Images of Fear

How Horror Stories
Helped Shape Modern Culture
(1818–1918)

Martin Tropp

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by

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Again, to my family,
and especially
my daughter Rachel

Preface

> What happens to the idea of a democratic culture . . . if the increasingly powerful and self assured literary academy, barely challenged by critics outside its walls, remains aloof from the larger culture, remains content to live and work within its own space?
>
> — Irving Howe

Writing this book was a risky venture when I began, some five years ago, and it remains risky as the book finally sees the light of publication. This is not because I write about horror stories, although the subject has at times resulted in two extremes of unreliability: abstruse academic excursions into textual and psychological analysis or popular pastiches of inaccurate commentary on fiction and films. The difficulty stems from the dimensions of this study, which determined the nature of my research, and the intended audience, which I kept in mind throughout the long process of writing and revision.

In 1976, I published *Mary Shelley's Monster: The Story of Frankenstein,* which attempted to reach the "common reader" with an exploration of the reasons for the popularity of a modern myth, traced from the 1818 novel through the twentieth century films. Though the topics ranged from galvanism to Freudianism, and I discussed creators of the myth from Mary Shelley to Mel Brooks, the single story itself limited the scope somewhat. In this book, I examine how a series of images of "horror" in fiction interacted with an emerging modern culture over a century, shaping attitudes towards such aspects of life as new technology, urban crime, and gender relationships — culminating in the recasting of life and death on the Western Front of World War I in the mold of the horror story.

Thus, the scope is enormous. At the same time as I wish to tread selectively on this vast terrain, I hope to avoid limiting my audience to those already familiar with the latest critical theory or the complexities of Victorian culture. In short, I tried (in advance) to heed the admonition Irving Howe gave in the June 12, 1989, issue of the *New Republic:* "Critics might learn once more to speak to the common reader, as if he still matters, as

if she will soon respond; and to speak in English, a language that for some time served criticism well" (31).

I assume my reader, like myself, wants to see how popular literature and mass culture intersected, and how the conjunction helped determine (and still accounts for) the popularity of the literature and the way we see the world around us. One way to do that is to seek "universals" in fiction: the shape of the narrative, psychological patterns, linguistic tensions. Though a bit of all that works its way into my book, I have chosen to focus on how these texts emerged from and reshaped their time. There are, certainly, other reasons for their power and other critical works that examine those reasons. The bibliography and references direct readers towards those studies. In the text, I trace a process that took a hundred years and encompassed bits and pieces of many aspects of literary analysis and cultural history—namely, the movement of the images of fear from distant fantasies to contemporary realities.

In the course of my research, I have examined many works which explore in greater depth information essential to my overall theme or which look at the same information from different perspectives. For example, after finishing a draft of the manuscript, I examined *"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" After One Hundred Years,* a collection of criticism published in 1988. Many of these essays take some issues I mention—from the book as detective fiction to the influence of *Frankenstein*—much further than I do. But the purpose there is to elucidate the novel itself, primarily for an audience of academics. I have a different purpose and another audience.

Similarly, two other recent books, *Fasting Girls* by Joan Brumberg and *Idols of Perversity* by Bram Dijkstra, examine an image found in *Dracula* that I look at—the Victorian ideal of beauty as a pallid woman wasting away, what Dijkstra calls the "consumptive sublime." Much of the information in those two books (and a third recent study, *Myths of Sexuality* by Lynda Nead) overlaps. But the context differs; Brumberg is interested in the history of anorexia nervosa, Dijkstra in the iconography of the image in Victorian art at the turn of the century, while Nead sees types of women (such as the prostitute) linked to concepts such as disease. All of them deal with the fact, as Nead says, that "the respectable woman was represented in terms of physical frailty" (30). But each author chose a different way to connect that fact to a larger structure of meaning. For my purposes, the iconography of the woman at her most beautiful when she is between life and death elucidates *Dracula,* which takes that cultural stereotype to a horror story conclusion, destroys it, and replaces it with another. The other contexts and content, though valid and fascinating to read, are not within the scope of my study.

Thus, this book is original in the way it examines the intersection of literature and culture, using a narrative structure that attributes the

continuing wide appeal of certain horror stories to the less well known facts of a century of cultural history. Placing these modern myths into a pattern of development that links literature and life, fantasy and fact, imagination and experience, helps us better understand how one side of the equation illuminates the other. The intent here is to account for the power of popular fiction in its historical context, as well as to show that such an account can reach a popular audience.

Although books have been written about astronomy, history, biology, psychology, and other academic subjects for a wider group than specialists in these fields, somehow studies of literature have meant (at least recently) academic literary criticism, a genre that excludes a vast number of literate readers. Not only are such books written by and for professors, lately they tend to narrow themselves even further. Fiction is at times examined apart from the culture that spawned it and the readers that made it popular; it often is discussed in opaque jargon or seen through the clouded lens of the latest theory, sometimes reflecting the cleverness of the critic rather than illuminating the meaning of the literature ostensibly under discussion.

