THE BATHORY QUARTET

Treating anxiety with anxiety, the benefits of horror

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Abstract

‘The Bathory Quartet: treating anxiety with anxiety, the benefits of horror’ is a work of literary horror with some elements of weird fiction accompanied by a creative commentary contextualizing my novel within the vampire genre.

The Bathory Quartet is a novel in four voices, a fragmented attempt at exploring the childhood trauma of the cellist, Mina Fisher, and the sudden paralysis of her hands during a recital at the Royal Festival Hall. Through the overlapping fragments we learn of The Bathory Quartet and their cello, The Countess, with its enormous and sinister emotional resonance.

The thesis considers how horror can be used to treat anxiety and my own experience of childhood trauma, examining film and literature that influenced my decision making and their effects on mind and body.

[129 words]

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INTRODUCTION – ANTECEDENTS

My interest in horror stems from a childhood sense that we are puny stakeholders in reality; there are other forces, other stakeholders with different ideas about how to run things. Later, I would identify these other stakeholders as those creatures supremely indifferent to humanity in H.P. Lovecraft's novella, *At the Mountains of Madness* where Lake the biologist recalls "the primal myths about Great Old Ones who filtered down from the stars and concocted earth life as a joke or mistake."[1]

The idea of a powerful non-human intelligence crystallized over time into my novel's central image of the cello. The cello sings in a musical language that breaks down barriers through the universal appeal of its voice. The novel examines the nature of this voice, how through its beauty it leaves the audience defenceless. The cello possesses an ancient intelligence evolved from the primal myths that Lake the biologist alludes to. The Countess harvested from non-human elements, fashioned for the aesthetic pleasure of its listeners, shares the Old Ones view that humanity is a commodity. Humanity's hopes and desires are reduced to a lubricant that maintains the cello's unique timbre.

The indifference of cosmic horror combined in my childhood with a love of ghost stories and the secret passageways of Gothic fiction where heiresses in peril bravely searched underground chambers, daring to peer behind the tapestry. The Gothic promised some final revelation, as if the secret stakeholders of the universe

[1] H.P. Lovecraft, "At The Mountains of Madness," in *The Thing on the Doorstep and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Penguin Classics 2002), 266.

could be caught unawares behind the curtain. I still haven't quite lost hope in a final reveal. The Gothic offered a space that could contain the irrational fears of my childhood where over time the horrors of the haunted castle gave way to the terrors of the family sitting down to Sunday lunch. The feudal baron was replaced by an equally despotic mother holding forth for hours over bottles of red wine and underdone meat. The only escape route was through the open hatch of the dumbwaiter. Both Gothic fiction and cosmic horror alerted me to the shadowy forces operating on our world and chimed with my own sense of instability since its protagonists, "are gradually led to acknowledge the unreliability of their perceptions and finally to accept the existence of the entities and aspects of reality of which they have been previously unaware."[2]

When you are a child, it is easier to believe in the physical reality of alien stakeholders. As you grow older you may concede that the stakeholders are *probably* imaginary, and that there is nothing behind the curtain. H.P. Lovecraft described himself as an "indifferentist"[3]. In a letter to Ferdinand Morton, he explains the universe isn't informed by any controlling force since it doesn't care "one way or the other about the especial wants and ultimate welfare of mosquitoes, rats, lice, dogs, men, horses, pterodactyls, trees, fungi, dodos, or other forms of biological energy."[4] Lovecraft's cosmic disdain for the random and bizarre lifeforms which he selects in his list, privileging mosquitoes and lice over men, is very much the perspective of an outsider peering through the telescope of deep time. This

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[2] Pasi Nyyssonen, "Gothic Liminality in A.J Annila's Film Sauna," in *Gothic Topographies: Language, Nation Building and 'Race'* ed. P.M. Mehtonen and Matti Savolainen (Routledge, 2013), 194.

[3] H.P. Lovecraft, *Selected Letters III,* ed. August Derleth and Donald Wandrei (Arkham House,1971), 39.

[4] Lovecraft, *Selected Letters III,* 39.

disparaging view of earth's evolutionary detritus has a destabilizing effect on humanity. We are part of the same process that produced vermin, dinosaurs and parasites. The viewpoint is both vertiginous and liberating, key ingredients that explain the awe inducing pleasures of cosmic horror.

Whether there in anything behind the curtain or not, the Old Ones work well as an analogy for the churning evolutionary forces that keep us reproducing and eating other lifeforms in a constant regurgitating of matter. The cello in my novel is an exemplar of this process, trapping layers of human yearning beneath its varnish.

Childhood mystery descended at bedtime when I looked out of my bedroom's barred windows, marvelling at the interstellar distances between us and the stars and realised we are creatures cleaving to a rotating rock (the chimneys do not tilt; the steeples do not fall off). The mystery gave way to the fear of abandonment. But abandonment by whom? Who could I address my letters of complaint to? The world seemed to have a negative tilt. I thought of "undoing forces" at work.

However, there were two specific antecedents that shaped my interest in horror by chipping away at the sense of security: my father's work as a criminal barrister and childhood illness.

I became aware that my barred windows had a different purpose from just preventing me from falling two storeys to the garden below. In 1980 at the age of 10 there was a visit from the Special Branch and a chat about security and "stranger danger." Dad was a criminal barrister who was prosecuting some big IRA cases; there had been a breakout at Brixton prison and the accused was on the run. The barred windows started making more sense. I also began creeping up to his study. The door was always unlocked after an overnight session when he polished off a bottle of Bells whisky while preparing his cases for the next day.

I was drawn to the mysterious manila photo booklets on the floor, stamped Metropolitan Police. They had the simplicity of the most basic units of narration, the most compelling stills of story-making.

They would begin with an external shot of a building. For example, an apartment block on a windy embankment; photos followed of the front door, the hall carpeted like The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*,[5] the living room, the gas heater. All the contingencies of living. The photos would take a more sinister turn. Bloodstains in clumps of thick pile like a bleed out from a scalp wound would announce violence, so far, off-camera. The objects (the contingencies of living) took centre stage, taking on a fascination, standing in their relations to themselves with their own weird power. About halfway through the booklet, the body would appear. The body never appeared restful, always dropped as if from a great height or thrown from horseback – only that could account for the painful positioning, wedged under a coffee table etc. What followed were close ups of all the wounds.

The final batch of photos was the body lying naked on a table in a mortuary; the shock of the dead face and wispy pubic hair thrilled and upset me. The first horripilation, the zoological bristle of feathers, went through me, as I anxiously held the booklet and checked no one was coming through the study's glass door.

Rulers were placed next to wounds, blossoming under strip-lighting, and measured precisely. At the end of the booklet, like a film running backwards, was the murder weapon. This was the baddie and the baddie in the 1980s criminal

[5] *The Shining,* directed by Stanley Kubrick (1980*;* Warner Home Video, 2000), DVD.

murder investigations my dad worked through the night on, was predominantly a knife with keen, serrated edges.

Dad was a keen cook; he would go out and shop for these murder weapons so he could master his brief by understanding the effects of impact and handle the weapons himself. Our knife drawer was rammed to overflowing with items such as the Kitchen Devil, still in service today. The black humour pervaded everything; he would supply a cynical rundown of the defendant's statement while he sliced onions with a knife identical to the murder weapon, "I can see why our client went for this one… good grip…"

Quite a sensory experience for my brain to take in; the illicit and taboo quality of the booklets, especially the naked body laid out in the mortuary under powerful lights—that absolute level of reality that Shirley Jackson argues no creature can bear.[6] There were no narrative gaps like in the horror anthologies I devoured where characters lost consciousness during moments of overwhelming terror, just the absolute reality of these bodies on the table. Compelled by the storytelling suspense, my secret flipping through the photos continued; the fear and anticipation of approaching a new booklet unsure what I would find; would I be able to stomach its contents?

In my mind a murder gallery formed of wax men and women, the unlucky ones. I wouldn't be like them, my life was progressing in an orderly manner. The haphazard happened to others.

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[6] Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (Penguin UK, 2009).

They must have done something wrong. Surely it wasn't a series of accidental circumstances, an indifferent killer, an unlocked door. Could death really be as horrible as in Eugne Ionesco's short story *The Colonel's Photograph*[7] where a giggling child/dwarf follows the protagonist, Berenger, around a deserted city centre. Chuckling at every attempt of the protagonist to understand the killer's motives for destroying happiness, Berenger ends up repeating a series of self-justifications about life that seem less and less convincing. Ionesco had tapped into my childhood anxiety; except he addressed his unanswered letter to death to the reader.

The dead were a different species. It wouldn't happen to me. I would have time like all children to find a workaround. The workaround would turn out to be the unspectacular solutions of sublimation, denial and consumption. Then there was the surreal. The photo of the aftermath of a ritual beheading in 1980s' Hounslow, preceded by a punishment beating, left a bruised and battered head on a suburban pavement near the privet and picket fencing. In the days before CGI effects, I was left puzzling over the image. It wasn't a model; the textures of the black eye were masterful. The only option was a camouflaged manhole with the rest of the actor hidden underground. No, it was real. A head in broad daylight—this was the stuff of ogres and *Grimms Fairy Tales.* It had no place in TW3.

I wondered how my parents would react to my snooping. It didn't seem like snooping since the booklets were scattered on the floor. My education into human anatomy continued, the climb up those study stairs irresistible. I decided to tell my dad about my weekly visits to his study. He laughed, "interesting, aren't they?"

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[7] Eugene Ionesco, *The Colonel's Photograph* (Faber & Faber,1967).

Childhood illness was the second initiation into horror. Allied to the sickness was a sense that reality was again unstitching in haphazard ways. The self-contained imperfect reality of our family life was beset by other marauding realities, viruses that have been around for many hundreds of years, (the revenge of The Old Ones) and the IRA's bombing campaign in the UK.

I was hospitalized for a life-threatening skin condition called eczema herpeticum, that happened suddenly with partial loss of sight as my eyes discharged milky fluid. The collective illusion I had been participating in with family support by working hard at school, practicing the flute, compulsively reading B.B.'s *The Little Grey Men*[8] hoping to better myself and pass the Common Entrance exam became dreamlike and unreal.

Within 48 hours I was turned from a relatively normal boy into a black and bleeding crusted mask, weeping custard yellow pus. A virulent-smelling warm liquid trickled down my cheeks and around my eye sockets. I was in the middle of my own body horror movie, rooted in the liquefying and purulent processes while an inflamed body seemed only faintly connected to a scared and marooned mind. A new crust casing formed around my reduced self.

The transition was sudden: from home and sibling squabbles to hospital and the chirrup of machines. Isolated in a narrow room without mirrors, I could just about avoid the physical horror of what was happening to me. Not so my parents. In protective yellow capes, like a couple of garden gnomes sprung from the local

[8] 'B.B,' *The Little Grey Men* (Methuen, 1973).

nursery, their faces were set in real fear that was both more enlightening and terrifying than a mirror. I realised things were bad but after my parents' reaction I did not want to see for myself just how bad they really were. The body was reconfiguring, dissolving into something unknown.

The skin never really settled down after the infection was treated. The eczema was underpinned by anxiety and restlessness throughout childhood and adult life. I could not remain still or quiet. Instead, I was racked by monster fidgets. Fingers raked my scalp until the nails were crusted with blood, anything that required a change of state or decision led to an orgy of itching and handwringing and, in later life, scalding. How could I stop those fingers in their search up and down seams of skin to find bumps and irregularities and ways of breaking open old scabs, tearing angrily at skin as dry as parchment? The severity of the damage done when alone or asleep was sudden.

The itching was pleasurable, a continuous thread like chain-smoking. It soon grew into a new way of marking time and writing notes on the body. I needed strong medicine to distract myself. Supernatural horror did just that. In adulthood I discovered horror soothed. By its repetitive and compelling nature, it distracted me from myself: distracted me from distraction. The carefully planned dismemberments and the rituals of the chase were choreographed – the genre seemed to have more common with dance or ballet than traditional film. When I set out to write the novel, I knew that childhood trauma would be the basic spring launching Mina's search for her identity.

We must live as if horror is reserved for other people (we will not be one of the murdered bodies) but as we grow older, it is harder to ignore the body count.

Maybe we have been touched by suicide or the death of children or long debilitating illnesses and start to think that consciousness is a meaningless mutation, a chance occurrence like contracting eczema herpeticum, giving us insight into the difficulties of existence and knowledge of our own death and little else. Soon we confront our emptiness and the prospect of losing those we love. We might turn to the classics (the bible, drugs and alcohol) or find horror films with their effect on our physiology — increased heart rate, sweating — oddly beneficial, rehearsing extreme scenarios under a duvet. Seeking relief in imaginary deaths might distract us from our own.

We push away the fact that we will die in pain amid many more horrors such as loss of dignity, loss of loved ones, loss of mobility, decline in mental powers. We go on as if we are immune and immortal. We cannot just sit back and reflect on the horrors waiting for us. Worse the horrors in the world around us: death of children, the killing of civilians in Israel, the Gaza strip and West Bank while the world looks on. We reach an accommodation with ourselves while the horrific becomes normalized. This is all so obvious that it doesn't bear repeating, except we forget. Daily. Maybe we are hardwired for horror, after thousands of years of surviving, not sure we would make it through the night. We seek it out so our bodies can reexperience the panic and adrenaline. Horror asks us to reflect on our frailty and our imminent victimhood. Horror doesn't discriminate between the rich and poor, it chooses its victims arbitrarily and, often, through no fault of their own. Horror is this inner dialogue with ourselves. The anxieties which we push away in the daytime are reworked into the pleasurable terrors of film and literature.

CHAPTER ONE: INTENTIONS

What did I set out to do?

Before I start it is important to acknowledge that the terms used to describe horror are varied and interchangeable. Horror is a broad church that includes various sub-genres. Within my thesis, I will distinguish between the Gothic — here taken to mean the tales of terror pioneered by Ann Radcliffe in the nineteenth century, characterized by their prolonged, claustrophobic scenes of heroines in peril fleeing through sublime landscapes—and horror more generally which is notorious for its brutality and shock value.

Radcliffe distinguished between the two terms: "where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil."[9] As we will see later the notion of obscurity can mean darkness as well as losing consciousness at a moment of crisis. Obscurity is vital for horror scene-setting since we can never outgrow our primal fear of sensing something hideous in the dark. However, it is also a question of degree depending on authorial temperament and self-censorship. Ann Radlcliffe chose to draw a veil decorously over the horrific and spare the reader the details.

The Gothic is characterized by excess in both style and content; the heightened registers and decorative prose signify a rich and unnerving verbal entanglement with the reader. The ideal reader would stay up and finish the novel in a single session. Contemporary horror also famed for its excesses is more plain

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[9]Alan D. McKillop "Mrs. Radcliffe on the Supernatural in Poetry," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 31, no. 3 (1932): 6, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27703650. I have used this journal to cite from because most versions of the quotation reverse the terms "terror" and "horror" which is an error in the *New Monthly* text where the article originally appeared in 1826.

speaking and brutal. In the novels of Ann Radcliffe, the heroines have the good fortune to be able to swoon when overwhelmed by a mixture of threat, imprisonment and atmospheric effects. In contemporary horror, unconsciousness is not always an option. The camera or authorial intelligence is more likely to linger over grisly and innovative scenes of dismemberment.

The Master, Stephen King, tells us in regard to writing horror that best of all you should aim to create in the reader a fine and unsettling psychological terror: "I recognise terror as the finest emotion…But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross out. I'm not proud."[10] King offers us a sliding scale of emotional arousal in the reader, from the fine psychological terror of Ann Radcliffe to the head exploding in David Cronenberg's *Scanners*.[11]

The gross out or gag reflex may be the low point but is probably the most beloved by horror afficionados. I can never forget the beefed-up diegetic crunch of the pruning shears snipping off fingers as they worm through a grate in *House of Wax*[12] followed by the audience's revoltingly delighted laugher during the afternoon matinee. One of horror's paradoxical pleasures is the collision of contrary states. Not only do we watch monstrous category errors on screen but we the fans in our cruel laughter are the embodiment of topsy-turvy emotions. We defy easy categorisation. No experiment in writing horror can shy away from the gross out. As a writer to keep things interesting I asked myself when embarking on this project what was I willing to risk? Would I really go there? Horror dares you to go further.

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[10] Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (Hodder Paperbacks, 2012), 39-40.
[11] *Scanners*, directed by David Cronenberg (1981; Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2005), DVD.
[12] *House of Wax,* directed by Jaume Collet-Serra (Warner Bros, 2005).

My starting point was to complete an original work of literary horror examining issues of childhood trauma in a safe fictional space. Horror with its hallucinatory jump scares and its well-established connection with depicting PTSD survivors in films like *Taxi Driver,*[13] *House*[14] and *Jacob's Ladder*[15] is the ideal art form to portray disruptions in time and identity consistent with the experience of the traumatized. So much for the horror. What do I mean by literary horror?

Literary horror like the creation of monsters may create a feeling of ambivalence in the reader: are they facing yet another category error? Literature and horror appear to pull us in different directions. Horror must have a clear controlling idea; no encrusting of literary detail can conceal the absence of that idea. The question whether literariness is opposed to the delivery of horror must be connected to the degree of literary detail slowing down the propulsive horror plotline.

Literature and genre are uneasy bedfellows. If horror becomes too literary and loses its rhythms and pace, will it still horrify? In an interview, Stephen King discusses the differences between the two:

> I think that literature in quotation marks is about extraordinary people in ordinary circumstances. And what I do are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances.[16]

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[13] *Taxi Driver,* directed by Martin Scorsese (1976; Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

[14] *House,* directed by Steve Miner (1985; Arrow Video, 2017), DVD.

[15] *Jacob's Ladder* directed by Adrian Lyne (1990; Maple Pictures, 2007), DVD.

[16] Jeffrey Brown and Anne Azzi Davenport, "Stephen King Reflects on His Iconic Career and Latest Release 'You like It Darker,'" PBS, August 26, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/stephen-king-reflects-on-his-iconic-career-and-latest-release-you-like-it-darker.

King differentiates between the horror genre, usually focused on fast-paced terrifying events, and literary fiction, driven by the complexities of character. In literary fiction the characters may appear to have greater autonomy, and their psychological complexity will influence the story organically. A literary character like Clarissa Dalloway[17] is dramatized through the rhythms of her thought processes, what she must do, reminiscences, repetitions. Woolf's skill is to give the reader the impression of a living consciousness, anything that enters Mrs Dalloway's head she may act upon. The inner flow *is* the story as she prepares for her party.

In the horror genre characters have limited choice. The nuances of their internal thoughts are secondary to their reactions to external events. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*[18] Poe gives us a tightly focused inner monologue. The thoughts never wander, leading up to the killing of the old man and the narrator's subsequent confession of murder. The stakes are much greater in horror where the characters are restricted by the storyline's fatal momentum and their need to survive.

Poe is a writer of literary horror. Within the genre conventions of horrifying the reader with deadly external events he takes time to show the psychological complexities of character while writing in a rich and heightened register. In *The Pit and The Pendulum* (another variant on the theme of premature burial) an unnamed captive held in the dungeons of the inquisition speculates on states of dreaming and waking, equating dream with "memories of the gulf beyond."[19] The narrator attempts to "regather some token of the state of seeming nothingness"[20] so he can know

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[17] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford World's Classics), 2025.

[18] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart," in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Book Club Associates, 1979), 17.

[19] Poe, "The Pit and The Pendulum," 85.

[20] Poe, "The Pit and The Pendulum," 85.

death before he dies. The prisoner like many of Poe's narrators is prone to philosophizing, registering his reactions even under sentence of death. In his asides he writes like a visionary, "whose brain grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence."[21]

King's quote about the prioritizing of plot (focused on *extraordinary* circumstances in genre fiction) or character (emphasizing *extraordinary* people in literary fiction) is not always so clearcut. It makes sense at the extreme ends of the genre/literature divide but there is plenty of supernatural fog in between.[22] Poe combines extraordinary people and extraordinary circumstances to create a type of literary horror where both character and story matter equally. Literary horror allows for the complexity of character to develop.

However, King is right to emphasize that horror stories are propelled by the shock of external events. One of the pleasures of horror is that there is no limit to the fantastic nature of these interventions if they flow from only *one* source. King's success is his ability to cordon off the extraordinary from his powerful reality-building. He understands the need for contrast between the supernatural interventions from without and the solid normality of his characters in their smalltown setting. Too many extraordinary layers as I discovered in early drafts of my novel can be counterproductive.

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[21] Poe, "The Pit and The Pendulum," 85.

[22] Anthony Trollope's comments in his *Autobiography and Other Writings* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 160, is an early example of the genre v literary fiction debate. Trollope criticizes Wilkie Collins for prioritizing the intricate plots of his sensation fiction (a precursor of the modern horror novel) over character development: "The author seems always to be warning me to remember that something happened at exactly half-past two o'clock on Tuesday morning; or that a woman disappeared from the road just fifteen yards beyond that fourth milestone." Trollope is concerned that the explicit signposting in sensation fiction can disrupt the reader's enjoyment of the more organic flow of character-led fiction. Interestingly, Trollope goes on to say that all realistic fiction should have a sensation element and he reworks the bigamy plot in *Dr Wortle's School* but very *unsensationally* as he examines the moral consequences rather than milk it for thrills.

Literary horror combines stylistic richness and a well sustained mood of claustrophobic intensity (both aspects of the Ann Radcliffe school) with more shocking scenes influenced by contemporary horror cinema. I wondered how far I could push against genre and embrace the literary aspects of my writing without losing the pulpy, unputdownable appeal. The genre and literary aspects of the novel remain in conflict; they were not resolved in the writing. The conflict goes deeper. It is about the prestige of the literary novel vs the rather cultish feelings including shame which surrounded horror in the 1980s when I came of age. Horror now is mainstream and, sadly, almost respectable, unlike my teenage experiences of hanging around *The Scala* in King's Cross dropping acid during all-nighters (back-to-back screenings of six movies) where the other audience members were often homeless, drunk or talking to themselves. Even then I thought of horror cinema as a refuge, a home from home. This community of students, rough sleepers and ageing hippies communed in an old neon palace which was once tellingly a primatarium. Literary horror was a way of addressing my shame towards those teenage horror binges by making it respectable.

Neurodivergence also drew me to literary horror. If I had a controlling idea, I was certainly unable to tell it in the most logical sequential way. However, if I were to write about trauma then I could use symptoms such as repetition, dissociation, hallucinations, incomprehensibility and embed them structurally in a non-linear work. Symptomatic of an adult ADHD diagnosis, and what my supervisor called an "unruly mind," the two aspects of literary horror document my battle to marshal thought and storytelling into a logical sequence. Genre is the ticking clock to the unruly mind that prefers to preen and polish.

The Bathory Quartet combines literary writing, a heightened prose register and complexity of character, with the more extreme elements of horror including rapes, child abduction and the representation of abject fluids. The setting of Middle Honing is given prominence. The eerie marshland is a repository of folkloric secrets, able to both communicate with characters (Mrs Barwell) and influence action. For these reasons *The Bathory Quartet* qualifies as a work of literary horror.

CHAPTER TWO: EVEN VAMPIRES GET THE BLUES

I began writing with trauma survivors in mind who might relate to a fictional account of its effects. The idea of the wound central to the vampire narrative is also relevant to trauma which is described by Cathy Caruth as a "wound that cries out."[23] Mina's experience of trauma is akin to an open wound, like the scabs she keeps breaking open, she remains in a state of woundedness, of not healing. The wound cries out in strange dreams of the granny hag[24] but doesn't make much sense.

Trauma according to Caruth is "the endless inherent necessity of repetition'."[25] The vampire reduced to a pair of fangs, biting through all eternity is in the grip of an overpowering compulsion and exists both as traumatiser and traumatised. The oral sadistic bites remain red and puffy and last a lifetime until the victim dies. Both trauma and vampire bites do not follow the normal pattern of healing. The wound inflicted upon the mind by trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors."[26] This description fits both vampire and victim. What does it mean to live a life under repeated compulsions with the rationale for those behaviours not available to our understanding? How can something happen but owing to a lack of preparedness on our part, it has also not happened to us?

Mina was a means of investigating the traumatic ghost that haunts and whispers to us but evades our understanding. Caruth implies we are silent

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[23] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*: *Trauma, Narrative and History* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

[24] Jeffreys, *The Bathory Quartet*, 15.

[25] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 63.

[26] Caruth, 4.

witnesses to traumatic events but cannot communicate the hidden knowledge to our ourselves because we weren't there. Mina's gap in understanding is large. She doesn't know her birth mother, the suffering she endured in the Romanian orphanage, but she does know she's in the grip of recurring nightmares. Her unconscious actions herald a sequence of events which leads to repeated forms of confinement: Ingatestone House, her endurance training in the cello case, imprisonment in the Sicilian catacombs and finally her metamorphosis into human/cello hybrid locked in the cello case/coffin.

Alongside trauma and the contradictory death-in-life existence of Mina where her history and behaviour remain incomprehensible to her, I wanted to investigate the relationship between the vampire myth and depression. The idea of being locked into eternal life while compelled to repeat a cycle of such narrow, repetitive behaviours as the continued search for the same unvarying food source, blood, seemed at the very best, unglamorous. In the light of Caruth's descriptions of trauma we can now view the vampire as trauma victim, repeating the sequence of wounding after suffering their first bite. Trauma is also connected to depression. It seemed natural over time that the vampire would suffer from a host of mental health problems.

The vampire in my imagination was a creature of fantastic agility, cunning and powerful charisma – but how would the experience of living for ever impact on mental health? The vampire's immortality and lifestyle -- low energy consumption, sleeping all day-- shares more similarities with a depressive outlook where time slows down and simple tasks seem insurmountable.

