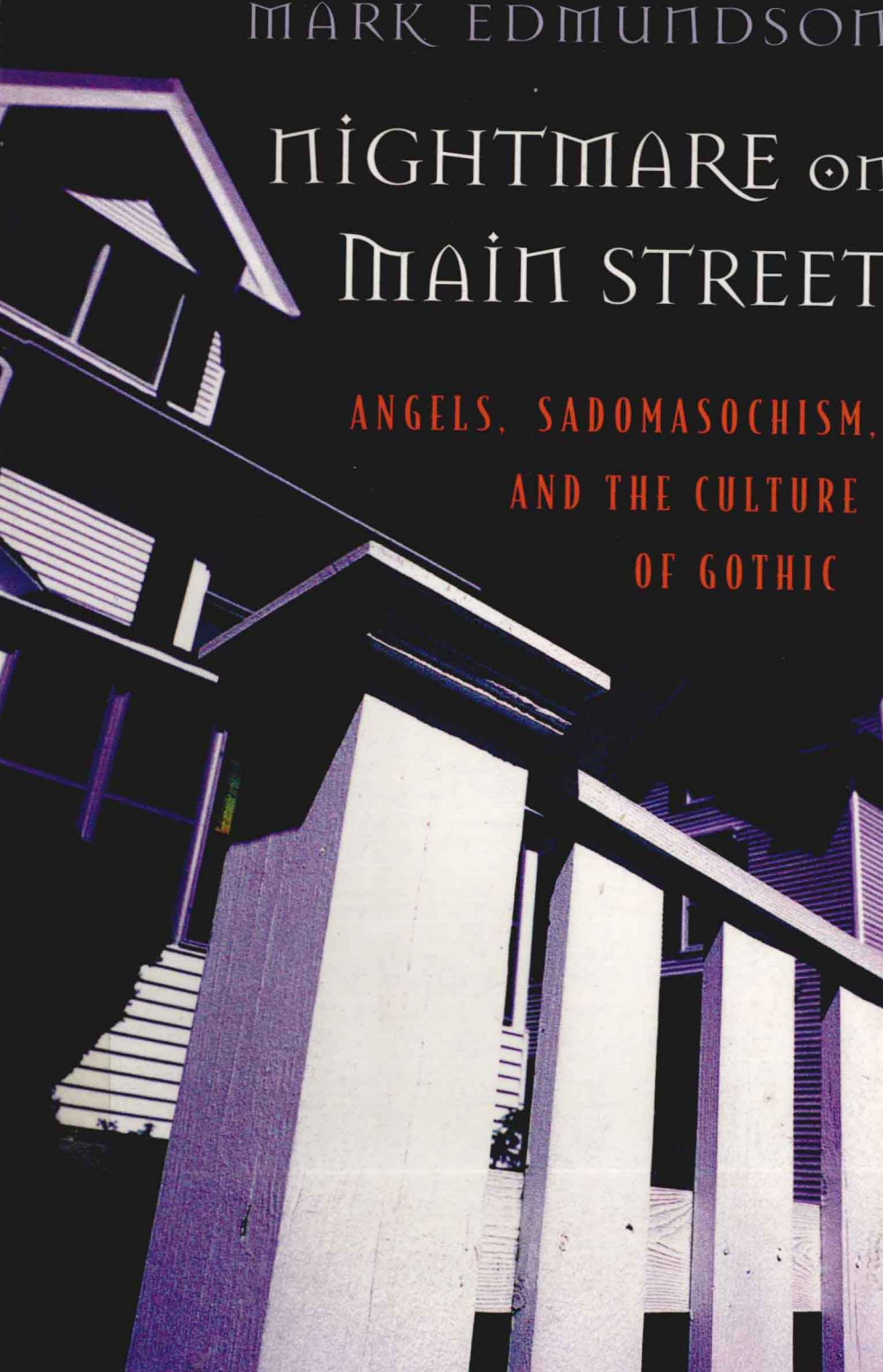
MARK EDMUNDSON

NIGHTMARE ON MAIN STREET

ANGELS, SADOMASOCHISM, AND THE CULTURE OF GOTHIC



Nightmare on Main Street

Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic

Mark Edmundson

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PREFACE

Several years ago, for no reason I readily discerned, I began watching horror movies. In the space of twelve months, I must have seen a hundred of them, films like *Night of the Living Dead, Dawn of the Dead, Nightmare on Elm Street, Last House on the Left, Psycho, The People under the Stairs, Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. I talked about horror with some notably strange people inside video stores and out. I flew through obscure books and journals on the subject. In the beginning, I wasn't looking to understand these movies or my need to see them, though as a professor and writer with a penchant for analyzing all significant passing phenomena—and some of the not-so-significant as well—that was probably the logical thing to do. Rather, I wanted new titles, more films to see. I wanted the best, the most frightening and radically conceived movies that the genre offered.

After a while, my ardor waning a little, I became more reflective. A penchant for horror films didn't fit in particularly well with my self-conception. I think of myself as an upbeat type, not entirely unworldly, but still optimistic; someone

who, against volumes of current testimony, finds teaching English in a university a fully engaging and a humanly useful thing to do; who has no qualms about bringing children into the world; whose often harsh views on America come out of a wounded but still somehow thriving love for the place. I teach the visionary poets, after all, Shelley, Blake, Emerson, Whitman, writers confident that humanity, or at least some consequential part of it, is capable of dramatic, saving transformation. So what was I doing teaching Shelley's rhapsodic "Ode to the West Wind" by day, then at night repairing to the VCR to watch *Texas Chainsaw Massacre II?* Horror films were for misanthropes, for people who lived in the cellars of their own minds and never wanted to come out. Horror flicks were for losers.

