgressive, and therefore can easily become a parody of itself and expose its own fictionality. The self-deprecating melodrama and metafictionality of the Gothic can be seen as a characteristically modern anti-allegorical artistic mode, helping to animate the anti-allegorical in the works of the romantics, symbolists, decadents, modernists and postmodernists. The Gothic points beyond itself to the chance, the uncanny, irrational, horrific and sublime in modern life; the other which never fully disappears despite the best attempts of modern empirical rationality and social engineering. In this sense, the

Gothic is a genre much suited to southern Africa, given southern Africa's history of social engineering. The Gothic, especially in the form of Gothic imagery, has helped to expose that which social engineering attempted to sweep under its carpet: both the violence of its projects and the various individuals and groups who were othered by and within these projects. In other words, the Gothic is a classic route, an abject route I might add, towards the other. The other is invariably inhabited by imagery of sexuality, madness, death, race, violence, terror and sublimity when this kind of abject route towards it is taken.

So one might argue, against Morphet, that southern African Gothic is not that melodramatic after all. Indeed, the relative lack of melodrama in the southern African Gothic indicates a number of revealing things about this region, its literature and its current situation within the postcolonial. Firstly, it suggests the enduring legacy of brutal oppression which did not allow for cultural playfulness but insisted on a sternly serious commitment to correct values and practices (of course I am not necessarily arguing against all those values and practices). Secondly, the opprobrium evident towards melodramatic elements in the Gothic implies a certain naivety about culture in general, and this genre in particular; it is my sense that culture is often crepuscular for cathartic effect, appeals to desire in all its forms, both elevated and crass, and thus includes the popular. Behind this condemnation of the popular we might glimpse forms of religious essentialism and a legacy of high-culture imperialism. Finally, in the condemnation of the Gothic and melodramatic we find another survival of empire, a certain Euro empiricism which can be seen as the philosophical cornerstone of modernity: only the overtly scientifically measurable is useful and valuable whilst the mythical, poetic, fantastic are tawdry baubles to be cast aside. So the only Draco to be found in southern African literature is the draconian. As Tolkien said, "I yearn for dragons". These are our ghosts, and they continue their spectral haunting. Perhaps only a harsh southern African Gothic can show us how long these ghosts linger and how much healing is required? Derek Walcott refers to such haunting legacies as "The leprosy of empire" in his poem "Ruins of a Great House" (Walcott 1992: 18); Gothicism manifests these legacies and, to this extent, is required to heal them. Thus this southern African Gothic is creative and innovative in its own right; it has reinvigorated the Western form and given it a new socio-historical depth and seriousness and a potent analytical purchase that the form might not otherwise have. In particular, the southern African Gothic has been a powerful form for the treatment of trauma and the charting of new experimental postcolonial directions. What we have discovered is that the embarrassing Gothic is actually quite central to our own story; for all of its savagery and masks we even quite like the Gothic. Indeed, we might even like it best when it is in that most scabrous of self-deprecating modes that could not exactly be called funny. Without an understanding of our own

savagery and the sense of mortality that the gothic promotes our ghosts continue to haunt us.

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