

The Gothic: Reinventing the Past

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I have chosen today not to talk about the ‘original Gothic’, whatever that might be, but rather about some contemporary texts which again conjure up the spirit of the Gothic in one form or the other. What underlies my talk is the idea that the Gothic, whatever else it may be, is a ‘reinvention’ or reconstruction of history, a version of history told along ‘different’ lines, perhaps a series of culturally motivated distortions – although, of course, to speak of ‘distortions’ at all is to suppose that there is an ‘authentic’, true version of history; and this is what Gothic, in many of its guises, comes to contest.

A story by the great contemporary writer Russell Hoban called ‘The Ghost Horse of Genghis Khan’ begins, as all good ghost stories must, in a Gothic study:

There were shadowy places and lamplit places in the study. There were maps on the wall. There was a human skeleton that made gentle clacking sounds when you moved it. There were three pendulum clocks that struck the hours at different times when they were running. Now they were stopped at different times. There was a model of a Portuguese fishing boat, there was a stuffed barn owl. There were rocks and seashells from many places and a stone from a Crusader fort in Galilee with chisel marks on it.¹

This realm, however, a realm of the antiquarian, is unable to sustain itself in isolation. It overflows, it crumbles and buckles before a superflux of meaning. As John, the young protagonist of the story, reads a further story – one that his father has been writing and has left

unfinished in the typewriter - his father lies unconscious in hospital. Somehow John finds him both dreaming and carrying on with the writing of this story, which is a history of how Genghis Khan was saved from death by a ghost horse. There is a sense in which this ghost horse invades the world of modernity, represented in the hospital, the fibrillators and endotracheal tubes, asserting a connection through history that threatens to make a mockery of the 'maps on the wall'.

Gothic has always had to do with disruptions of scale and perspective, with a terrain that we, again following Hoban, might refer to as 'the moment under the moment'. No point on the map or in time is exactly where or what it seems; on the contrary, it opens into other spaces and times, and it does not even do that in a stable fashion, what might have been an opening last night into another world may now be closed, absent, terrifying in the quality of its unyieldingness.

Another way of putting this approach would be by asking what has happened in recent years to the Gothic castle. We can find traces of its presence in 'The Ghost Horse of Genghis Khan', in, for example, a curious dialogue that takes place in the story. John's mind 'was much older than the boy', we are told; 'it was as ancient as the stars, it remembered all sorts of things that John had never known' (p. 75). Just so, the traditional Gothic castle embodies a past that goes back behind – or beneath – the 'moment' of the subject, that asserts a different kind of continuity, even if it is one that can be known only under the sign of the secret, only in the 'shadows' of the darkened study, or in 'the shadows and the long night and the herds of the dead' (p. 77).

To take another example: 'last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'; 'if', muses Mike, the first-person narrator of Stephen King's *Bag of Bones*, 'there is any more beautiful and haunting first line in English fiction, I've never read it'². This, as one would expect from King, is a Gothic book which plays more on the haunting and the ghostly than on the beautiful; but it can also be seen as energised by a curious relation to the question of history, and especially the relation between history and naming. Perhaps, after all, this is in any case the source of the haunting – the haunting *in Rebecca*, and the way in which *Rebecca* haunts *Bag of Bones*, manifests itself in dream, supplies its 'proper name' and yet perforce withholds it in favour of other names.

But although Mike might wake up from the recurrent nightmares which have plagued him

since the death of his wife with the line from du Maurier in his mind,

I didn't dream of Manderley, of course, but of Sara Laughs, which Jo sometimes called 'the hideout'. A fair enough description, I guess, for a place so far up in the western Maine woods that it's not really even in a town at all, but in an unincorporated area designated on state maps as TR-90. (p. 46)

Sara Laughs is, in fact, a place, albeit a place which is not a place, that is 'unincorporated', perhaps incorporeal, certainly lacking definite proof of its own status. A place, furthermore, known only by a name that, initially at least, poses itself as a syntactical impossibility, as a sentence issuing from an unknown historical source, containing within itself the further naming, the encapsulation or incorporation, of an unknown person.