But, I answered myself, saying as much entailed a simple-minded view of these movies. For even in fairly detached terms, some of what I was watching was very good. It's hard to imagine a better directed or more brazenly innovative movie than *Psycho*. (Hitchcock's willingness to kill off his protagonist midfilm, then seduce you into identifying with psycho killer Norman Bates, remains, nearly forty years after the film's release, shocking enough.) Wes Craven's *Nightmare on Elm Street* does a splendid job of dramatizing the oppressive hatred, especially for the young, that can abide behind sanitized institutional appearances. In George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* one finds a jaggedly violent but well-aimed attack on American consumption and conformity (though maybe the scene where the bikers roar through the shopping mall decapitating the shambling, barely animated zombies—"attention Kmart shoppers"—*is* a bit heavy-handed).

But whatever the caliber of the fare, my horror film watching had an obsessive quality about it. I was getting some kind of cumulative hit from these movies that I wasn't eager to question too closely. For it's possible to use horror films and

novels not as a means of insight, but as a way to generate a reductive, bitter version of experience overall. The temptation to take horror's antipathy for virtually all human institutions to the ultimate degree—to see them as intrinsically repressive; calmly crazy, even lethal, in their ministrations—was one to which I could see myself succumbing. So what exactly was I getting into here?

The films I was watching were in what I knew to be the Gothic tradition. As a literary form Gothic was initiated by Horace Walpole in his 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto,* then elaborated and intensified by such writers as Monk Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley and, in America, by Edgar Allan Poe. *Otranto,* which it's said Walpole composed in a furious night of writing, is a tale that features a haunted castle, a mad prince, and frightened heroines in flight, along with a lethal giant helmet; it's a most peculiar book. But it originates the central Gothic conventions, the conventions I was encountering in my horror films: hero-villain, heroine on the run, a terrible place, uncut fear. Much read, *Otranto* was little imitated until the 1790s when, incited by images from the Revolution in France, English writers poured forth Gothic novels. Suddenly all of the passions that the age of reason had banished came back on the wings of the Revolution and in the books of middle-class authors who sometimes frightened themselves with their creations nearly as much as they did their readers.