Angela Carter in *The Lady in the House of Love*[27] emphasizes the depressing nature of vampire existence. She portrays Dracula's daughter as trying to escape a restricting net of repetitive and obsessive behaviours by shuffling the tarot cards which always repeat the same pattern: wisdom, death and dissolution. She has been cast in the wrong story: "Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror except her horrible reluctance for her role."[28] Carter interrogates the restrictions of genre fiction that dooms The Countess to her appetites ("a system of repetitions, she is a closed circuit")[29] while at the same time bemoaning the sad imprisonment of the "beautiful somnambulist."[30] The Countess is searching for a way out of her depression, a consequence of her predetermined future. She longs for love and connection but ends up killing her prospective companions. Traumatised and marked by her ancestral vices she is waiting existence out.

Genre restrictions and the vampire's captivity are linked to her pet lark that sings in a cage unable to learn a new song.[31] Both the cure for vampiric depression and successful genre reinvention is about the writer's ability to discover a new melody by placing the notes[32] in a different order.

The restrictions of vampire literature become part of this new song. By recasting the vampire as depressive, looking for a way out, Carter interrogates the vampire genre by bending the bars of the cage. We sympathize with The Countess'

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[27] Angela Carter, "The Lady in the House of Love," in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (Vintage Books, 2006), 107.

[28] Carter, "The Lady in the House of Love," 110.

[29] Carter, 108.

[30] Carter, 107.

[31] Carter, 108.

[32] By those notes I mean the more inflexible vampire conventions: blood-drinking, heliophobia, the archaic but still much enjoyed chestnut of the vampire having to be invited over the threshold.

s soullessness and her desire to be human. We would like to see her freed from her compulsions. When her claws scrape the bars of the cage it sounds like "the plucked heartstrings of a woman of metal."[33] The route out of depression is reengaging with our emotions. We can only recover when the plucked metal strings of insensibility turn back into nerve endings. In the absence of emotion, the cello strings are Mina's way of experiencing feelings and function as an extension of her nerve endings. In tuning and playing The Countess Mina is also finetuning her own emotional landscape, navigating a path out of grief. These are themes I developed in my novel: Mina coming out of herself; forming a relationship with Tony outside her musical routine while trying to escape her compulsions.

The Bathory Quartet connects the puncture wounds of the vampire with the self-inflicted wounds which occur in self-harming. The puncture mark is a short-term solution to relieving the anxieties of living. The self-harmer, like the vampire, engages most fully in life at the point of wounding. An overwhelming situation becomes controllable. In the paper "Non-suicidal reasons for self-harm: A systematic review of self-reported accounts' individuals experience of self-harming was summarized both as "a positive experience"[34] and "defining the self."[35] The acts were aimed at terminating a dissociative state. Self-harm can bring you back to life: "I feel numb—physically and emotionally. I can't feel my own skin. [after self-harming] I can physically feel again. My senses come back. I get a surge of energy and regain sensation."[36] The description of the senses coming back, and regaining

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[33] Carter, 108.

[34] Amanda J. Edmondson, Cathy A. Brennan, and Allan O. House, "Non-suicidal Reasons for Self-harm: A Systematic Review of Self-reported Accounts," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 191 (February 1, 2016): 109, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2015.11.043.

[35] Edmondson, Brennan, and House, "Non-Suicidal Reasons for Self-Harm," 109.

[36] Edmondson, Brennan, and House, "Non-Suicidal Reasons for Self-Harm," 112.

sensation suggest a return to life, a form of resurrection from a world of numbness and deadened sensation. Except this resurrection unlike the vampire, may take place many times in one day. It appears from this study that self-harming is not purely the removal of negative feelings but rather can enhance the subject's experience.

Most vampire fictions do not dwell on the positive and enhanced feelings of resurrection. James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney, the Vampire: or The Feast of Blood* is the exception. Amidst much bloodshed owing to Varney's teeth that tear rather than puncture is an oddly beautiful pastoral scene.[37] Varney experiences a lunar resurrection in a moonlit river, his hair flowing in death among the waterweeds. After running his fingers through his wet hair, he raises himself towards the moon: "His breast heaved with life, and a kind of deep inspiration, or groan, came from him as he first awoke to life, and then he seemed to pause for a few moments." He swims off with "long easy strokes"[38] where "the rush of water against the stones, seemed like sparkling flashes of silver fire."[39] This moment of moon-assisted transcendence, among many other resurrections, shows Varney as a spiritual being, separated however briefly from his own appetites. Varney's return to life like the description of self-harm in the preceding paragraph offers the vampire an opportunity for renewal before he starts gorging on young heiresses again in his obsessive search for both financial security and blood.

This renewal from dissociative states fits into the mythology surrounding Elizabeth Bathory in Valentine Penrose's influential, biography *The Bloody*

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[37] James Malcolm Rymer, *Varney, the Vampire: Or, The Feast of Blood* (Zitaw Press, 2008), 336-338.
[38] Rymer, *Varney, the Vampire*, 338.
[39] Rymer, *Varney, the Vampire,* 337.

Countess[40] where Bathory relieves the stress of her isolation and otherness by wounding and drawing blood among the servants and the young girls in her gynaeceum.

The Bloody Countess depicts a Countess who suffers from a form of insensibility. The mind acts as a bolstered space separating us from the world and reinforces the theme of impenetrability. In one way the depressive is already bricked up alive in their own castle (Bathory's punishment for her crimes), walled off both physically and mentally from the current of external life, frozen in their affectless state, mirror gazing, revolving the same tired thoughts. Could my characters come up with ways of breaking the glass and implement strategies for vampire/ depressive survival? The novel was the means of testing this out.

Bathory is unmoved by experience and needs sadism or piercing (the torture of servant girls) to break the mirror's surface and bring her back to life. The spurting or puncture wounds – what I term *edraculation* – is the pleasurable spurting of blood as opposed to semen which relieves anxiety/pressure. The breaking of the skin releases Bathory from the mirror and state of non-being through a strong physiological shock that can become compulsive. Both the vampire and modern antihero, Mina, suffer from insensibility, alive but not being fully in life.

My novel examines the search for transcendence and the obsessive corporeality of the vampire's body, an obsession located in the physical need to scratch and puncture in their search for intensity. The act of wounding or self-harming allows us to momentarily escape ourselves while, paradoxically, locating us more firmly in the body.

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[40] Valentine Penrose, *The Bloody Countess* (Creation Books, 2000).

My novel investigates further through my vampire musicians, The Bathory Quartet, the effect of music on depressive states where loss of feeling and numbness replace feelings of interest and engagement. The quartet's continued existence depends on the 'health' of their cello, since they feed from the turbulence and sensations of strong emotions evoked through their music. In my attempt to depart from previous vampire narratives, I decided to turn the cello itself into the vampire. The cello has absorbed different identities over a long-life including Elizabeth Bathory. The cello possesses a vicious spike or fang to secure it to the floor where the recitals take place. The cello is now the means of breaking through emotional insensibility, the vampire's depressive disorder, by tapping into the audience response. The instrument's expressive power in performance enables it to ratchet up emotions in the listener.

There are parallels with the fictional quartet and the effect of the musical soundtrack in horror movies where the spectator is given clear emotional cues to the content. The viewer's physiological response is often stimulated by surges in volume. The musicians are also creating music that will maximise emotional content, their favoured source of nourishment. In my novel, the depressive tries to fix the affectless state they find themselves in by musical means.

The writer Thomas Ligotti, a contemporary writer of weird tales, offers the following evaluation of the depressive's mindset:

> This is the great lesson the depressive learns: Nothing in the world is inherently compelling. Whatever may be really "out there" cannot project itself as an affective experience. It is all a vacuous affair with only a chemical prestige. Nothing is either good or bad, desirable or undesirable, or anything else except that it is made so by laboratories inside us producing the emotions on which we live. And to live on our emotions is to live arbitrarily, inaccurately — imparting meaning to what has none of its own. Yet what other way is there to live? Without the ever-clanking machinery of emotion, everything would come to a standstill. There would be nothing to do, nowhere

> to go, nothing to be, and no one to know. The alternatives are clear: to live falsely as pawns of affect, or to live factually as depressives, or as individuals who know what is known to the depressive. How advantageous that we are not coerced into choosing one or the other, neither choice being excellent. One look at human existence is proof enough that our species will not be released from the stranglehold of emotionalism that anchors it to hallucinations. That may be no way to live, but to opt for depression would be to opt out of existence as we consciously know it.[41]

What stands out is the phrase "the ever-clanking machinery of emotion," conveying the cumbersome nature of these industrial feeling factories inside each of us. The laboratories are essentially primed to get us into one state or another, cooking up chemicals to provide us with our responses. Ligotti's phrase also describes the processes at play in the Gothic novel where the reader is worked up into states of suspense and fear.

The brutality of this mechanistic vision, stripped of the 'chemical prestige' of our experience correlates with the mindset of my undead quartet and their conscious need to manufacture emotional content through music. The reader of a Gothic text might likewise be motivated to seek out strong emotional content because of a failure to find the necessary material in life. Could there be numbing mental states that predisposes a person to Gothic horror?

Without meaning-charged emotions attaching to events and memories, combining in an overall sense of self, our minds would have more in common with disconnected data storage units. This is dramatized in the novel when Dave Gulch discovers the servers for Dark Forest by the windfarms. We would be unable to privilege one thing over another. Instead of a self, cobbled together with the

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[41] Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (Penguin, 2018), 104.

'chemical prestige' of our interactions, we would more and more resemble an uncanny puppet, going through the motions. Mina experiences this at the start of her stay at Ingatestone house where she lies on the bed, fully dressed, in an interim state.

We would not choose to live in an affectless zone, leaving the way wide open to horror. According to Ligotti, we are then tied to "hallucinations" of our emotional entanglements. In the context of the novel the hallucinations are not just generated by the listener's chemical reactions to the music but the memories in the cello itself.

The second component of my novel influenced by the weird tale, which I will examine in chapter twelve, is an examination of the non-human other, in this case a Stradivarius cello, The Countess. The Countess both refers to the cello and her origins which link her to Elizabeth Bathory (1560-1614). The non-human also extends to the varnish and emulsifying ointment that is used to treat the wood and affects the instrument's tonality. My intention was to accord an object, the cello, equal value to the human characters.

The unique 'voice' of the instrument and its seductive and dangerous power stems from this otherness, a woodworm/ deathwatch beetle that can hibernate and reawaken when the cello is played, drawing emotion from concert goers. The worm within the wood is also a metaphor for recent research into depression which connects inflammation and microbial imbalances in the gut with the onset of illness.[42] Non-human agents are acting upon us, resisting the primacy of the

[42] Juliana Durack and Susan V. Lynch, "The gut microbiome: Relationships with disease and opportunities for therapy." *J Exp Med* 7, 216 (1) (2019), https://doi.org/10.1084/jem.20180448.

mind/brain where depression is traditionally located. The cello challenges our notions of agency. The Countess, drawing inspiration from Lovecraft's Old Ones, embodies an ancient intelligence within the wood, nourished by human emulsion. She shares the Old Ones' perspective that humanity is an evolutionary anomaly for her own experimental use. Her actions are even more extreme since, in her view, humans serve as an inexpensive source of fuel.

The musicians have vampiric non-human antecedents and bridge the gap between the human and non-human. The protagonist, Mina Fisher, does not know her family history before agreeing to play the cello, only knowing that the music and ointment is key to cure her paralysis and deteriorating mental state. Mina has suffered childhood trauma and because of her dissociative skills and coping strategies is more similar to the vampire quartet than she realises.

Through Mina's mastery of the cello, I examine ideas of the artist finding or losing their voice. The cello is both the 'natural' voice of the instrument and the sound produced by the player's technique. The musician plays the instrument, makes it sing, but who is ventriloquizing who? Could the non-human voice of the cello take over the performer?

The non-human also impacts on the novel's setting, a remote coastal region, where I determine how landscapes hostile to man can be best conveyed and their otherness expressed. I am particularly interested in the eerie quality of the East Coast and the sea wall in Brightlingsea. My writing investigates the possibility that there may be unseen agency at work. Connected to the non-human are also the

alien narratives of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*[43] and Joan Lindsay's, *Picnic at Hanging* Rock[44] and their attempts at creating the non-human without anthropomorphising the other. My book explores how the writer can convey an alien intelligence within the framework of language.

[43] Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (Fourth Estate, 2015).
[44] Joan Lindsay, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Vintage, 2013).

CHAPTER THREE: RESURRECTING THE DEAD

In my review of vampire film and literature my focus was to seek out examples where conventions of the genre have been challenged or reinvented. The most successful are where the vampire metaphor has been extended and allowed to embrace new possibilities. In this chapter I will look at the films and literature in horror that influenced me with new possibilities as well as methodologies I learned from and rejected.

The vampire is often characterised by the ability to transgress traditional categories, including those related to sexuality. Dracula feeds on both men and women, and at one point brings a baby back to the castle.[45] The complex reactions that people have toward this figure can be analysed through the concept of abjection.

Kristeva focuses on abjection in *The Powers of Horror*,[46] which is the human reaction to all that is grotesque, repulsive and threatening to the self. The abject state is one of betweenness. She cites birth trauma and the child's painful separation from the mother as the origin of this complex of contradictory feelings such as being both alive and dead, inside and outside at the same time. The bloodied baby half emerging from the vagina, entangled in the mother's organs, is according to Kristeva, our initiation into the abject.

It is this state of '"in-betweenness" that horror exploits, dramatizing the struggle to maintain this border between inner and outer, protecting us from contamination. The abject is an attempt to cast off the repulsive fragments from

[45] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Penguin Classics, 1993) 55.
[46] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror, An Essay in Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982)

within. This desire to “other” rather than own contradictory states underlie our fascination with the vampire, a creature both alive and dead, attractive and repulsive, old and young.

The abject creates in the subject a strange dance: “an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion.”[47] Horror books and films exert the same pull, the paradoxical pleasures of revolting delights. They are the building blocks of my novel. Vanberry in the novel combines childhood innocence and corruption. Vovoid is associated with flies and excrement. The most memorably abject episode is when Conrad breaks down the barrier between inner and outer and uses his guts as cello strings.[48]

If we apply Kristeva’s theory about the threats posed by this permeable boundary separating inner from outer, we might view horror cinema and the vampire as a way of policing this boundary. Horror breaks down definitions and categories only to redraw the boundaries in a primitive purification ritual.

GENERAL

My initial draft suffered from an inability to learn how the horror novel is structured, thinking I could go rogue and dispense with some of the solid world building and realism that horror relies upon. In my mind horror was essentially lumps of narrative carbohydrate that had to be ploughed through like dollops of mashed potato to get to the rewards: the tense moments of discovery. My novel was all Ritalin moments

[47] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 1.
[48] Jeffreys, *The Bathory Quartet,* 95- 96.

of revelation and heightened registers and this I will consider in the section on structure and the neurodivergent brain.

The slow-release mashed potato was in fact suspense, something I had to learn, but suspense could be boring. Was there a similarity between our physiological reaction to anxiety/stress by yawning[49] and the boredom like state of prolonged anxiety caused by the suspense in horror literature?

ROLE OF CURSED OBJECT

In Stephen King's most recent short story collection *You Like it Darker*, the novella *Rattlesnakes* exemplifies all the most formulaic and least scary aspects of horror writing. The story fails in my opinion because the cursed object which drives the plot has limited functionality.

A retired advertising exec, Vic Trenton, is isolating from COVID in a friend's McMansion in Florida Quays where he reflects on his wife's death (recently) and his son who died of dehydration many years ago. Tad's death was particularly horrible because he was marooned in a car, only a short distance from his home, blocked in by a rabid St Bernard. King is referring to the events of an earlier novel, *Cujo,*[50] where Vic was away in New York pitching an advertising idea leaving his wife and Tad at home. If Vic had been with his family the tragedy may never have happened.

Vic becomes interested in elderly, eccentric neighbour who wheels around an empty stroller with two seats which she tends and talks to, believing it carries her long dead infant twins who were stung to death by rattlesnakes. The twins are

[49] Bryan Gardiner, "Big Question: Why Do I Yawn When I'm Nervous or Stressed?" *Wired,* June 23rd, 2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/06/big-question-yawn-im-nervous-stressed.

[50] Stephen King, *Cujo* (Hodder Paperbacks, 2008).

attached to their dead stroller which becomes a cursed/uncanny object, the chosen site of their haunting. Vic is sympathetic towards his neighbour. The reader connects these two disparate adults both having experienced abnormally traumatic children's deaths.

Grief is a very common horror trope, an excellent means of destabilizing character and reality. Mina's grief in chapter one of my novel is a way of defamiliarizing the world. It is also the means in *Rattlesnakes* which gives the widower extra analytical insight into his neighbour, Alita, and attunes him to the possibility of other realities outside quotidian existence. The widower's continued mourning of his own son forges a communality of suffering between him and his crazy neighbour, allowing him to consider her "crazy" action as part of some coherent strategy. Alita dies suddenly and the stroller makes a connection with Vic. The dead twins sense Vic's grief about his own dead son and decide he will make an ideal adoptive parent

King's main innovation in this ghost story and it is a good one, is that the dead do not remain frozen in time where they are embedded, unchanging, in our memories but go on growing in some awful afterlife. The twins are no longer children but appear to Vic as swollen-necked and convulsing adults, still racked with the poison and agony of those rattlesnakes' bites that punctured their tiny bodies over forty years ago. Their child minds are still in control, telepathically urging Vic to "see us, roll us, dress us."[51] This adds another layer of horror since the ghosts

[51] Stephen King, "Rattlesnakes," in *You Like It Darker* (Hachette UK, 2024), 376.

possess the capricious, irrational aspect of children. They cannot understand their awful predicament. Not that anyone *could* really make sense of it but a functioning adult brain might be better suited to resilience. Their response like many children to not having their demands met when they telepathically urge Vic to push them through the neighbourhood, is of course, the tantrum.

The novella hinges on the uncanny object, the stroller, similar in many ways to an empty invalid chair, rolling into Vic's garage, presaged by the squeak of an unoiled wheel. Where the story disappoints is in the limitations of how the stroller, the cursed object, can scare the reader. The sound of a squeaky wheel which might set your nerves on end in an empty house (if your grandfather's wheelchair is abandoned in the attic and it is the anniversary of his violent death) is less effective on the page. The auditory phenomenon is less well suited to the Gothic's preferred mode of highly visualized scene setting. Rebecca Martin states in "I Should like to Spend my whole life reading it: Repetition and Pleasure of the Gothic" that 'the Gothic is unequivocally proto-cinematic, and this is especially noticeable in its customary staging of such spectacular scenes of human suffering.'[52] The very theatricality of the Gothic's set-pieces rely on cinematic immediacy, this is why the squeaky wheel is so disappointing.

The novella despite its musings on grief and how its slow poison seeps through adult lives like a snakebite or can rear up suddenly to strike when we think we are home and dry, is let down by the weakness of the cursed object.

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[52] Rebecca E. Martin, "'I Should like to Spend My Whole Life in Reading It': Repetition and the Pleasure of the Gothic." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 28, no. 1 (1998): 78, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225483.

The problem with *Rattlesnakes* may be the twin's invisibility, they only appear briefly to Vic. The reader is then left with the haunted machine. Not enough time is taken investing the stroller with its own discrete existence. It remains an empty pushchair carrying the story's emotional burden, the suffering of the dead twins, and creating a clash in the reader between the paltriness of the object and what it is meant to represent.

Horror relies heavily on cursed objects and category defying monsters to create its clanking machinery of fear; the serious emotional content of the story is in danger (perhaps like no other genre) in being undermined by the absurdity of the creature/cursed object. In *Rattlesnakes* the reader navigates passages of realistic prose while waiting for another squeak. Let me call this the 'squeaky wheel problem' - how does the writer engage in the emotional turmoil of the horror genre without losing credibility in their choice of supernatural agent?

The cursed object has a long history in horror, two examples that particularly influenced me is the haunted mirror episode directed by Robert Hamer in Ealing films portmanteau horror, *Dead of Night*.[53] In one of the episodes framed within the structure of a recurring dream, Joan gives her fiancée the buttoned-up and cigarette smoking Peter, an antique mirror that reflects back to Peter as he tightens his top button, a sumptuous stately room with a four-poster bed and roaring fire. The mysterious reality of the reflected room starts to absorb Peter, pulling him into the mirror's depths where we learn the previous owner, a bedbound invalid, accused his wife of adultery, killed her and then slit his throat in front of the antique looking

[53] *Dead of Night* directed by Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Deardon and Robert Hamer (1945; Ealing Studios, 2014), DVD.

glass. Peter's identity fragments as he takes on the moods and jealousies of the dead man. The cursed object is visually effective, the mirror flashing from what his fiancée sees, a modern London apartment, to Peter's view of the sumptuous, firelit interior bolstered by a crashing orchestral score, both revelatory and doom-laden. The mirror perfectly carries the emotional weight of the story, the anxieties of the couple about to be married, literally framing poor nervous Peter in one last bachelor fling with this haunted object. Peter perhaps might not be marriage material after all.

In many ways Peter's unwillingness to commit and abandon his bachelor existence suggests a secret self that is glimpsed in the mirror. The pull of secrecy is greater than his fiancée's enticements. Taking into account Robert Hamer's personal life and critical writing on the segment[54] writers have speculated on a homosexual undercurrent that informs Peter's mirror gazing and his lack of interest in his fiancée's wedding plans.

Peter has much in common with the solitary male narrators of M.R. James. These often lonely academics are driven through their curiosity to unearth a vast array of cursed objects that will have unfortunate and often life-threatening consequences. Innocuous seeming fragments from the past threaten to disrupt modernity, suggesting a fear of fragmentation. Andrew Smith states in *The Ghost Story*: "James projects a modernist idea of fragmentation back into the past.'[55] This is a particular thrill of the ghost story, the sense that the past is taking revenge on

[54] Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard. *British Cinema of the 1950s: A celebration*. (Manchester University Press, 2018), 77.

[55] Andrew Smith, "M.R. James's Gothic Revival," in *The Ghost Story, 1840-1920: A Cultural History* (Manchester University Press, 2010), 182.

the present. Or in James' case he's weaponizing the hated modernist fragment, turning it into a medieval relic and deploying it as explosive shrapnel to destroy the Edwardian households of his fiction.

The cursed object informs nearly all of M. R. James's ghost stories. James demonstrates real agility in smuggling scraps from the past into his characters' secluded lives. Most cunning to my mind is the pattern in the auctioned lot 486 that Mr Denton has copied for his curtains in *The Diary of Mr Poynter.*[56] Mr Denton's aunt seizes on the pattern, "she was right too, in thinking that these main bands resembled rippling – almost curling – tresses of hair."[57] This pattern will overflow the frame, in this case the curtain's borders and realistic narrative, creating uncanny tactile sensations when Mr Denton realises the fabric in his bedroom under his fingers is spouting hair. The curled lock of hair is a brilliantly concise image that conveys the delinquency and luxuriously corrupt lifestyle of Sir Everard Charlett "a very beautiful person…" who "constantly wore his own Hair, which was very abundant, from which, and his loose way of living, the cant name for him was Absalom."[58] Charlett designed the hangings of his chambers as a memorial to his magnificent hair, it is a scrap from this seventeenth century design that Mr Poynter purchases at auction.

James in this story combines the decadence of a seventeenth century cavalier (the lock of hair which is often a keepsake or a love token and suggests to the reader Everard's affairs) with the actual uncanny nature of hair itself-- hair is

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[56] M. R. James, "The Diary of Mr Poynter," in *Collected Ghost Stories* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 242.

[57] James, "The Diary of Mr Poynter," 246-247.

[58] James, 251.

made up of dead cells. The eruption of an unruly and undead cavalier past into Mr Denton's chaste and fusty present leads you to believe the horror is tailormade to offend Mr Denton's sensibilities.

What drew me to the cursed object is its unmaking nature, how uncontrollable sprouting hair disturbs the quiet pattern making tendencies of Mr Denton and his aunt. The unmaking effect is also seen in one of his most celebrated stories *Oh, Whistle, And I'll Come To You, My Lad*.

In this tale a cloistered academic, Parkins, is victimized by another fragment from the past: an entity summoned by an ancient whistle he excavates above a beach. Parkins books a room in a hotel on the East coast with a double-bed and a spare single bed but refuses Mr. Rogers, a contemporary, when he offers to accompany him. His refusal to share/participate leaves Parkins vulnerable to the supernatural which becomes especially ironic in the light of Rogers' parting remark, "I should do so nicely to keep the ghosts off."[59] Parkins unwittingly creates a sense of haunted vacancy by allowing himself to share a room with two empty beds where the sheets on the spare bed will get mysteriously entangled, mirroring his own restlessness.

Parkins is the Professor of Ontography (reality) and his dismissal of the supernatural will be tested. We find how fragile Ontography is and the props which keep it in place: "There were neither blinds nor curtains…when he noticed this he was a good deal annoyed, but, with an ingenuity, which I can only envy, he succeeded in rigging up, with the help of a railway-rug, some safety-pins and a stick

[59] James, "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You," 77.

and umbrella, a screen which if it only held together, would completely keep the moonlight off his bed…"[60]

Without blinds or curtains, the Professor will suffer the unmediated intrusion of the external world into his room; a level of reality he is reluctant to experience. This cobbled together protective screen is analogous to how the Professor and by extension the reader constructs reality. The flimsiness of its untested frame and the very provisional nature of the random objects (railway-rug, safety pins) seized upon to shore up beliefs and structures points to one of horror's abiding preoccupations: the individual's vulnerability in the face of hostile and more challenging realities. The Professor's mental acuity, nimble and improvisatory as it is, remains no match for the sequence of events he unwittingly unleashed by blowing into the cursed object. Likewise, the sceptical frame through which he views the world and his protective screen of beliefs, years in the making, can simply be undone: "In a moment he realized what had happened: his carefully constructed screen had given way, and a very bright frosty moon was shining directly on his face."[61]

The rational framework of the Professor's belief system is knocked down by a puff of wind. Now he is about to be inducted into the unmediated reality but only after the world has been 'unmade' and the Professor is free from old incumbrances to see his new position more clearly.