Or is this wildly Gothic house, in some sense, Sara herself? Certainly it is possible for such a sliding to occur: unable in his dream to get as far as the house, Mike finds himself in any case scared of 'her' reactions. 'Suppose Sara resents having been left so long alone? Suppose she's angry?' What all this constitutes will turn out to have been a sign: the very set of historical secrets supposedly long buried, secrets of violence and murder that come back to 'haunt' the present, is in fact already revealed in the ambiguity, the inexplicability of this naming, the entire novel is a long, slow revelation of the implications of the name.

But this historical space which is not clearly a historical space is organised not around the roads, paths, boundaries beloved of official map-makers; it is instead organised around a lake, a lake which has an equally confusing name, a lake called Dark Score. The territorialisation of Dark Score is, in a sense, meticulous:

You come to Dark Score this way: I-95 from Derry to Newport; Route 2 from Newport to Bethel (with a stop in Rumford, which used to stink like hell's front porch until the paper-driven economy pretty much ground to a halt during Reagan's second term; Route 5 from Bethel to Waterford. Then you take Route 68, the old County Road, across Castle View, through Motton (where downtown consists of a converted barn which sells videos, beer, and second-hand rifles), and then past the sign which reads TR-90 and the one reading GAME WARDEN IS BEST ASSISTANCE IN EMERGENCY DIAL 1-800-555-GAME OR *72 ON CELLULAR PHONE. To this, in spray paint, someone has added FUCK THE EAGLES. (p. 106)

The signs, one might say, are all there: signs that point us toward the lake, signs that warn us what to do in the event of emergency, signs that provide us with routes through the chaos that is the history of Dark Score Lake and its people, dark people with scores to settle, people living in shadows. We are confronted here with, as it were, a ‘familiar’ location, even if it rapidly and uncannily slides into its opposite, a location where ‘you’ might be at home. But it is also true that this is a description of a passage to death, to the final settling of the dark score of history, to a Gothic ‘state of emergency’ against which no warden can offer protection.

In ‘The Ghost Horse of Genghis Khan’, the antiquarianism of the study slides into the modernity of the hospital; in *Bag of Bones* the historical identity of the house and lake slip and slide through time. Iain Banks’ *Complicity*, a novel of the double and of the draining of identity, told in a mixture of first- and second-person narrative voices, offers a Gothic hotel as one of its central locations. We are introduced to it, as to Dark Scores, by a sign, a sign that’s ‘been there for years, ever since they opened the new road, and it says “Strome Ferry – no ferry”, and that just says it all’³. A sign, then, that is no sign, a sign that cancels itself in its very act of utterance, a sign that depicts, or indicates, a time that is no more, that belongs to a different regime, a different order of the past.

Just as the hotel itself seems to belong to the past, to a realm of rot and decay:

The ballroom smells damp. It is illuminated only by the light shining from the stairwell and the desk lamp on the old trestle table which holds the computer. Torn, bleached-looking curtains hang at the sides of the six tall window bays. My breath smokes in front of me and mists on the cold glass. All the panes are dirty and some are cracked. A couple have been replaced with hardboard. In two of the window bays there are buckets to catch drips but one of them has overflowed and caused a puddle to form around it. ... [It] is scattered with cheap wooden chairs, tables, rolls of ancient, mouldy-smelling carpets, a couple of old motorbikes and lots of bits of motorbikes standing or lying on oil-stained sheets ... (p. 137)

This description clearly poses itself as the provocation for an enquiry into the state of the historical subject. Somewhere here, as frequently in Banks as in the classic Gothic, the remnants of a feudal order remain to haunt the decay of the present, but here the faded curtains are matched by a new, barbaric invasion represented by the motorbikes and ‘what looks and smells like an industrial-standard deep-fat frier’.

It is as if the condition of the ballroom – as of the hotel in general – represents a frozen moment, a moment of incompatibility and conflict. In this context, the subject can gain no firm purchase on past or present; all that can be done is to ‘take up a position’, to insert oneself in one way or another into the contradictory matrix the room and the hotel represent. But the structure of the text goes further than this, and prevents the reader from knowing exactly who or what it is that is inhabiting – or perhaps being produced by, being given substance by - this haunted location. The passage above suggests a ‘first person’; but there is also a ‘second person’ at large in the hotel, perhaps occupying some other timescale, some other set of dimensions, moving on trajectories that never intersect. From this second-person perspective, for example, the ballroom looks the same yet also different: ‘The old motorbikes, tables, chairs and carpets ... look like forlorn toys in some long-neglected doll’s house’:

At one end of the dark corridor ... a door lies ajar. ... In the corner of the room the dumb waiter contains a selection of logs of various sizes, most of them still damp. You take the biggest of the logs, which is about the size of a man’s arm, and walk softly across the room to the bedroom door. You go through and stand listening to the rain and the wind, and – just audible – the noise of a man breathing slowly and rhythmically in the bed. You hold the log out in front of you as you walk towards the bed. (p. 177)

Complicity: what would it be like to be a readerly ‘you’ formed in the image of the hotel itself, to be an effect of one’s own predetermined history, to feel no compunction as the log comes down since all has already been staged as the consequence of a specific conjunction in this time and space, a time and space in which the shards and fragments that make up the past of the destroyed hotel prove impossible to hold together, where the psychoses that historical locations hold close to their heart detonate.

In Carlos Fuentes’ *Distant Relations*, the aristocratic Branly recalls his own past, his childhood and the Parc Monceau, an ambiguous space which, ‘though public, is the private domain of the nearby residents’. He recalls

his childhood in this magnificent place where an entire city’s secret aberration flowers and dies, blooms again, and is nourished in unexpected fantasy before becoming frozen in the paralysis of counterfeit ruins. In Monceau, eleven years before the Revolution, there were, oh, any number of follies – a Roman temple, a Chinese pagoda, fake feudal ruins, a Swiss dairy farm, and a Dutch windmill. The bourgeois mansions that flank five of the six sides of the park

are like Medusa eyes which petrified that final flash of desperate, dying aristocratic madness.⁴

Here there is an intertwining, through the repeating figure of the ruin, of life and death, of a life attempting to fulfil its destiny in a ‘desperate’ gesture which simultaneously condemns itself to a ‘frozen’ fate – similarly to Branly himself, whose long attempt throughout the novel to tell an incomprehensible story – incomprehensible because it cannot be recaptured from a past location – also figures as an attempt to recall a lost past.

This attempt to ‘recapture’ is also the attempt of Gothic – not to reconstruct a painstaking version of history, but rather to distil from that history an image, or a series of images; but here those images may be seen – as they would have been in Walpole’s Strawberry Hill, or in the short-lived and unstable magnificence of Beckford’s Fonthill – as ‘any number of follies’. Faced with this continually resurfacing memory, which is nevertheless unfixed in any recognisable location, the subject can find no place to form; the weight of the congealment of the past, the pressure of its untold stories, causes the self to collapse, to become open to influences that distort it, that render it forever ‘different’ from itself.

Branly – and his lost auditor, the author of the text – struggles to make sense of his memories. He imagines, for example, a sailing vessel:

He strains to see the distant figures pacing slowly back and forth on the deck, men with hands clasped behind their backs, women with opened parasols. He wishes he were close enough to see them, and instantly his wish is fulfilled. Now he is on deck, but the ship is adrift, crew and passengers have abandoned her, and the woman, at the estate on the high cliffs, and cloaked in the mists of a La Guaira dawn, is instead wandering through corridors of ochre stucco, through dew-wet patios that open into passageways of salt-air-pocked stone that lead to other patios of lichen and dry grass, vainly seeking a mirror in which to see and remember herself; yet all she knows is what is whispered in her ear.

‘Memory may be a lie’. (p. 103)

This straining of vision, this attempt to see with other organs and through translocations of space and time, produces its effect: an instant wish-fulfilment; but in the very moment of this transition, the moment under the moment is also revealed, and all comes ‘adrift’; the apparent certainty of memory is wrecked, the apparent vividness of the image loses all

guarantee. Branly's attempt to recover the past leaves him more adrift, as it leaves the entire text finally adrift: 'The St Martin's summer is dying. No one remembers the whole story' (p. 225).

Perhaps we should, in the quest for certainty, visit a club – not Branly's club, the Automobile Club de France, where he and his listener attempt together their impossible task of remembrance, but another club, a club in New York, in TriBeCa. But really, is there any point? Victor's memory in Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama* is catastrophically faulty, he has never been where he thinks he has been, he never has any recollection of meetings that (appear to) seem certain to other people, his memory, his sense of his own sense of his own history, has already been invaded by a certain corporate toxicity, a cloud of the already-unknown, a paralysed reversal of *déjà-vu*. Perhaps, if we are to be in his company at all, we would do well to look at the question of poisoning head-on, to inspect, if not its causes, at least some of its effects, and more than anything the prospect of, if not a cure, then at least some temporary relief from the infestations of memory, from the cataclysmic proliferations that overwhelm even the most sophisticated of defence mechanisms.