Gothic, one might say, is the art of haunting, the art of possession. The Gothic artist tries to grab hold of the reader, make it so he can't put the book down, can't think of anything else. In a Gothic fragment, John Keats describes his "living hand," which "would, if it were cold / And in the icy silence of the tomb, / So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights / That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood / So

in my veins red life might stream again."[1] Gothic, at its most aesthetically potent, acts as would Keats's dead, grasping hand; it fills its audience with fear, with an uncanny sense of impending harm, that abides even after the film is over, the book finished and back on the shelf. "See," Keats says, flourishing the hand, "here it is— / I hold it towards you."

Over time I saw that I wasn't the only one in 1990s America who was absorbed by the Gothic. For in our fin de siècle, Gothic novels and films are proliferating. Stephen King and Anne Rice are the dual monarchs, Hades and Persephone, of American Gothic fiction. Their tales of vampires, demons, and ghastly possession probably reach more people than the work of any other American writers. The influence of Alfred Hitchcock, major Gothic artist that he is, remains omnipresent in American film. Quentin Tarantino, David Lynch, the Coen brothers, and Brian de Palma, to name just a few, are Hitchcock's lineal descendants, but there is hardly a suspense or horror picture made in America that doesn't owe a debt to the Master. The kitchen knife that young Michael Myers wields in the opening scene of *Halloween* comes courtesy of Norman and Mrs. Bates.

But what I saw, as I continued to think about my own Gothic fixations and started rereading Poe and Mary Shelley, was that our major Gothic modes are not all fictive. Rather (as my first chapter will show), Gothic conventions have slipped over into ostensibly nonfictional realms. Gothic is alive not just in Stephen King's novels and Quentin Tarantino's films, but in media renderings of the O. J. Simpson case, in our political discourse, in our modes of therapy, on TV news, on talk shows like *Oprah,* in our discussions of AIDS and of the environment. American culture at large has become suffused with Gothic assumptions, with Gothic characters and plots.

There was, it turned out, nothing unusual about my fixation with horror films; in '90s America it seemed that almost every-

one was tied up, in one way or another, with the Gothic. If they weren't into slasher movies, it was the *X-Files,* or the Simpson case, serial killers, Rice's vampires, recovered memory, or any of two dozen other extravagances. Gothic isn't everywhere exactly, though once you understand its conventions, Gothic's strong presence is hard to miss.

But that provokes a difficult question. What cultural work is contemporary Gothic doing for its consumers? Why do we need it? Early Gothic writers like Lewis and Radcliffe offered means of insight. They acquainted willing readers with their suppressed passions and allowed them to reflect, however indirectly, on the place of priests and nobles in a revolutionary age. Even in our own time, artists have used Gothic to rouse readers and help them see the world in revealingly darkened shades.

But what about our current, true-life Gothic forms? Do they have any such vitalizing effect? Do Gothic renderings of the Simpson case help us to break through the crust of convention and see race and violence in fresh, if shocking, terms? Does the recovered memory movement, in which young people, mainly women, affirm that they have recaptured memories of abuse, chiefly by parents, lead us to a deeper understanding of gender relations, of sex, of the workings of the unconscious? In other words, to what degree are we as a culture using horror for fresh insight, to what degree to generate sourly reductive versions of experience? (With my horror films, you'll recall, I was doing a little of both.) In the first chapter I try to answer these questions, reflecting on the value of our current culture of Gothic.

In its initial wave, Gothic was the literature of revolution, specifically the revolution in France that dominated European consciousness in the last decade of the eighteenth century. In order to answer questions about Gothic's current workings, I will need to pose large questions about its relations to our own

cultural and historical moment. Why Gothic *now?* My answers will be broad ranging, entailing thoughts about religious faith, about the oncoming millennium, and—odd as it may initially sound—about the still potent pressures of the American 1960s on current culture.

One of the major repositories for '90s Gothic is the afternoon talk show. Onto Oprah's stage troop numberless unfortunates, victims and villains. The victims have been pursued, harassed, mistreated. They are sublimely innocent (as any reader of Gothic novels knows they would have to be). The villains present a more interesting case. At first they come across to us as evil incarnate, or simply as monstrous creatures who have gone beyond evil and good. But eventually we learn that they themselves have been victims. They too are haunted by some form of past abuse, so that their bad behavior takes on an air of inevitability. At times, Oprah is an apostle of fate worthy of Edgar Allan Poe: if you were molested by your father, you'll be a molester in turn. There's no way out.