The cursed object exists in one of its most enduring manifestations in W.W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*, a tale that mingles the enchanted genie from *The Tales*

[60] James, 91.
[61] James, 91.

of the Thousand and One Nights[62] (with his ability to grant three wishes) and the impossibility of escaping the perversity of fate. Aladdin's lamp is transformed into a mummified monkey's paw brought back from colonial India, threatening the 'civilized' way of life in Laburnum villa.[63] *The Monkey's Paw* shares with *Dracula* the theme of reverse colonization. The colonized, a severed paw, seeks redress from the colonizers, contracting with life in a version of a diabolical handshake when Mr White makes his first wish.

The tale is neatly foregrounded with a father and son playing chess, a classic symbol of man controlling destiny. The father "possessed ideas about the game involving radical changes, putting his king into such sharp and unnecessary perils"[64] that he loses the game with bad grace. The father's possession of the monkey's paw despite the warnings of its previous owner, a colonial soldier, repeats his risky chess strategy; he imperils his family initiating a sequence of radical change in his first wish for £200. The perversity of the monkey god in its ability to both honour and thwart human wishes is made clear when Mr White receives £200 as compensation for the death of his son in an industrial accident. Tellingly his son, Herbert, is "caught in the machinery"[65] alluding to both the accident in the factory and the spinning flywheels of fate.

This cursed object tale is filled with images of visual immediacy, the monkey's face glowing in the coals of the fire after the first wish is made, a symbol of the colonized other, objectified and abject, but now having crossed over into the

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[62] "Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp," in *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights* translated by N.J. Dawood (Penguin Classics, 1973), 165-242.

[63] W.W. Jacobs, "The Monkey's Paw," in *The Oxford Book of Ghost Stories* ed. Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert (Oxford University Press, 2008), 180.

[64] Jacobs, "The Monkey's Paw," 180.

[65] Jacobs, 185.

hearth in its cradle of flames. The tale's visual suggestiveness and promise of lifting the veil on the borderland between life and death when the parents wish for Herbert's return is brilliantly handled. The mangled revenant whose body has been horribly crushed is wished away before the door is fully opened. In the tale's resolution the Gothic deploys its customary sleight of hand by *both* revealing and concealing. The phantom disappears into a cold wind avoiding an extended scene of graphic and grotesque horror at odds with the story's "prosaic wholesomeness."[66] The concealing of the horror leaves the reader with a blank canvas to paint their own hallucinatory version of Herbert's mutilated image in their mind, an image that we are encouraged to imagine by Mr White telling his wife their son was only recognisable by his clothes. The image builds in our mind while the thing knocks on the door and the bolt is drawn with difficulty.

The Bathory Quartet also utilizes a cursed object in the shape of the Cremonese cello. To avoid the 'squeaky wheel' problem I set out to convey the cello's powerful physicality, the living-dead quality of treated wood that still needs feeding like the living-dead hair sprouting in Mr Denton's bedroom. The object has a life-in-itself apart from human construction. The wood was formed by environmental pressures shaping its tone alongside the varnishes that enhance its sound, creating a living entity capable of many different responses. The heaping on of realistic and scientific detail was a deliberate attempt to draw the reader in to the human and non-human processes that go into instrument construction. It takes a lot of reality to create a little horror.

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[66] Jacobs, 184.

The result was to create an object that could carry the story's emotional weight. The cello is imbued with a level of consciousness, combining sap and chlorophyll, the sweat of the virtuosos who have played The Countess and the non-human life of storms and forests. My plan was that the instrument would grow in presence (I hesitate to use the anthropomorphic term personality) as the story unfolded. The unique aspect of all musical instruments is that they already have their own voice, their natural resonance. The cello's natural voice is a questioning and unravelling song that prepares the reader for the unmediated horror: the new realities that horror demands. The Gothic narrative requires a rich and complex voice to harness all its excessive energies. The story demanded a cursed object with the versatility and emotional registers that the cello provides.

The cello case is equally important. The case functions as an intrauterine space. The case is a variation on the vampire coffin representing Mina's desire to return to the womb. Creed refers to the "abject womb"[67] a common trope in horror films where "monstrous births play on the inside/outside distinction in order to point to the inherently monstrous nature of the womb as well as the impossibility of banishing the abject from the human domain."[68] The overlapping of the inner (birth fluids and blood) and outer, Mina as adult, are preserved in an unstable state, prone to dissolution, within the cello case. Creed states: "the womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life form which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination."[69] Mina's journey is her repeated attempts to enact a successful separation to free herself from the polluting womb

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[67] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1993), 49.
[68] Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine,* 49.
[69] Creed, 49.

and archaic mother. Mina's inability to forge a separate identity from the mother by symbolically getting in and out of cello cases throughout the novel represents her failed bids for autonomy. Her failure to enforce a successful separation leads to her reabsorption into the plush intrauterine lining of the cello case realised in the novel's final act.

The cello case allowed me to update the image of the travelling vampire coffin, sailing overseas from Eastern Europe to Middle Honing, combining the abject womb with the crumpled silk lining of a suitcase. Mina's peripatetic existence as a professional cellist removed from her homeland forces her into the cello case which offers both danger and refuge. Mina is a displaced person, without a real home, settling into the cello case/coffin with her few possessions. She has no ancestral earth to luxuriate in just souvenirs from past performances.

Even with the excesses of the Gothic style I did my best to exercise, not always successfully, restraint. In my first draft the story began with the history of the cello in an abandoned prologue. The wood of the cello was originally taken from the True Cross: the blood of Jesus soaked into the hungry cells of the woodgrain, altering its colour and creating an appetite in the wood for suffering. Ultimately, I decided the unrealities I was inflicting on the reader had to be tempered with much more reality. In literary horror I discovered the combination of a rich verbal style with the sudden immersion into extraordinary events can overwhelm readers and compromise pacing and credibility.

The texts I studied often used a circling device like the letters in *Frankenstein*[70] that act as a realistic buffer separating the reader from the

[70] Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008).

supernatural element. *Dracula* too begins with realistic travel reportage through Harker's journal entries where he writes of unpunctual trains and the spiciness of chicken cooked in paprika.[71] The spiciness slyly sets up the theme of thirst that will run throughout the novel. Harker's convincing domestic details (he must copy the recipe for Mina) go a long way in blurring the lines between fact and fiction, illustrating one of horror's preoccupations with passing itself off as real.[72]

There are interesting similarities between the first person "witness statements" of *The Woman in White*[73] and *Dracula* which point forwards to contemporary found footage horror movies. Stoker in his efforts to make his horror story real appears to have been influenced by Collins' use of first-person accounts in *The Woman in White*. These accounts emphasize the immediacy and 'authenticity' of Collins' authorial evidence gathering approach:

> Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness – with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most intelligible aspect.[74]

Bram Stoker adopted this technique in *Dracula*, assembling the material as if he were collating witness statements. Stoker discovered early on the importance of making the unreal real. Count Fosco the fascinating foreign villain of *The Woman in White* also shares some similarities with Count Dracula. Not only does he possess the foreign honorific and is a member of a shadowy organisation called The

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[71] Stoker, *Dracula*, 7–8.

[72] I assumed for years, as did many others, that the novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was based on a true story.

[73] Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford World's Classics, 1996).

[74] Collins, The *Woman in White*, 5.

Brotherhood dedicated to acts of murder, but he possesses the power of mesmerism which extends to his control over birds and mice.

The original prologue I wrote plunged the reader directly into the supernatural element, it was 'unearned' surrealism before the fictional world stabilized. I had no witness statements or authenticated papers! I rejected my initial beginning, deciding instead to go gently into the horror through Mina and casual mentions of The Bathory Quartet through soundtracks and archival recordings. It was as if all the fictional lies then could be substantiated. The first rule of horror is that normality must be established before challenging it with the uncanny.

VAMPIRE ANTECEDENTS

Readings of the vampire often focus on their supernatural aspects, agility and animality, the magnetic gaze, the romantic aspect of otherness, their shifting racial identity as writers respond to specific xenophobic fears. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is often read as a fear of reverse colonisation with anxiety focused on Jews and East Europeans. John Carpenter's film *Vampires*[75] and Roberto Rodriguez's *From Dusk till Dawn*[76] locates the threat in rural Mexico. However, the vampire's versatility means that they can be renewed in line with what Stephen King refers to as society's "phobic points."[77]National phobic pressure points are the cultural fault lines in our society, according to King, where our shifting anxieties reside.

[75] *Vampires*, directed by John Carpenter (1998; Columbia TriStar Home Video 1999), DVD.
[76] *From Dusk till Dawn,* directed by Robert Rodriguez (1996; Buena Vista International, 1998*)*, DVD.
[77] Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (Hodder Paperbacks, 2012), 18.

The horror writer reports back from these fault lines which have evolved over the years from radioactive monsters, *Attack of The Fifty Foot Woman*,[78] the threat of communism, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*[79] to yuppies flipping rural houses to make a quick profit, *The Amityville Horror*.[80] Immigration and the fear of the other have been a constant thread. Even themes of recolonization, seizing back from an immigrant community, have been examined in such films as *Vampires Vs. the Bronx*[81] where undead, white real estate tycoons are sucking the lifeblood out of the black community by gentrification. The vampire real estate moguls see themselves as the white saviours "cleaning up" a diverse and culturally exciting area by both killing and outpricing black and brown residents. Middle class gentrification is every bit as ravenous as Dracula with his ailing aristocratic bloodline.

Vampire as metaphor for economic bloodsucker takes us all the way back to the original Dracula, an economic migrant importing boxes of Transylvanian soil via Whitby and Purfleet to London while he builds up his real estate portfolio.[82] Karl Marx's quote about the 'sucking' effect of vampire economies adds to the horror: 'Capital is dead labour, that vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.'[83] This quote differentiates between dead

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[78] *Attack of the Fifty Foot Woman*, directed by Nathan Hertz (1958; Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

[79] *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*, directed by Don Siegel (1956; Universal Home Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

[80] *The Amityville Horror*, directed by Stuart Rosenberg (1979; MGM Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

[81] *Vampires vs. the Bronx,* directed by Osmany Rodriguez (Netflix, 2020), https://www.netflix.com/title/80998174.

[82] I am indebted to Mark Neocleous's article which started me thinking about uncanny capital. Neocleous, Mark. "The Political Economy of the Dead: Marx's Vampires." *History of Political Thought* 24, no. 4 (2003): 668–84. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26220011.

[83] Karl Marx Jr, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol 1, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, (Progress Publishers, 1887) 163, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf.

labour, labour being done and completed, and living labour, work in progress. Marx was a keen consumer of horror[84] and the quote hints at how the accumulated wealth of capital is literally the labour of *dead and decayed muscle*; every brick the transfer of a living person's lifeforce into monuments and buildings. The buildings remain, testament to a zombie workforce, lives expended in construction who magically live on since the capital remains uncannily alive. The dead workforce are now channelled into savings accounts and further transformed into consumer goods. The vampiric appetite to increase capital is built on consuming lives, turning biological existence into hard currency.

In my novel I sought to develop the vampire's economic origins and the idea of uncanny capital through *The Bathory Quartet's* smuggling operation. Coffins, transformed in my text into cello cases, are filled with contraband. The idea of the cello case stuffed with Magyar gold and children is influenced by old gangster films. The cello case is a travelling coffin allowing the undead and their victims to be couriered around the world. The vampire's transformative powers extend to their ease of converting children into capital through black market adoption rackets. In contrast to the vampire's restricted mobility, uncanny currency can cross borders either by electronic transfer or smuggling. The vampire with his shapeshifting powers may ultimately be able to translate himself into capital and travel by BACS transfer, travelling anywhere around the globe in three working days!

[84] Christopher Frayling explained, "Karl Marx enjoyed reading the horror tales of Hoffman and Dumas père for relaxation at bedtime. https://lithub.com/the-zombies-of-karl-marx-horror-in-capitalismswake/#:~:text=Writer%20Christopher%20Frayling%20explained%2C%20%E2%80%9CKarl,p%C3%A8re%20for%20relaxation%20at%20bedtime.

The vampire narrative has usually embraced technology from Dr Seward's wax cylinders and Lucy's blood transfusion in Bram Stoker's original to the tape-recording device favoured by1970's Dracula in Fred Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape*[85]. The main exception is *Salem's Lot* [86] where King writes in the introduction: "I saw a different world, one where all the gadgets Stoker regarded with such hopeful wonder had begun to seem sinister and downright dangerous."[87] It seems that in the most recent BBC retelling of *Dracula*[88] the story has returned to its technophile roots. Lucy Westenra is portrayed as a selfie obsessed party girl and Dracula swipes through photos of her friends searching for his next victim. In my novel I was keen to keep up with technological developments with the quartet investing in the virtual reality game, *Dark Forest* which would show foresight in 2014 when the novel is set.

The musicians' aggressive economic savvy finds its most horrific expression in the commodification of men, woman and children— where we see individuals, the quartet see organic matter to be churned and boiled down into their life-preserving ointment. The commodification of humanity, the processing and repackaging of individuals into gloop, gave the ointment uncanny properties. The horror that you can even be robbed of death and still be circulating in the marketplace seemed a suitably horrific violation of our rights. Such an act of pure and cynical evil was necessary to make my vampires interesting.

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[85] Fred Saberhagen, *The Dracula Tape* (Tor Books, 1975).
[86] Stephen King, *Salem's Lot* (Hachette UK, 2008).
[87] King, *Salem's Lot*, xiii.
[88] *Dracula* directed by Jonny Campbell, Damon Thomas, and Paul McGuigan (Hartswood Films, 2020), DVD.

THE BLISSFUL WOUND

Case asserts in "Tracking the Vampire" that "the taking on of the transgressive and the consequent flight into invisibility are inscribed in the figure of the vampire."[89] Queer theory is about breaching boundaries and not surprisingly has focused on the taboo-breaking vampire as a way of challenging heterosexist values. Most importantly it offers new possibilities in thinking about the wound in vampire fiction. One of the strategies of queer theory is that it "strikes the blissful wound into ontology itself."[90]The vampire in its collapsing of binary oppositions (life/ death, natural/unnatural) does not just puncture the neck but punctures notions of desire and reality.

The vampire in its unusual intermediate state can articulate same-sex desire as well as the voices of the marginalized. Negative experiences such as exclusion can be repurposed in the vampire story as a critique on binary choices. We might label these aspects of vampire fiction following on from Case's "blissful wound" as "the pleasures of the wound."

The vampire's ability to turn wounding preconceptions on their head is what continues to attract writers to reinvent their own vampires and empower the marginalized. In the recent novel *Woman, Eating*[91] Claire Kohda uses the vampire to investigate a young woman's eating disorder as she struggles to control her emotional and physical appetites.

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[89] Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," in *Feminist and Queer Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 67.

[90] Case, "Tracking the Vampire," 67.

[91] Claire Kohda, *Woman, Eating* (Virago, 2023).

Through Mina (a hybrid vampire herself and a descendant of Elizabeth Bathory) I could normalize her obsession with scab-eating and woundedness. The hallucinations of the trauma survivor, a world of sudden insight and cinematic imagery, influenced the physical details of Middle Honing. The 'wound' of neurodivergence manifested itself in a desire to overwhelm the reader with sensory stimuli bringing the marginal into the mainstream. The Bathory Quartet too were an attack on the family with their abduction of Mina and obsession with nourishment. They also gave me the opportunity to come up with an alternative creation myth where God is a suicide bomber.[92] The wound functioned in my novel as an opening to imaginary worlds.

Queer theory "revels in the discourse of the loathsome"[93] and like the vampire "the queer dwells underground."[94] The vampire is both a metaphor for underground beliefs as well as a literal embodiment of the underground dweller in their daytime hideouts in basement nests and crypts.

Case uses opera as part of her musical analogy: "the queer [exists] below the operatic overtones of the dominant: frightening to look at, desiring as it plays its own organ, producing its own music."[95] This quote catches the queer, masturbatory quality of creation. The creator playing on their own organ manufactures desire through the creative process. The creative chaos of Tony's workshop is another example.[96]

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[92] Jeffreys, *The Bathory Quartet,* 66.

[93] Case, 69.

[94] Case, 69.

[95] Case, 69.

[96] Jeffreys, 41: "We sat drinking in the workshop of creation, a satisfyingly filthy business with crumpled tissues dabbed in varnish and brown apple cores and nibbled crackers."

The camp aspects of opera have been absorbed into queer culture and become mainstream. This is highlighted in the episode *That's Amore* from the recent Amazon series *The White Lotus*[97]. The dying aria of *Madame Butterfly,* associated with queer longing in the melodramatic spectacle of suffering, provides cathartic release when the gay bon viveur Quentin holds hands in solidarity with the chaotic billionaire Tanya during a recital at Palermo's opera house. Tears stream down their faces in a very public outpouring of sadness as they sit in their box. The artificiality of the opera like the vampire bite opens a wound, where all forms of desire can be expressed in full view. The enacting of tumultuous emotions in opera is very similar to the safe space of horror where extreme mental states are depicted. We learn later that Quentin plans to kill Tanya and use her money to restore his palazzo. However, their mutual display of grief appears genuine rather than performative, highlighting the feeling/unfeeling dichotomy at the heart of my novel. Music supplies the emotion. When the music stops, Quentin can return to killing Tanya for her money.

In my approach to writing, I have borrowed from the rhythms and spectacle of opera. The unreal pasteboard sets are mentioned explicitly in chapter six[98] and form the super-real backdrop to the novels' emotional swells, the textual equivalent to the aria, when I describe the effects of the Countess's music.

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[97] "That's Amore," *The White Lotus,* season 2, episode 5, Amazon Prime, accessed June 29th, 2025, https://www.amazon .co.uk/gp/video/detail/B0B8NGQ3Q2/ref=atv_dp_season_select_s2.

[98] Jeffreys, *The Bathory Quartet*, 89.

CHAPTER FOUR/ EMOTIONAL DEPTH AND GRIEF

The vampire has evolved from their early illness and invasion stories to embrace almost any cultural shift, although immigration and post-colonial fears are still very much 'phobic points.' I am now going to look at a couple of films that influenced my writing.

Guillermo del Toro's *Cronos*[99] is the film that has had the most impact on my writing. There is a fluidity in the narrative of del Toro's first feature which fuses together alchemy, Catholicism, entomology and vampirism with the complex and emotionally satisfying relationship between Jesus Gris, the owner of an antique store in Mexico City, and his granddaughter, Aurora. Mrs Barwell is a character who is a repository of arcane knowledge and an occult practitioner, echoing some of *Cronos's* concerns. I also hoped to mirror the level of engagement between Jesus and Aurora with Mrs Barwell's relationship with her missing daughter.

The laws of genre aren't yet totally rigid in *Cronos*, allowing for more surprises and deviations; making it more satisfying than later del Toro films where well-worn genre conventions create predictability. My love of *Cronos* reflects my own genre anxieties and the contradictory pull to write within the lark cage of genre while resisting definition. *The Bathory Quartet* combines genre elements while remaining outside mainstream horror which might make it hard for the novel to find a home.

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[99] *Cronos,* directed by Guillermo del Toro (1992; The Criterion Collection, 2010), DVD.

Cronos as the name suggest is a meditation on time and the search for eternal life. Cronos in Greek mythology is a titan who devours his children, similarly the Cronos device drinks the blood of its possessors. Del Toro sees a correlation between blood and time; the possessors of eternal life must use their blood to lubricate and feed the worm inhabiting the inner workings of the horological mechanism.

An alchemist flees from the Inquisition to sixteenth century Mexico with a mechanical device: an artificial scarab that houses within the mechanism a living insect that draws blood when the device is attached to the host organism. Del Toro was astute in realising that marvels such as fantastically long lifespans boosted by hibernation are already a reality in the insect world:

> Maybe insects are God's favourite creatures? Christ walked on water, just like the mosquito does. And as for resurrection, it is not a strange concept to ants, to spider…They can remain inside a rock for hundreds of years until someone comes and set them free (del Toro 1993)[100]

This was the most intelligent reappraisal of the vampire mythos I have seen to date. Del Toro draws on zoological discoveries, demonstrating that resurrection is a fact of the insect world - a simple, non-spiritual process. It also allows Del Toro to originate a new vampire myth by transferring the vampire's agency from a human being to an unusually long-lived insect. This was my inspiration for the beetle brooches, taking a familiar creature and giving it an uncanny life. By combining the organic with a steampunk aesthetic, I was able to enrich the fantastic element in literary horror. The mechanized brooches are symbolic of non-human processes altering our lives.

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[100] Sorcha Ní Fhlainn, *Postmodern Vampires: Film, Fiction, and Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 147.

The scarab is hidden inside a rotted Archangel statue in Jesus's antique shop.[101] Jesus discovers the scarab when cockroaches crawl out of the statue's eye socket. Breaking the statue open, he accidentally activates the *Cronos* device and starts growing younger, developing a taste for blood.

Jesus Gris is a victim of a horological vampire, the worm that is entrapped and entraps its possessors in the flywheels of the clocklike device. The vampire is both outside time and locked in time. The break in temporal reality underpins Caruth's writing on trauma which she describes as a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world."[102]

The stopped clock in Cronos is symbolic of the traumatic event, the unmediated experience that was too overwhelming to be assimilated. When the device starts again this symbolizes consciousness returning on the other side of the breach in time/ being. The gap between when the clock stops and starts is the period of unrecoverable time, the traumatic experience. Presumably the device will go on functioning forever enacting the pattern of stopping and starting as each new user dies or is robbed of the mechanism. Each death of the user enacts the unknowable nature of trauma. The time locked like the worm in the mechanism constitutes a growing and repetitive iteration of traumatic episodes.

Gris after applying the device becomes a repository, like all vampires, for storing up time. After one bite from the horological spider, he steps from the finite

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[101] The role of the antiques shop in disseminating cursed objects in horror films and literature cannot be underestimated. *From Beyond the Grave* (1974) where Peter Cushing camps it up to Barlow and Straker Antiques in Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (1975) and later *Needful Things* (1991) the name of the shop of cut-price curios where cursed object corrupt their owners. The flow of otherworldly charms and talismans seems unstoppable.

[102] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 4.

linearity of a human lifespan into an unending reservoir of time. Gris shares the traumatic compulsion of all vampires to fixate on the wound and either repeatedly reapply the mechanism or bite others. He becomes a stranger to himself, a breach in his self has occurred,

Returning from the dead after being pushed off a hillside in a car he becomes a paradigm for the trauma survivor who is caught up in a double telling: "the oscillation between *the crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*," [103] although we might prefer to call Gris's continued existence "unlife." Gris must now deal with the incomprehensibility of his survival. We could apply Caruth's intriguing idea we explored with Mina, that the unexpected nature of his death has left him without a witness and from now on his mind (possibly forever) will be stuck in its inability to process the event.

Gris's resurrection appears to hold off decay rather than rejuvenate him since his body is marked with the ravages of his accident underneath the embalmer's ghastly paint. The crisis of death has marked his resurrected body. Time conversely both expands into immortality and contracts around the narrow focus of the vampire's compulsion to feed when Gris is forced to repeatedly enact the trauma of his initial wound.

We are invested in the prolonging of Jesus's life because of his guardianship and close attachment to his granddaughter but we wonder whether his new compulsions will erode his humanity. The granddaughter adapts to becoming Jesus's carer during his transformation. As his vampiric self emerges his old grey

[103] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 7.

(gris) skin peels away revealing a white larval covering. In a touching moment she removes her toys from her toy chest so Jesus can use it as a temporary refuge from sunlight. Their reciprocal relationship built on tenderness was an unusual addition to vampire cinema.

The loss of innocence and the role of child as protector are major themes in my novel. Evie the ghost child guides her mother Mrs Barwell, leaving clues (the harpy statuette) and taking her by the hand to comfort her for her loss. The Roman children also comfort Mrs Barwell. Mina remains like Vanberry frozen in her traumatized childhood self. In later life, she seeks out maternal figures such as Ramona and Mrs Barwell who she hopes will thaw out/ resurrect these undead but lost facets of her identity. Without a protector she falls for the partly reflective image of the young Elizabeth Bathory in the mirror in Ramona's loft. The mirror image is the abject mother calling her back into the womb.

One of my main problems in my novel was allowing the reader to draw closer, campness and a ready quip were at hand to prevent intimacy. I was hardwired to disregard feeling. My first third person draft focused on Barry Schwarz, a spectacularly unsuccessful music promoter who unwittingly through a desire to make it big, hires The Bathory Quartet, ignoring warnings about their history, and brings disaster to an East Coast village. My own will-less existence was seeping disastrously into my fiction. William Gass in *Finding a Form* has this to say about the writer Robert Walser: "Walser's narrators… have become will-less wanderers, impotent observers of life, passive perceivers of action and passion.

Only on the page will the will risk the expression and exercise of its considerable means."[104]

Walser's ability to make the insignificant unique particularly in the collection *Berlin Stories*[105] shows a skilled writer whose lightness is never frivolous. I tried for Walser's lightness of touch but in my case of will-lessness the writing was all frivolity. I felt like one of his narrators, a passive perceiver not only in life but on the page where I merely repeated the stasis of my domestic routine. I wondered whether as a result of childhood trauma I would ever overcome this lack of will. Hunkered down in myself, I was reluctant to emotionally engage and my characters, as a result, lacked feelings. The choice of horror satisfied my need to feel more, suggesting that I actually felt less. How else could I take pleasure in watching people die in hundreds of different ways unless I fundamentally lacked empathy?

Cronos is one of the few vampire films that demonstrates real emotional depth. It taught me that the camp aspect of other vampire films could be entertaining without being emotionally engaging. After *Cronos* the slick productions – you can hardly blame the undead for being soulless – lost their appeal. What initially drew me to the vampire may well have been the lack of feeling, the campness and cape swishing that often denied an inner life to victim and abuser.

