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Review of Marshall Brown, *The Gothic Text*.

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Marshall Brown, *The Gothic Text*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. 280 pp. ISBN 0804739129.

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Writers on the Gothic have long remarked on similarities between the excessive Gothic text and the unleashed Gothic monster. In her 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley equates her text with her monster: "I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper." In *The Gothic Text*, Marshall Brown also turns to this well-worn metaphor: of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, he notes, "[the] author never . . . mastered or understood the monster he was creating" (33); of *Frankenstein*, Brown writes, "Like the monster, the novel is misshapen" (185). More recently, with the burgeoning interest in Gothic literature in the wake of the postmodern focus on the marginal text and writer, scholars like Maggie Kilgour have remarked on the monstrous proportions of the body of Gothic scholarship. Brown also acknowledges the uncontrollable excess within the body of Gothic criticism: "critical books on the gothic novel have flooded in" (xi). In fact, horror is an appropriate response for a scholar facing the burden of attaching a new appendage to the monstrously proliferating body of Gothic criticism. And yet in *The Gothic Text* Marshall Brown adds something new to the literature, taking a fresh critical approach that results in a thought-provoking argument.

In his first two chapters, "Three Theses on Gothic Fiction" and "Fantasia: Kant and the Demons of the Night," Brown introduces the propositions that ground his argument and serve to interrogate the orthodoxies of Gothic criticism. He asserts that the major contribution of the Gothic text to literature and culture is the movement toward an introspective focus upon the subjective self that aligns the Gothic project with that of the Enlightenment; Brown thus posits the Gothic perspective as complementary to Kant's thinking. Moreover, Brown contends that other aspects of the Gothic considered important by critics -- the supernatural, the sublime and the political -- are mere distractions.

In Part I, "Origins: Walpole," Brown argues that the major contribution of Horace Walpole, the putative creator of the English Gothic, is not the introduction of ghosts and the supernatural to the literary scene but the development of the Gothic focus upon the interior of the human psyche. In Part II, "Kant and the Gothic," Brown shifts his focus to Kant to consider the philosophical resonances of the Gothic focus on interiority. This section surveys Kant and his followers' theories of mind, consciousness and the soul, occasionally weaving in discussions of the Gothic text. In Part III, "Philosophy of the Gothic Novel," Brown explores the implications of his reading for specific Gothic texts, all European: Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin*, E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Devil's Elixirs*, Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams*. In Part IV, "Consequences," Brown continues to read Gothic texts through the prism of his theories, returning to Radcliffe, the writer who engenders his discussion, and arguing that Radcliffe deploys her influential clichés as means of understanding the world. Brown also presents a reading of Shelley's *Frankenstein* that develops his primary argument for the significance of psychic interiority and the insignificance of the supernatural and cultural contexts in the Gothic novel. Brown concludes his monograph with "Postscript: Faust and the Gothic." This chapter expands his reading by taking the somewhat startling step of interpreting Goethe's *Faust* within the context of his Gothic theories.

Brown comes to his argument by taking a refreshingly new perspective on the Gothic text; he focuses on the seemingly empty narrative space that connects the moments of horrifying action that punctuate the Gothic novel: the descriptive or reflective sections that, as Brown persuasively argues, many readers and scholars tend to see as distractions from the more dynamic plot developments for which the Gothic is famous. Brown bravely describes the typical experience of reading Gothic literature: "one slogs to the occasional fireworks through marshlands of descriptive or even analytical prose" (xi). He posits an alternative reading in which "background becomes foreground" (xv), and the "formal structures of gothic style" (xv), the recurrent motifs for which the Gothic is famous, become less important than the thematics of the Gothic, its focus upon the inner life. In focusing on the slow, seemingly static, passages that record the mental processes of the Gothic narrator and character, Brown discovers that these sections, rather than the descriptions of horrifying and supernatural activity, are central to the Gothic. In Brown's version of the Gothic, "perceptions and imagination are the focal issues" (xiv). For him the meditative passages reflect a textual shift of focus upon the interiority of the individual, the space of the psyche, which Kant was simultaneously imagining. Ultimately, Brown makes a compelling case for focusing upon "the words actually filling the pages [rather] than . . . the incidents that only intermittently spark them or . . . the fantasies buried beneath" (xi), revealing to the Gothic reader much that is missed in "reading for the plot." Thus, in Brown's formulation, reading the meditative and descriptive moments that permeate the Gothic text through the prism of philosophy reveals "what they show us about the transcendental dimensions of experience" (xii).