There may be a place for examining *Frankenstein* in such a way that the reverse alphabetical order of the names of the Monster's victims has significance (as one critic argues). But there is also a place for examining why the Monster, as an image of man as machine, machine as man, has helped shape our response to the dangers of technology for over 150 years. Both approaches, like the audiences for both, can coexist — can sometimes even overlap. What is still needed, and what I have kept in mind as I have enjoyed researching and writing this book, is to speak to the common reader in our common language. I hope to convey in the following pages not only the results of my research, but also my respect for the perspicacity of the popular audience that gave stories like *Frankenstein, Dracula* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* enduring life.

Acknowledgments

THE PAINS OF SLEEP

... But yester-night I prayed aloud
In anguish and in agony,
Up-starting from the fiendish crowd
Of shapes and thoughts that tortured me:
A lurid light, a trampling throng,
Sense of intolerable wrong,
And whom I scorned, those only strong!
Thirst of revenge, the powerless will
Still baffled and yet burning still!
Desire with loathing strangely mixed
On wild and hateful objects fixed.
Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
And shame and terror over all!
Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
Which all confused I could not know
Whether I suffered, or I did:
For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
My own or others' still the same
Life stifling fear, soul-stifling shame...

Samuel T. Coleridge (1803)

BOMBARDMENT

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While the shells crashed overhead.

The fifth day there came a hush;
We left our holes
And looked above the wreckage of the earth
To where the white clouds moved in silent lines
Across the untroubled blue.

Richard Aldington (1919)

Contents

Introduction:
The Argument of This Book

> Scientific and poetic or imaginative accounts of the world
> are not distinguishable in their origins. They start in
> parallel, but diverge from one another at some stage. We
> all tell stories, but the stories differ in the purposes we ex-
> pect them to fulfill and the kinds of evaluations to which
> they are exposed.
>
> — Peter Medawar

> Popular fiction responds to the shared dreams and hidden
> fears of its audience.
>
> — Leslie Fiedler

This is a book about the relationship of popular literature to life. Specifically, it examines how images of fear in some famous works of Victorian fiction helped give form and meaning to the frightening events that have come to mark modern culture. Literary criticism usually can't find an audience outside the ranks of college professors and other specialists. But this isn't a book of literary criticism. And, despite the fact that much of it is about horror stories, it isn't only for lovers of vampire movies, though both academics and aficionados of the tale of terror are welcome. Instead, the following pages focus on how and why a few very special stories have helped determine the way we see the world around us.

After their first appearance in nineteenth century England, three quickly became classic tales of terror, the modern equivalent of myths: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula.* The other two — Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* — haven't the same myth creating power (though they are still widely read), yet help show the subtle ways two great novelists imprinted the dark design of horror on the fabric of reality.

All five became part of the popular consciousness between 1818 and 1918, a century that brought Western society from the first decades of the

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Industrial Revolution to the cataclysmic disaster of the First World War. Along the way, accepted gender and class relationships, belief in progress and perfectibility, and faith in the unchanging nature of Nature itself were replaced by widespread insecurity, disillusionment, and fear of the future — the hallmarks of the twentieth century. Horror fiction and real terror coincided, and the same audience read and reacted to both.

In order to understand why horror stories continue to have such a hold over our imagination and perceptions, we also will be exploring diverse aspects of culture — architecture from medieval castles to glass palaces, evidence of man's barbarity from Jack the Ripper to the Battle of the Somme, scientific theories from Charles Darwin's to Havelock Ellis', popular movements from the first modern stirrings of women's liberation to the last gasps of nostalgia for the vanished order of the Middle Ages. Throughout, the focus will be on their fictive quality — the ways they came to be seen by an audience steeped in popular literature.

As the biologist Peter Medawar has pointed out, we cannot make sense of the world around us without some structure which gives it meaning — there is no such thing as pure observation. To understand new phenomena, we must place them within an imaginative pattern that later can be modified or discarded if it does not conform to further observation. For instance, in the nineteenth century, the scientific study of our geological and biological past was marked by the painful process of abandoning the Bible as a conceptual framework when it could no longer account for the great age of the earth and the gradual evolution of life. It was replaced with a model that gave the impetus for change, not to cataclysmic, purposeful acts by an all powerful creator, but to the countless minuscule effects of unseen forces over vast stretches of time — the erosion of wind and water, the adaptions wrought by natural selection, even the landscaping power of earthworms. That new model influenced more than geology, biology, or religion; it became the pattern into which change was fit, a new way of seeing how change affects our lives.