But that lack of empathy was impoverishing the reading experience. Did I lack basic feelings or were they long buried for self-protection? Horror was both a cape to shelter under as well as a debilitating late-night habit. *Cronos* made it clear

[104] William H. Gass, *Finding a Form: Essays* (Cornell University Press, 1997), 75.
[105] Robert Walser, *Berlin Stories* (NYRB Classics, 2012).

you could write horror with emotional depth and that real world anxieties were the basic building blocks.

Thomas Ligotti's short story *Last Feast of Harlequin*[106] is an example of how to achieve this emotional depth in a short story. Ligotti builds on real anxieties in this case depression/seasonal affective disorder in his description of a town that undergoes a "winter metamorphosis."[107] Depressive illness and the peculiar "subseason"[108] that surrounds the sufferer is dramatized with the authentic feel of painful lived experience. Here again we see horror asserting its authenticity in its scholarly discussion of illness through the mouthpiece of an anthropologist narrator. The narrator with an interest in the history of clowning stumbles on the trail of his missing professor who has disappeared (rumoured to have gone native) in a secretive clown festival in the midwestern town of Mirocaw (a name both suggestive of a parrot and a miracle). The circular story of pursuit and pursuer with the professor now the high priest of a clown cult having left clues to lure his student to Mirocaw mirrors the circularity of seasonal affective disorder. Horror finds a unique way of communicating depression. A heroic attempt to stave off the winter blues is set against an unusual cult of worm-worshipping clowns; a company of strangely will-less men drifting mirthlessly about town enact a performance of sadness that induces fear not laughter in the locals. The riddle they pose is "what buries itself before it is dead?"[109] The answer is both the depressive and the earthworm. Ligotti

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[106] Thomas Ligotti, "Last Feast of Harlequin" in *Songs of a Dead Dreamer and Grimscribe* (Penguin Classics, 2015).

[107] Ligotti, "Last Feast of Harlequin," 266.

[108] Ligotti, 266.

[109] Ligotti, 284.

finds an imaginative analogy for the depressive state of mind which is another form of premature burial. The Freudian death drive is both reflected in the cult members embracing "the conqueror worm"[110] in the prime of life and the painfully slow movement of Ligotti's prose, leading not to resolution but a recognition that no matter how far the narrator travels from Mirocaw, he will always remain one of the worms.

When I returned to the final draft of *The Bathory Quartet,* Mrs Barwell and her missing child emerged out of the writing process. Drawing on my own anxieties about the loss of my own daughter I was able to communicate that fear to the reader. An exploration of such serious loss provided the emotional heft to move the story forward. The writing demanded patterns and symmetry that operated on an unconscious level.

It was only upon a recent rereading that I recognised the novel's controlling idea as follows*:*

> Any attempt to escape a traumatic past inevitably results in confronting an even more profound and ongoing nightmare.

The nightmare the novel articulates is the trauma of a lost childhood and the search for lost children. Mrs Barwell struggles to reproduce her child by magic. Mina attempts to unearth her lost childhood so she can integrate the missing parts and locate the break in time. Mina cannot outgrow her sense of stifled disconnectedness until she resurrects the ghost-child inside her. Mina's forgotten childhood in the orphanage and the extinction of part of her personality through protective amnesia

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[110] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Conqueror Worm," in *The Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Charles Griffin and Company, 1880) 100-101.

is balanced by the physical loss of Evie in the *Mrs Barwell/ Village Voices Ensemble*. Mrs Barwell's attempt to bring her back is initiated by Mina playing *The Lazarus Suite* in Part One.[111]

The other major innovation in *Cronos* was the total re-imagining of the vampire as clockwork insect. The search for immortality leads to the non-human with the advantages of insect biology trumping medical intervention. I couldn't imagine how to dramatize vampires when so much has already been written of their agility, charisma and revulsion without recourse to the non-human. My vampire text would have to find different ways of describing a vampire bite.

The beetle brooches were my innovation in the horror genre to link the vampire bite to both an insect sting and injection. The hallucinatory appeal of the beetles allowed me to summon up the teeming and glittering visions produced by De Quincey's opium use[112] and mix them with the pleasures of the needle in the Reverend's narration. The brooches put the characters in jeopardy while prickling the reader into a continued awareness of puncturing and self-harm. They evolved from a series of images conveying puncturing. At Ingatestone House a horror movie is playing in the background of a vampire sizzling on a sunbed while Mina is practising staking green olives with cocktail sticks, a bathetic reminder of impalement.[113] More Vlad Tapas than Vlad Tepes.

The hypodermic quality of the church spire is described with its potential to deliver a 'feeling-fix'[114] to God if there is one, the ship's rigging too transforms into a

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[111] Jeffreys, 27.
[112] Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (Penguin Classics, 1986).
[113] Jeffreys, 26.
[114] Jeffreys, 52.

needle[115] and finally the beetles with long ovipositors and stingers burst on the scene.

They represent a sudden self-harming need to puncture the fictional dream, reinvigorate the world with a dramatic sting, arousing reader and writer from the sedate narrative torpor of realistic prose. The sting allows access to a heightened written register, while seizing back control of the project and reinfusing it with pleasure. My hope was to structurally embed within *The Bathory Quartet* the psychological drive to self-harm and mirror its effects in prose.

DISRUPTION AND GRIEF IN HORROR

The final film in this section I would like to examine is *The Babadook*[116] directed by Jennifer Kent. Again, this film was important in showing me how emotional intelligence elevates horror while conveying truths about grieving and trauma. In my writing I was hoping to demonstrate a similar level of emotional engagement with Mina and Mrs Barwell.

In an interview on his *Nightmare Network* Ligotti says: "The supernatural only interests me in its experiential aspect, its power to *disrupt* our lives, and its symbolic value in alluding to the monstrous insanity of all creation."[117] This is a useful explanation of why the horror genre offers certain advantages in portraying the reality and extremely disruptive distress of mental states like grief, anxiety and trauma. We don't have to believe in the sasquatch, Cthulhu or the vampire, although unreality must erupt from a realistic starting point (I have lost track of the amount of

[115] Jeffreys, 156.
[116] *The Babadook*, directed by Jennifer Kent (2014; Icon Home Entertainment, 2015), DVD.
[117] "The Nightmare Network," accessed July 4th, 2025, https://www.ligotti.net/tlo/faq.html.

times Stephen King in his novels and short stories has described the textures of roads, predominantly blacktops, taking the time to convincingly world build). Horror is very good at authenticating its sources with found footage or first-person witness statements. Horror requires us to believe in the basic set up where characters respond in a realistic and relatable manner to the super real. What horror offers is the opportunity of proving a character's mettle in extreme circumstances, the disrupting event. Stephen King says something similar:

> In every life you get to a point where you have to deal with something that's inexplicable to you, whether it's the doctor saying you have cancer or a prank phone call. So whether you talk about ghosts or vampires or Nazi war criminals living down the block, we're still talking about the same thing, which is an intrusion of the extraordinary into ordinary life and how we deal with it. What that shows about our character and our interactions with others and the society we live in interests me a lot more than monsters and vampires and ghouls and ghosts.[118]

Aside from its visceral stench and gore, horror often demonstrates the protagonist's courage and ingenuity against almost impossible odds. As a device to explore grief and anxiety horror seems a more versatile genre since it has recourse to nightmare and hallucinations; distortions of a character's inner life give birth to *actual* monsters within the horror movie, such as in *The Babadook* which I will examine below. Horror specializes in disruption and is better able to convey the effects of arbitrary violence on normal people, people who until the moment of disruption assume that the universe is constructed on benign or at least non-malicious principles.

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[118] Stephen King, "The Art of Fiction No.189," interview by Nathaniel Rich and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, *Paris Review,* no. 178 (Fall 2006). https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5653/the-art-of-fiction-no-189-stephen-king.

All the creatures invented from the Wendigo to the werewolf are ways of exploring powerful emotional states and are often aspects of ourselves: types of emotional turmoil made flesh. They are our stand-ins for nightmarish real-life experiences such as isolation and savagery. The monster represents many things. Cohen asserts monstrosity can be used as a way of control and "stands as a warning against exploration."[119] He describes the monstrous fish on the edges of medieval maps as deterrents used by merchants to protect their trade routes.[120]Monsters not only threaten us in the external world but inhabit our internal one too. If we examine the grotesque marginalia in psalters when monks doodled, we see how closely we coexist with the monstrous: "The monster is the incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – all of those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within."[121] With the ever-present possibility of slipping into aberration it is no wonder that the border between us and the beyond is tightly policed, feeding our fear of cultural difference and immigration. The outside is inside of us. If a war were to start in our own country, then we would be the displaced.

The monster, like the vampire of queer theory, exists in an "ontological liminality."[122]The horror film acts as a ritual reinforcement of the boundaries that have been transgressed, restoring order by shelving the books in the correct sequence. The monster in its crazy hybridization is an attack on our binary thinking, thwarting our attempts at categorisation. Elizabeth Bathory, a Protestant ruler during

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[119] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 12, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttsq4d.4.

[120] Cohen, "Monster Culture," 13.

[121] Cohen, 7.

[122] Cohen, 6.

a pro Catholic Counter-Reformation, represented a crisis in categorisation for her contemporaries. Recent research[123]suggests she kept a printing press in her castle and was disseminating knowledge rather than torture devices. The metamorphosis into monster was swift.

Grief is another staple in horror that opens a wound into the monstrous. Grief is well suited to the genre because of the disjunction between the character's internal reality and the external goings on in the world. With grief there is a sense of seepage, that the grief cannot be contained and flows into the world, distorting our view. The boundaries that we ritualistically redefine to keep monstrosity at bay are imperilled. Kristeva's notion of the abject explores this barrier:

> Abjection is without doubt a frontier, but it is above all ambiguity. Because although it demarcates, it does not radically detach the subject from what menaces it – on the contrary it shows it to be in perpetual danger.[124]

The mechanism with which we throw out these abject and contradictory crumbs to retain our identity is the process through which many Gothic villains are created. This human need runs parallel with the horror film's role in enacting purification rites by first dissolving and then reinforcing those boundaries. *The Babadook* explores the breakdown between life and death as Amelia tries to assimilate the grief of her husband's death in a car crash which is followed closely by the birth of her son. Life and death are seen as overlapping, breaching Amelia's boundaries. The film charts

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[123] Anouchka Bayley, *The Blood Countess* (Matador, 2023).

[124] Julia Kristeva and John Lechte, "Approaching Abjection," *Oxford Literary Review*, vol 5, no.1/2 (1982): 132, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43973647.

Amelia and her son's attachment to the object that menaces them before finally confining the Babadook in the basement, redrawing the boundaries between life and death once again.

Grief is what I would categorise as a prime unmaking experience since the world must be refashioned to accommodate the absence of a loved one; it might involve temporary measures, the suppression of the bad news (the equivalent of stopping up the cracks under your doors with draught excluders) but eventually you will need to rebuild.

In Millar and Lee's "Horror Films and Grief" [125]where they consider *The Babadook* in a three-stage paradigm of loss, disruption, defeat either through evasion or taming, they assert that the use of monsters in horror makes the genre particularly adaptable to dealing with as well as managing grief:

> Horror is well suited to represent the experience of grief, in particular because the disruptive effects of horror "monsters" on protagonists mirror the core experience of disruption that accompanies bereavement. Second, horror offers ways in which the experience of grief can be contained and regulated and, in doing so, may offer psychological benefits for the bereaved.[126]

[125] Becky Millar and Jonny Lee, "Horror Films and Grief," *Emotion Review* 13, no. 3 (2021):174, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/17540739211022815.

[126] Millar and Lee. "Horror Films and Grief," 172.

THE BABADOOK

The Babadook has both a disrupting monster and a disrupting bereavement. Horror further increases the rupture at the heart of grieving by depicting shocking and grisly deaths. In fact, the first scene of *The Babadook* is Amelia's traumatic dream where she relives the death of her husband Oskar in a car crash as they drive to hospital. Amidst bright blinding lights and a close-up of Amelia hyperventilating, we infer she is giving birth or about to give birth. The disrupting event is really two traumatic experiences in one: death of husband and presumably birth of child in car-wreck or hospital.

This contradictory state of being both in life and death signals the abject. The child is born of death: the father's frantic drive to hospital as Amelia goes into labour is the reason he crashes. The Babadook is an abject object, a product of Amelia's anger and guilt, mixed with resentment for the son that survives and displaces the father. Amelia, unable to resolve the contradictions surrounding the birth of her son, splits off the abject fragments that threaten cohesion into the Babadook. The Babadook like all good monsters has a collaged, improvisatory quality. The one-dimensional flatness is especially appropriate since the monster originates in children's illustration.

Amelia is roused from her dream at the film's beginning by her son calling for her (he is also experiencing a nightmare); we see her falling from a great height back on to her bed, a classic image of an out of body experience, revealing a dissociative state which is often recorded in trauma survivors. Amelia like Juan Gris in *Cronos* suffers a break in the way she experiences time as her mind replays the accident in her dreams. The shock of the car accident is a classic example of trauma because of the speed of the occurrence. The accident is "experienced too

soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors."[127] Caruth stresses the way the trauma remains unassimilated, something that is not known yet resides within the body. The trauma manifests itself in incomprehensible hallucinatory flashes which the horror film is well suited to portray in jump scares of the Babadook. Amelia was not prepared in time to deal with the car crash which her dream repeats, confronting her in Caruth's theory with the blankness of her original, missing response. Caruth argues that it is the waking from the dream that is "identified with the reliving of the trauma."[128]The near-death experience carries with it an oscillating and abject sense of overlapping life and death. Caruth describes this flashback as "not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival."[129]

Amelia's new life as a sleep deprived, single mother is further tested by Sam's recurring nightmares. She will need to rebuild her reality but the process takes time:

> Revising all of one's taken-for-granted beliefs about the world, and learning to live in a new reality, is likely to be a painstaking and slow process. Focusing on the profound disruption characteristic of grief seems to support the idea that grief is not (by necessity) characterized by a coherent narrative structure.[130]

The disruption of grief which is a complete rebuilding of your private world has an unruly and uncontrollable quality. When a close friend died prematurely, I noticed the break in temporal reality. In the middle of customer inquiries in the library I found

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[127] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 4.
[128] Caruth, 64.
[129] Caruth, 64.
[130] Millar and Lee, 172.

myself zoning out, drifting back to our last meeting, fixating on details of what we ate. In my lunch hour I would suffer from hallucinatory jump scares, seeing the red gloss of his dyed hair swinging from the window of a passing car.

I found myself feeling sad for him when it was raining in the cemetery, thinking he will be cold and wet and miserable. Should I take up an extra duvet to wrap him in? It didn't seem right him suffering on top of being dead. On one level I knew it was nonsense, an attempt to keep the psychic pylons connecting us in working order, to still think of him, however sadly, as a cold, miserable person under the earth rather than acknowledge he wasn't there at all. Death was overlapping life. When it rained the thought returned. It felt self-indulgent and silly, but I was trying to weave him into a narrative of continued existence. Coincidentally at the same time I embarked on some large doorstopper fiction; *East Lynne*[131] by Ellen Wood, *The Way We Live Now*[132] by Anthony Trollope and Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan.*[133] The disruption of grief in my case occasioned a massive hunger for narrative. Sensation fiction like horror was a wake-up call to my nervous system. The important thing was to feel *anything.* All that matters is that you feel.

The disruption and incoherence of grief may benefit from a narrative structure being imposed upon it. Both external stories and my internal fantasies, where I was still able to sense my dead friend's needs, helped contain my feelings. Millar and Lee go on to say how narratives are important in giving meaning to the broken

[131] Ellen Wood, *East Lynne* (Oxford World's Classics, 2008).
[132] Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* (Penguin Classics, 1994).
[133] Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan* (Methuen, 1895).

world: “Narratives can be used a tool to restore coherence to a world that has been irrevocably changed.”[134]

Amelia as a single parent struggles to deal with Samuel and his worsening nightmares; we sense she blames Samuel for Oskar’s death. The resentment curdling under nights of disrupted sleep. Death has touched them both, doing what horror does best: opening a conduit from a monstrous reality into the everyday. Samuel is the opening, the wound into grief, the living reminder of the father through certain shared features that triggers Amelia’s anger.

The young boy is interested in magic, wearing a magician’s cape and hat. Aspects of the magician’s fancy dress becomes a shorthand for the Babadook, a monstrous representation of grief itself. The shared cape of both boy and monster indicates, like trauma, that the Babadook partly resides in the boy without him being aware of it. The monster is a composite creature: elements of Mr Hyde, Jack the Ripper and Edward Scissorhands are reflected in the monster’s long cape, top hat, silhouette and very nasty set of claws. The magical attributes confirm that grief is a disruptive trickster capable of distorting reality. Amelia glimpses the Babadook’s uniform in places of supposed safety, hanging on the back of the door at the police station. The suggestion is that grief can embody harmless empty forms, shapeshift with a series of everyday objects, plunging the grief-stricken into full blown panic at a moment’s notice.[135]

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[134] Millar and Lee, 173.

[135] Freudian theory on trauma describes the onset of symptoms after the “incubation period.” Amelia’s hallucinations indicate she is now suffering from “traumatic neurosis.” She has experienced trauma’s weird temporal latency, the delayed response before the onset of psychical symptoms.

Magic also leads us to enchantment, another layering of reality. In an early shot we glimpse an old poster for a magician in Sam's bedroom, the writing on the poster says *Do the Spirits Come Back?* Magic might be an obvious solution to a child, since its most powerful spells relate to vanishing and bringing back. The magician's skills point towards the possibility of resurrection. Samuel is trafficking in taboo things; on one level his innocent childhood activities are helping him work through the tragedy of an absent father but in terms of horror he is pushing ever wider the portal for the monster to step into his world. Sam's instincts may be correct, urging a confrontation with an uncanny force is the way forward to acceptance and healing.

The Babadook illustrates a crucial aspect of traumatic behaviour, the desire to reenact traumatic episodes in the present unaware of their deeper meaning. Freud examines the issue of repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* when watching his grandson play a game of *fort* (gone) and *da* (here).[136] The child threw toys away from him and retrieved them while saying *fort* and *da.* The game was designed to reenact the departure of his mother and her happy return. Freud noticed after a while that his grandson more frequently completed the first part of the game -- throwing the toys away or playing *fort* with them. The grandson was compelled to reenact departure. Critics have interpreted the child's behaviour as an attempt to gain mastery over a traumatic situation, bolstering his sense of self for future separations. The child through creative play is preparing for his eventual mother's death and his survival afterwards. The child acquires mastery over the

[136]Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* translated by James Strachey (W.W. Norton and Company, 1961) 8-10.

traumatic episode by creative intervention. The element of creative play is crucial to assimilating trauma.

Sam's magic tricks in *The Babadook* can also be seen as re-enactments of vanishing and retrieval, working through his father's catastrophic disappearance through creative play. The top hat which the Babadook wears represents a magic hat, the cylindrical vacuum from which the magician plucks rabbits, doves and bouquets of flowers. The hat acts as both a symbol for departure *and* return. However, unlike Freud's grandson's focus on death and departure, the supernatural element in the film allows for a resurrection of the father, a return from death albeit in an altered form.

In *The Bathory Quartet* Mina suffers from repetition compulsions as she unsuccessfully tries to assimilate her trauma. She climbs into a suitcase and various cello cases re-enacting her failure to separate from her mother. She attacks her skin as if to break down the barrier between inner and outer, her hands act independently of her body, ritualistically unmaking the world and herself. Caruth mentions in her analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour*[137] that the woman narrator's refusal to accept the death of her German lover is "carried out in the body's fragmentation, in the separation of the hands from the rest of her corporeal self"[138]as they scrape against the walls of her prison.

The unspoken resentment between Amelia and Sam mould *The Babadook's* peculiar monster. A mysterious book about a terrifying creature, the Babadook, appears on Samuel's bookshelf. Amela destroys it but it only returns on her

[137] Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Calder Publication ltd, 1966).
[138] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 31.

doorstep. The analogy about trying to bury grief is clear. She cannot exorcise her feelings by destroying the book and burrowing under the duvet. Denial is not an option, rather her grief returns even more powerfully. No longer a two-dimensional picture book but a living creature. The grief-creature bursts into her world, crawling across the ceiling-rose.

Millar and Lee explain how horror is well suited with the intrusion of the monster (with the physical and emotional damage it unleashes) to mirror the original shock of bereavement:

> Disruption to assumptive worlds is a core feature of horror narratives…there is a parallel between the disruptive experience of grief for the bereaved and the disruptive effect of a monster's entry into the protagonist's life.[139]

The advent of the monster embodying grief (the double disruption) allows horror to symbolically and viscerally show the changing hourly battles with grief whereas in a realistic mode, scenes such as moping, distraction, the feeling of waiting around for something but not knowing what may appear undramatic. Grief in reality may make your stomach clench but it might not make for suspenseful viewing.

Amelia swallows down the creature becoming possessed by grief, furious and enraged. The monster demands the sacrifice of her son. At this point Amelia's perspective fragments into incoherence in line with people's experience of grief and the loss of a narrative. We watch her pupils widen and contract as she channel hops through a diet of late-night horror, an incoherent stream of monsters and resurrected bodies. This is a popular trope in horror films where often other horror

[139]Millar and Lee, 174.

films are playing in the background, highlighting the recycling of ideas while paying homage to favoured directors.

Finally, the Babadook is vanquished in a scene that may be psychologically convincing but is visually disappointing. A similar ending is played out in both *The Stand*[140] and *Needful Things.*[141] After the protagonist has been beaten and is on the verge of being destroyed by a destructive and super powerful entity (in *The Stand* the adversary Randal Jarrell is linked to the devil, in *Needful Things* the antique shop owner is also a demon, possibly the devil again) the evil is often dismissed by a frankly childish iteration from the hero/heroine along the lines of: 'I don't believe in you/ I am no longer afraid.' Amazingly, that is enough to banish the previously unstoppable force. Amelia's version of not allowing the Babadook headspace is to shout, "get out of my house, you are trespassing!" The creature goes full circle from its beginnings as a suspected figment of the imagination, to becoming embodied (with other characters confirming its existence) and then disappearing like a puff of smoke.

Luckily *The Babadook* doesn't end there. We cut to Samuel's birthday, the same day as the anniversary of his father's death. Pink blossoms are blooming, and a well-adjusted mother and son are gathering worms in the garden. The worms are for the Babadook. Are they the father's birthday treat?

Tellingly, the creature is kept in the basement, buried deep within the foundations of their home – an integral part of the domestic landscape. Unusually, the Babadook is not vanquished but tamed. Amelia must live alongside grief – not

[140]Stephen King, *The Stand* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011).
[141]Stephen King, *Needful Things* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011).

only accept it as part of her newly remade world but maintain it by regular feeding. One aspect of grief is the maintenance of memories, not bagging up all reminders for the charity shop but keeping the dead alive by active reminiscence. Or if we follow Amelia's example, we can curate a space in our minds secure as a basement to contain all the contradictory feelings that bereavement leaves behind. The ending also demonstrates how the monster is contained within the house, indicating that the monster resides within us. It is better to reach an accommodation with these fragments of ourselves, rather than cast them out and wait for their inevitable return. The abject has been tamed allowing the boundaries between life and death to be redrawn in the domestic space. The horror narrative allows us to contain the feelings of anger and loss, not by characters saying "there there…time is a great healer… we'll get through this…" but by showing people at the cutting edge of emotional extremity and allowing the viewer an outlet.

In Millar and Lee's study into "Horror Films and Grief" they make the point that the physiological changes associated with grief are also caused by fear:

> Research has shown that acute grief is associated with stress responses, much like fear, rendering it unsurprising that there are certain similar physiological effects involved. For example, grief is associated with elevated heart rate and blood pressure, and an increase in the stress hormone cortisol.[142]

Within the frame of *The Babadook* the viewer is experiencing the grief of Amelia through their fear response: shortness of breath, increased heart rate, enabling a greater empathetic connection. Horror is uniquely placed to offer a commentary and a respite from mental states:

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[142] Millar and Lee, 176.

> Horror films … are well placed to scaffold a bereaved subject's emotions: they can "give voice" to experiences characteristic of grief due to their ability to represent the experience… and play a regulatory role. In particular, they seem to be effective in providing a temporary narrative structure to one's emotional experience. While grief may often be characterized as involving a lack of narrative coherence, films provide a narrative structure, and this may help to shape our emotional experience.[143]

By containing powerful emotions in the satisfaction of a narrative, where we see patterns and development as Amelia moves through rage to a realistic compromise with grief, the audience is allowed a coherence that is lacking in life. The shellshocked Amelia makes sense of her survival through her struggles with the Babadook. Amelia is able through the intervention of the Babadook to assimilate what appears unassimilable – the shocking death of her husband. The Babadook influenced my practice and approach to trauma.

The horror film is expertly placed to investigate the traumatic space between knowing and not knowing through hallucinatory flashes and temporal disruptions. Drawing on these devices I wanted to show the reader the frightening experiences of the trauma survivor and their attempt to recover meaning from an event that happened too fast without them being present. The trauma survivor is caught up in their very own ghost story, searching for a part of themselves.

[143] Millar and Lee, 178.

CHAPTER FIVE: PRACTICE

The regulatory function of horror in terms of emotional management has parallels with self-medicating. It may seem contradictory that Gothic literature and horror that derive so much of their power from excess, what we might call emotional mismanagement, can lead to calm and resolution. Is it down to the narrative scaffolding? What is true of grief also seems relevant to anxiety.

The Gothic is the natural home for fiction that deals with strong emotions ranging from dejection and exaltation and back again. It is a where a depressive might turn to counteract a lack of affect, a sense of numbness. Elinor a jilted bride who appears in *Melmoth the Wanderer* also acts very much like the ideal Gothic reader. Dealing with her abandonment at the altar after which her life has become "mere mechanism,"[144] she struggles in vain for a renewal of that "cold mediocrity,"[145] the happy medium that has zero appeal to the Gothic temperament. No Gothic heroine or reader worth their salt could accept life under such niggardly terms; their only real recourse is more extremity and Gothic fiction.

