Maria Beville. *Gothic-postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Modernity* (Rodopi, 2009)

Attempting to define a new genre in the current critical milieu is undeniably brave; attempting to define a new genre that includes both the Gothic and Postmodernism is, perhaps, an act of sublime heroism. Conjoining the sprawling, unstable fluidity of the Gothic, both as a term and as a genre, and the boundless, chameleon qualities of the Postmodern suggests an entity that may indeed become ‘a literary monster’ (16). In this accessible offering from Maria Beville, one can ably track, through the primary focus on the unspeakable and ‘the sublime effects of terror as the heart of Gothic and Gothic-postmodernist literary exploration’, the difficulties encountered by the author (15).

In proposing the unspeakable and sublime terror as the main points of contact between the two genres, Beville’s argument is stretched by an insistence on sublime terror as the ‘most apparent common denominator between the Gothic and postmodernism’, and diluted when the genre is later located ‘as a literary blend of many theoretical approaches to subjectivity, in a pivotal role in contemporary literary development’ (15-16). Considering too, the importance of sublime terror to Beville’s overall argument, it is a shame that no more than a rudimentary explanation of the Sublime is offered until page 137, where an explanation of Longinus’s connection of Biblical language to the Sublime is rushed.

Likewise, it is an unfortunate oversight that a repeated reference to Botting (2003) is not listed in the Bibliography. One can only assume that Beville is referring to ‘Metaphors and Monsters’, *Journal for Cultural Research* Volume 7 no. 4 (2003). Assumptions in scholarship, however, are dangerous. As there is a list of references for Botting in the secondary sources, it is hard to know whether one is dealing with a typo (there is more than one), or an omission.

These minor flaws do not detract from the overall defence of sublime terror as an important element in both Gothic and Postmodern literature. Beville makes a fine distinction between terror and horror:

> horror is a limiting experience as it presents the horrifying event in full and grotesque detail, causing the imagination to shrink and recoil into repressive isolation. The power of terror … is in suggestion. It functions as part of the Gothic enterprise to stimulate the reader’s imagination in the recreation of a terror that it unspeakable and sublime. (89)

This should be abundantly clear to students of Gothic literature, yet it remains a continuing subject of contention, with charges of snobbishness and canonizing occurring whenever contemporary discourse on Gothic literature fails to include well-known authors of Horror.

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After establishing the unspeakable and sublime terror as the main points of contact with the Gothic and Postmodernism, Beville lists a set of conventions for the genre of Gothic-postmodernism:

the blurring of the borders that exist between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, *the doppelganger*, and a dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function. (15)

It is difficult to resist the contrary observation that this list could be used to include or exclude almost any contemporary text, and when taken alongside her further claim that ‘the essence’ of the Gothic, is ‘sensualità, melancholia, morbide fascinazione, amore proibito, and the sublime aspects of pain and terror’, the list highlights the formidable task faced when attempting to define boundaries without limiting possibilities (36).

Beville’s application of her new genre is illuminating. Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* and Easton Ellis’s *Lunar Park* offer excellent scope, and her readings are enriched by insightful commentary on works from authors as diverse as Wilde, Eliot, Beckett, Vonnegut and Amis. If, however, as Beville suggests, the inherent terror of facing one’s own subjectivity is where the ‘truly sublime’ in postmodernity is posited, surely the aesthetic of the Sublime is impoverished as a result (178).

Beville contemplates contemporary issues and concerns throughout her extremely accessible textual analyses, producing a wide-ranging text that should appeal to undergraduate students, particularly within the disciplines of Literature, Cultural Studies and Media. I take issue, however, with her statement that ‘we are the first to face a terror that is globally pervasive and uncanny in our historical memory’ (96). Individuals may be seeking explanations, or even expiation of, post-9/11 trauma through terror literature, but there is no reason to believe that the obsession with terror in the twenty-first century is greater than, for example, that suffered throughout the Inquisition or Cold War. Both were global in their contemporaneous contexts, and induced terror within individuals and whole nations. No special pleading is required for the existence of terror literature in the twenty-first century, but a deeper understanding of the way in which it has evolved, and why we continue to be drawn to it, will both ensure its continuing vigour and enrich our understanding as readers. In this respect Beville has produced informative and readable research that opens up the possibility of applying contesting or alternative genres in the literary analysis of contemporary novels.

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