

Dark Materialism: Gothic Objects, Commodities and Things

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Disorder of Things

Gothic fictions are traversed by darkly material disturbances, traces of unformed things operating beyond the reach of reason, rule and sense. Going bump in the night, making skin crawl or hairs stand on end, these things undo the laws of the known world, out of place, out of time and out of nature. In Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), a huge helmet falls from nowhere to crush the estate's unlawful heir on his wedding day (Walpole 1996: 18). Too large at times, things of terror and horror also assume much smaller form: plague narratives such as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) or Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842) manifest malign, non-human and microscopic powers of (monstrous) nature. Ghosts manifest little substance. Things evince too much materiality. Victor Frankenstein, assembling a creature from dead limbs and organs, almost collapses in horror at the sight of animated and excess physicality (Shelley 1968: 57). Solid bodies disintegrate yet remain animate: in Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843) an eviscerated organ continues to beat loudly; in 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845) a swollen, blackened tongue speaks from beyond the grave. Bodies dissolve: released from mesmeric stasis, M. Valdemar rapidly decomposes into a putrid 'liquid mass' (Poe 1986: 359). Arthur Machen's 'The Novel of the White Powder' (1895) ends with a body, 'neither liquid nor solid', oozing and bubbling in terminal dissolution (Machen 1977: 233). Even buildings defy the laws of nature, crashing in ruins without identifiable cause, manifesting strange animations on and in walls, or contravening the laws of physics (Walpole 1996; Poe 1986: 138–57; Gilman 1992; Jackson 2005; Danielewski 2001). Everyday objects, too, are malevolently animated against humanity (James 1987: 292).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, such entities proliferate. Fears of cultural degeneration appear among malformed, criminal and atavistic bodies. Science meets mysticism, glimpsing ‘the unthinkable gulf’ between worlds of matter and spirit to disclose horrible forces ‘at the heart of things’ (Machen 2005: 185, 225). Pagan legends materialise as things from ‘outer Darkness’, slimy, slug-like, slaving horrors (Benson 1992: 229, 238). Dr Moreau’s vivisectionist experiments confound species identity with ‘Things’ that question the priority of humanity (Wells 1946: 62). William Hope Hodgson’s *The Night Land* describes strange, horrid, monstrous, creeping and evil things on almost every page (2008: 9, 11, 36, 78, 88, 109). Things that ‘cannot be’, these ‘Ab-human’ invaders from horrifying dimensions, materialise and threaten the human species (Hodgson 2008: 10, 12). H. P. Lovecraft’s fiction sees a proliferation of things on the doorstep or in the moonlight, ‘pinkish’, ‘accursed’, ‘flaming’, ‘nameless’ things (2008: 669, 684, 695, 520, 750). Arguing that ‘accelerated taxonomical activity’ in the nineteenth century produced paradigm disorder, Kelly Hurley identifies a range of corporeal forms that challenge conventional notions of solid and inert materiality (Hurley 1996: 26). Things become fluid, slimy and revolting, like the protoplasm considered by T. J. Huxley to be the basis of life (Hurley 1996: 32). ‘Things’, ‘rent from within by their own heterogeneity’, are signs of ‘chaotic fluctability’ and a materialism without transcendent anchor, reality or meaning (Hurley 1996: 9). ‘Gothic materialism’ discloses bodies as partial and plural categories rather than definite objects, a body of multiple effects and affects existing outside the determination of objectivity (Fisher 2011: 241).

In the late eighteenth century, two astronomer-mathematicians independently inferred the existence of ‘dark bodies’. The first, John Michell, in the course of a paper delivered to the Royal Society in 1784, proposed that a star with a radius 500 times larger than the diameter of the sun would have a gravitational field stronger than the speed of light so that ‘all light emitted from such a body would be made to return towards it, by its own proper gravity’ (Michell 1784: 42). Considering the implications of observing stellar objects that allow ‘no information from light’, he notes that, without data from the senses, calculation and better tools will be needed to study ‘non-luminous bodies’ more effectively (Michell 1784: 50–4). For Pierre-Simon Laplace, in his *System of the World* (1798), dark stellar bodies posed a challenge to explaining the physical laws of the universe. In the recording of planetary orbits, there are stars whose motion does not conform to predictions based on their brightness or distance from other bodies (Laplace 1798: 422–4). Laplace calculates that a

star of sufficient magnitude and density could produce gravitational forces powerful enough to inhibit the emission of light, going on to speculate that there may be many large, invisible stellar bodies throughout the universe, bodies he calls '*corps obscurs*' (1798: 424). Dark bodies have considerable gothic resonance. In 'Eureka' (1848), Poe's scientific romance, '*non-luminous stars*' are described as 'suns whose existence we determine through the movements of others, but whose luminosity is not sufficient to impress us' (Poe 1904: 84). The ability to deduce presence from an absence that itself provides an alternate mode of information is not so far from the method of detection employed by Poe's Dupin or the mode of 'proof' advanced in unmasking public performances of automata (Poe 1986: 330–49; 1967: 97–122). Poe's 'tale' also pursues a new theory of matter that '*exists* only as attraction and repulsion', a polarisation of atomic particles calibrating gravitation and electricity to body/matter and soul/spirit (Poe 1904: 34–5). It reaches a striking conclusion: given the universe's tendency to return to a state of 'objectless unity', matter's existence is temporary. When things return to the universal oneness that is nothing, there will be 'matter no more' (1904: 144–5).