Elinor though (for a couple more chapters) still seems intent on keeping her head down and despairingly muses, "far better the dull and dusky winter's day, whose gloom if it never abates, never increases… to the glorious fierceness of the summer's day, whose sun sets amid purple and gold."[146] Are we really meant to believe Elinor that unvarying gloom can trump the purple and gold? The way the sentence is weighted functions as a wakeup call to go out and exercise our

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[144] Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Penguin UK, 2000), 529.
[145] Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 529.
[146] Maturin, 530.

emotions; in other words, get burned once more by the “glorious fierceness” of unsustainable Gothic demands. Elinor, of course, does not heed her own counsel but resolves to seek out the purple and gold, the man who jilted her, listening “to a whisper half unheard, yet believed…that murmured from the bottom of her credulous heart, ‘Go – and *perhaps.*” [147]

None of this is surprising since the Gothic novel is a huge feeling-machine pumping out feeling after feeling, you can almost smell the fumes as the engines get into gear. Elinor’s newfound hope will probably be met with disappointment but there will be another “perhaps,” perhaps even smaller…

Taking stock of the Gothic novel’s machinery and devices of darkness: the subterranean passages; the sublime and picturesque landscapes in the pioneering novels of Ann Radcliffe that create changing emotional rhythms in the reader from terror to tranquillity, we must acknowledge how repetitive the experience is. The Gothic reader is addicted to the repetitions. Could it be that the repetitive structures in the Gothic novel are so familiar to us because of our own compulsions to repeat behaviours?[148] Mina is both Gothic reader and heroine, consuming horror and pushing forward in to danger. At the mercy of scab-picking compulsions and a shaky sense of self, she finds her rhythm both in art horror (on screen) and musical practice. Mina’s experience of disruptions in time compels her into embedding herself temporally in film and music scores forcing her to exist in a creative continuous present.

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[147] Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, 535.
[148] Martin, “I Should like to Spend My Whole Life in Reading It,” 85.

Voyeuristically we watch Elinor's misery and Mina's descent into danger like connoisseurs of suffering. Does that mean we are no better than Melmoth himself who observes: "anything of intense and terrible resolution,-- of feeling or action in extremity, -- made harmony with the powerful but disordered chords of his soul."[149] Melmoth is describing the Gothic reading experience. How can we start to feel good about any of this?

Apart from the obvious pleasures of suspense, a negative and anxiety-inducing account of the wronged Elinor or even more horrible the tale of Moncada trapped in a convent with Maturin's frighteningly real descriptions of a soul-destroying monastic routine,[150] may have an overall positive valence when Moncada escapes and Elinor arrives at some bittersweet resolution. I'm not so sure. It doesn't matter that Moncada escapes into another form of captivity or that Elinor when she reunites with her would be husband discovers he is now suffering from a form of idiocy; we are relieved that we are witnessing a more manageable pain. The emotions aroused by Melmoth's many hundreds of pages detailing suffering cannot be resolved with any ordinary resolution. We are grateful for the temporary respite from anxiety before the engines start up again.

I have been suffering for many years from skin problems and insomnia, both exacerbate each other. They led me to self-medicate with horror films and literature, both were compelling distractions and I planned to use my knowledge when creating Mina. All the films I watched waiting for an ADHD diagnosis, unable to concentrate on written work and feeling panic and a growing sense of failure. My

[149] Maturin, 415.
[150] Maturin, 97-217.

area of hyperfocus (aside horror and Gothic novels) extended to musical scales, I practiced them like The Countess in *The Lady in the House of Love* trying to find a new song but all I heard was the intervals between notes, never a melody just a musical grammar.

Through Mina's early induction into horror during the grieving process when she watches *The Valley of The Sasquatch*[151] I demonstrated the horror movie's soothing potential as a form of comfort viewing where emotions are regulated in repetitive scenarios mixing the familiar and outlandish. Mina enjoys the luxurious late-night intimacy between the viewer and film, sprawling in Gabrielle's double bed with a bottle of wine, distracted by the pleasures of a snowy forest and a rampaging sasquatch.

> Grief fitted easily around this low-fi horror with jump scares of the sasquatch appearing in the bathroom mirror when the medicine cabinet closed or leaping on to the roof of the camper van. It was seductive and rebellious to sit in the dark, glugging white wine, watching blood spill on to snow.[152]

The horror offers in a strange way clichéd surprises. The viewer knows that the mirror in a horror film, a classic uncanny object, will always signal the possibility of an alien, unwanted image staring back. Part of the viewer's pleasure is anticipating how each film maker approaches these set-pieces. Here I hoped to show how the emotional cadence of grief naturally sits comfortably with the disrupting jump scares of an acrobatic sasquatch. Mina is self-medicating with wine and horror, anxiety being aroused and resolved through the "jump-scares.'" Through the character's reactions to horror, I was able to supply a commentary on horror and what are to Mina illicit pleasures.

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[151] Jeffreys, 12.
[152] Jeffreys, 12.

The forest setting is a nod to King's "national phobic pressure points"[153]. Today it is clear living in the Anthropocene that horror is attaching itself to the pressure points of ecological anxiety. Netflix serials such as *The Break*,[154] *Black Spot*,[155] *The Forest* [156]and *From*[157] titillate the viewer with a similar tracking shot during the title sequence of a sea of deep green: leading us into a reassuringly pristine wilderness, repositories for human renewal, wisdom, mysticism and danger. In *Black Spot* the forest is defended by an ancient God at war with the human pollutants. All serve as wish-fulfilment: nature can survive and self-regulate without human intervention.

I envisaged *The Valley of The Sasquatch* in a similar vein, acres and acres of lush eco eye-candy, the magisterial stillness broken only by the severed limbs of campers dropping from the treetops. The forest is here foregrounding the life of the non-human, the spruce that can be fashioned into musical instruments. The horror soundtrack designed to increase heartbeat and blood pressure is written and performed by The Bathory Quartet. Mina's induction to their music and horror are one and the same.

The horror soundtrack is another means of creating anxiety by sudden intrusive noises and volume surges while at the same time resolving anxiety through emotional cues for hope and resolution. Sadly, because of my proximity to my wife and daughter, I often watch the movies at night with the sound down. Without the

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[153] King, *Danse Macabre*, 19.

[154] *The Break,* directed by Matthieu Donck (Netflix, 2016 -2018).

[155] *Black Spot,* directed by John Despaux and Thierry Poiraud (France 2, 2017).

[156] *The Forest,* directed by Julius Berg (Netflix, 2018), https://www.netflix.com/watch/80988422?trackId=268410292.

[157] *From,* directed by Jack Bender (Amazon Prime Video, 2022- 2024), https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/video/detail/B0CHYJ6HQ5.

soundtrack, horror has much less potential to frighten. Imagine the shower scene in *Psycho*[158] without the slashing violins.

I chose to put Mina at the beginning of the bereavement process with her having to consider whether her mother was murdered or committed suicide; her porousness and extra receptivity make her susceptible to unusual breaks in reality. A therapist friend described the death of a parent as like "a brick being removed from your house's foundation." Another unmaking image, a structural absence letting in a gust of cold air.

Mina's gap in her understanding is consistent with Cathy Caruth's breach in being. The danger is perceived too late. She has no direct experience of what happened: "it is this lack of direct experience that thus becomes the basis of the traumatic nightmare … the return of the traumatic experience is not the direct witness to a threat to life but rather the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to master what was never fully grasped in the first place."[159]

Trauma according to Caruth is without a witness. There is a gap in the continuity of Mina's being. Nothing can be recalled from that gap because she wasn't present. Memories are wedged on either side of this breach. When I created Mina, I wanted to show someone who is embedding themselves in time, keeping to routines and practice schedules to counteract their intuition that time is non-sequential, that embeddedness in the moment devouring doorstopper novels and musical scores restores time to a linear sequence.

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[158] *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1960; Universal Home Entertainment, 2005), DVD.
[159] Cathy Caruth, "Painting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival," *intervalla:* vol.2 (2014): 22.

Gabrielle's death is a plot device which allows Mina to discover secrets about her childhood later in the book but more importantly it creates a heightened and immediate emotional register enabling the reader to empathise with her. The reader is further attuned to Mina's emotions by her descriptions of moving into her Mum's flat and what it feels like to be around her personal belongings. Not only her emotions but also Mina's imagination which is made directly accessible through her grief, as she states "Gabrielle's death has opened me up to a few magical ideas[160]" before continuing to describe a fantasy about aliens. The connection between grief and magical thinking is well documented in Joan Didion's memoir *A Year of Magical Thinking*[161] in which she believes if she performs the correct series of actions disaster can be averted; her dead husband will return; her daughter will recover from septic shock. Didion wants to leave things where they were when disaster struck, not dispose of her husband's shoes because he will need them when he returns. The empty syringes left by the paramedics on the living room floor are also part of the ritual. If somehow things are left as they are the dead will be able to return.

After my grandmother died, my grandfather left her dressing table in their bedroom exactly as it was. The perfume bottles were without stoppers; one was tipped over and the syrupy spillage over time thickened into a vitreous puddle. More disturbing for a child was her set of tortoiseshell hairbrushes clogged with the fine candyfloss bloom of her hair, dyed the colour of methylated spirits. The disorder of the dressing table, the chair pushed back at an angle fed the magical and disturbing

[160] Jeffreys, 11.
[161] Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Fourth Estate, 2021).

thought that death was a brief and hasty removal, the very temporary nature of the objects demanded her presence to put things right. But did anyone really want the creepiness of a resurrected granny returning to her dressing table looking into the almost completely non-reflective depths of her mottled dressing mirror?

I gave some of these memories to Mina, especially the strange uncanny nature of hand-me-downs: smeared reading glasses, false teeth, the prosthetic shorthand of a person's identity. What are we to do with these haunted artefacts? The flat Mina returns to seems haunted by Gabrielle's dresses; they drape long static-charged arms around Mina.[162] She seeks imaginative and magical solutions to her mother's whereabouts:

> The stuffed corduroy donkey Neddy Merrill that followed me through school and university and was my most powerful good luck charm sat slumped against the bolster on mum's bed. No matter how much I plumped him up, he still sagged. In my more magical moments, I put it down to grief, but sadly he was haemorrhaging his stuffing. Mum's insomnia must have got worse, and Neddy had left a trail of sawdust tracing her last movements through bedroom to bathroom to kitchen. I left those crumbs on the floor wondering if I followed them, I could sleepwalk to wherever she is now. [163]

The idea of the crumbs of sawdust referencing Hansel and Gretel deep in the forest was the bereaved brain working through magical solutions.

In the flat Mina reverts to childish games, the haunted emptiness longs to be filled with sound, especially the rich voice of the cello continuing an internal dialogue with Gabrielle commenting on Mina's playing. Mina's emptiness leaves her open to other possibilities, the dream of the granny hag later in the chapter. In Mina's mind the cello case lying beside her in the bed is like her, an empty receptacle that can

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[162] Jeffreys, 9.
[163] Jeffreys, 8.

be filled with nightmare. A reversal is happening. She is disembodied, the container of the cello's sound.

Mina's woundedness is established in the first chapter with her long description of harvesting scabs:

> "Musicians are wound dwellers," Marcus once told me in his know-all way, "and like you, Mina, dedicated to keeping everything that ever hurt, black and sticky." Annoyingly he was right about my capacity to let the past fester.[164]

Death is one of those events that encourage us to pick over the past, explore old memories. Mina in her disturbed state is already in the habit of physically reviewing her past scars but her mother's death signals a new interest. Her repetitive skin picking disorder is diagnosed under the heading -- body-focused repetitive behaviours (BFRBs) and is considered an obsessive-compulsive disorder. The idea of repetition and its soothing power in cases of OCD also links to musical rhythms.

Mina's trauma puts her in the grip of a restless, unfocussed anxiety, unfocused in the sense that it wanders all over her body and she cannot assign to it any specific cause. Scabs are important thematically in the work. The wound-dweller wants to keep the pain current, prematurely picking open the scabs thus preventing the healing process. Mina's logic would be: if we are all wounds then our personalities are just protective scabs that we cannot resist unpicking. The freshness of the wound is a memorial like musical notation to an authentic feeling self, whereas the scabbing over represents a dulling of intensity. Mina's peeling and eating of her scabs remains a sad and soothing, solitary pleasure while also keeping the pain in the present.

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[164] Jeffreys, 10.

MINA'S DEPRESSION AND CONTINUITY THROUGH MUSIC

Mina's character was drawn from personal experience of depressive states including dissociation. Through Mina's disembodied feelings, I wanted to question assumptions about identity. Before going on stage at the Royal Festival Hall, she addresses the reader:

> There is no sense of continuity between you and the person who practised cello two hours earlier; between you and the woman who ate two slices of Seville orange marmalade on toasted sour dough. You don't suffer from amnesia: you remember it all, but you don't feel *inside* yourself. Every moment you doubt your ability to function even though, by and large you always do. It is quite simple: you are not who you are. No number of signed souvenirs and recordings can make you believe in your own gift. Someone must believe for you: Gabrielle, Ramona. The evening's program made little sense: recital, round table discussion where I would theorise on the cello's singing voice, its human register. [165]

What Mina is rejecting above is a commonly held belief in a person's narrativity in forming their identity. In *Against Narrativity* the philosopher Galen Strawson summarises the narrative view of human life using a series of quotes from other writers: to live an enriching life we often view ourselves as the principal actor in a coherent story. The self is a continuum through time engaged in writing and perhaps revising an autobiography. The autobiography makes sense of ourselves through the unfolding story of our lives, which enables us to develop as people.[166]

While lived experience does not always equate to the vitality of fiction or the dramatic coherence of a good autobiography, the idea of a narrative life, with arcs of rising action is compelling – especially to a writer.

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[165] Jeffreys, *The Bathory Quartet,* 17

[166] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* XVII (2004): 428–452, https://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Paper/against_narrativity.pdf.

Strawson further differentiates in his paper between “psychological Narrativity” and “ethical Narrativity.”[167] The former is a specifically “psychological property or outlook”[168] while the ethical Narrativity thesis states “that experiencing or conceiving one’s life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative self is essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood.”[169]

Many of us have experienced ourselves as different selves in time which does not fundamentally disrupt our ideas of an integral and stable personality. Strawson quotes from Henry James who talks about rereading one of his past masterpieces and viewing it as a “rich relation…who suffers me still to claim a shy fourth cousinship.”[170] James is aware that the masterpiece was written by a different self, maybe the act of writing that particular masterpiece went some way into exorcising that specific flowering of the self in time. However, James doesn’t doubt that overall, he is still the same person. Both fourth cousin and rich relation.

Strawson goes on to make two further distinctions between the Diachronic self like James where you consider yourself “as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future,”[171] and the episodic self where “one has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being.”[172]

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[167] Strawson, “Again Narrativity,” 428.
[168] Strawson, 428.
[169] Strawson, 428.
[170] Strawson, 429-430.
[171] Strawson, 430.
[172] Strawson, 430.

Strawson would probably diagnose Mina as an episodic self. The “lack of linkage” [173] to her past selves might in some ways encourage her to exist more fully in the moment, might even enhance her musical prowess as she plucks musical forms out of thin air. What made Mina’s interior hard to write was that I tried to use my own experience as an intermittent self rather than episodic self. Intermittent better conveys the mechanical aspect of a lamp being turned on and off which is naturally outside the lamp’s control. The light is on and then it isn’t, you sit unplugged, directionless, waiting for the brain chemistry to readjust and turn the lights on again. The intermittent self, I would argue, lacks ‘long-term continuity’ since it operates in fits and starts. Factually you may say certain things have happened to you but when recalling those events there is no feeling attached to the memory or connection with that point in the past. The effects of this predisposition influences Mina’s choice in music as a strong connecting structure where she can feel coherent and embodied from minute to minute. It also holds out the promise of reinvention. She can identify as a new character, baroque, austere etc evolving selves to meet the music’s demands.

The novel returns repeatedly to the symbol of the empty cello case, the abject inter-uterine container which carries the self through time, the death-in-life protective chamber for the intermittent being. This in-between state is comparable to hibernation and the vampire’s coffin, awake but not fully alive. Inside the case Mina is waiting for someone to lift the lid or a puncture wound to bring her to her senses. This birthing chamber also threatens Mina with dissolution. If she sleeps too long in

[173] Strawson, 431.

the amniotic fluid of The Countess/mother, she risks being reborn as a new creature.

I always hoped to be a character in a rich and fast developing narrative. The raw flux of time resisted my inventive attempts at a symbolic interpretation. The sense of an intermittent self makes you value and seek out stories. People experiencing this might find themselves like me plunging into the compulsive readability of genre fiction with the appeal of its readymade structures and its power to arouse and contain strong emotions, Mina on the other hand turns to music for structure.

CHAPTER SIX: SUBLIME TERROR

Terror, according to King when writing horror, is "the finest emotion."[174]Creating terror has a long literary history. Writers such as Ann Radcliffe studied contemporary aesthetics to develop visual equivalents in landscape to her heroine's mood swings. Narrow bridges and defiles, pine forests clinging to sunless mountain sides are depicted to enhance feelings of fear and isolation. Characters are rewarded after stormy, nighttime abductions through mountains passes with sublime moments of reflection when they gaze out of pictorial window-frames.[175] Radcliffe employs rhythmic rest pauses from imprisonment and pursuit where characters renew their mental powers by appreciation of natural beauty. In Radcliffe I recognised a desire for respectability in the Gothic. As a writer interested in landscape I wondered if her methods were still relevant, so I reviewed the contemporary theories that influenced her.

Ingredients of this school of terror are satirized in *The Terrorist School of Novel Writing*. The author blames the new interest in terror on the bloodthirsty French revolution; fictional terror was forced to keep pace with the awful events of reality. The writer suggests using the following ingredients:

> I would advise you to construct an *old* castle, *formerly* of great magnitude and extent, built in the Gothic manner, with a great number of hanging towers, turrets, and pinnacles. One half, at least, of it must be in ruins; dreadful chasms and gaping crevices must be hid only by the clinging ivy; the doors must be so old, and so little used to open, as to grate tremendously on the hinges; and there must be in every passage an echo, and as many reverberations as there are partitions.[176]

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[174] King, *Danse Macabre*, 139.

[175] Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian* (Penguin Classics, 2004), 105.

[176] "The Terrorist System of Novel-Writing," *The Spirit of the Public Journals* (1797), https://richardburtphd.com/terrornovelwriting.pdf.

The above shows the effect of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* on terror writers in the new Gothic genre. Burke's ideas are still prevalent today in Gothic video games[177] and horror fiction.

The sublime is rooted in self-preservation, turning on pain and danger. In the extract words such as "magnitude … dreadful chasms…gaping crevices" are features of the sublime, partly through the sense of scale and ruggedness of the ruins but also in the idea of power conveyed by the ruined castle. With the French revolution fresh in readers' minds, the castle will not be a symbol of enlightened tolerance but rather symptomatic of the arbitrary rule of despots. If dead, they can always be reanimated like Dracula or explained away as mannequins in *The Mysteries of Udolpho.*[178] Gothic fiction delights in reenacting the struggles between feudal despots; Wallachian Boyars and the middle-class adventurers who fall into their clutches. The young British officer travelling from Vienna[179] to Romania who spends the night with Dracula's daughter in *The Lady in the House of Love* depicts the clash between modern therapies and ancestral bloodlust in the bridal bedchamber.[180]However, it is still a retelling of the tyrant/ subject encounter.

The effects of terror according to Burke are equivalent to the "convulsive agitations"[181]of bodily pain. "Things that cause terror generally affect the bodily organs by operation of the mind suggesting the danger."[182] Burke's "violent emotion

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[177] Erica Moore, "Haunting Memories: Gothic and Memoir," in *Gothic Landscapes: Changing Eras, Changing Cultures, Changing Anxieties*, ed. Healey and Yang, 88.

[178] Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Penguin, 2001), 622.

[179] This is clearly a nod to Vienna and Dr Freud and the possibility of curing the vampire through psychoanalysis.

[180] Carter, *The Lady in the House of Love*, 123-124.

[181] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1998),120.

[182] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 120.

of the nerves"[183] which entangles mental and physical processes is very much the experience of watching a scary movie where the Gothic tropes perceived by the mind of unlit cellars, dark tunnels, men with chainsaws etc leads to higher blood pressure and increased heartrate. Burke goes on to say how the emotions need a proper work out alongside the body, terror being the mental equivalent of physical labour for the body: "They [the emotions] must be shaken and worked to a proper degree."[184] Terror is a way of keeping our emotions healthy and well-exercised in the mental gymnasium. Horror movies have been legitimised. They function as mental gyms: I can feel good about doing my nightly workouts, putting anxiety and fear through their paces while still piling on the calories.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld a writer, essayist and an early analyser of terror and its effects unlike Buke does not subscribe to the exercise model. Although scenes of fictitious distress may "exercise sensibility… but sensibility *does not* increase with exercise. By the constitution of our frame our habits increase, our emotions decrease…" [185] Barbauld sees our emotions and habits in terms of profit and loss, suggesting there is a limited reservoir we should be careful in drawing on. Too many delicious terrors could leave us emotionally drained.

She may also be the first critic of what she sees as the moral inadequacy of terror fiction, hardening us to suffering due to over-exposure: "young people, by a course of this kind of reading, often acquire something of the apathy and indifference which the experience of real life would have given them, without its

[183] Burke, 120.
[184] Burke, 122-123.
[185] Anna Letitia Barbauld, "Reflections on the Pleasures of Distress and Terror," *New England Review (1990-)* 22, no. 3 (2001): 186, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40244005.

advantages."[186] Real life affords us the opportunity of acts of benevolence, almsgiving, which improves our sense of self-approbation. However, without this outlet our good intentions appear to atrophy as we bury ourselves in more Gothic literature and imaginary tales of distress.

[186] Barbauld, "Reflections on the Pleasures of Distress and Terror," 186.

CHAPTER SEVEN: GOING UNDERGROUND

Chapter ten modulates between Mina's psychological terror and in the culminating scene of repulsion and horror in the dripping room. It is the chapter where she tries to confront her trauma. I consciously set out to incorporate Burke's theories on the sublime in my writing, making use of his ideas on obscurity and darkness as the background to Mina's quest.

Mina's underground journey was like so much of the Gothic designed to generate reader anxiety. The journey makes use of obscurity, a characteristic of the sublime which increases fear: "When we know the full extent of any danger…a great deal of the apprehension vanishes."[187] The darkness also suggests the gloom and lack of clarity surrounding religious orders, in this case the Franciscans. Terror is heightened by the mummified bodies and the lost child, without language, unable to communicate her fears. The lost child is the third in the book (including Mina and Evie). In a sense Mina is without language too, since a lot of her trauma occurred in the pre-verbal phase, when she was without a parent to help interpret and vocalize experience.

I also wanted to acknowledge writers such as Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin who are famous for scenes of Gothic horror in their novels *The Monk*[188] and *Melmoth the Wanderer*.[189] Both writers employ tunnels and subterranean vaults in memorable scenes of horror. In a sense there is very little variety in the setting, most horror scenes involve characters in a dark room, today no longer a crypt but a

[187] Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 54.
[188] Matthew Lewis, *The Monk* (Oxford Paperbacks, 2008).
[189] Charles Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (Penguin Classics), 2000.

cellar. These sites of conflict and fear remain effective. The horror writer's biggest challenge is finding new ways to describe the dark.

Catacombs, cellars and basements resonate as uncanny storage spaces because of the sense of digging deep and excavating. We are frightened by what we may turn up. Excavation is key to unearthing the mysteries of the haunted house; Depending on how deep we are prepared to go and the depth of the writer's unconscious fears, the horror may even extend beyond known human history. H.P. Lovecraft encourages us to dig deeper, travelling through time to sites of slimy, devolutionary and gore-stained chaos.

The Rats in the Walls[190] is concerned with both excavations into an old building, Exham Priory, and self-excavation in the form of family history as the narrator unearths atavistic impulses within himself (a cannibalistic inner self) just as the archaeologists reveal deeper layers of gruesome antiquity in the sub-cellar. The house gives way to monoliths, Roman ruins, a sprawling Saxon pile and holding pens filled with the gnawed bones of unknown human variants (human livestock bred for their flesh who devolved into quadrupeds) used in sacrificial rituals. We can excavate our houses, and in true Gothic style we can excavate ourselves—no more potent symbol than the zombie puzzled and tugging at its intestines, unravelling all identity into a final hungry nothingness. This act of unravelling occurs in my novel in the entity Nobodaddy, the great unmaking emptiness which I discuss in a later chapter. The Gothic encourages us to dig down to the gruesome foundations.

[190] H.P. Lovecraft, "The Rats in the Walls," in *The Rats in the Walls and Other Stories* (Alma Classics, 2023) 19.

The Monk still has the power to shock and chooses for its two most horrific scenes an underground crypt and a prison cell. There is a sense in both these locations we have arrived at the bedrock of horror, immured underground, given up for dead - we can go no further. Lewis understands that talking about fear creates fear and helps place the reader in the same emotional climate as Lorenzo. When Lorenzo discovers the chained and emaciated body of Agnes in her underground cell he gazes upon her with pity:

> He trembled at the spectacle; He grew sick at heart; His strength failed him, and his limbs were unable to support his weight. He was obliged to lean against the low Wall which was near him…[191]

After extensively listing fear's physical effects, almost a full-on fainting fit, Lewis reinforces fear's mental characteristics:

> While He listened to her melancholy accents, Lorenzo's sensibility became yet more violently affected. The first sight of such misery had given a sensible shock to his feelings…[192]

This is emotion by numbers, Lewis is coaching and schooling the reader in how to react. At this point there is no separation between the reader and Lorenzo: "the Gothic reader enters each spectacular scene aggressively allied with the spectator in the text."[193]

This is still a popular feature of horror, where there is no emotional separation from the viewer and victim. While they stumble about in the dark, they function as our avatar. What they feel we feel, in a pure unmediated mirroring. When we shout, "don't be an idiot… don't go down there' (they have no choice, the plotline is

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[191] Lewis, 369.
[192] Lewis, 370-371
[193] Martin, "I Should like to Spend My Whole Life in Reading It," 80.

hungry) what is in play is our own instinct for self-preservation. Our identities are fused together. When we shout out our warnings, we are trying to save ourselves.