Brown's reading of the long descriptive passages of Ann Radcliffe provides a strong foundation for the assertion that the focus of the Gothic text is the psychic interior. Brown contends that Radcliffe deploys her descriptions of nature as a means of turning inward toward the human and that the landscape exists only in terms of its subjective meaning to the observer. Thus in observing nature, Radcliffe's characters experience "[t]he discovery of consciousness as an interior expanse, a world of qualitative feeling" (107). Nature, and the long slow passages used to delineate the natural world, are, then, a means toward understanding the self. Turning to some admittedly more exciting and plot-driven Gothic texts, Brown asserts that even "the big-boned novels of Lewis and Maturin have vast empty regions" (4), pointing to the interior spaces of the human psyche. In fact, Brown asserts that the landscape of Maturin's *Melmoth* exists only through human consciousness, thereby connecting the Gothic psyche to "the Wordsworthian imagination" (144), that in part creates the landscape it perceives.

The conceptual core of Brown's argument is the alignment of the Gothic text with Enlightenment philosophy, exemplified by Kant, an argument that is truly provocative since the Gothic is usually considered an outgrowth of Romanticism. Having established the significance of the move toward interiority in the Gothic text, Brown works to link the Gothic and Kantian foci upon the interior geography of the human psyche. He argues that the Gothic text is a "contemporaneous discourse, originating in or deriving from the writings of Kant" (xiv), and he asserts that Kant, while demarcating the limits of human reason is, like the Gothic, attracted to the limits of consciousness that lie beyond Enlightenment boundaries: "One tenet of Kant's philosophy is that human understanding is impelled towards its limits" (70). Brown invokes the language of the Gothic to emphasize the significance of the unknown space that lies beyond Enlightenment comprehension: "The Critiques both construct and keep at bay an imagined,

'transcendental' realm that haunts the borders of our experience" (x); "Kant's imagination is haunted at its edges by a mysterious world beyond the limits of reason" (12-13). Kant's thinking evokes in the reader "the sensations of a passion outside the limits of reason" (79); it gestures to a "ghostly world" beyond (83) and to the "ghosts that haunt the edges of Kant's imagination" (91).

For Brown, then, the Gothic text and Kant propose a model of the psyche in which transcendent mysteries lie beyond the grasp of human comprehension. Since Kant focuses on the rational world within comprehension and the Gothic on the irrational world beyond, the two texts complement each other in important ways, each focusing on the aspect of the psyche that is repressed by the other. Thus the Gothic provides the space in which the individual encounters whatever lies beyond Kant's boundaries, filling in the blank within Kant's formulation, dramatizing the abstractions of Kant by constructing the world that lies beyond the known: "the gothic relieves us of the utter featurelessness attributed by Immanuel Kant to the thing in itself. For, indeed, the gothic lavishes its most colorful eloquence precisely on the limits of experience where the in-itself resides . . . The gothic confronts us with transcendent reality" (10-11) and in doing so reveals "the nature of pure consciousness" (12).

To promote the significance of the interiority of the Gothic text, Brown insists on the insignificance of other Gothic elements, notably the political, the supernatural and the sublime. Brown expends much critical energy on dismissing the power of the supernatural and the sublime in the Gothic text, an odd strategy when one considers that both refer to the human subject. Even the Gothic representation of external political realities ultimately sheds light upon the subject, since so often the energies of the text concentrate upon the psychological response of the subject to evil political structures.