The last time Chloe and I were in L.A.: a rehab stint in a famously undisclosed location that only me and one of Chloe's publicists knew about. The various strings had been pulled and Chloe bypassed waiting lists, landing in a fairly posh cell: she had her own deluxe adobe-inspired bungalow with a daiquiri-blue-coloured sunken living room, a patio with faux-'70s lounge chairs, a giant marble bathtub decorated with pink eels and dozens of mini-Jacuzzi jets, and there was an indoor pool and a fully equipped gym and an arts-and-crafts centre but there wasn't a television set so I had to tape 'All My Children' on the VCR in the hotel room I was staying at in a nearby desert town, which was really the least I could do. Chloe had her own horse, named Raisin.⁵

Here, it would appear, we have a certain sense of the past, but it is rendered virtually meaningless by the fact that the location is 'famously undisclosed', it is an open secret, its constant non-disclosure is precisely the key to its placing in history, provided we can read the signs aright. Not that the decisions about disclosure will have been made by 'these people', but rather by 'their people', the publicists whose task it is to promulgate secrets, to provide the public with the stimulation of knowing that there are secrets to be withheld, for without secrets and their potential disclosure there would be no 'public' interest, the interest lies in the

always withheld possibility of ‘going public’, although unless one had already in some other sense ‘gone public’ nobody would know of the existence – or the quality – of the secret in the first place.

But what *is* – and this, of course, is the Gothic’s crucial question - the ‘first place’? Perhaps the ‘first place’ is a ‘cell’, a ‘posh cell’ which is presumably not susceptible to precisely the same laws of proliferation and division that characterise the cells we know of more intimately in our bodies, even if they alert us to their existence only, or most forcefully, when their proliferation can no longer be controlled, and we have to recognise that the force that is poisoning us, that is turning us cancerous, is the manic success of our own cells.

In the stories that make up Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, it appears to be as much the history of the settings that determines the action as any of the desultory, often misunderstood actions undertaken by the characters themselves. The effect, as elsewhere in Carter, is for the characters often to seem as though they are characters from *somebody else’s* story – not their own, nor even their apparent authors’, but stories that come from a ‘different’ past. And thus character becomes, in the end, a *bricolage* of story, of embedded tales according to which we live and move and have our being. What story, we may ask, is the heroine actually inhabiting – as one might, of course, inhabit a Gothic castle, while knowing all the time, on some other scene, that one does not *live* there – as she approaches the location we need know only as ‘his castle’:

And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day ... that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place!⁶

And so ‘his castle’ becomes, in the course of a single paragraph (which is nonetheless divided at its midpoint, which encloses a hiatus, an aporia) ‘that castle’: an attempted deictic, we might say, which in its presumption of fixity seeks to draw the castle from the ambiguous realm in which it exists and to place it firmly here, or there, but at any rate on dry land, while

at the same time severing it from all that holds it as 'his', and casting it loose so that we might be able to see it as in some clearer relation to the protagonist.

A doomed attempt: 'this' Gothic castle can no more have reality conferred on it by language than any other, but here, of course, there is a further, particular mystery; for the 'castle' is, it seems, momentarily 'at home' but, immediately, 'neither on the land nor on the water', undecidably hovering between a state of being at home *nowhere* or of being at home in some third realm, a realm which mediates between, slips and slides between, land and water, the dream-state, the moment beneath the moment; or the story beneath the story, the history beneath – or alongside – the history, the 'other' castle' that always shadows any particular castle we see, the further ruin that underpins the mere 'materiality' of the ruins we see.