What makes *The Monk* tip over from terror and melodrama with its vaults groaning with "rotted, loathsome corrupted bodies"[194] and "pestilential air of corruption"[195] into full blown horror is the embracing of bad taste. Lewis understands that the true function of horror is to push boundaries and cause outrage. The History of Agnes de Medina lying in the cell with toads crawling across her breast and lizards leaving their slime on her face[196]in terms of horrific detail puts it at the forefront of eighteenth-century horror literature. In that sense it is cutting edge. But Lewis goes further, even in a book already burdened with excessive horrors. The scene when she clutches her dead baby, discovering her "fingers are ringed with the long worms, which bred in the corrupted flesh of my Infant,"[197] is reminiscent in its desire to shock of all the clamour surrounding the video nasties of my adolescence. Lewis at that moment in 1796 is the advance guard of horror. Horror's cutting edge must keep moving forward, inventively finding new ways of causing offence. Horror is endearingly adolescent in its desire to deliver continued shocks to the status quo, fighting hard to reject any notions of respectability.

The underground scene of Mina's imprisonment and rape was my most explicit attempt at achieving the "cutting edge" disturbance of horror. Daring myself to go further than I felt comfortable. I thought of Mrs Radcliffe and her swooning fits where she draws a veil over suffering. Was it gratuitous? Could there be

[194] Lewis, 385.
[195] Lewis, 388.
[196] Lewis, 415.
[197] Lewis, 415.

accusations of a lingering male gaze? My own self-editing streak is strong, not only do I find it hard to extend normal scenes but when I reach the climax of a dramatic confrontation (for example when The Bathory Quartet throw Tony in the chest freezer) I cut away. Another approach would have been to embrace the opportunity for an updated premature burial among the frozen peas, relishing in the effects of hypothermia on the character. The choice to cut away rather than linger at certain moments was instinctual, informed by my reading of Gothic texts.

In *Repetition and the Pleasure of the Gothic*, Martin tells us that within the Gothic there is a constant dynamic of seeing and concealing, of deliberate authorial withdrawals and blankness.[198] Owing to Gothic novels' heightened emotions, characters are more likely to suffer swooning fits when the spectacle becomes overwhelming:

> The faint, the fall into speechlessness… leaves a gap in the text and renders the reader particularly conscious that vision is first promised, then denied, held just out of the range of vision.[199]

The gap in the text also explains why such devices might appeal to the trauma survivor. We see a dramatic representation of what Caruth calls "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world."[200] The Gothic excels in portraying these dissociative breaks in time and the victim's subsequent emotional suffering. The Gothic aligns us with the victim, haunted by the impossibility of trying to recover the missing revelation.

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[198] Martin, "I Should like to Spend My Whole Life in Reading It," 79.
[199] Martin, 79.
[200] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

The reader is drawn on to the next gap, the unknowable is again about to be revealed—this is the Gothic novel's engine, the promise of revelation. The dynamic drives the reader's anxious pleasure in the consumption of more Gothic texts. As the reader grows aware of the narrative dissonance between the novel's promise of showing everything and then, again, concealing, the ideal Gothic text becomes literally unputdownable. We are anxiously enslaved and dissatisfied knowing that the emotions aroused can never be assuaged by a "reveal."

Martin explains how appetite and anxiety only increase by concealing the revelation, deferring the reader's need to ferret out secrets: "The thrust away from revelation is so strong that the concomitant power of that which is hidden is given greater, renewed allure."[201] Each failed reveal or concealing gap revitalizes reader interest and anxiety; the deferred weight of expectation is transferred to the next, failed, moment of narrative promise. It turns out that the Gothic is built around a series of deliberately tantalizing gaps. The reader not only reads the text but also projects the full power of their imagination into these strategic blank spots, desperate to visualize what they can no longer see:

> The reader's repeated experience of the spectacle of suffering, and specifically the reader's struggle with the blank spots or gaps that the scenes inevitably enact, is the most important part of the reading experience[202]

In terms of the Gothic and its teasing and tantalizing structure, the deliberate omissions make frustrating sense. It may even be we carry a surplus of unresolved

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[201] Martin, "I Should like to Spend My Whole Life in Reading It," 80.
[202] Martin, 80.

anxieties to the next novel feeding our Gothic reading habit, partly fuelled by the hunger to visualize these unseeable moments. No wonder the Gothic reader wanders around with unbrushed hair in a state of distracted, over-caffeinated vigilance. When I set out to investigate whether treating anxiety with anxiety by channelling neurotic energies into anxious making fiction, I hadn't considered that the answer might be that the whole process only aggravates anxiety.

The issue with Mina in her dungeon was whether to stay in scene or allow for an authorial blank spot. The moment is one of horror and immobility. When Mina is secured to the table, we plunge into horror proper with the revulsion of the bioluminescent heads and the possibility of them popping. The School of Horror according to Norton offers a to-do list of all the necessary items for the full-blown experience: "Full-bodied demons…Incest and rape become almost commonplace, and scenes of torture and death are portrayed in lurid physical detail."[203] In this case the monk clanking his bucket is an external agent, demonic in nature if not an actual demon. Yang makes a useful distinction between horror and terror: "For the reader, the two experiences are different, unlike terror – which *activates* an attempt to escape – horror *freezes* a character into passivity and immobility."[204]

Interestingly, when I wrote this scene which took me by surprise, taking me back to traumatic memories of passivity and childhood helplessness, the writing froze up for over a year. The writing itself was enacting the traumatic process. It refused to move on, instead just repeating the image. Leon Terr in *Too Scared to*

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[203] Rictor Norton, "Gothic Readings," accessed July 7, 2025, https://rictornorton.co.uk/gothic/horror1.htm.

[204] Alice Davenport, "Beauty Sleeping in the Lap of Horror," in *Gothic Landscapes,* ed. Healey and Yang, 76.

Cry which explores the effects of childhood trauma on a group of children kidnapped on a coach in Chowchilla, tells us of the "ascendancy of visual representations over all other perceptual memories"[205] among the Chowchilla children and that, "it is the *visions* that seem to come back most to haunt them."[206]

Horror also shares many similarities with pornography in its refusal to turn away from the defenceless body. The body is scrutinized until it is forced to give up its fluids, secrets, even its internal organs. Both activities are rooted in the body and are designed to achieve specific, physiological things: either arousal, fear or both. Sexual violence is common in horror, offering another way to test the body's limits. Both genres share a common ancestor in the libertine writings of De Sade where sexual violence, torture and the Gothic are fused together. In the need to shock they both challenge our ideas of obscenity, pushing towards new extremes. The power relations so inherent in the Gothic between baron and villager, abbess and novitiate, heiress and jaded voluptuary are interchangeable with pornographic roleplay.

Equally in both horror and porn we aggressively ally ourselves to victim and actor. We are in their bodies for the duration of the movie, participating in their physiological thrills, delighting in orgasm or grimacing at the loss of internal organs. Porn enacts our desires; horror enacts both our desires and fears.

The relationship between sex and death, the latter often a punishment for youthful carnality, is well documented in horror films. *It Follows*[207] tells the story of the traumatic return of an STD virus that stalks young adults who have participated in unprotected sex. Unusually sex doesn't end in death, rather to escape the "It" in *It*

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[205] Lenore Terr, *Too Scared to Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood* (BasicBooks, 1992), 132.
[206] Terr, *Too Scared to Cry*, 133.
[207] *It Follows,* directed by David Robert Mitchell (2014; Second Sight Films, 2023), Ultra HD Blu-ray.

Follows the solution is to pass on the virus with more unprotected sex. We can only marvel at horror's reinventing genius when a movie can both highlight the dangers of unprotected sex and offer promiscuity as the answer.

Horror and pornography are visual spectacles where we are *unable* to look away. We are encouraged to watch the body reach its crisis in the throes of either desire or distress. Voyeuristically we hope to possess the mysteries of the organism and the moment of death, see the inside and the outside all at once.

Mina is 'possessed' by trauma; old hurts cast out in her body where her hands have fragmented and begun unpicking the world. In *Repetition and the Pleasure of the Gothic* Martin quotes Cathy Caruth: "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event."[208] The choice of the word possession is key to unlocking some of trauma's demonic and persistent energy. Trauma, Martin goes on to say, manifests most commonly in repetitive visual imagery and is attracted to the repetitions of the Gothic novel. "The appeal of the Gothic may well spring from and feed on the traumatic condition, attracting and holding readers by the uncanny familiarity and the pleasurable thrills of its repetitive structure."[209] We have also seen how the traumatic breaches in being are represented by gaps in the Gothic text.

[208] Martin, 85.
[209] Martin, 85.

CHAPTER EIGHT: NOBODADDY

Nobodaddy entered the novel at a late stage as a successful dramatization of external pressures complicating the writing process. In a novel featuring many absent fathers he remains the absent father par excellence. Before I examine his specific characteristics, I would like to examine the significance of this absence in terms of psychoanalytic theory.

Nobodaddy flourishes in a fictional world without fathers. The loss of paternal authority prevents the child's separation from the mother. What Kristevsa refers to as the "semiotic order" remains dominant:

> Through frustrations and prohibitions, this [maternal] authority shapes the body into a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty… It is a primal mapping of the body that I call semiotic…[210]

The mother teaches the child the prohibitions of the body as a language, negotiating the chaos and filth of the pre-Oedipal relationship which is later repressed when the child separates from the mother and enters the symbolic paternal order. Creed pinpoints the failure of "the paternal order to ensure the break, the separation of mother and child"[211] which reverses the normal process of differentiating clean and dirty, leading to "a return of the unclean, untrained, unsymbolized body."[212] The semiotic order with its filth and abject fluids can return to overwhelm us.

The cello which contains the spirit of Elizabeth Bathory has rejected paternal authority, growing in power it represents a hungry unsatisfiable womb creating a cult

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[210] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 72.
[211] Creed, 38.
[212] Creed, 38.

of intrauterine worshippers. The Bathory Quartet ship children's bodies around the world to be broken down into the abject ointment that feeds the ancient uterus. In a monstrous reversal the ancient womb takes in life and reabsorbs it into the cello. The cello case symbolically effaces the boundary between mother and child, between Mina and Bathory when she is locked in for her final transformation.

The horror is enabled by a broken patriarchal structure; authority figures such as the director of the Romanian orphanage are corrupt and complicit in the smuggling of children, the Reverend is a drug addict, Tony is a lech and seducer of young girls, Dave Gulch the most sympathetic male deals cannabis to teenagers and spends most of the novel locked inside a virtual world. Nobodaddy himself is an uncreating God. He is a vacuum. The symbolic representation of all the world's absent fathers, he is without a father as well.

CHARACTERISTICS

Nobodaddy exists in as a category error where meaning collapses and oxymorons like "fruitful emptiness" abound. Nobodaddy is the source of a global separation anxiety in all his children and functions as an anti-creation myth where traumatic unmaking is his sole characteristic.

A Blakean inspired God his role is to unravel the tapestry of existence into meaningless coloured threads. Trauma is dramatized by the anxious, unpicking fingers of Nobodaddy representing trauma's role in unmaking our experience of the world which we are unable to put back together. Instead of the completed tapestry, a form of narrative, we have the incomprehensible coloured threads squirming meaninglessly through our fingers. Nobodaddy is the unmaking cloud, the anti-narrativizing force that makes mincemeat of our memories and understanding.

Trauma takes us over, destroying our power of mastering events:

> As it is generally understood today, post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the direct imposition of the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically by an event we cannot control.[213]

The event we cannot control also appears to be the event we cannot capture in narrative form. If narrative is our way of making sense of the world, then Mina is without a narrative that exists outside the continuous present of playing music. Trauma has manifested as a series of breaches in her intermittent being, without narrative continuity she is locked into the unravelling process, emphasized by the accompanying image of the unthreading of coil pots.[214] Mina's struggles in the novel to regain her narrative by situating herself in a love story with Tony or becoming a special agent in Palermo looking for the ointment are short-lived. The unmaking forces of trauma overwhelm her.

Mrs Barwell also suffers the intrusion of the anti-narrativizing monster into her home depicted in uncanny symbols of the clicking knitting needles working in reverse.[215] The traumatic monster Nobodaddy enters the world through her anxiety for her young daughter's welfare. This is an example of discovering through the desire to frighten others what terrifies you. My own fears focus on sudden death and the loss of my child. Many parents will have shared my experience of going up

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[213] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* 58.

[214] Jeffreys, 47.

[215] Jeffreys, 173 and 275 (in the latter example we see Nobodaddy as the source of thousands of clicking unthreading needles).

to check on their child's breathing and recheck a window lock. Being up to date on innovative deaths in horror cinema feeds into the vast imaginary field of speculative deaths your child may encounter. Might she bend down and piece her eyeball on a cane supporting the tomato plants? Could she scrabble helplessly in the rain butt after retrieving her frisbee, leaving muddied handprints up the sides? Mrs Barwell's anxiety begins the unmaking process. The fingers that absentmindedly pick at the thread on a blanket are evaluating the thinning texture of reality, fragile as a cigarette paper.

Mrs Barwell's antidote to trauma's unmaking tendencies is to fill the void with the narrativizing impulse. She collects stories like charms, secrets about the village residents, scraps of ancient Roman history as well as being a repository for witchcraft remedies. She is related to a whole line of what horror movies consider monstrous matriarchs, a "rebellious body of filthy, lustful, carnal female flesh."[216] Instead, she is recast as the nurturer, the mother of Middle Honing, showing the symbolic order to be at fault. Her spells may use menstrual blood, but she is not unclean. She embodies tenderness and wisdom to balance the limitations of the paternal order.

Through spells and stories, she fortifies herself against the encroaching chaos nibbling away like tiny teeth at the seams of being. Mina and Mrs Barwell share a similar strategy to surviving trauma. If trauma involves becoming unstuck from time, losing life to repetitions while being stuck at the point of reliving the crisis, the dreadfulness of the experience making it impossible to comprehend or locate,

[216] Creed, 38.

then the solution is temporal embeddedness. Mrs Barwell obsessively regales the reader with details about the world she inhabits, which lanes of the swimming pool are open, how potholes are filled with oystershells. She employs a continuous process of narrativizing experience to feed the hungry emptiness of Nobodaddy. Mina also grounds herself in the present by picking at her body and practising music, using these actions to counter dissociation and reinforce her sense of physicality.

Nobodaddy was also a way of representing the traumatic forces unstitching me and the whole project. Neddy Merrill Gabrielle's soft toy and comfort bear, the very object Mina as child would have used to overcome separation anxieties, is also leaking his stuffing.[217]

Once Nobodaddy was internalized in the novel (rather than playing fast and loose in life) I could then fight this enemy of unmaking. Trauma is baked into the novel's structure, attacking itself while threatening the integrity of the imagined world. Mrs Barwell's final plea "don't fade"[218] as she clutches her daughter's phantom hand encapsulates the whole conundrum. The suspension of narration leads back into unmaking and those grimy, busy fingers unpicking everything we value.

[217] Jeffreys, 8-9.
[218] Jeffreys, 291.

CHAPTER NINE: GENRE AS SAFE SPACE FOR THE NEURODIVERGENT

Within horror the restrictions of the vampire genre and the various rules governing mobility perversely offered a safe space for me to operate in, containing the wild and bloody chaos of the story and my own inability to focus. Having ADHD means I respond to the compulsive quality of genre writing; horror helps me concentrate.

Stephen King describes the compulsive quality of genre fiction through the writer Paul in *Misery* as the "gotta" – "you knew the *gotta* when you got it. Having it always made him slightly ashamed – manipulative. But it also made him feel vindicated in his labour." [219] Later, King refines the definition of this unputdownable quality for both reader and writer: *"You were also Scheherazade to yourself*."[220] Paul's comment reveals how inextricably linked his life is to narrative production. It might be tempting to see how all writers' narrativizing of experience is the best means of revitalizing themselves against the death drive.

When the stories stop and he fails to compel himself to continue he will cease to be. This refers both to his meaningful identity as writer and the fact that Annie, his dedicated reader, will kill him off. Annie will perform the role of the sultan in *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*,[221] a culmination of her ongoing reshaping of Paul's body and his body of work. Annie reserves the right to edit his body since literary production and Paul are the same thing but even with missing foot and thumb the compulsion to write through grisly bodily edits remain intact.

The Bathory Quartet 'gotta' was Mina's search for the ointment to cure her hands, it becomes a life and death struggle like Paul's survival being dependent on

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[219] Stephen King, *Misery* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2019), 265.
[220] King, *Misery,* 266.
[221] Dawood, *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights.*

producing high quality genre fiction. I also set a narrative clock ticking with Mina's search for identity. My neurodivergent brain needed to be glued to this novel otherwise it would float away like any other extended project—the more I could raise the stakes for Mina and Middle Honing's survival, the better the writing outcome.

My fiction up until this point consisted of short stories published in *AMBIT* and *The London Magazine,* sprints of writing which relied on late night sustained bursts. Late night is when the bricks loosen around the fireplace and the nocturnal quality creeps in. Writing projects fell apart because of a process of sedulous encrustation—I would obsessively work on polishing individual paragraphs. Eventually they became airtight without any wind blowing through the narrative. The text quickly got bogged down in details, replicating on the page repeatedly the often overwhelming barrage of sensory information.

Despite advice from writers about my lack of narrative thrust (hard not to take it personally), I was unable to find a solution. I couldn't see how to open up the writing, allow scenes to breathe in real time. Crawling along in real time with unmediated dramatic scenes was something I couldn't do. The preferred narrative method was first person summary because it allowed me to skip over weeks and years. It was only my supervisor urging me to stay in the scene for longer (like holding your breath) that forced me to develop strategies to allow the writing to breathe. These strategies positively improved the novel. I will list my two major breakthroughs below:

STRUCTURE

My mind resists linearity and yet I want to write simple narratives. Since the novel deals with a quartet, it enabled me to write the book in four fragments (Mina, The Reverend, Mrs Barwell, E.H. Munby) allowing for tonal differences that would keep me engaged. It also allowed me write towards and around those Gothic gaps, where revelation is promised and, sadly, withheld.

As well as narrative gaps the novel also deals with gaps in memory; those blanks or half remembered fragments that haunt us daily. Mrs Barwell's ghost daughter Evie is haunted by a memory of a mother whose name she no longer remembers. Mina doesn't know what happened to her so can't report back from the vantage point of an integrated person.

I envisaged the fragments would be in different voices to reflect musical instruments. Mina, I conceived as the soloist, adrenalin energy and virtuoso passages, unaccompanied by other characters. Since she didn't know her own story it was appropriate to let other instruments fill it out in the other fragments.

The Reverend I conceived as a rather pompous wind instrument but then he isn't what he seems. Mumby is another highly strung individual. Mrs. Barwell and the village were the raucous sounds of an orchestra tuning up, the community taking action. When Mina returns in the E.H. Munby section it allowed me to show her as insensate and objectified in the third person. She is in the process of reification, completing her journey to the non-human.

ESCAPE FROM MINUTIAE

The cleaning lady, Mrs Barwell, was cast as detective fulfilling the detection theme in horror novels supplied by Van Helsing. I had also noticed in coastal communities the strength of the matriarchs holding things together, and the value of an overlooked character, hidden in plain sight by the ordinariness of her occupation. My research threw up lots of interesting accounts about witchcraft. The trial of Agnes Waterhouse at Chelmsford in 1566 was fascinating since Agnes was sentenced to death on the testimony of a 12-year-old girl. I sensed a set of circumstances where innocence, wickedness and a childish desire to please led to the death of a human being. The girl invented a monster straight out of a bestiary of fantastic beasts: a talking dog with a monkey's face and whistle around his neck. The dog carried a knife in its mouth and was allegedly sent by Agnes to urge the child to kill herself. Mrs Barwell was the natural repository for all this knowledge.

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[222] *The Devil in Feline Form,* woodcut, WordPress, July10, 2025, https://www.essexrecordofficeblog.co.uk/the-trial-of-agnes-waterhouse-witchcraft-in-essex-1566/#:~:text=We%20should%20remember%20Agnes%20on,(London:%20Routledge%2C%202000).

The interest in Essex witchcraft aligned with Mrs Barwell's role as wise woman. Remedies transmitted orally down through generations of midwives are contrasted with the decayed paternal authorities in my novel. Tony Avis the obsessive architect designs a visionary dome rather than a building that might benefit the community.[223] These authorities are the same that struck back historically at female knowledge gathering, setting the limits on what was deemed acceptable by labelling some women witches. Creed tells us that "the witch is an abject figure in that she is represented in patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order." [224]

The story at the core of Arthur Machen's *The White People* is the hidden world of women who pass down occult secrets over the generations, the young girl narrator is the last in the line. Ideas of transmissibility influenced the creation of Mrs Barwell and her Emporium of Secrets. In Machen's story transmission of the secret which the young girl learns in the glade by the Roman statue kills her (she appears to poison herself). To approach the dazzlingly bright idol you must be blindfolded. When the girl dies, the reader (perhaps in the most outrageous strategic blank spot) loses the psychic link to the unseen forces and the promised revelation. Instead, we are left in our ordinary human darkness, cut off from the sources of magic apparently for our own good. And yet at the tale's perverse heart is a human desire to know the secret, to stare at the idol in the wooded glade whatever the consequences.

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[223] Jeffreys, 252.
[224] Creed, 76.

Mrs Barwell is the adult version of the anonymous narrator. She has stared at the idol. She reflects on the values of secrets while possessing keys to most houses and knowing nearly all Middle Honing's hidden contents. My main focus was to keep the action moving, knowing my failure to see the bigger picture. The exigencies of the text and my painful encrustation of detail demanded a wide panning angle, enabling a switching to almost omniscient viewpoint, to get the sense of an ensemble piece to contrast with Mina's solo cellist account.

The beetles too and their drone like surveillance abilities also evolved to counteract the text's tendency to stasis. With their aerial ability another opportunity to think big arose, opening up the vista and helping me escape my neurodivergent preoccupation with minutiae.

CHAPTER TEN: IS THE LIFE STILL IN THE BLOOD?

Any retelling of the vampire story needs to assess the changing nature of blood. One of my questions is does blood still hold its strange, uncanny power over us? If it fails in its symbolic potency, then the vampire too might lose its grip on the popular imagination.

I am going to begin with a brief history of exsanguination looking at Bathory, Carmilla and Dracula where life is depicted as very much in the blood and then examine vampiric response to the shifting nature of blood and new technologies. It seems appropriate to start with the woman who inspired my fiction and the scarlet thread linking her to vampire film and literature.

Elizabeth Bathory is so redolent a myth because she symbolizes the sanguinary monarch, the effusive bloodletter, through the murder and torture of her subjects. She invests blood with spiritual anti-ageing benefits and allegedly "bathed in the blood of 650 maidens in order to stay eternally young."[225]

Blood is also connected to notions of blueblood, good breeding and preserving the pedigree of ancient families. Case has noted how closely bloodlines were controlled to regulate breeding and what constitutes "normal" behaviour:

> The right to life was formulated through a legal, literary, and scientific discourse on blood which stabilized privilege by affirming the right to life for those who could claim blood and further, pure blood, and the consequent death sentence, either metaphorically or literally, for those who could not.[226]

Feudal hierarchies benefited from this decanting of pure blood into their chosen receptacles, consolidating land and wealth while homosexual sex was considered

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[225] Aspasia Stephanou, *Reading Vampire Gothic Through Blood: Bloodlines* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 90.

[226] Case, "Tracking the vampire," 69.

sterile (because unable to produce children) and could only reimagine sexual practices outside the natural and living.

Carmilla in Sheridan Le Fanu's eponymous short story represents queer desire: "that which wounds – a desire that breaks through the sheath of being as it has been imagined in a heterosexist society."[227] Laura the story's heroine has a deep emotional involvement with Carmilla, their affair is liberating as well as an attack on the decaying aristocratic order to which they both belong. Laura's love affair prevents her from marrying and having children.

Carmilla is influenced by Bathory, they are both women living outside heterosexist norms. Carmilla is an undead member of the aristocratic Karnstein family to which her victim Laura is also related by matrilineal descent. The liaison may even be incestuous or perhaps akin to cousinage, one of the methods the aristocracy favours in keeping their possessions in the family. Carmilla is linked even more directly with Bathory through a description of her taking a blood bath in her coffin: "the leaden coffin floated with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed."[228]

Stephanou convincingly argues in *Bloodlines* that our old perception of blood as the elixir of life changes in line with the contrasting attitudes of pre-modern and modern governments: "the reality of blood in the pre-modern spectacle cannot express the new function of power to administer and invest life."[229] Stephanou is convinced that the shift from sovereign power and the spectacle of blood where people were subject to the whims of a ruler to a new medicalised world order where

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[227] Case, "Tracking the Vampire," 69.
[228] Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, "Carmilla," *In a Glass Darkly* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 315.
[229] Stephanou, *Reading Vampire Gothic Through Blood*, 13.

biopower is invested in preserving life, has changed our fascination with blood into an interest with new technologies. Biopower, however, can still influence “the legal, literary and scientific discourse on blood” by securing the right to life for the wealthy and deciding which bloodlines continue into the twenty second century. Biopower is itself shown as vampiric and dangerous in films like *Daybreakers*[230] where vampires farm humans for blood while searching for a synthetic substitute.