The other transformations of that time were just as destructive of the patterns of belief that had served for centuries. They also needed to be fit into models that made sense of both the events themselves and the feelings they engendered in all those who had to live with them. And, as we shall see, the pattern that continued to be imposed on those frightening realities often came from the tale of terror, slowly transformed from an imaginative fantasy to a way of encountering the world.

The term "horror" itself denotes both fantasy and reality. In fiction, it designates one kind of vicarious experience, existing in another realm, dealing with supernatural events and unbelievable characters, that readers approach with the expectation of an escape from the realities of daily experience. At the same time, the darkest of inescapable truths — natural

disasters, human suffering, and organized depravity—bear the same label. Imagination and experience, fiction and fact, are linked by language. The horrors of pulp literature and the horrors of war, the most frivolous and the most cataclysmic of human creations, are each signified by the same word.

This curious connection was brought out at the turn of the nineteenth century by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* when her heroine, Catherine Morland, a devotee of Gothic novels, announces that "something very shocking indeed will soon come out of London. . . . I have only heard it is more horrible than anything we have met with yet" (90). Her listeners don't realize she is speaking of the manufactured terrors of the latest Gothic tale, and imagine instead that she is predicting a replay of the French Revolution, with "a mob of three thousand men assembling in St. George's Fields, the Bank attacked, the Tower threatened, the streets of London flowing with blood" (91). (Of course, Jane Austen's readers are also privy to this conversation and well aware of the third meaning in her words; if the novel Catherine Morland awaits is anything like the bulk of popular Gothic fiction, it will indeed be terrible, awful, horrible—which then, as now, were synonyms for what's simply bad writing.)

Though the confusion of meaning within Austen's novel is part of the comedy, it also suggests the way we'll be looking at horror stories themselves. Catherine Morland's audience heard another meaning in her words because, at the time, many feared the recent Reign of Terror in France would be repeated on British soil; a series of riots in 1780 had caused ten times the property damage to London as was done to Paris during the French Revolution (Briggs 178). Catherine Morland alluded to the synthetic horrors of the hackneyed plots of popular fiction; her listeners heard in those words a real disaster that imagination had already shaped in the popular consciousness. She hoped for a few hours' quiet diversion; her audience pictured the possibility of the wholesale destruction of a way of life, the end of England as it had been known for centuries.

Jane Austen plays upon the difficulties of communication, the distinction between what "I mean" and what "the word means" that has become a cornerstone of much recent thinking about language and literature; she also confronts directly what was, from the start of the Gothic movement, one source of its power over its readers. The "horror" in Gothic fiction continued to contain this contradiction. While ostensibly the means to an innocent escape, it aroused in its Victorian audience fears that lurked beneath the surface, fears connected with the ongoing upheaval of a culture discarding a way of life that had been unchanged for centuries and, amid the social, industrial, and scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century, making a modern world. Conversely, those who wrote about the real horrors of the period often used the language, imagery, and structure of the supernatural

tale of terror, evoking in their audience reactions conditioned by popular fiction. Thus, the ambiguous meaning of horror that Jane Austen used for comic effect is at the very center of its power.

Nor is that the only ambiguity. Whether fantastic or factual, horror stories attract their audience by frightening it, two seemingly contradictory impulses. Tobias Smollett, whose novel *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), was one of the earliest Gothic tales, defined fear as "the most violent and interesting of all the passions." In reading horror fiction, we still seek to make a violent emotion interesting and safely remote, within the refuge of a book which we can close at any time. We also find refuge in the unreality of the imagery and the predictability of the plots, the very unlikeliness which, when we are having a nightmare, we can never recognize. The superiority of the readers of *Northanger Abbey*, who laugh at the characters' misunderstanding of the horror Catherine describes, is the attitude of readers of all horror fiction. While vicariously participating in the confusion and fears of others, the audience is always aware that the "horrible" events the characters encounter (often conveyed in horrible writing) are also unlikely.

As one reader among many, rather than as an individual suffering a nightmare, we can be reassured by the unseen audience of other readers. It is fear without isolation, with an instant escape, with familiar objects around us, with our rational faculties intact. As a collective experience (made immediate in our century when film enabled us literally to be alone together in the darkness) the popularity of the horror story transformed private nightmares into communal events.

In the process, it gave shape to fear; as E. H. Gombrich points out, Freud believed that "only those unconscious ideas that can be adjusted to the reality of formal structures become communicable." Freud, Gombrich argues, "insisted on that degree of adjustment to reality that alone turns a dream into a work of art" (36). Thus, horror stories are not nightmares transcribed, but fears recast into safe and communicable forms—a concrete, related, yet separate reality. In the act of fixing the shifting and subjective terrors of the subconscious into words on paper, the writer of the tale of terror created something quite different from the dream that was often its inspiration; he moved, in other words, from the privacy of the self to the shared conventions of communication, using language to wed nightmare to culture.