But Oprah speaks in two voices. For at other times, she's a prophet of the will. "I was a welfare daughter just like you . . . how did you let yourself become welfare mothers? Why did you choose this? I didn't."[2] In her second, pseudo-Emersonian guise, Oprah teaches that all is possible, simply through exertions of vital force. It's not hard; just repeat after me.

Oprah's guests are frequently addicted—our current word for the traditional Gothic term "haunted." They're addicted to drugs, sex, shopping, abuse, whatever, and it sometimes seems that there is no hope for them. But periodically Oprah breaks through her nearly Calvinist commitment to predestination and fate. She up and affirms freedom in the most facile terms: you are what you will yourself to be.

From productions like *Oprah* I came to see that interwoven with the '90s culture of Gothic is a culture that seems to be its complete inverse. I call it the culture of facile transcendence. My second chapter, "The World according to Forrest Gump," describes an anti-Gothic world inspired by the belief that self-transformation is as simple as a fairy-tale wish. I focus on the inner-child movement, where you're encouraged to deliver your inner infant from fear and loneliness, on the men's movement, on New Age panaceas, on the mild high that certain kinds of TV can bring, on the angel craze, on power ads, and on other formulas for easy self-remaking that now flourish in the American marketplace. As a culture we've become nearly as obsessed by angels, and guardian angels in particular, as by Gothic images of the serial killer. It's possible, too, to point to a reciprocal relation between our current forms of the Gothic and of facile transcendence: one often creates the need for the other.

Does the proliferation of these forms of facile transcendence substantially challenge the strength of premillennial American Gothic? Is there a creditable yearning for some better form of life, something more affirmative than Gothic pessimism, submerged in these pop modes? I think that sometimes there is, though I find that cultural hope in some of the least likely places, in the kind of popular culture that's most frequently maligned by academic critics and by sophisticated journalists. I also look for alternatives to the culture of Gothic in the past. The second chapter considers the Rousseauianism of the 1960s counterculture, and high modernism as exemplified by the theoretical (not the poetic) T. S. Eliot, as well as by the architects of the modernist school.

But even after identifying a culture of easy transcendence and seeing it in relation to more pervasive Gothic anxieties, I was still left with a riddle. Besides the fact that I had a taste for hyperbole indulged by both forms, I wondered why I would be locked into both Gothic *and* visionary work. How could I

be drawn to visionary renewal in the mode of Blake and Emerson and to Gothic horror films? Were the visionary poets in fact what many academic critics now suggest they are: dispensers of a culturally canonized means of facile transcendence? I was still left with what appeared to be an unresolved double life, not unrelated, I couldn't help seeing, to that of the standard Gothic hero-villain. During the day I was teaching Shelley, at night turning on the VCR to imbibe high horror films.

But it gradually came clear to me that the visionary poets were themselves no less interested in the Gothic than I was, though their interest was often of a deeper and more productive sort. It struck me that Blake and Shelley probably found in the horror writers of their day images for those forces, internal and external, that resisted their self-transforming drives. Gothic was a source for Shelley's cruel sky-king Jupiter, and for his mad Count Cenci, just as it was for Blake's inhibiting Spectres and his Selfhood. In part through reading Gothic writers, I imagine, visionaries like Blake and Shelley came up with ways to render their own attractions to absolutism and misogyny. And also to sadomasochism, which I think I can show is the ultimate expression of the Gothic spirit.

In the last chapter, "S & M Culture," I turn to Shelley and Nietzsche, who successfully bring the Gothic and the visionary impulses together in contention and give us images of renewal. Shelley saw his own attraction to sadomasochism and made it the subject of his greatest poem, *Prometheus Unbound*. So Nietzsche, learning I suspect from Shelley, put the Gothic problem of revenge at the core of his thought and worked to find ways to overcome it. America's major visionary, Ralph Waldo Emerson, is himself a Gothic writer—though he is much more than a Gothic writer, too.