Since the advent of safer blood transfusions in 1901 (unlike the unsafe procedure in *Dracula* when Lucy is far more likely to die from an allergic reaction to an incompatible donor) when Karl Landsteiner discovered three human blood groups, blood has come under close scientific scrutiny. Stephanou writes: “With the rise of new technologies and medical knowledge in the nineteenth century, blood enters the realm of science, no longer as a hidden property of the body, but as visible matter that can be clinically analysed.”[231]

The search for extended life through blood transfusion continues today. The internet is filled with biohackers and their own secret formulas for preserving life. The tech billionaire Bryan Johnson launched an anti-ageing programme named *Project Blueprint* which included him receiving plasma donations from his son. The donations were stopped because they proved ineffective.

There are even plans to produce hypothetical artificial red blood cells, respirocytes, that with the development of molecular nanotechnology will apparently become practical although “it will be many years before they are seen in the world of

[230] *Daybreakers,* directed by Michael Spierig (2009; Lionsgate Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.
[231] Stephanou, *Reading Vampire Gothic Through Blood*, 12.

medicine."[232] They have the hypothetical ability to better oxygenate our blood. If we were filled with respirocytes rather than red blood cells, how would that affect our view of blood? A vampire drinking respirocytes would lose most of their transgressive allure. Artificial blood would be divested of cultural taboos, a fluid that merely lubricates our organs. Stephanou argues in *A Matter of Life and Death:*

> Mechanical red cells are shown to be safer and less dangerous than real biological blood and can operate indefinitely beyond biological red cells' four-month lifespan. Because of their artificiality they have no symbolic value, are not infused with spirituality, and cannot conjure up notions of identity and life associated with whole living blood.[233]

However, these technologies are very far away. Despite these scientific advances blood still holds its spiritual and symbolic value in the minds of many writers. In the latest BBC2 *Dracula* production the blood remains paramount, an even more potent elixir since it grants Dracula telepathic powers over his victims; through drinking their lifeforce he retains their memories.

The Count is depicted as a connoisseur, treating humanity as bottles of wine, a collection of rare vintages to be decanted and quaffed at leisure. Blood transmits language skills as well as racial identity. We see Dracula committing acts of cultural appropriation as he drinks at leisure from each carefully selected source. The second episode entitled *Blood Vessel*[234] takes place on board *The Demeter*. The

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[232] "What is a Respirocyte? AzoNano, accessed July 10, 2025, https://www.azonano.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=3034.

[233] Stephanou, *Reading Vampire Gothic Through* Blood, 39.

[234] "Blood Vessel," episode 2, directed by Damon Thomas (Hartswood Films, 2020), DVD.

passengers chosen by Dracula for their excellent individual vintages give up their memories, identities and accents before losing their lives. The Count drinks not only to acquire life but to entertain himself, selecting a scientist one evening, a Bavarian the next, so he can absorb their accent. Dracula's shopping around for attributes demonstrates a new consumerist approach to his blood drinking. In this new adaptation we still see blood as the miraculous agent that preserves life as well as putting Dracula on the inside of everyone he drinks from, absorbing their lives, memories and identities. Blood in this retelling contains our uniqueness.

We are clearly allied to the vampire in our desire for immortality. Humanity's ongoing search for increased lifespans and anti-ageing therapies are starting to bear fruit. The regenerative function of stem cells with their ability to produce platelets, red and white blood cells are brilliant in fighting disease and explain our ongoing preoccupation with blood. However, they don't affect ageing. Recent developments in medical science suggests we need to kill off "zombie cells", senescent cells that refuse to die and are the cause of inflammation. Where does this all leave the vampire in fiction?

Despite the recent *Dracula* adaptation, I believe the life is no longer exclusively in the blood. The vampire's feeding habits have grown a little stale. There have been very few innovations in vampire feeding habits. One attempt is Suzy McKee Charnas's *The Vampire Tapestry*. Dr Weyland the vampire academic suffers from a human need to confide in people about his vampirism, at one point undergoing therapy. The need to allow the mask to slip in a desire to reveal an authentic self, jeopardises predator/ prey relations. The predator does not as a rule want to empathize too much with their next meal. Dr Weyland finds ingenious ways

to reveal his identity, talking about his feeding habits in a theoretical examination of the vampire myth in one of his anthropology lectures:

> Fangs are too noticeable… Large canine teeth are designed to tear meat. Polish versions of the vampire legend might be closer to the mark: they tell of some sort of puncturing device, perhaps a needle in the tongue like a sting that would secrete an anti-clotting substance. That way the vampire could seal his lips around a minimal wound and draw the blood freely instead of having to rip great, spouting wasteful holes in his unfortunate prey.[235]

The Bathory Quartet have rejected bloodsucking but still absorb their victims' identities through their ointment and music. Del Toro's alchemical/scientific approach in *Cronos* appealed the most; it has elements of mechanical transfusion since the insect within the mechanism must infuse the host's blood with its longevity gene, leading me to my decorative beetle brooch with the large pin/stinger. I wanted to convey its decorative function too and suggest an item that granny might have worn in her hatband. A domestic ornament with an uncanny undercurrent was required. The jewelled stinger is also a device connected to the possibilities of self-harming and piercing for pleasure, an elegant and feminine innovation that might have found a place in Elizabeth Bathory's gynaeceum.

The quartet's most unique aspect and main feeding innovation is their musical vampirism. It involves both draining the audience of their emotions and cultural appropriation. Herr Wolf's jokey appropriation of high-class English brands from Jermyn Street are designed to distract, giving him "class clearance" while the quartet acquire bodies and regional compositions. Their bloodless consumption of local compositions picked up on their travels (mazurkas, gypsy airs, the folkloric

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[235] Suzy McKee Charnas, *The Vampire Tapestry*, Living Batch Books, 1980), 37.

mishmash *Twelve Enchanted Stags*) are then regurgitated through live performance or on horror soundtracks.

> Herr Wolf fixes his identity in the feudal past:
>
> Yes, it's a shame we can't reinstate the old hierarchies, and you could hole up in your castle like in the old days. Feasting, sex and recreational bloodletting.[236]
>
> However, the feudal past seems another fantasy, another appropriation.
>
> Vanberry who is prone to lapses of honesty reveals more:
>
> You see something happened, people stopped feeling in meaningful ways and the potency dropped. Herr Wolf blames Hollywood. Vovoid says it's down to The Rothschilds. I think it's to do with Double Deckers getting smaller.[237]

Vanberry looks back to a golden age of authenticity and offers a hodge podge of excuses about the drop in feeling. Has Hollywood ultimately made us dream smaller, if we even dream at all? Hollywood may have appropriated our dreams (even our nightmares) but the quartet are stealing from everyone. They are part of the problem.

THE FEEDING PROCESS

Our emotional lives can be aroused and expanded by a musical score, once our emotions are aroused the Bathorys feed. The music possesses an uncanny power, placing us back in situations with strong emotional content (I have come full circle in describing the effects of the Gothic novel). The memories their music unleashes are at first sweet, promoting restlessness (like a traditional vampire bite) but each musical 'sting' takes the listener into a darker direction. The music is comparable

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[236] Jeffreys, 107.
[237] Jeffreys, 255.

with the definition of the unnatural reversal of the vampire kiss: “the evacuating kiss that drains the blood out.”[238] The novel focuses on emotional arousal rather than blood. The emotions are the real horror.

Of course, in a vampire novel there must be blood. The bloodletting occurs through proxies like the beetle brooches and the cello. The blood is no longer drunk but converted through vampiric machinery into life-giving ointment that is rubbed on Conrad’s stomach wound[239]. The ointment preserves wood and skin alike. The cello’s spike in the final concert is connected to Mina’s tooth by blood vessels that operates when she bites down and pushes the stings of the beetle brooches deeper into the audience’s wounds.

[238] Case, “Tracking the Vampire,” 72.
[239] Jeffreys, 230.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: VAMPIRE DECISIONS

The vampire genre shares something in common with detective fiction, both have well-plodded plotlines and are in danger of being buried alive under the weight of cliché. The plotlines and restrictions surrounding vampire existence and detective fiction may appear inflexible but, in both cases, creativity focuses on the renewal of character.

The vampire can be anyone. *100 Fathoms Below*[240] is a good example of how the undead can be resurrected with ingenuity. The story takes place during The Cold War in Soviet territory and shows what happens when vampires take over a nuclear submarine. Character renewal in film recently seems to focus on delivering vampire roles in high stakes situation. The claustrophobic setting on board the USS Roanoke is another version of Poe's premature burial scenario and would make an excellent movie.

Blood Red Sky[241] reinvents the vampire as cancer patient, bald, wearing a wig, on strong medication (the meds prevent the widow, Nadja, from reverting to a ferocious Nosferatu) travelling by plane with her son until she gets caught up in a terrifying skyjack. Only the Nosferatu starved of human blood locked deep inside Nadja can take on the skyjackers but that will involve the loss of her humanity, including her relationship with her son.

These recent offerings throw vampires into claustrophobic technological settings. Renewal means constantly upping the stakes. Where next? Vampires on

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[240] Nicholas Kaufmann and Stehen L. Kent, *100 Fathoms Below* (Blackstone Publishing, 2018).

[241] *Blood Red Sky,* directed by Peter Thorwart (Netflix, 2021), https://www.netflix.com/watch/80198645.

SpaceX's Polaris mission? or perhaps trapped in the newly refurbished Hadron Collider?

My vampires are not operating in such a confined space. Their story is slower paced and about the infection of an isolated community. The focus is on building that community and has more in common with Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*. The history of the saltmarsh and the landscape are part of the story.

The Bathory Quartet are not lithe and superfast which seems to be the way of contemporary vampire cinema. They are very much the shabby dregs of the old feudal order descended from a very traditional vampire lineage. Why did I choose such appalling old vampires?

If we trace the distinguished vampire bloodline from *Carmilla*[242] to the present day, we see the movement from exteriority to interiority. The vampire's otherness being replaced by a new interiority where the reader is invited to draw closer and view the vampire's humanity rather than its horror.

The domesticating of the vampire into a lively after dinner raconteur develops in tandem with the technological innovations celebrated in *Dracula*[243] (the typewriter, telegram, blood transfusion) being carried forward in later works with new discoveries such as tape machines providing the means for better communication and intimacy between the vampire and would be victim. The vampire seems anxious to throw off the ancientness of his pedigree by embracing modernity. *The Dracula Tapes*[244] demonstrates a tech-savvy Count embracing

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[242] Le Fanu, "Carmilla."
[243] Stoker, *Dracula.*
[244] Saberhagen, *The Dracula Tapes.*

1970s tape cassettes to record his memoirs. Technology and the need to set the record straight allow the reader/ interviewer access to a rich, humane and previously hidden interior, most fully exploited in Anne Rice's *Interview with a Vampire*.[245] We might even say that the confessional appetite temporarily replaced bloodlust.

One of my first considerations was how much interiority to allow the vampire. Did I want the new sympathetic confessional vampire where we see them as an extension of our selves or would it better to create fictional difference, deny access to the vampire's inner, undead life? In the latter case, the vampire will remain more unknowable, hence more frightening. I didn't want the reader to relate to Herr Wolf, Vovoid and Conrad. Vanberry was allowed some different qualities because of his capricious child nature.

I took my cue from *Dracula*[246] because of the novel's still potent mix of evil and realistic reportage. Apart from the brilliant opening when he is entertaining Jonathan Harker while also cooking, laundering and driving the coach, Count Dracula is largely absent from the novel. The evil builds in his absence. We are initiated into it early and then he withdraws with no direct access to his mind. This is the gold standard of frightening, unknowable exteriority. A Count with a conflicted interior and some good qualities, battling with his predatory compulsions is not Dracula.

The quartet's power was designed to grow in anxious making whispers, smallish initial incidents: Mina's initiation via the horror soundtrack followed by

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[245] Anne Rice, *Interview with a Vampire* (Sphere, 2008).
[246] Stoker, *Dracula*.

Vovoid's visit to the concert.[247] Rumours about them rather than their own testimony would hopefully extend the novel's window of reality. I was attempting a little realistic reportage too. The quartet creeps into the novel first as a footnote and then a jarring note and then they arrive with full orchestral fanfare.

Their names are related to the East or Dracula; Vovoid is the title of a warlord in Eastern Europe, Vanberry is of course a misspelling of Arminius Vamberry (1832-1915) one of the secret service's first foreign agents[248] whose *Travels in Central Asia* launched him as a celebrity. We know he was a friend of Bram Stoker, but I haven't found any proof that he was the inspiration for Van Helsing or advised on customs relating to the creation of *Dracula*[249].

The novel was meant to engage with its nineteenth-century counterpart by referencing certain themes and elements. The nocturnal insects are a sort of technologically enhanced vampire bat. The musical vampires arrive by boat like in Stoker's novel. The boat is called *The Pomona* in homage to *The Demeter*. The Goddess Demeter watches over the harvest/fertility while Pomona protects fruit trees. Both names are ironic since the undead spread sterility and death; the opposite of healthful harvests, unless we think in terms of harvests of death.

When choosing to locate my vampires in the East European tradition I was concerned that I might be associated with Stoker's racism in *Dracula*.[250] Beneath

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[247] Jeffreys, 22.

[248] Richard Norton Taylor, "From Dracula's nemesis to prototype foreign spy," *The Guardian,* April 1, 2005, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/apr/01.

[249] Much more convincing is the work of Marion McGarry on *Dracula as Cholera: The Influence of Sligo's Cholera Epidemic of 1832 on Bram Stoker's Novel Dracula* (1897) which alongside the letters of Charlotte Stoker firmly point to Dracula's Irish influences. Charlotte's letters are filled with gripping accounts of live burial and a terrifying drunken priest inciting a mob.

[250] Count Dracula's antisemitic descriptions include his aquiline nose, East European origins and his love of gold, where he privileges scooping up gold over saving his life when Harker cuts the lining of his coat, 394.

the racism, I sensed the fears of colonization and reverse-colonization were complicated by Stoker's financial dependence on Henry Irving and his own Anglo-Irish heritage. Irving and Stoker's relationship resembled that of a colonial ruler and subject. My rereading of *Dracula* suggested that Stoker was taking revenge on British colonial power, revelling in the chaos the "King Vampire" causes, contaminating Anglo-Saxon bloodlines with the vitality of the wanderer. The relish with which Dracula wounds Victorian society, enslaving Harker and Lucy reads like wish fulfilment -- the stuff that fills the dreams of the oppressed and colonized subject. What I took from Stoker was his vigour in attacking empire while choosing to set my vampires against a small town's smug inhabitants.

I drew on some details of my Jewish grandparents who emigrated from Eastern Europe for the creation of Herr Wolf. Herr Wolf the avuncular joker was based on my grandfather with his elaborate suits and anglophile hunting prints. Inside their apartment, far from the golf tournaments held in Clacton-on-Sea—a fashionable resort town in the 1930s where my grandfather embodied the quintessential English gentleman— were scattered a few handfuls of ancestral earth. My grandfather's rocks and minerals, chunks of amber with trapped insects, weirdly ornate dragonfly broaches, were all cluttered on the mantlepiece, bookended with posed studio photos of them in the style of contemporary movie stars. The mantlepiece was a reminder of their cultural identity. A border they crossed over every evening with the help of whiskey and Rothmans cigarettes

They bequeathed to me a pair of massive antique suitcases in cream leather with straps and brass buckles. The image took root in my mind of the refugee who has lost sight of home, just managing to throw in a few rocks to act as reminders before taking off. Case tells us that "the vampires, often from Eastern Europe as

well, … sought their lustful sleep in dirt from their *Heimat …* [and are] marked as the wandering tribe and despised."[251]

Herr Wolf speaks a very formal and antiquated guidebook English. Part of his sinister appeal is his rebellious, anti-social impulses couched in polite speech. They are connected to the old economies of blood with Elizabeth Bathory as their symbol and patron. My instinct was to place them among the decayed feudal hierarchies where blood was spilled for sport and peasant girls could be tortured to death in large numbers. They are traditional old school vampires in the sense that we cannot inhabit their interior. They are the marginalized and the unnatural, bound in servitude to the monstrous cello womb, regurgitating their snatches of song infused with their audience's suffering. They exist in the transitory moment of yearning created by live performance. Through their unnaturalness they occupy an intermediate zone where I could examine alternative creation myths.

[251] Case, "Tracking the Vampire," 80.

CHAPTER TWELVE: INTO THE WEIRD: A WALK IN THE WOODS

A Field Trip into Weirdness: Encryption and The Universal Masquerade

Before lockdown, I moved from London to Brightlingsea on the east coast in response to a midlife crisis. It is a more or less normal process as you assess your life aged fifty and are possessed, temporarily, with a feeling of deathly, creeping irrelevance— as a meaning machine you begin to break down. I began receiving emails from a dead friend, just an algorithm gone awry, but the messages contained photos of work colleagues, suggesting agency rather than a random worm munching its way through my mate's address book. Paul sent me pictures of a woman we worked with and messages about how he'd spotted her on a London to Brighton train, but she'd failed to recognise him. Not surprising since he was dead. The last time I had seen his strange, varnished head and neck, they were swelling out of an expensive paisley shirt in a storage facility in Canada Water shortly before his body was repatriated to his native Spain.

My last memory of him (prior to viewing his body) was the image of him drunkenly weaving between tables, gripped by escalating panic as he knew he was done for, hungry for the most trivial scraps of gossip as if he could offset the all absorbing emptiness with news of our boss's awful timekeeping or the reference librarian knocking back pints of ramrod bitter in his lunch hour so he could better face the ghosts who haunted the upper floors with bags of correspondence that would never be sent.

I couldn't understand the emails, the targeted jokes about the beautiful Cecilia Lucas Tooth. Who was the rather tasteless joker who knew so much about our shared history? That night, as I sat in the blue glow of my laptop, coming down from mushrooms, yawning and feeling myself unstretching, I was prepared to

believe it really was *him,* reaching out to me across the internet. He had always pursued some impossible debutante, so why should death change such obsessive habits?

This was digital witchcraft and it disturbed me.

The weird was there, a pair of old mummified claws scrabbling at the surface of reality. Micheal Cisco says: "The bizarre experience in the weird tale re-enchants the world for the reader, even if darkly."[252] Re-enchantment occurs unexpectedly in a world we take for granted. In this case, quotidian concerns about the integrity of my email server gave way to an encounter with the numinous, the very same quality that drew me to weird fiction. I had a sense of "the interestingness of things —the absorbingness, the picturesqueness… of things which happen in the most casual and everyday way! As if they were nothing you know!"[253]

Cisco's definition varies considerably from one of the first historians of the weird tale, H. P. Lovecraft. In his short critical history on supernatural horror, he offers a different defining characteristic of the weird tale:

> A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. [254]

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[252] Michael Cisco, "Bizarre Epistemology, Bizarre Subject: A Definition of Weird Fiction," in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature: The Critical Influence of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. Sean Moreland, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 193.

[253] Frances Hodgson Burnett, "The Christmas in the Fog," in *Queens of the Abyss, Lost Stories from the Women of the Weird* (British Library, 2020), 88.

[254] H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Courier Corporation, 1973), 15.

A contemporary reader might agree on the importance of dread, although that might be too generalized to set the weird apart from other forms of horror. Even if we agree that dread is important, it does not have to be conveyed through the "daemons of unplumbed space." Lovecraft in this early essay is perhaps more interested in defining the qualities of his own weird fiction, portentousness is his least appealing quality. What I respond to in the weird is that the sense of dread, or dark re-enchantment, can attach itself to the unsteadiness of everyday objects, rather than intergalactic adversaries.

Bruno Schulz's fiction shows life hiding behind lifeless disguises. Even the wallpaper in *The Street of Crocodiles* is a sentient, breathing creature:

> How the pullulating jungle of wallpaper, filled with whispers, lisping and hissing, closed in around him. He heard, without looking, a conspiracy of knowingly winking hidden eyes, of alert ears opening up among the flowers of the wall, of dark smiling mouths.[255]

This illustrates another aspect of the weird, more than just the uncanny effect of the inanimate becoming animate, the things themselves that are so brim-full of life overflow simple definitions and categories. Reality cannot be contained by dead forms. The weird much like "Schulz's entire universe is premised on the vitality of hidden life and encrypted purpose."[256]

Schulz's preoccupation with this squirming life inside commonplace things which threatens the stability of all objects goes further in his letters:

> The substance of reality exists in a state of constant fermentation, germination, hidden life…everything diffuses beyond its borders, remains in a given shape only momentarily… A principle of sorts appears in the habits, the modes of existence of this reality: universal masquerade. Reality takes on

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[255] Bruno Schulz, "Visitation," in *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories* (Penguin Classics, 2008), 13.

[256] Rod Mengham, "The Folding Telescope and Many Other Virtues of Bruno Schulz." *The Kenyon Review* 33, no. 3 (2011): 154, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41304665.

> certain shapes merely for the sake of appearance: as a joke or form of play… The life of the substance consists in the assuming and consuming of numberless masks. The migration of forms is the essence of life… There is an ever-present atmosphere of the stage, of sets viewed from behind, where the actors make fun of the pathos of their parts after stripping off their costumes.[257]

The weird tale is well suited to investigate these unmaking realities. The sense that we can peer behind the scenery, evaluate the quality of the pasteboard sets like Mina does when she goes backstage at the Massimo in chapter six is very much the weird's main register. Unlike the horror story, the weird is open-ended, dealing with glimmers and intuitions. If these perceptions were developed further, they would no longer possess their fragmentary power. The weird tale reenchants the reader by allowing us to feel we are on the brink of revelation; any minute we are about to discover the universe's encrypted purpose, although we never do. The weird is a loose and permeable barrier between our world of reality and the fantastic. It can raise questions about the dark nature of our world without providing any answers, mirroring human uncertainty.

Unlike the horror story the weird tale isn't usually structured around a final confrontation with the supernatural adversary, offering no definite ending like the vampire story of exile, destruction or integration. The weird doesn't employ the logical information gathering of detective fiction. The weird's essence is mysteriousness. Is there any meaning to this unmaking reality? Schulz's writing unlike the misanthropic gloom of Ligotti shows some consolations: "In some sense

[257] Bruno Schulz, *Letters and Drawings of Bruno Schulz: With Selected Prose*. (Fromm International Publishing Corporation, 1990), 113

we derive a profound satisfaction from the loosening of the web of reality; we feel an interest in witnessing the bankruptcy of reality."[258]

The weird invests matter with an uncanny, spectral life. It is interesting that two different writers, Arthur Machen (1863-1947) and Bruno Schulz (1892-1942) would not have realised they were operating in some specialist niche within the horror genre, given the imprimatur of 'weird' by latter day connoisseurs (perhaps to privilege their good taste in rejecting horror and its desire to revolt). Both writers are preoccupied by matter as a magical and malleable substance.

In *N*, Machen employs a series of fragmentary narratives, like a series of concentric circles spreading out from the initial disruption caused by the precise location of Canon Park in Stoke Newington. Canon Park is a transformative place that both exists and doesn't exist, once one has viewed "the architecture of fantastic and unaccustomed beauty,"[259]you will go on tramping the streets of London to try and find it again. Initiated into the weird by a glimmer of transcendent beauty where the encrypted nature of creation is about to be revealed you can only hunger for another sighting. The pseudo explanation of how fantastic structures can arise from our reality is connected to man's relationship to the universe before The Fall where it was "originally fluid and the servant of the spirit" until it "crashed down upon him overwhelming him beneath its weight and dead mass."[260] The "Heavenly Chaos" [261] was "a soft and ductile substance, which could be moulded by the imagination of uncorrupted man into whatever forms he chose it to assume."[262] Machen like

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[258] Schulz, *Letters and Drawings*, 113.

[259] Arthur Machen, "N," in *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories,* ed. Aaron Worth (Oxford University Press, 2019), 312.

[260] Machen, "N," 310.

[261] Machen, 310.

[262] Machen, 310.

Schulz imagines a sort of divine modelling dough flowing through everything. The protoplasm in *N* can build cities, lakes and minarets, things of unsurpassing beauty, that can disappear just as quickly. Both writers share a sense of the chronic instability and magic of matter.

The Bathory Quartet is also a means of investigating matter through their magical ointment. Mina starts "unselfing"[263]when she is by the fountain after using the ointment, mysteriously gaining access to other forms of consciousness: the monk, La Bambina, the crevices in the statuary. Consciousness percolates through everything and the compound allows her to experience other existences.

The Universal Masquerade Continues

The weird has always influenced my writing practice which explores issues of agency and consists of daily walks in locations that are the sites of historic trauma where accidents, suffering and deaths have occurred: walking the sites of the North sea flood surges of 1953; The Cage in St. Osyth where local witch, Ursula Kempe (1525-1582) was held until her trial; the footpath where the women accused of witchcraft hurried between Mistley and Manningtree. Once the weird calls to you, you are immersed in the unmaking mist, the uncertain place so beloved of Sheridan Le Fanu and Arthur Machen where the stability of the suburban street gives way to emptiness and unfinished developments, half-built villas and brickworks, rows of streetlamps illuminating an unfinished avenue of mud, where your feet tapping on the pavement are connected in their dying echoes to the complexities of the past. After all, aren't we the sum total of all the events that have already happened?

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[263] Jeffreys, *The Bathory Quartet,* 119.

An old building near the quay in Brightlingsea is the site of the town's first cinema once owned by Junius Booth, the nephew of John Wilkes Booth – the murderer of Abraham Lincoln. Booth an impresario and playwright uprooted from managing a cinema in Lancaster gate, was convinced that Brightlingsea was an ideal spot for a permanent cinema. Warned that the locals' income could not support the venture he invested hundreds of pounds.

Booth rented a large building at the bottom of Tower Street from J.W. Aldous and transformed it into The Tower Cinema Theatre. Whether it was the morphine that Mr and Mrs Booth "took freely to produce sleep"[264] or his visits to the local Swedenborgian chapel in Spring Road, he became convinced that he was being chased by angels with frostbitten feet while his frantic wife, Florence, piled trunks against the bedroom door at his insistence to keep them out. The frost-bitten angels thumped harder, pushed slips of paper under the door. The bailiffs and creditors pursuing Booth had caught up with him in Brightlingsea.