In a period of rational and empirical enquiry, obscure bodies disclose a peculiar darkness in Enlightenment knowledge, one that is not the negative or absence of light but harbours an active, material (non-)presence. Developments in natural science, too, involve obscure bodies: monsters do not exist simply as negatives enabling classifications of species but also disclose a 'ceaseless background murmur' that both undermines and enables taxonomic distinctions (Foucault 1970: 54–6). Baseless bases, black holes, as it were, puncture modern discourse from within. They also evince wider disturbances of dark, insubordinate energies and entities called 'base matter': neither homogeneous, organised nor discrete, its 'contradictory materialism' opposes the 'physicist's mechanical and rational materialism' (Hollier 1998: 64); base matter as 'an *active* principle having its own essential autonomous existence as darkness (which would not be simply the absence of light but the monstrous *archontes* revealed by this absence)' (Bataille 1997: 162). Not simply negative (which would already place it within a system of hierarchies and distinctions), it lies 'outside myself and the idea', remains 'external and foreign to ideal human aspirations' and refuses 'to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations' (Bataille 1997: 163). Many types of 'materialism' are, from this perspective, considered idealist, since they are forms of thought that tie 'dead matter' to 'a conventional hierarchy of diverse

facts' (Bataille 1995: 58). To view planetary bodies as discrete stellar objects occludes the material dynamism of a universe seen as a 'whirling explosion' of stellar prodigality and generosity: the life-giving light of a Sun contradicts a reductively terrestrial perspective in which life is nothing more than object and expression of human 'avidity' and 'unquenchable greed' (Bataille 1986: 75–8). Base matter refuses isolation: an effect of 'non-logical difference', it is 'neither a transcendental signified nor an ultimate referent, neither the final reality (the basis of things) nor the controlling idea'. It cannot be 'subsumed by theory' nor 'submitted to the categories of reason': 'matter is insubordinate' (Hollier 1989: 135).

As insubordination, base matter destabilises any system of understanding, whether idealist or materialist, theoretical or practical. Disclosing the absence of any final ground (Hollier's 'ultimate referent') or any presiding idea ('transcendental signified'), it shows all structures, whether cultural, scientific, philosophical or linguistic, to be incomplete, constituted and confounded by a negativity in excess of the antitheses articulating subject and object, idea and thing, spirit and matter: base matter is not (not something, not nothing, just not). Theory, knowledge and meaning founder. Collapse is held at bay by means of the limit-figures called Things: registers of obscure destabilisation, Things and, conversely, spectres acknowledge the systemic frailties that admit too much – or too little – formless matter. Excluded from yet intrinsic to any system's functioning, Things exhibit a particular and necessary asystematicity haunting any theory: deconstructive 'aporia' and *différance*, psychoanalytic objects (*a*) and abjection, schizoanalytical '*anormals*' signal unruly traversals of atheological, ateleological and atheoretical energies.

Things, the plugs and holes on and through which base matter may be temporarily focused and filtered, remain apart and different from unformed base material. The argument that follows tracks their immaterial appearance as spectres, ghosts and phantoms in the historical materialism of Karl Marx and goes on to identify – as monstrous automata and vampires – an over-materialisation associated with surplus value. Spectres disturb the reality sought by dialectical materialism: immaterial and all-too real instantiations of the commodity form, in Jacques Derrida's reading of *Capital's* spectres, disclose both the dematerialisations activated by economic transformation and the frustrations attendant on any critical attempt to restore a rational and human sense of social reality. In one direction, solid things seem to evaporate in phantasmal, spectral shapes. The other track, however, sees the excessively material incarnations of

capital as monstrous machine and voracious vampire. Here Marxism's revolutionary impulse is aligned with insubordinate base materialist energies. Giving up the attempt to recover social realities that have been lost or occulted by the commodity-form, Marx's metaphors push monstrosity to its limit to frame capital's exploitation of all bodies and values in terms of the utmost horror. The effect of this critical destruction-creation (making space for an as yet unavailable human and social reality) is to entangle Gothic figures fully and contradictorily in the work of commodification and fetish: they sustain, in their difference and in the limits they mark, the (ideological) 'reality' that circulates as an effect of the commerce of ghosts and spectres at the same time as they acknowledge the phantasmal character of lived, modern 'reality'. They become the fantasy objects that occlude the fantasy form in which reality is lived. Negative and avowedly unreal, Gothic figures do not overturn the modern reality of capital's empire of things, making no claim to present another world nor radically displacing this one: they provide the shadow that alludes to its substance. Gothic forms and fictions remain aligned with commodities and capitalist production, as the final section, on Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, argues.

