Authorship Writing Culture

Marcus Clarke, Gustave Doré and the Mystery of the Popular

ANDREW McCANN, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

In an 1878 *Melbourne Review* essay entitled 'Colonial Literature and the Colonial Press,' James Smith traces what he saw as the poverty of nineteenth-century Australian writing to the fact that 'as in all young dependent communities, we are too prone to regard journalism and literature as synonymous' (Smith 340). The dominance of the daily and weekly press, at least in Victoria, he claims, has meant that the journalist has come to be regarded as 'the typical man of letters' (340), implying that the public is not able to distinguish properly 'between literature as art and as mere merchandise' (341). The essay turns on a predictable longing for the author as a figure who seems to function independently of the market place. This propensity to imagine the author or man of letters as one who has somehow managed to transcend a historically specific context of production also views the work of art not as an object to be bought and sold, not as merchandise, but as antithetical to the commodity form. According to this view the pleasure of art's consumption is bound up with this resistance. When, in the *Melbourne Review* essay, Smith turns to 'such men as Tennyson, Ruskin, Browning, Froude, Newman, and Matthew Arnold, who are in no sense of the word journalists,' the desire for the solace of literature in the fallen world of the textual commodity was also bound up with a colonial longing for the culture of the metropolis (341). In Melbourne, in 1878, the term literature, we might say, embodied this imbrication of geographical and metaphysical need.

Though Smith clearly admired *His Natural Life*, no one could have been more anomalous to the realm of the literary, as Smith imagined it, than Marcus Clarke, whose own career enacted precisely the confusion of journalist and man of letters, commerce and culture, that Smith bemoaned. Indeed the relationship between commerce and culture is something that Clarke, eschewing a Romantic faith in the autonomy of the aesthetic, addressed directly in an 1871 essay entitled 'Modern Art and Gustave Doré', which is also a minor treatise on the relationship between market capitalism and the development of artistic forms throughout the nineteenth century. The essay examines the ways in which the pressures of the market and, more specifically, of commercial print culture, have impinged upon the practices of painting and engraving to produce a formally innovative visual style. The 'immense demand for cheap popular literature,' Clarke claims, created opportunities for visual artists who could adapt their work to accommodate the requirements of profit motivated textual production: 'Illustrated papers, magazines, and journals were the rage, and many an artist of eminence threw down the maulstick for the

graver' (Clarke, 'Modern Art' 473). What is at stake in this transformation is an apparent renunciation of the forms of production associated with detailed and elaborate history painting, often dedicated to the monumentalization of great national events, and a corresponding acknowledgment that the market required a kind of virtuosity linked to the speed with which work could be produced:

> A rapid change was at hand. The followers of the 'heroic school,' who would potter for months over some terrific and impossible conception, and who, in their heavy chariots of conventionality, lumbered with much dust and labour towards the goal, saw the lightly-clad footrunners pass them in the race, and were forced to flog their fat and pursy steeds to overtake their daring competitors. The laurel was bestowed by popular acclaim ere these daudlers could strip for the contest, and while they were meditating upon the course of action their barbarous rivals were half-way to the winning-post. (472)

Clarke saw the effects of this shift in visual culture as unambiguously positive. The essay enthuses at the thought of the competitive and vaguely shamanistic market-place that produced the popular artist *par excellence* – Gustave Doré himself. Clarke described Doré as an 'artist of the people,' by which he meant not a revolutionary artist, but a marketable, commercially successful one whose work had 'hit the public taste' and embodied 'the present state of artistic feeling in Europe' (472, 474). A correlation between marketability and aesthetic appeal is implied here, as Clarke clearly rejects the notion that cultural value and market value are antithetical. Yet this correlation of market appeal and aesthetic or cultural value is not simply reducible to the assumption that the demands of a competitive market place encourage some kind of artistic refinement. In fact the opposite seems more the case. Clarke applauds Doré's work precisely because of its lack of technical refinement and its inattention to detail. In refusing what Clarke calls the 'elevation of mechanical skill, in copying above the faculty of conceiving what is to be copied' (475–6), Doré's work transcends laborious realism and grasps a totality that cannot be caught by works of elaborate and minute detail: 'His pictures of battle fields seem as if we had caught a glimpse of the scene through a moments rift in the smoke. We grasp the whole but have not time for detail' (475). This completeness at the expense of detail (the 'reckless disregard of detail,' Clarke writes) suggests that the rapidity of composition and, relatedly, a rejection of technical accomplishment lend Doré's work a unique kind of penetration. It is as if, under the pressure of a profit-driven market-place, the engravings inadvertedly grasp something hitherto concealed or occluded in the fastidiousness of technical minutia. Doré's work achieves insight (tantamount for Clarke to a kind of visionary second sight) precisely because of its technical deficiencies and its move away from the undoubtedly more exacting visual registers of pictorial realism and photography.