But our own Gothic dilemmas are in certain ways different from those faced by Shelley, Nietzsche, and Emerson. Our

difficulties centrally involve the attractions of wielding and submitting to absolute power, the attractions of sadomasochism, yes. But our current Gothic crises also erupt from our manifold anxieties about race. Is it possible that the visionary mode might be reinvented for our day, for our particular Gothic traumas? I try to answer that question by looking into two remarkable Gothic works of the American fin de siècle, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. My objective, finally, is to do what criticism in its traditional guise often did, to point toward possibilities for future imaginative work.

Rather than seeing ours as a culture of chaos, as many now do, I see it as shot through with a significant dialectical pattern, the play of Gothic and facile transcendence. Naturally there are many important cultural forces that have little to do with either of these phenomena. But to me, reflecting on Gothic and on easy transcendence goes a long way toward helping us make sense of our current circumstances and letting us see how we might better them.

This book is intended as a piece of public criticism. It is not written chiefly for specialists in the Gothic or the so-called Romantic, or for practitioners of what has come to be called cultural studies. *Nightmare on Main Street* ought to be accessible to anyone with an interest in current culture and a willingness to hear it construed from a new angle. It is a speculative book, an attempt at broad cultural diagnosis, thus an essay in the etymological sense. I do not seek comprehensiveness about current culture: many instances of contemporary Gothic and of facile transcendence are not included, or mentioned only in passing. Nor do I strive for a historically inclusive vision of the Gothic: the book shuttles between the late eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries with only a few stopping points be-

tween. *Nightmare on Main Street* offers a condensed vision of how things stand with America as the millennium nears, a vision that I hope readers will be able to use in their own attempts to conceive the present and shape the time to come.

I had valuable assistance in developing this book, and it is a pleasure to be able to acknowledge it here. My wife, Elizabeth Denton, read the book at every stage, helping me in numberless ways. Michael Pollan read at least two drafts of the manuscript, and offered fine editorial advice, as well as friendship and encouragement. Richard Rorty made extremely useful suggestions for shaping the argument. Chip Tucker brought his considerable acumen to bear, corrected mistakes, and asked telling questions. Jean Bethke Elshtain responded with remarkable generosity and intelligence. Stephen Smith and Adam Goodheart at *Civilization* reacted warmly to the project, printing a selection from the first chapter in the magazine.

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American Gothic

Cultural historians of the future, looking to mark the moment when America's fin de siècle began, might do worse than to point to the glittering evening when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences declared that the best picture of 1991 was a slasher movie, *Silence of the Lambs*. *Silence* featured not one, but two serial killers, the twisted genius Hannibal Lecter and grunting Buffalo Bill, who murders women with the improbable motive of stitching himself together a female skin. Clarice Starling, a novice FBI agent played by Jodie Foster, represents the law. With the help of Hannibal (and her own dark side), she tracks Buffalo Bill to his lair and blows him away. For his part, Lecter, known popularly as Hannibal the Cannibal, escapes to a remote island, there to continue his pursuit of high culture and anthropophagy.

Around 1975 slasher films began proliferating in America: *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the Thirteenth*. But these were down and dirty productions, shot on shoestring budgets and patronized by adolescents looking for quasi-sexual shivers, and by the sorts of middle-aged men who have trouble keeping eye contact. But then suddenly, at the onset of the '90s, an expensively produced slasher film was at the center of mainstream American culture. Middle America was lining up to enjoy a world where women were flayed and men devoured; where the good, as embodied by Agent Starling, require tutelage from the worst, Lecter; and where the archvillain is left free at the end to follow his singular calling.

Horror had reached prime time—and it has stayed there. During the last decade of the century (and millennium), horror plays a central role in American culture. A time of anxiety, dread about the future, the fin de siècle teems with works of Gothic terror and also with their defensive antidotes, works that summon up, then cavalierly deny, Gothic fears.