Base Marxism

Base matter undermines any idea that things, human life included, are ultimately reducible to discrete and useful objects. It contests economic practices in which accumulation makes the overriding demand that 'productive forces produce only new productive force' (Bataille 1986: 78). Instead, it activates unruly materialism, 'a crude liberation of human life from the imprisonment and masked pathology of ethics, an appeal to all that is offensive, indestructible, and even despicable, to all that overthrows, perverts, and ridicules spirit' (Bataille 1985: 32). In an essay attacking Surrealism's radical gestures as 'pretentious idealistic aberrations', Bataille calls upon the materialist 'Old Mole' (a figure Marx uses to describe the unpredictable patterns of political struggle): 'revolution hollows out chambers of decomposed soil repugnant to the delicate noses of the utopians'; it 'begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians' (Bataille 1985: 32, 35). Base Marxism emerges in this trenchant refusal of idealism: 'by excavating the fetid ditch of bourgeois culture, perhaps we will see open up in the depths of the earth immense and even sinister caves where force and human liberty

will establish themselves, sheltered from the call to order of heaven that today demands the most imbecilic elevation of any new spirit' (Bataille 1985: 43). Matter robustly refuses spirit, dismissing any system of thought that is a 'servile idealism to the extent that it is not immediately based on psychological or social facts, instead of on artificially isolated physical phenomena' (Bataille 1995: 58). Just as Marxism interrogates the way that commodities, when fetishised, construct an objectivity and sense of value that effaces the social relations of the labour process, so Bataille's critique of the idealism informing 'artificially isolated' things looks to materialist 'social facts'. In line with Marxism's interrogation of commodities, base materialism refuses idealist mystifications, but importantly, without recourse to a pre-formed sense of reality.

Base matter also revises the inversion characterising a Marxist approach to things. For Marx, capitalism evinces 'the rule of things over man, of dead labour over the living, the product over the producer' (Marx 1976: 990). It is an inverted order that may be rectified. Though recognising the 'unreserved surrender to *things*' demanded by capital and sharing Marx's aim to 'free the world of *things*', Bataille proposes a strategy that involves 'going to the limit of the possibilities implied by *things*': rather than denouncing the dominance of things over humans, it requires 'the movement that reduces man to the condition of *things*' be taken to its 'ultimate consequences' so that current hierarchies are overturned and exhausted. Only then, when things are reduced 'to the condition of man', when, that is, the idealism sustaining an (inverted) hierarchy of things over humans is expended, can humans achieve 'the free disposition' of themselves (Bataille 1988: 135–6). A dual strategy emerges, countering surplus with excess and disrupting the spectral realm of commodities with unruly energies: it challenges acquiescence to prevailing bourgeois values, forms and (un)realities and activates unproductive and inordinate energies against imperatives of accumulation.

Numerous phantoms, spectres and monsters gather in the reality dominated by commodity-forms. A commodity should be a 'trivial thing and easily understood', but it turns out to be 'a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (Marx 1976: 163). Reality, too: shaped by the ideas of a ruling class (ideology), it involves 'false conceptions' and 'phantoms' that, having escaped human brains, dominate the world. Liberating people from the 'yoke' of 'chimeras', 'dogmas', 'imaginary beings' requires the transformation of the 'phantoms' of consciousness and the 'material life-process' that informs them (Marx and Engels 1970: 37, 47).

Dialectical analysis aims to exorcise this ‘phantasmaterialism’ but becomes entangled in the very metaphors that it uses for clarification and criticism: optical analogies (such as the way in which an inverted image of a physical object appears real on the retina compared to the false reality perceived under capitalism) imply that an objective situation existing beyond the eye can be reinstated (Marx 1976: 165). As Sarah Kofman observes, these optical metaphors assume that inverting the inversion will secure a return to original meaning and ‘given’ reality. However, Marx’s analysis of commodity-effects discloses a simple thing, a wooden table, as being ‘swept up in vertigo, having lost its grounding, drunk’: ‘the table dances. It turns’ (Kofman 1997: 3). Neither given, nor readily recuperable beyond ideological artifice, reality is ‘a world already transformed enchanted’, ‘the reflection of a reflection, the phantasm of a phantasm’. Material processes shaping consciousness are, from the start, caught up in ideological ‘darkness, evil and terror’: not even science can ‘dissipate ideological phantasmagoria’ (Kofman 1997: 11, 17–18). Simple demystification is ineffective. Instead, the ‘labour of transformation’ provided by critique is required (Kofman 1997: 19).