Brown does provide a critical service in offering an alternative to the new historicist readings that currently dominate Gothic criticism. His "refusal to confine the significance of the authors to their own time" (xvii) and his insistence on locating the Gothic text within transcendent, otherworldly philosophical concerns offer an important new way of reading. Brown's attempt to diminish the significance of readings that foreground the political engagements in the Gothic, however, results in a critical hyperbole that detracts from his argument. This problematic strategy is visible in Brown's early assertion that "Gothic novels are not women's writing" (6). Although Brown does not overtly return to this statement in his text, it seems to serve as an emblem for a larger argument that he unfolds: the Gothic focuses upon the subject (the self), and political readings (feminist, Marxist and new historicist) that consider material externals thereby miss the central issue of the Gothic text. He dismisses the interests of "most critics" in "social, political, and sexual themes" (xiv) as "allegorical" in comparison to his own commitment to "take the gothic enterprise literally" (xii). "[M]y concern, Brown writes, is not what transcendental fictions show us about daily or historical existence" (xii).

As such, Brown disputes critical readings of *Otranto* as a revolutionary text in which "the supernatural [indicates] destructive uprising" (50), reading *Otranto* instead as part of the neo-classical tradition, in which "the supernatural is not the historical past in opposition but the timeless past rising up to rescue us" (50). Brown even disputes the significance of the political aspect of *Caleb Williams*. He argues that despite the shift in Godwin's novel from the

supernatural to a natural, realistic social setting, *Caleb Williams* is also grounded in transcendental concerns. Although conceding that Godwin's text "implies the hope for a natural (historical, social or psychological), rather than a strictly transcendental (moral) resolution of the antinomies of existence" (149), that it is "primarily a critique of political and social conditions" (150), Brown nevertheless argues that *Caleb Williams* also moves to the interior space of the Gothic: "The ills that Godwin attacks rest in the constitution of the social fabric, but the causes reside in the constitution of the human mind" (150). Brown connects Godwin's recipe for social cure, "a revolution in our ways of thinking," to the "revolution in thought [that] is, of course, just what Kant had proclaimed" (154).

A similar lacuna occurs in Brown's reading of Radcliffe. Brown does make a strong case for his cause in his discussion of Radcliffe and her clichés; he argues for the "literariness" (161) of the Gothic, meaning that the frame of reference for the Gothic is not the real world, in which ghosts do not appear, but the network of other Gothic texts replete with hauntings. Thus, the repetitive, convention-laden Gothic gestures not to the real external world but to the imaginary internal world. Brown reads Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* to argue that the Gothic novel yearns for the place of confinement where the individual may encounter the self. He asserts that "only underground does a realm exist from which the paternal Other has excluded itself and left the eternal feminine intact" (110). The problem with this reading is that the womb-like underground space in Radcliffe's novel is not a sanctuary; it is, rather, an underground dungeon in which the mother is imprisoned by her husband. The novel's female protagonist seeks to escape this space and to free her mother from the confinement imposed by the paternal Other.

Brown's interpretation of *Frankenstein* suppresses the gendered anxieties that feminist critics have identified in Shelley's monster. Brown accuses such critics of "reducing" fantastic fiction "to the mundane" (184), reasserting that Gothic fiction is "pure fantasy" (185) with no frame of reference but itself. Yet Brown's argument seems to deny the Gothic tendency to equate transcendent evil with the evils attendant upon political oppression. It is Brown's repression of political readings that leads him to conclude that *Faust* radicalizes the Gothic in moving from the inwardly focused Gothic of pure self to the Gothic that is engaged with the world. Yet here Brown appears to be unjustly harsh on the Gothic texts that precede *Faust*: he faults these texts for a solipsistic focus on the self; yet he disallows critical readings that contextualize the Gothic in the outside, social world. In fact, such readings reveal that most Gothic texts are, in fact, engaged with the external world.