But *this* castle, at any rate, 'contravenes' materiality; the mode of its existence – reinvented, remembered, reconstructed – challenges the notion that any one 'moment' can be severed from its echoes, whether those be ruined echoes of the past or hallucinated echoes of the future. And that contravention of materiality is linked further with a mysterious sign, the melancholy of the mermaid, the melancholy of the being who would have life as it was and refuses to accept the weight of stories piled against her – who refuses, oddly like Victor in *Glamorama*, to accept that the evidence presented to him, lies though it may all be, is the only evidence he is ever likely to see, and that the place in which he – or she – find themselves will continue to form their subjectivity no matter what alternative lies they would prefer to fashion for themselves.

Another quotation:

The castle has a full reserve of memories, their living-on a special sort of death. ... I saw so many dances here. ... The great hall resounded like a skull, abuzz with wheeling thoughts, dissimilar and same. The patterns of their music took them, held them, there in its gloved hand, at once fused and confused, and scattered them about the brighter hallways, their laughter like the music for a dream.

The halls and rooms are empty now; the balconies and battlements hang dim, like handholds in the voided dark. In the darkness, in the face of memory, the castle seems now inhuman. Blocked windows mock with the view they no longer afford; here there is a stair's stone spiral disappearing into a blank ceiling where an old tower was levelled, long ago, and here cramped rooms open randomly off one another, implying a passageway, centuries abandoned and reshaped, an appendix within the

castle's bowels.⁷

The inhabitants of this castle, in Banks' *A Song of Stone*, are not heroic; indeed, they are variously unpleasant, and it is possible that the continuous warfare which reduces them to the status of refugees on their own lands provides a better way of living – at least for some – than the feudal stultification they mourn or the restricted codes of elegance to which they once claim to have had access.

But no matter; they are not important, what is important, as in so much traditional Gothic, is the castle, and they, like their enemies, are mere functions of it. Here again is a castle that 'contravenes', and what it contravenes here are the notions of what it might be like to be 'full' or 'empty', notions, perhaps of the full or empty sign, the 'full reserve of memories' and the empty halls and rooms. The castle's past and present slide together, yet they cannot fit with exactitude; all that can be provided is a series of 'handholds', perches (like rocks on which mermaids may sit) in the enveloping darkness.

A 'reserve of memories'; 'in the face of memory'; some further sliding here too between a notion of 'memories' as something that might be 'held' by the subject and, on the other hand, a notion of 'memory' that is larger than, that precedes, subjectification; as one's mind precede one's self, as any one moment might presuppose another, occluded one beneath it. Either way, it would seem, the matter of memory is also the matter of death, a 'living-on' in the face of the improbability of that survival, a hidden knowing (an open secret) about one's survival being in fact at the mercy of a quite different version of memory, memories held by and within the castle itself.

Another story here, then, of melancholy, another set of Gothic metaphors for the storming of the safety of the subject by a set of realisations that lands and realms cannot so easily be separated one from another, protected, guarded against invasion. The 'barbarians' who take over the castle are, we might say, apotheoses of Deleuze and Guattari's nomadry⁸: they have no wish to replace a state by another state, a condition by another condition, yet neither do they have the lust for pure destruction sometimes attributed to them; they do not, in fact, have recognisable motives at all, they are functions of their location – as the outside, as the outlaw, as that which continually and ineluctably contravenes the violent stabilities of historical order.

In *A Song of Stone*, then, there are no 'perfect' inhabitants of the castle; the castle

predicates a location in space and time to which there is no adequate subjective equivalent, and in doing so suggests a power of control over those who might attempt to exist within it. Within this Gothic framework, we may sense the germ of a Gothic dislocation, an uncertainty – not about who the ‘rightful’ inhabitants of the castle might be, but now about whether there can be such a thing at all as ‘rightful’ inhabitants, or whether the attempt of the subject to insert him- or herself into the tissue of historical trajectories must remain doomed to a certain uncanny alienation, a feeling of being outside the very systems whose professed aim is to support your presence within these grids and networks.

The problematic which the classic Gothic of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth addresses – the uncertainty of history, the loss of the past as both desired and feared, the threat of being still enclosed within the memories of an apparently defunct feudal order – is therefore retraced in these contemporary texts, just as, for example, the imagery of Frankenstein and Dracula continues to be remade in different cultural registers. The ‘original’ Gothic was not ‘original’; it had continuing trouble working out from what shards and fragments of history it was composed. Just so, these contemporary recapitulations of Gothic face and repeat their own difficulties, difficulties of memory and the subject as well as difficulties in establishing – and trusting – a stable account of the past.

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