Instability dominates analyses of value and the commodity: distinctions of use- or exchange-value do not delineate strict divisions but manifest value’s impermanence, a ‘passing form’ changing in respect of the costs of commodities and variations in price and regulated by an ‘eternal form’ (money) also subject to alterations in patterns of exchange and driven by a restless pursuit of surplus. As capital, money is only viable when producing profit (Marx 1973: 646–7). Stable realities and value-systems evaporate amid productive flux, allowing no return to usefulness outside the net of exchange-value. Commodities change ‘into something transcendent’ and exist ‘in relation to all other commodities’ rather than being tied to human and social needs. Marx’s exemplary commodity, a table, ‘stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain, grotesque ideas’, turning ‘a definite social relation between men’ into ‘the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1976: 163–4). Derrida’s account of Marx’s spectres notes how dancing, turning, wooden brains produce a theatre of sensuous, sensible and supersensible animated Things assuming many material and immaterial forms. It transforms the world of being and things in themselves – ontology – into the ‘spooking’ of a less substantial ‘hauntology’ (Derrida 1994: 150–1).

While spectres and phantoms emphasise fantastic and unreal effects of commodification, monsters give form to capital’s less visible effects and agencies that are driven from two locations: directly embodied

as the mechanism central to manufacturing and, more abstractly and obscurely, as the agency of accumulation. Industry's interconnecting and automation of discrete machines demonstrates how capital 'constitutes itself a vast automaton' driven 'by a self-acting prime mover': the automaton, materialising capital, is endowed with 'consciousness and will', 'animated by the drive to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by men, the obstinate, yet elastic human behaviour' (Marx 1976: 502, 526–7). A 'mechanical monster' possessing 'demonic power', it usurps working minds and bodies, reducing the need for skills and physical strength, exhausting nervous systems and rendering the content of labour meaningless. Workers are trained out of 'desultory' human habits and forced to 'identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton' (1976: 503, 548–9). Consciousness is divided: production creates the conditions for a new subject (a 'collective worker'), but, since agency is given to the 'mechanical monster', capital decomposes labour into the 'conscious organs' of 'the unconscious organs of the automaton' (1976: 544). Another inversion occurs: the 'technical and palpable reality' of production employs the worker, displaying how capital operates as 'dead labour' which dominates and soaks up living labour power (1976: 548). The phrase connects the mechanical monster of technical dehumanisation to another image of capital: the vampire.

Vampire Materialism

Production is both 'labour process' and 'capital's process of valorization' (Marx 1976: 548). The latter – capital's 'sole driving force' – demands ceaseless extraction of surplus value (1976: 342). Profit is not to be spent uselessly but, in the interests of continued accumulation, returned to production in order to create more surplus value. Surplus, inherent in but external to the inexhaustible process of accumulation, drives and destabilises everything. Abstract, impersonal and relentless, it is inhuman and voracious: 'capital is dead labour, which vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour and lives the more the more labour it sucks' (1976: 342). 'Dead' is synonymous with 'static': whether invested in machines or buildings (the result of prior labour), capital only profits by extracting surplus value (Osborne 2005: 96). The bloody vampire metaphor at the core of production also presides over the entire system. The sucking of lifeblood depicts how capital sustains value and duration (Marx 1973: 646); underpins the forced freedom of wage slavery (Marx 1976: 416); and signals

work's callous squandering of human blood, flesh, nerves and brain (Marx 1981: 182). In extending the working day, it again sucks on living labour, children's blood too; in money form, it 'comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt' (Marx 1974: 79; 1976: 926). The pattern is reiterated: blood, life, flesh, labour are objects of a voracious, abstracted yet very real consumption by something not really a thing. Without the figure of the vampire, capital's surplus drive is difficult to imagine.