Brown clearly favors the interior move over the showy supernatural of the Gothic text, the "empty theatrics of popular supernatural fiction" (6) at the center of so much narrative, readerly and critical attention. Hence Brown's early assertion: "Gothic novels are not ghost stories" (5), meaning that the supernatural is not the primary focus of the Gothic text. Not surprisingly, Brown bases this argument upon novels that do ultimately suppress the power of the supernatural. For example, Brown illustrates his thesis with Radcliffe, famous for her "explained supernatural," in which seemingly ghostly apparitions are inevitably provided with rational explanations. Brown also invokes Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which the monster, who is created through science, searches for his identity. Yet Brown's claim that the "monster is assuredly no ghost" (187) restates the obvious, since Shelley's novel distinguishes itself in the Gothic canon by providing a quasi-scientific explanation for monstrosity. Thus statements made about the

absence of the supernatural in Radcliffe and in *Frankenstein* do not necessarily translate to the majority of Gothic novels that do display the kind of supernatural paraphernalia associated with the Gothic.

The overt power of the supernatural in *The Castle of Otranto* might highlight the radicalism of Brown's assertion that Walpole's novel, too, is valuable more for its interiority than for its ghosts. He states: "Walpole's genuine innovation was not in the supernatural but in the response to it" (45); the supernatural effects of Walpole's novel are only an excuse to focus on human responses to excess. And yet, Brown's idea is not quite as original as it appears: Walpole himself recognizes that human subjectivity is the primary focus of his work. In his Preface to the Second edition of *Otranto*, Walpole announces that the purpose of the "boundless realms of invention" is to explore the human responses: "to conduct the mortal agents of his drama according to the rules of probability . . . to make them think, speak and act as it might be supposed mere men and women would do in extraordinary positions" (9-10; 1998). Brown is, then, very much aligned with Walpole's stated project when he values *Otranto* for the exploration of human consciousness in its pure state: "Manfred is man freed from all civilized bounds," Brown asserts (24); Walpole's characters are "pursued by [their] own internal desires and fears more than by any external monsters and demons" (31). True -- and in the case of Manfred, these internal desires and fears are emblemized by ghosts.

In a strategy that is analogous to his denial of the power of the supernatural in the Gothic, Brown works to minimize and even suppress the importance of the sublime in the Gothic text. Brown contends that the "Burkean terror often identified as the defining characteristic of the gothic is in fact the least significant aspect of the genre. Rather, the romantic gothic naturally interrogates or ironizes its most fearsome imaginings" (212); as such the Gothic project is "not sublime but countersublime" (134). For Brown, Radcliffe's "landscape has little in common with the Burkean sublime" because "it elicits and doesn't overwhelm a human response . . . The movement is away from, not toward, transport and terror" (108). And yet the unknowable Alps of *Udolpho* do resist an encompassing human response, as do the snowy wastes of *Frankenstein*. The Burkean sublime is rooted in the human response to grandeur, the human realization of the limits of this response, and not in the grandeur itself. The Burkean sublime exists in heightened emotional response, as Ann Radcliffe herself recognizes: "I apprehend that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one" (168). Ultimately, Brown's focus upon Gothic interiority at the expense of the sublime neglects an important message of the Gothic: the most frightening and unfathomable place in the Gothic text is not the labyrinthine castle, nor the lofty mountain, but the dark and uncharted human heart.

Brown turns to the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* to develop the picture of a Kantian island of human reason surrounded by "an imagined, 'transcendental' realm that haunts the borders of our experience" (x). While Brown calls this realm "[a] hidden mystery of generation, something unnaturally, illicitly, even unspeakably erotic [that] lurks at the borders of our understanding" (90), he never names this space as the sublime. Perhaps an accounting of Brown's representation of Kant may be found in his statement that the "true subject [of his book] is the Kantian style rather than the subject of Kant's doctrines -- Kantianism, not Kant" (72).