Perhaps he was a chip off the old block, the locals said, divided in their admiration for his celebrity status and fear he might be a criminal. Junius was a huckster and showman, like all the Booth family tainted by their association with theatricality and murder, with more than a suggestion of congenital madness.

The winter wore on, relentless, flocks of Brent geese in their thousands churned the fields of winter wheat into mud. The water froze in tumblers on kitchen tables while the cold clawed at the lungs. The cinema was failing. Plagued by oil

[264] A.L Wakeling, "The Double Tragedy at Brightlingsea," WordPress, accessed July 12, 2025, https://lincolnconspirators.com/picture-galleries/booth-family/jbb-jr/article-about-junius-brutus-booth-iiis-murder-suicide-1.

dripping on the spark plug of the projector, which he had paid eight guineas to have overhauled, the show had to be stopped while the engine was cleaned. The next morning in December 1912, Junius shot his wife and then blew his brains out in their rented house at No 19 Tower Street, Brightlingsea.

I ask myself does anything still resonate in the countryside and community connected to this trauma? When I stand in AB storage the site of the old cinema now leased out to a fishmonger filled with chiller cabinets packed with otherworldly grey squid, I call out to Junius. It seems fitting I am surrounded by these frozen offcuts from Cthulhu. The weird when you remove mechanistic plot points boils down to a sensation. How do you pursue Lovecraft's cosmic dread while avoiding his successors who have followed him all too literally with "fiction commodified to the point of losing meaningful association with the cosmic horror actually espoused by Lovecraft?"[265] Surrounded by rubbery Cthulhu tentacles I make a mental note to avoid the creative equivalent of fried calamari and aim for the deep time kraken.

I watch myself more closely, all these family men who become monsters, in the winter months. We suffer from the atavistic feeling that we may not make it through until Spring when we realise, in January, that winter is just getting underway. I journey to these traumatic spots, looking for a feeling like the physiological delight of "horripilation" when the hair bristles and stands on end and we feel cleansed and purged by terror. Terror is the feeling that cuts through the emotional mix, flooding

[265] John Glover, "Reception Claims in *Supernatural Horror and Literature* and the Course of Weird Fiction," in *New Directions in Supernatural Horror Literature: The Critical Influence of H. P. Lovecraft*, ed. Moreland, 181.

us with cortisol and adrenalin and like the weird tale, removes our sense of safety leaving us to reconfigure the world.

Perhaps, the location most incongruous of all is the village green, South Street, Manningtree, where four local women were hung in 1645 for the crime of witchcraft. Looking down to *The Red Lion* among the Georgian houses, it is hard to imagine how a well-groomed market town like Manningtree could collude in such horror. It gave me butterflies on a warm May afternoon. I looked at the poster with the Covid app on the nearby Methodist church advertising a 'text your prayer service.' "We can pray for you," it said. Was this an unconscious sop to the ghosts of the dead women: Anne West, Helen Clark, Anne Cooper, Marian Hocket? I say their names as an incantation, a reverse spell to bring them back into daylight.

The weird was calling. I could feel it especially in the woodland between Mistley and Manningtree where the women accused of witchcraft by Matthew Hopkins gathered.

It is no surprise that wood is connected to the weird, since it blurs the line between organic and inorganic, an interstitial thing that possesses uncanny attributes. We lovingly oil and feed our parquet floors, massage our wooden instruments and rejoice in the beauty of the grain, the flame maple on the back of an acoustic guitar, the rosewood fretboard — even when 'dead' we treat wooden instruments with the respect we might accord the living, laying them carefully into their coffins lined with coloured velvet plush. After all that polishing and shaping, is it any surprise that folktales celebrate the quickening of matter into life? The Czech

fable *Otesansek*[266] like *Pinocchio* is about a lump of wood brought to life by a childless couple. The wooden child gobbles both parents and is defined by its insatiable hunger. Both wooden baby and boy puppet, cut off from their traditional sources of nourishment (sunlight and water), crave food. Woodenness is represented as a hungry hollow, trees transforming into rootless children who quickly become insatiable. Pinocchio's search for a soul, an *animus,* develops the key aspect of the uncanny, the journey from inanimate to animate. By the same token, the reverse journey can be made and this was especially relevant to my experience of the mid-life crisis when depression disconnected me from the things I valued, forcing me to seek out new ways of feeling. Anything to escape the woodenness of my responses, the stiffness of my movements lacking sap and vitality. My wife accused me of being "thick as two short planks," unthinking, catatonic about our future before we moved from London. Hence humanity's fear of the mannequin and ventriloquist's dummy.

Wood is also the source of Nordic creation myths. The first humans, Ask and Embla, were created from polished driftwood, discovered by beachcombing gods, limb-like branches that you might mistake for body parts washed up on the shore. In addition, wood has other qualities. The Manningtree witches discovered that wood was both protector and persecutor. Wood (particularly the forest on Furze Hill) provided a sanctuary for hunted women while also forming the raw materials for the gibbet. Wood not only possesses weird properties but the very origins of the word weird relates to the handmaiden of a tree.

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[266] Karel Jaromir Erben, *Slavonic Fairy Tales: The long-desired child,* trans. John Theophilus Naaké (1874), accessed July 12, 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Slavonic_Fairy_Tales/The_Long-desired_Child.

The word weird is derived from the old Saxon word for fate[267] (wyrd) and is linked in Norse mythology to the handmaidens who tend the sacred ash tree, Yggdrasill, that pokes its branches through the universe. One of the Norns from Nordic mythology, Uror, who tends the tree, is also responsible for human husbandry. Alongside two fellow giantesses, she presides over each birth, carving the individual's destiny on the bark, scarifying the tissue with long yellow fingernails – much as graffiti artists or lovers tag themselves in a tree's outer skin. Throughout our lifetime (so the story goes) secret communications are whispered by the maidens who tend the supernatural tree, whispers that are part of the woodland susurrus. Traditionally, the woods are a place to get lost and found, where we undergo some trial of reflection and renewal. It is no accident that the antecedents of the weird are symbolized in a sacred, secret-bearing tree.

The weird has always been linked with this hidden and mysterious process of becoming: the future that Uror has inscribed in the ash. Uror can trace the trajectory of our lives with her fingernail, following the raised ridges on the bark, what we can only glimpse in dreams and whispers. The weird creates a tension between the possibilities of becoming and our knowledge that the scratches on the bark are already ingrained. The weird exists in this tiny zone of apparent free will. We act as if we have agency and can ignore our individual 'weirds' already carved on the tree. While we live our lives, the maidens operate like clandestine tree surgeons, lopping a life off here, pollarding a future there, and while this secretive surgery continues, there are glimpses in our waking lives of other realities: dreams and encounters with

[267] For a discussion on how the word weird is derived from the German, die gewordene (the 'Has Become'), please see J. Machin, *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939,* (Palgrave Gothic, 2018), 32.

the bizarre that overflow the normal channels of experience. Emails from the dead. Objects that turn up in odd places but aren't worth worrying about. It seemed fitting to return to the weird's roots in Nordic mythology, go back into the woods and examine my responses to an ancient tree, not quite as old as Yggdrasil. Maybe I could find some magic sap or ointment dripping from the trunk that would stop me turning back into the raw materials of Pinocchio.

Old Knobbley is an 800-year-old oak associated with the Manningtree witches. It is one of the growing rank of celebrity trees dreaming green thoughts in a green shade, that now has its own Facebook page and armies of picknickers. One day it will have its own chat show with celebrities sitting in the boughs. Old Knobbley has even been modelled and re-assembled from cardboard in Colchester's *Firstsite* art gallery[268] with recorded transcripts of seventeenth century confessions from women accused of witchcraft, their testimonials whispered from hanging speakers. The whispers affected me. The dead women's testimony unsettled me, filling me with an undead susurrus, directing me to find the tree where they sought shelter—the wide boughs and trunk with its numerous footholds, smoothed over the years by hundreds of scrabbling feet.

The woods today are still a place of re-enchantment and the tree a site of pilgrimage. On my many walks there, I have met a descendant of a woman hung for witchcraft in Salem, Essex County, in 1692, as well as a spiritualist holding a

[268] susan pui san lok, *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND*, Firstsite, 2019, WordPress, accessed July 12, 2025, https://spsl-projects.net/covengrovestand.

moonlit séance around the tree. She was shouting up into the darkness, “is there anyone there? Did you do anything vaguely herbally?”

Despite all these fellow mavericks and interlopers, despite the moonlit witch-hunting tours using downloadable electro-magnetic apps that light up myriads of mobiles with red bars, the woods still retain this quality of eerie tangled, stillness; especially when you look down on moonlit nights towards the glitter of Gamekeeper’s Pond and wonder at the duckings and drownings that took place under Matthew Hopkins’s supervision.

My research drew me to showmen and performers, tricksters on the fringes of respectability. The tour guide conducting a conversation with the dead witches had more in common with Matthew Hopkins than she realised. The witches were served up as entertainment. The symbolic order was reasserted by public hanging, hammed up as a purification ritual. The community impoverished by the civil war looked on cold, hungry and paranoid. Now the women were offered up again for the tour’s moonlit benefit. Mina in my novel was another sacrifice. Her traumatic illness performed on stage. Mina is familiar with having no boundaries and no safe spaces, her final horrific performance would not be unexpected.

The first few visits I could not find Old Knobbley in the wild wood at the top of Furze Hill. As the country headed towards lockdown, people grew more guarded. I was an outsider in a close-knit community where curtains are still drawn early and lamps are lit, giving me an insight into witchcraft. The pettiness of the accusations: a lame hen, a refusal to give an old woman a cup of milk. Even today there is a sense of increased watchfulness, of people knowing your business. The persecution of the Manningtree witches was not the work of one unpleasant zealot but a community

wide effort to report on unlucky individuals. Later, during lockdown I became more aware of the watchful community: a non-essential visit to a late-night garage could result in public shaming on a local Facebook group. One local teenager was pilloried for buying rizlas and packets of mini eggs during lockdown with the community debating hotly whether these were essential purchases. It doesn't take a lot for whispers to start.

On my third visit I hoped to find the tree quickly, wondering whether I was worthy after two pints of Golden Ale in *The Mistley Thorn* once owned by Matthew Hopkins, self-appointed Witchfinder General and serial murderer of Essex women. A man of contradictions: puritan and publican. Bar staff told me (a little embarrassed to regale me with ghost stories) that his poltergeist smashes pint glasses, perhaps this is his way of reconciling his puritanism with his commercial instincts. It is strange how the image of him on the frontispiece of the original 1647 edition of *The Discovery of Witches* has him aping in many ways the appearance of a conjurer, the tall-banded hat and cape, the staff he holds in his right hand like the handle of a broom. His wide-eyed leonine face mirrors the astonishment of the large eyed, inquisitive familiars that watch us from the foreground while his strange, finely twizzled moustache quivers like an extra sensory apparatus for sniffing out evil.

The treatise is a depressing read; questions and answers posed in a cod legalese language reflecting his early training as a lawyer and his attempts to elevate acts of sadism into a legitimate science. Here are early forms of torture: sleep deprivation and waterboarding, which have yet to be improved upon, taken up rather too enthusiastically in latter-day Wars on Terror — a risible attempt to rebrand torture as a "humane" form of interrogation. The pamphlet contradicts itself. Women are to be walked so they cry out to their familiars in exhaustion and prove

their guilt, but later, we are told "if they lay down on a couch immediately comes their familiars into the room and scares the watchers."[269] So why do they need to be walked? The latter method appears to offer much more concrete proof.

Hopkins, although a keen scaremonger, seeks to reassure the reader of the limited power of the devil and his disciples and by extension of the witchfinder's own omnipotence. He exonerates the witch from doing *actual* harm – their real crime is being duped by the devil. The devil, Hopkins tells us, has 6000 years of experience in art and physic. He only knows if a man is liable to a certain disease. In other words, he diagnoses terminal conditions and then makes the witches believe that they are responsible for these inevitable deaths already inscribed on the ancient bark. Only once does his mask slip when he addresses the witches as if he were Satan tempting his children, referring to them as "delicate firebrand-darlings."[270] You can feel his tongue flickering over their fire-racked bodies, a rare sensual outburst from this young puritan.

I waited for the room to communicate with me, touching the old wainscoting hoping for a volt from the past, an engraved initial but it's all repainted in grey and there is little sign of the past here: German bar staff, jars of homemade vodka—one made from bacon—and a group of elderly women wearing transparent capes—ghosts of a different sort, pecking at the rich fish stew. Maybe it was the ruby ale but I felt myself dispersing. I couldn't seem to maintain focus and felt as hollow as an old tree trunk, echoey with other voices.

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[269] Matthew Hopkins, *The Discovery of Witches* (1647; Project Gutenberg, November 10, 2004), https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14015

[270] Hopkins, "The Discovery of Witches."

Mistley feels well-to-do, smart, slightly artificial, as if you wandered on to a stage set on the banks of the Stour with its armies of swans arrowing through the water, today still as glycerine. There is that note of unreality. It is one I'm hearing more and more, quickening in response to the writing process as I see how the past – the wainscoting and the witch trials – keeps erupting in the present. This is where Hopkins walked, this is the hopping bridge, another body of water that his ghost is rumoured to frequent on full moons.

Mistley was once a speculator's dream designed to rival Bath as a centre of fashion with a church, saltwater spa and assembly room. Now instead there is a gap between the towers, the two neoclassical pavilions topped with cupolas that bookended the church. The scheme failed; the church fell into disrepair. All that remains are the ornamental bookends framing emptiness, the moral centre vanished, supplanted by buddleia, horse chestnut and cloud. Nearby instead of a saltwater spa is a condemned animal sanctuary – the braying of celibate donkeys filling me with dread.

The road climbs uphill, past grey stone villas and what once must have been the road to Old Mistley Hall, now kennels. It feels like trespassing as you continue past empty fields with churned up lanes of earth and turn into a paved road under an avenue of small trees. The avenue leads to an entirely new prospect; ahead is a little valley of bright green fields leading down and then climbing to the crown of trees on top of Furze Hill. A man in waterproofs stands under a tree looking up into the canopy. He is "landscaping" and when I mention my destination, he looks at his watch: "only an hour of daylight left… you don't want to get stuck on that hill." That's exactly what I do want, to get lost and found, to find something in the wood that will enhance reality.

I am looking for the numinous, how the sky-blue curtains in the theatre appear to the young narrator in *The Street of Crocodiles*: “The tremor sailing across the large area of that sky...revealed the illusory character of that firmament, caused that vibration of reality which, in metaphysical moments, we experience as the glimmer of revelation.”[271]

The wind is getting up, stirring armfuls of tiny yellow leaves, dancing in circles. A flock of long-tailed tits fly among the upper branches, their curious flattened faces like flying mice. I imagine the women persecuted by Hopkins, running through these fields to the straggling woodland, wading through the pond that oozes along the outskirts of the wood. The greenness is startling on the downhill, an unreal emerald-green similar to the fields that grow luxury lawn turf, the technicolour ramped up to dazzling brightness. I stop to take in the number of massive tree carcases scattered in these meadows. Ghosts of Neolithic beasts: cave bear and giant elk lying on their backs in the wet grass with their shiny legs trampling the air, great crowns of antlers are entangled with mud and ivy.

One more intimation of the eerie intrudes on your notice as you approach the wood: an outlying Lodge, all that remains of the Manor House long since demolished. It has a thin, one-dimensional aspect. A whitewashed wall with white door and marble columns, a ceremonial doorway between worlds. The door functions as a prop from the weird tale. Fisher claims that the weird tale deals with threshold states. We are in a state of betweenness while we hover on the threshold. On either side lie the rigorous constraints of fantasy and realism. “Fantasy

[271] Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles,* 54.

naturalises other worlds. But the weird de-naturalises all worlds, by exposing their instability, their openness to the outside."[272] The weird needs a route into the everyday. It might be a fireplace where oil paintings of ancient rites drop down the chimney at irregular intervals, or a windowpane fashioned from otherworldly glass that at night proposes other views of squirming, tentacular forms rather than the lampposts of a quiet suburban street. Mirrors, however small, may be portals from which the terrifying sons of the bird crawl through in Robert Heinlein's *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag.*[273]

I am tempted to knock, call up the spirit of the old lodgekeeper. I bang on the door, no response only an intensification of the silence. There is the sense I have started something, the hollow knock louder than I anticipated. It will trouble me later when I lie in bed listening to the wind through the chimney and the banging of the cat flap (we have no cat). The lodgekeeper doesn't come so I peer around the corner. There is no inside, just a plain brick wall—the Lodge functions as a perspective façade. The owner of the vanished Manor would have looked from his study down the deep planted avenue, waving with mature trees, at this seemingly stable three-dimensional structure, admired the Ionic columns from the top of his staircase, relished in the solidity of the illusion and his clever penny-pinching strategy, projecting influence on a limited budget. Nowadays, we are only left with the struts holding reality in place. It is thinner stuff than we imagine. The dream of prestige, classical symmetry torn apart by the great ransacking wind bowling emptiness before it. Similarly, Mistley Towers commemorates the grey skies and

[272] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater, 2016), 29.
[273] Robert A. Heinlein, *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag* (Dobson Books Ltd, 1964).

wildlife and “the failure of presence: there is nothing present where there should be something.”[274].

The door has a handle and I look around before breaking and entering. The real does not feel real. A creak and dull thunk as the spindle turns, I pause, the watcher on the threshold, prolonging the moment of betweenness. The door opens. Furze Hill is enhanced in its whitewashed frame of rotten wood. I know how this story goes. I have inserted myself into the frame, turned into an interloper and by crossing the threshold have violated the laws of The Old Ones and awakened Cthulhu himself. I will be punished. So much better than being ignored.

I pass through the doorway into woodland and a steep, leafy hill. It is here I can most easily transport myself to the seventeenth century among the huge hollow carcases of trees and can inhabit the physical space of those persecuted women who walked the connecting pathway between Mistley and Manningtree on their daily errands. Women and widows from the civil war still raging, dispossessed of everything, burrowing down into their secret selves and trading in an economy of secrets: wisdom, gossip, tittle-tattle, folk remedies – anything to keep body and soul together. Secrets confer power and prestige on the powerless; whispers of scandal kept tongues nimble and minds ticking over during harsh winter months when the only diversion was a church service on the banks of the Stour. It was those half-truths and brags that would be worked up, later, as evidence. A mixture of potent

[274] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie,* 61.

puritanical zeal and poverty, paradoxically led to such a Christian failure: the lack of charity, the unwillingness to help your neighbour.

I approach the crazy tilting pasture and the huge trees, hornbeams and horse chestnut, growing sideways, putting down extra limbs in the goose grass, stumps under half-shade that look like witches' familiars. Gamekeeper's Pond forms a moat around the bottom of Furze hill; the path and shallows are bedraggled with willows. This is where the witches were once "swum." A dog walker informs me that Matthew Hopkins materialises in the dusk, sitting on a bough extending over the water. I imagine a beatnik puppeteer in polo neck and black leggings, a finely twizzled moustache vibrating like a tuning fork. This is a liminal place, home to two apparitions, that I have yet to see despite varying the times of my visit. In addition to Hopkins, an agitated white lady is rumoured to be seen ducking in and out of the twiggy alcoves, wringing her hands, her gown trailing in the water.

From this vantage point trees straggling up the slope form a natural nave, branches knitted overhead in the triangular savagery of Gothic windows. The altar piece is at the top of the hill: the massive 800-year-old charred trunk of Old Knobbley. Yes, I am worthy, the tree has been revealed in its most impressive vista. Broken amputee limbs jab at the sky. The tree resembles some giant half-exploded crustacean. I climb the hill and listen to the susurrus of trees: beeches and silver birch, leaves flipping silver in the wind. Strange effect in the woods, along the lower slopes there is this still frozen mist, finely textured cobwebs suspended in the air—my eyesight is bad and I can't tell whether this is some faint grey foliage. Under foot is witchy stuff: brown ectoplasmic fungus, shaped into orifices and tiny ears.

The trunk bubbles and creases into folds and chancres, a charred hollowed jacket where children light fires. A pistachio green lichen stains the lower branches.

I pull myself up and an angry red hornet buzzes out of the hollow. I remember the terrifying fanged and vaginal spider in M.R. James's *The Ash Tree*,[275] the spirt of an executed witch who cursed the descendants of the family who put her to death, nestling in the tree's hollow with her bloodsucking children. But here there is stillness, no furry fanged maleficia. The tree is solid and comforting—the woodland wild and unhusbanded, neglected by Tendring council. I listen to the sighs of the tree, the wind whispering through the branches and feel timeless, anxiety free. Did the Manningtree witches take shelter here? Their familiars rather than venomous spiders were white kittens and polecats. Innocent creatures with soft, furry bodies: Pyewacket, Vinegar Tom, Holt, Jarmara, Sacke and Sugar, all apparently witnessed by Matthew Hopkins during the interrogation of Elizabeth Clarke over multiple nights of sleep deprivation. I sit back in the branches, now for a moment part of the canopy and its susurrus.

I realise that I am the source of this strangeness. Normal woodland conventions have been abandoned: I don't own a dog and it is unusual to encounter a grown man sitting alone in a tree unless dressed in green leggings. I am providing the element of wrongness in the landscape. One of Fisher's definitions of the weird is that the weird focuses on travel between worlds. The creature seeks a conduit. The weird tales of Lovecraft detail how these creatures travel through incantation, interstellar flight on crumpled black wings, exhumation, the opening of a long disused doorway, the cleaning of a stained-glass window that now casts a coloured heraldic symbol on a library wall when the sun strikes the glass. I am that

[275] James, "The Ash Tree," 35.

conduit. I understand these empty immensities all reside within; it is through me that the ghosts of these persecuted women enter this world. Mina Fisher, Gabrielle, Kitty Barwell are all women who operate on the border between natural and supernatural, their role "to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability."[276] We all contain the numinous, unknowable hidden qualities that can, intermittently, surprise us.

I stay in the tree for a while longer, comfortably wedged in the uppermost branches, seeing diggers in a distant field, zoning out of the woodland sounds and my own anxieties about childcare (shouldn't I be picking my daughter up from ballet?) Consciousness is reducing to a manageable hum, a low psychic reverberation from a tiny gong. Yes, I will move to Death-on-Sea and meditate myself into a pinprick of light. Already, I am practising the art of mindlessness, slipping beneath the surface agitation into great still pools of glycerine – there is nothing here just the heat of my blood, the tree whisper and the hillside turning dark. I cannot decipher the writing on the bark. Surely, there is nothing to be afraid of.

[276] Creed, 11.

CONCLUSION

The creative and critical components of this project both explore horror as a useful tool in treating mental health issues. Anxiety, trauma, grief and dissociative states, resulting from past trauma, are explored in *The Bathory Quartet*, both in the structure of the actual narrative, fighting against its own unpicking, and embodied through the experiences of Mina.

Two aspects of the genre are discussed as being particularly successful in addressing mental health issues. Firstly, horror has the power to soothe within the safe space of make believe while still allowing powerful emotions to play out in the viewer. Secondly, horror, confronts our fear of death by helping to contain difficult emotions through its narrative structure, scaffolding experiences which in life are incoherent.

The disruption of the creature into reality can, according to Millar and Lee's study, specifically help with the unmaking and incoherent experience of grief where the monster's intrusion mirrors the sudden impact of grief on our lives. Grief is associated with Kristeva's theory of abjection since death or "the corpse… is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."[277] When we look at the uncanny corpse it creates a monstrous category error. We oscillate between two incompatible states which we are unable to assimilate. The betwixt and between nature of abjection threatens boundaries between the self and other, the very same boundaries that horror so successfully exploits.

[277] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* 4.

Horror and the Gothic novel, somewhat counterintuitively, manage to soothe our experiences of mortality and grief through the repetitive rhythmic structure of suspense and relief which readers/viewers suffering from grief or trauma are drawn to. In works such as *Melmoth the Wanderer* we have seen the rhythmic effect of emotional patterning, from dejection to exaltation.

The horror genre is a safe space to be. Other repetitive structures in Gothic fiction, notably in the essay by Rebecca E. Martin, includes the device of seeing and concealing, where the use of strategic blank spots in the narrative are enticingly frustrating and have a special appeal to the trauma survivor because of the temporal break in their experience. We are drawn on through these stories by the promise of revelation, which is renewed at each disappointment when the promised secret turns out to be another textual gap. We may find safety and titillation in being able to suspend our belief long enough to hope an answer can still be found in the abyss, or womb or abandoned spacecraft. The empty cello case is both "all-devouring womb of the archaic mother"[278] and a place of safety.

The sense of a final reveal just beyond our apprehension has parallels with the weird tale, where fragments of the numinous appear sporadically, often haunting us in our inability to repeat the experience. Horror's repetitive patterning, through suspense-creating anxiety only to relieve and begin the cycle again, undoubtedly draws certain readers to the material through their own compulsion to repeat behaviours. In my practice, I have highlighted through Mina how someone suffering

[278] Creed, 27.

trauma, responds to horror's almost musical rhythms; much of the chase and pursuit of monster and victim have the choreographed appeal of dance.

Through the writing process I turned depression into narrative. The therapeutic process took over through the act of writing. I had no idea that my neurodivergent battle with linearity would find a solution on the page by dividing the novel up into four voices. Nor did I realise that I would align myself with my female characters or the paternal order in my novel would fail so badly. The writing alleviated my anxieties. I can't say whether it will alleviate yours. Horror's ability to shock (the shiver of horripilation) is horror's finest therapeutic benefit. For anyone suffering numbness the fact that horror can just make you *feel* is a beginning. Somewhere nearby on a video game, phone screen or between the pages of a book, the clanking Gothic machinery is starting up again, inviting us to boost our mood with stories of people in extreme situations.

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