The vampire remains a curious metaphor to be employed in a serious critical work. Wondering whether Marx's spectres are merely remnants of 'medieval illusions and fantasies' dispelled by modernity, or bogeymen thrown up to scare children, Chris Baldick argues that they are 'more than a decorative trick of style': they constitute meaningful attempts to explain the effects of a haunting that is not so much of the past but registers the strange effects of capital itself (Baldick 1987: 121). 'Gothic Marx', a writer prone to 'mixing his metaphors' in negative juxtapositions of feudal images and modern forms, uses 'a gothic literary imaginary' to visualise capital 'secretly possessed by a series of pre-modern forms' while actually revealing them to be effects of present contradictions: fetishism, thrown up and then thrown back by modernity, exemplifies the 'arbitrary materialism' discarded by Marx but does not revive animistic beliefs, denoting instead a new mode of 'social *idealism*' derived from exchange-value (Osborne 2005: 16–17, 19). Fetishism inverts colonialist projections of primitivism: demonising other cultural investments in the power of objects, it enables a 'disavowal' of things by the subjects of European capital so that they can enter the transcendent realm of market value (Stallybrass 1998: 184–6). As projection, fetishism turns commodity capitalism into a 'religion' invested in 'non-sensuous desire' and reproducing itself in processes of occultation and substitution: here money circulates like metaphor, concealing social materiality and substituting commodities in its place (McNally 2011: 122, 120). As a metaphor entangled in productions of reality and value, the vampire is no idle decoration. Eschewing populist associations of usury and anti-Semitism and liberal fears of sexual difference, Marx's metaphor negotiates the 'dual character' of commodities and labour, rousing the living and shedding the weight of the dead (whether dead labour or dead, feudal forms). Its twofold function demonstrates the operations of capital and warns against it (Neocleous 2003: 684).

As a figure of demonstration and caution, the vampire reactivates an older function of monstrosity in a new context: reiterating dual forms of value and dual (trivial–transcendent) forms of commodities,

its twofold dynamic traverses living and dead labour and fantastic and material conditions. Duality extends to the use of a figure from popular horror. Odd and obtrusive, vampire metaphors draw attention to artifice by foregoing stylistic smoothness and foregrounding incomplete substitution, refusing, against commodity fetishism, to occult social and productive processes. A metaphor of surplus addresses the way capital ‘invisibilizes its own monstrous formation’ (McNally 2011: 114). It gives form to something that is barely perceptible but has real effects (without furnishing it with a substance, timelessness or value); suggests extensive, mysterious powers (without dignifying or deifying them); fractures processes of substitution-exchange by which reality and value are transformed (rather than naturalising a fantastic-real world); and turns a figure of surplus into critical excess. The vampire’s condensations of different clusters of connotation maintain a series of unresolved negations: not rational, not sensible, not human, not social, not spiritual, not moral, not natural, not real, not animal, not machine. Though echoing Enlightenment oppositions (reason–superstition, nature–culture, spirit–matter, modern–primitive), the vampire metaphor eschews conventional structure: reason, for instance, assumes a sane, if inhuman, economic logic, just as the transcendent value or supernatural power of surplus is not sacred or moral but systematic and monetary. The oscillations and alterations of negation continue: not social, the vampire’s individualism counters human autonomy and agency, particularly that of a collective subject; not generous, it maintains a calculating, cold and predatory appetite untouched by interests or values apart from its own; unproductive, it depends on the work of others, disallowing social bonds or useless expenditure or pleasure; unnatural, it assumes diverse species forms and reproduces through blood, disease and death; insubstantial, it thrives only in relations which it consumes; unreal, without history, existence or objectivity, a flux of commodities and values, its fantastic form has material effects. Its negations conjure up a callous, asocial and inhuman form, maintaining critical distance without coalescing into position, affirmation or substance. Behind the metaphor lies nothing but un-life, un-reality, fantastic materialisations. Incomplete, the vampire figure does not crystallise as metaphor proper: reflecting no pre-existent reality or value, instituting no final substitution, it leaves matters open to contestation, critical reading and collective transformation. Without ground and solidity, the vampire retains only the spectral objectivity of the commodity: sever its headless surplus, pierce its automated heart, and there is only dust. Irreducible to anything but

Thing, tangled condensation and conjuration of antinomies, polarisations and oppositions, ‘matterphor’ without solid form, finality or fixity. Too much, it also marks an empty locus, a figure divesting history, content and meaning, surplus matter and voided materiality at once.

Surplus Materialism

Marx enjoyed horror fiction (Neocleous 2003: 673). Reading preferences aside, horror metaphors display an additional surplus: affect. Horror involves repulsion, recoil, nausea, abhorrence, disgust, revulsion (but not yet revolution). Marx’s vampire is never a figure of identification or attraction but sustains an implacably negative relation: surplus value’s vampiric associations signal another excess: the intense, unproductive, uncontrollable and destructive connotations of capital describe the inhuman demands of accumulation and inscribe an overwhelming human reaction. Surplus value involves a mode of extreme pleasure, a pleasure to the point of horror, called ‘surplus *jouissance*’ (*plus-de-jouir*) (Lacan 1998: 80). Combining a sense of ‘more’ (more effort, more gratification, more spending of energies) and ‘no-more’ (things have become unbearable), the double gesture registers both the demand and exhaustion of excess. *Jouissance* pertains to bodily, sexual and material intensities associated with a reality (the ‘Real’) beyond ordinary representation and encountered as breakdown, shock, trauma and orgasm. Integral to and outside everyday reality, it sustains and derails normal functions – sexuality, for example, enabling both reproduction and ecstatic abandonment. Ultimately unproductive, it has to be moderated by law, articulated at the limit of more-no-more by the ‘Thing’ (Lacan 1998: 3). Lacan’s Thing lies at an ‘unbearable’ limit, an ‘outer extremity of pleasure’ (Lacan 1992: 80). Beyond representation and reason, the Thing is both strange and familiar, an otherness and gap that, in horror, threatens utter dissolution (1992: 54, 71). Yet it also provides the occasion for law (the Symbolic) to reassert itself and serves as a site for the projection of imaginary figures that assuage more pervasive anxieties (1992: 43, 84). Locus of disturbance, occlusion and projection, the Thing evinces a curious and surplus materiality notable in the circulation of spectres and monstrosities and in anamorphic visual disturbances (Lacan 1977: 92).