In reading of the actual horrors of our world or watching films that document the darkest corners of reality, our motives and responses may be quite different from when we encounter the fantasy of the horror story, though the curiously contradictory power that draws and repels us is similar. Thus, though we hope to be surprised and terrified by the invented horrors of popular fiction and film, and though we may be profoundly

shocked by the actual horrors of history, we want to be reassured by them as well. For both, our place as audience insulates us; they complete their meaning after they are completed, when we are free to close the book or leave the theater and retreat into safety.

Horror stories, when they work, construct a fictional edifice of fear and deconstruct it simultaneously, dissipating terror in the act of creating it. And real horrors are filtered through the expectations of readers trained in responding to popular fiction, familiar with a set of images, a language, and pattern of development. Horror fiction gives the reader the tools to "read" experiences that would otherwise, like nightmares, be incommunicable. In that way, the inexpressible and private becomes understandable and communal, shared and safe.

This book looks at the interplay between the two meanings of horror in the century leading up to the First World War — how a vast new readership, trained through reading horror fiction, learned to read the horrors of the world around it in similar ways. Thus, you are about to follow, not a history of Gothic fiction, but an exploration of the way, over time, meaning and understanding changed as the world changed. Those works of horror fiction which have lasted (a minute fraction of a huge output) continue to speak to their audience because they echo fears that have remained with us. The novels themselves remain perennially popular. In addition, the stories and characters in those novels still are evolving, re-emerging in other books, plays, films, and popular culture — keeping pace with the continuing needs and evolving uncertainties in the audience that has kept them alive.

Their power comes from more than the tapping of the ancient and private sources of nightmare; they use those materials to connect individual lives with the group experience of culture. In the century we are considering, horror in fiction moved from a safe remoteness to a frightening immediacy, from subjective to objective reality. It bridged the gap between the two poems quoted at the start of this book — "The Pains of Sleep" (1803), Samuel T. Coleridge's confession of the tormenting emotions behind his own nightmare, and "Bombardment" (1919), Richard Aldington's account of the communal horror of his comrades trapped in the nightmare of war. In both, sleep evokes terror, though the intervening century has transformed the source of fear from the "maddening brawl" of secret passions to the "bursting steel" of artillery, from the private creations of an individual imagination to the common threat of a hostile reality, turning metaphors for the unconscious into narratives of experience.

Just as the stories we will look at are familiar, the events are familiar as well — chronicles of Victorian poverty and crime, the Great Exhibition at mid century, the horrors of the First World War. At those moments, when the fears given form through fiction came up against the real horrors of day

to day experience, imaginative fiction helped shape the response. For Coleridge, the nightmare reveals "deeds to be hid which were not hid"; similarly, the horror story transforms the elements of nightmare to explore the dark side of society and hint at its collective secrets. Finally, by the end of the First World War, history itself had become a tale of terror, a nightmare from which we in the Twentieth Century are all still trying to awaken. World War I made clear that the pattern of fear in the popular fiction of the previous century had not been an escape from the outside world, but a way of seeing deeper into it, as well as revealing the shape of things to come.

This book, then, speaks to anyone who wishes to know why certain stories have continued simultaneously to attract and repel us for over a hundred years, how the metaphor of horror slowly evolved from a frivolous escape to a model for an inescapable reality. For that reason, I have avoided arcane critical language or extensive scholarly apparatus. At the same time, the text builds upon (and credits) the work of many other people. It is possible, precisely because these stories are so familiar, for a study of the sources of their power to be accessible to a wide audience—to anyone interested in how modern myths like *Frankenstein, Dracula* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* came to be, and why they remain so popular.

I persist in believing that any aspect of literature or culture can be discussed intelligently without jargon, that it does no injustice to either subject or readers to use familiar diction, a clear style, and a strong narrative drive. There is a fascinating story to be told here, encompassing frightening events and great achievements, imagined characters who became almost real and real people who lived through almost unimaginable horror. It starts with the bizarre dreams of a few upper-class eccentrics and the harmless pastime of a small literate class; it ends in the collective nightmare of an entire generation.

Hayden White has written of the difficulty of making sense of human culture, that "the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion of them" (1). Just as horror stories imposed a limiting fictional pattern on frightening experiences to make them coherent, this book of necessity reduces the complexities of social change to a narrative that leaves much out. For example, for the sake of coherence I have scrupulously avoided the temptation to break chronology and draw comparisons with contemporary life. However, to make clear the aspects of a vanished time that remain with us (and avoid tedious plot summary or obscure commentary), I have confined the discussion almost totally to fiction and nonfiction still in print and popular. Even when I examine World War I memoirs, though I use some archival material, most references are drawn from the more familiar published sources such as the memoirs of the soldier poets Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves or the