The conflation of the Gothic project with the Enlightenment project is the most unsettling aspect of Brown's argument. The dangers of such an approach are most evident when Brown addresses the Gothic convention of madness. In his discussion of Balzac, Hoffman and Maturin, Brown claims that while the turn to madness in the Gothic text is a necessary respite from the search for the self, the goal of the Gothic self is sanity and not madness. Brown's rational reading of the Gothic limns insanity as a defeat; at best, madness provides an unavoidable detour from the path toward reason and truth. Here, in an alternative to current Gothic criticism, Brown unfolds the controversial argument that instead of valorizing madness, the Gothic text "yearns" for the "composure" (171) and sane reason that beckon to the Gothic subject from beyond the closing frame of the text. Although Brown does not identify the critics who have already laid claim to this argument, he aligns himself with the controversial argument of Marta Caminero-Santangelo who asserts in *The Madwoman Can't Speak* that madness does not represent liberation from social structures since the madwoman is typically imprisoned and silent. Brown thus implicitly argues against the influential reading of the liberating and subversive powers of Gothic madness in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*.

In Brown's reading, the eponymous magical charm of Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin* is dangerous because it offers "freedom from the categories and conditions of ordinary existence, that freedom whose other name, from Kant onwards, has been madness" (121). Although this liberation is exactly what the Gothic text and the Gothic protagonist seek, Brown condemns it as "self oblivion" (122). Similarly, Brown views madness in *Melmoth the Wanderer* as a respite from the soul's search for unity. The horror of *Melmoth*, in his formulation, is that it "explores . . . the border region . . . where rational and irrational coalesce" (136), entering "a shadow realm that effaces all distinctions" (137). Yet this novel is ultimately a triumph for Enlightenment ideology, Brown asserts, because Melmoth never manages to destroy or madden any of his victims, demonstrating that "the soul itself remains unassailable" (137). In his discussion of E.T.A. Hoffman's novel, *The Devil's Elixirs*, in which madness is one of the "evil effects" (127) of the elixir, Brown relates the trope of madness to the Gothic trope of the double, in that both represent the fragmentation of the unified self. Brown asserts that just as madness is useful only as a step toward sanity, so is the double useful only when it leads to the production of an integrated self.

Similarly Brown implicitly refutes Hélène Cixous's reading of the ludic and subversive joy of monstrosity in "The Laugh of the Medusa." In discussing the trope of the monster, Brown identifies the categorical transgressiveness of the monster as presenting a disruption of Enlightenment categories that the Gothic wishes ultimately to reinstate: "The terror of *Frankenstein* lies in the collapse of the antinomial categories of reason into a grotesque deformation of the order of experience" (195). Elsewhere Brown does emphasize the significance of play in his text, focusing on the affinity of the Gothic with the spectacle of drama and tracing the recurrent motifs of gambling and gaming. He notes that the Gothic "plays" with terror -- "imagining" it (14), and quotes a Hoffman character on play: "It takes you out of yourself" (130). Nevertheless, Brown indicts the Gothic for its "[m]oral frivolity" (131).

The prioritizing of Enlightenment strategies works to explain why Brown seems so committed to the project of finding the one true meaning of the Gothic text. The value of Brown's focus on the significance of the interior journey in the Gothic is not diminished if Walpole is not the "true

source" (32); nor is it diminished if we choose to value Walpole's glorious and hilarious supernatural as well as the interiority of his text. The focus on Radcliffe's interiority is important and useful, even if we allow for the sublimity of Radcliffe's descriptions and for the very detailed attention that she focuses upon the legal and economic realities that affect her protagonists. The recognition that Shelley's monster is a subject looking for an identity during the Enlightenment is significant, even as we recognize that the creature and creator also exemplify anxieties of gender and maternity. The power, and indeed the fun, of the Gothic lie in its ambiguity and resistance to categories, generic as well as critical. Any single reading that claims to invalidate other readings unnecessarily diminishes the Gothic. Nevertheless, Brown's reading reveals another facet in the jewel of the Gothic text.

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