Mr Hyde and Dracula are exemplary Things. The former’s physical deformities coalesce projections of degenerate monstrosity and

derail bourgeois habits of perception: Enfield notes a wrongness and ‘feeling of deformity’ which eludes description; Utterson apprehends an ‘impression of deformity without any nameable malformation’; Lanyon observes an ‘odd subjective disturbance’ occasioned by proximity, something both ‘abnormal and misbegotten’ and ‘seizing, surprising and revolting’ (Stevenson 1979: 34, 40, 77–8). Partially visualised, he is experienced rather than seen in a moral-affective reaction correlated to disrupted perception: an anamorphic blur denaturing reality. Dracula, too, is a Thing condensing anxieties and disturbing normal perceptions. ‘Thing’, ‘him’ and ‘it’, the vampire confounds and exceeds species categories: ‘this Thing is not human – not even beast’ (Stoker 1998: 109, 293). Likewise, the vampirised Lucy Westenra, voracious of appetite and distinctly non-maternal, shatters all the codes used to maintain Victorian femininity. Killed, buried and then returned undead, Lucy becomes ‘nightmare’, a ‘carnal’, ‘unspiritual’, a ‘devilish mockery’ of her former ‘sweet purity’: a ‘foul Thing’. As Thing, she is also the occasion for a restoration of values. The group of men who conduct the task in her tomb in the dead of night do so furnished with holy instruments, incantations and righteousness. Arthur, her husband-to-be and widower-to-become, hammers a stake through white flesh and into her heart: she writhes; utters ‘a hideous, blood-curdling screech’; fangs bite her own mouth until ‘crimson foam’ bubbles; body quivers, contorts, blood spurting from a pierced heart. All the while, Arthur’s arms rise and fall, ‘driving deeper and deeper’. Excess body fluid and sexual violence contrast with justifications of ‘mercy’ and ‘high duty’ supporting her return to the sweetness and ‘holy calm’ of a beautiful and properly feminine – and dead – object (Stoker 1998: 272–7). Symbolic and religious modes employ and suppress excess in the name of value and spirit. The violence is legitimate and symbolic (a marriage and funeral service at once) and too much, consuming all parties in its intensity. Both sides enjoy bodily tremors, blood and tears: Lucy screams, writhes, spits; Arthur sweats, cries, grows pale. Surplus *jouissance* excites and exhausts them both, her monstrous excess exorcised by his extreme expenditure, her voracious energy, endlessly calling for more, met by his sanctioned but horrifying force (legitimate but too much), a gesture of excess exorcising unbearable excess.

Interrelations of law and excess deploy violence to exhaust violence, throwing everything into disarray in order to restore things to their place. The trouble in Stoker’s novel, associated with concerns about unbridled materialism, degeneration and regression, is that all

demarcations ordering social reality have been disturbed: things flow across borders, bodies transmute, values evaporate. Any sense of proper, naturalised and unified reality is upset. Aberrant and excessive flows of sexual energy are not the only concern. Lucy embodies female sexual abandon. Her counterpart, Mina, displays the intelligence and skill-set (her typewriting and secretarial work notably) that suggest the economic potential and threat of the 'New Woman' (Wicke 1992). Cut Dracula and he bleeds notes and coinage. Like movements of desire and appetite, money flows across borders, between and beyond social codes, roles and bodies, unregulated by moral values or human, cultural interests. Money has a hypnotic allure, reproducing itself unnaturally and sustaining itself by exhausting human life. Though figured as aristocratic, savage and alien, the antithesis and excess of a bourgeois culture that cannot live without it, capital's vampire cannot be easily excised. Dracula also evinces bourgeois characteristics: without servants (they are unproductive labour), he savours neither violence nor blood (it is necessary and used carefully), is 'a saver, an ascetic, an upholder of the Protestant Ethic', and has an incorporeal body that, 'sensibly supersensible', compares to the commodity-form. His appetite, 'impelled towards a continuous growth', exemplifies accumulation (Moretti 1982: 72–3). Dracula embodies the monopoly form of capital as it emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Threatening the balance previously associated with free trade and individual liberty in the market, the significance of monopoly capital explains the vampire's aristocratic associations and why new US money, in the shape of Quincey, must die at the end (Moretti 1982: 75). Conjunctions of aristocratic and bourgeois features affirm, in horror, Dracula's excess: as a figure of surplus the vampire manifests a thoroughly inhuman, amoral imperative; as a fetishised image of the commodity-form, it signals a phantasmatic – and very real – disturbance in the system of values structuring realities of economic circulation.

Poor Things

The vampire of capital is a fabrication, but no less effective for that. Giving form to what is abstract and obscure, its unreality imitates commodity substitution, its horror anchoring fetish-effects in the production of a sense of materiality. Consumer society only delivers semblants and only circulates 'an imitation surplus *jouissance*' (Lacan 1998: 81). Semblants, Gothic forms and figures function as

capital's shadow, offering images of the effective unreality of commodity fetishism rather than naturalising an idea of universal stability or solidity. Rarely, if at all, do they locate a space outside capital's sway. Gothic monsters and phantoms tell a parallel story of commodification, ideology and power: in affirming unreality (as fancy, superstition, madness, hallucination), their horror enables a return to and naturalisation of a world framed in bourgeois terms. Realism and reality, also haunted, are similarly effects of fictional stagings of differential oscillation (of fancy–probability, propriety–vice, romance–reason).

In the eighteenth century, novels and romances circulated as commodities in an expanding popular and feminised market characterised in terms of questionable tastes and propriety and threatening older hierarchies and paternal virtues (Lovell 1987; Williams 1970). Fictions, as cautionary endorsements and readerly escapism, tested female virtue while testifying to its economic necessity in a contemporary marriage market, sexual purity being correlated directly with commodity value (Clery 1995: 122). In Ann Radcliffe's novels, moral and economic values almost embrace: nowhere, amid her fiction's copious lessons, does any heroine display as much fortitude as Emily St Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, when, alone, unprotected and threatened with imminent death, she defies the pressure to sign away the economic independence of her inheritance (Radcliffe 1980: 381). Metaphorical and economic movements see spectral forms intimate an order in and beyond market forces: like the gigantic objects that herald providential intervention in *The Castle of Otranto*, an 'invisible hand' ensures good measure (Adriopolous 1999). A world materialised by way of spectral economic virtues and values, however, does not necessarily advance human interests: the interrelation of use- and exchange-value sketches a prototypical Gothic world in which character is not so much a synthesis of singular human traits but an aggregation of commodity features leaving self somewhat shadowy and insubstantial, a hollow – and interchangeable – figure (Henderson 1994: 229–30). Even people, as exchange-value comes to encompass nature and reality, do not escape the domination of the commodity but remain things in the realm of things, objects of exchange and commerce.

Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) interrogates capital's empire of things, probing the extent of the commodity's grip on bodies, selves, communities and places. While its main narratives unfold in Glasgow during the industrial revolution, it opens in the 1970s, replaying the trope of the discovered manuscript and playing out a framing dialogue

between a novelist and a local historian as to the veracity (or not) of the story. The discovered text, reprinted in facsimile form with grotesque illustrations, makes explicit reference to the canon of Gothic fiction. Written by a shy doctor in the city, it is a fantastic tale of monstrous creation, relating the recovery and reanimation of the body of a pregnant woman drowned in the River Clyde. Though brain-dead, the mother is brought back to life by the transplantation of her baby's cerebral organ. Her new life, enlightened education and subsequent adventures relate a story of female emancipation, her humanity and reason unclouded by contemporary mores. Her existence – one person made up of two – questions the basis of bourgeois individualism; her education and experience challenges Victorian sexual, moral, class and racial prejudice; her vitality exceeds male fantasy. Undermining prevailing patriarchal and imperialist assumptions, her fantastic existence and actions disclose the artificiality of the morality and reality that tries to contain (and, in the shape of her first Victorian husband, own) her. In that guise, like many others in the novel, she is one of the impoverished entities to which the novel's title alludes. Things pervade the novel: a city of manufacturing and trade, Glasgow reeks with the smoke of industrial production and the steam of the ships and trains that distribute goods; a city of knowledge and power, it is inhabited by lawyers, doctors and scientists able to organise and regulate a world of objects (including the bodies of patients). Industrial fabrication extends from the production of material and physical objects, from the shaping of reality, to less obviously material things. Chapter titles extend manufacturing to persons, characters, identities: 'Making Me', 'Making Godwin Baxter', 'Making Bella Baxter'. The heroine, a woman's body with a child's brain, not only manifests the extent to which constructions of bodies and identities are affected by education, science and politics, but pursues and challenges how these constructions of value, meaning and prejudice are materialised and circulated.

The novel's attention to sexual commodification is paralleled by political and economic considerations: objectifying systems of power impoverishing female existence are part of a commercial and industrial culture that thrives by perpetuating conditions of unnecessary deprivation, from bad housing to poor sanitation, malnourishment and ill-health. The final part of the novel (aside from a closing section of genuine and fabricated critical and historical notes) takes a very different form and tone as it rebuts the claims of the previous tale. A posthumous letter offering a realist account of the events already rendered in fantastic form, it sternly corrects

earlier Gothic flights of fancy. Its writer, a female doctor, socialist and widow of the facsimile's fabricator, debunks its sad fantasies of femininity with a plausible, but no less wonderful, account of a woman's struggle to receive medical training and qualifications in late nineteenth-century Glasgow. It goes on to trace her subsequent professional and political achievements in ameliorating the conditions of poverty in that city. Dismissing the impoverished male fantasy of her husband's manuscript as a waste of money (its production cost would have been 'enough to feed, clothe and educate twelve orphans for a year'), she expounds a strong critical reading of the entire fictional canon on which it draws: Gothic writing, a symptom of the callous commercial culture which nurtured it, 'positively stinks all that was morbid in that most morbid of centuries' (Gray 1992: 251, 272). An extensive literary catalogue is accompanied by a list of Victorian Gothic buildings, materialisations of the same cultural fantasy that inspires fiction: styles of fabrication and construction to be dismissed as 'sham-gothic', they warrant criticism for the way they, like the commodity fetish, present a gloomy, haunted and fantastic materiality that occludes the real and terrible conditions of industrial exploitation suffered by so many people: 'their useless over-ornamentation was paid for out of needlessly high profits squeezed from the stunted lives of children, women and men working more than twelve hours a day, six days a week in NEEDLESSLY filthy factories' (Gray 1992: 275). The expenditure of time, energy and money on such hideous fabrications is reprehensible in its wilful neglect of social welfare, good housing, clean water and decent education. 'Sham-gothic' is not an idle term but actualises a distraction from social realities by materialising Gothic commodities. And it turns human beings into 'poor things'.

Narrative juxtaposition seems to achieve an unequivocal critique of Gothic fabrications. Linking buildings such as the Scott Monument and the Houses of Parliament to fictions such as *Jekyll and Hyde* and *Dracula* foregrounds a widespread materialisation of fantastic forms (including the 'Victorian values' of hard work, thrift, prudence): stones and slate as well as words and images are scrutinised as fantasy forms supporting a world dominated by fetish-things obscuring social reality and feeding on impoverished and objectified labouring bodies. In the epistolary criticism of the ideological limitations of patriarchal fantasy, 'poor things' addresses the conditions engendered by Victorian culture and condemns the poverty of (the idea of) bourgeois materialism and its unashamed preference for fantastic things. However, the choice the

novel seems to offer (a polarisation of Gothic patriarchal bourgeois fantasy against socialist-feminist humane reality) is not so easily sustained, given the postmodernised trope of the discovered manuscript that frames the two accounts. Offering no resolution, its playful and reflexive gestures pose the question of fiction and history, not in terms of a stable, interdependently defined system in which distinctions of fantasy and reality, truth and falsity are securely fixed, but as a constructive process in which things, persons and realities are made and remade.

While formally more credible and politically more sympathetic, the socialist, humane realism of the epistolary account recognises its place in a world overwhelmed by commodities and fantasy. A choice between positions and narratives, already staged amid the fabricated distinctions and fantastic materialisations composing Victorian reality, is further entangled in the frames of a novel all too aware of the postmodern resonances of its contemporary contextualisation. The attention to and interplay of forms and things (commodity fetishism in particular) suggests another approach: to select one or other position as outlined in the book would involve readerly absorption – a mode of textual fetishism – and assume the objective reference of the writing, thus requiring an identification with a fantastic form of reality (uncritically, passively taking prescribed codes for granted, recognising already-naturalised distinctions and accepting given meaning without question). The framing and juxtaposition of two formally very different renditions of female struggle and emancipation, both emphasising processes of making, however, invites readers to assume an active role in the labour of determining and producing meaning. Reading occurs in material contexts. Even in private it remains a social and political process. And it can be dialogic rather than fetishistic if it takes place in acknowledgement of material conditions beyond the covers of a book rather than being absorbed by fantastic-real stories. Here things continue to move, darkly and otherwise, between object-print and Thing-text, not stabilising any particular arrangement of signification, any particular order of things, but making materialism a matter of productive and critical social processes.

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