Clarke, however, seems unable to specify the nature of Doré's popularity be-

yond a discussion of the enigma by which insight is achieved through technical deficiency. The nature of Doré's insight, the *frisson nouveau* that his work embodies, remains unspecified. But the mystery of Doré's popularity is also the mystery of public taste, and one need not know a great deal about Clarke to imagine him obsessed with delving into the mysteries of the market forces that would also determine his own fate as a writer. Clarke's prose seems to proliferate uncontrollably around the issue of Doré's appeal in what is easily recognisable as a kind of textual hysteria bound up with the problem of not being able to capture Doré's secret in language. Doré's work is 'more vigorous than Darjou,' 'more natural than Berthall and more eccentric than Marcelin.' It partakes in the 'grotesque ideality of Retsch,' the 'realistic tone of Holbein' and the 'accuracy of Durer'. It has the pathos of Hogarth and the 'massive proportions' of Michaelangelo (474). The illusive nature of Doré's secret propels Clarke's own language into a kind of metaphorical extravagance that clearly registers the unnameability of the popular, or what Adorno calls the cryptically inaccessible character of the new (Adorno 20):

> Doré's genius lies more in grotesque than in sublimity. He terrifies, not awes us. His pictures are like farces become tragedies. The desire to ridicule is so strong that it peeps out with hideous pertinacity, and, like the skeleton at the feast, thrusts its unwelcome presence among the maskers. But his grotesquerie is too near to sublimity merely to amuse. His laughter is like the grin on the jaws of a death's head – it warns, not ridicules us. (Clarke, 'Modern Art' 480)

In this passage Clarke uses a series of Gothic tropes to evoke the secret of Doré's popularity precisely as a secret. The metaphor of the death's head amidst the maskers suggests that the secret of the popular culture-commodity, and by extension the secret of the popular itself, is bound up with this notion of revelation, the anti-epiphany in which the complacency of the public is suddenly disturbed by the appearance of something it would rather forget or not confront, something non-identical with it. By this reckoning the relationships between artist and public, or between object and consumer, are not simply about straightforward networks of patronage, the conscious exercise of taste, or innocuous mechanisms of supply and demand. On the contrary the marketability of art and the constitution of taste in the public sphere involves something altogether different. Behind the everyday circuits of exchange and pleasure that seem to regulate an empirical social order, the secret of the popular resides in a covert craving for that which refuses the world of the maskers, the self-deceiving public unaware of or disinclined to acknowledge the nature of its own desire. The mystery of the popular, the secret of the public taste, points us in the direction of all that is unnameable in public – the obscene, the morbid, the abject, the uncanny. The public, by the same token, is represented by the metaphor as constitutively performative. It is based on a consensual refusal to reveal or confront, except in the sequestered space of culture-consumption, something which remains other to communality, but which is nevertheless as

irreducible as the identities concealed in the masquerade. 'Modern Art and Gustave Doré 'inscribes the popular as a psychologistic paradox. The truly marketable object is one which represents or marks a lesion otherwise disavowed in the course of normal social interaction. By this reckoning the performativity of everyday interaction in public – the masquerade – must constitute a denial of the authentic desire that coheres around Doré's work. Part of the effect of the metaphor, in other words, is to fortify this sense of a desire that is pre-discursive and that retains an ontological status prior to social mediation.

What seems to be implied here is a theory of public taste that anticipates the dynamic of repression and return that Freud elucidates in his ground breaking essay 'The Uncanny'. Put briefly, Freud argues that the sensation we name uncanny is a result of a process in which what we have repressed, as part of the process of socialisation, is suddenly presented to us, creating a sensation in which the assumptions of normalcy seem suddenly suspended: 'This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression' (Freud 241). It is a theory that points us to psychoanalysis more broadly, but also beyond it to materialist theories of culture in which a dynamic of repression operates under the name of ideology or instrumental reason. In Clarke's essay the popularity of Doré's art suggests that the popular itself must be characterised by an internal antagonism – it must encompass two opposed but mutually sustaining poles: repression and return, the complacent pleasure of bourgeois appearances and the subversive pleasure of the grotesque, the mask and the 'hideous pertinacity' of the death's head. The 'popular' is itself Gothicised here in its replication of the dynamics of the uncanny, which, Freud shows, are integral to Gothic fiction (his essay is a reading of Hoffmann). Yet critical theory also invites us to be sceptical about the idea of a desire that is pre-discursive or pre-social, arguing that this is also, to some extent, mediated through forms of objectification continuous with the world of the commodity. By this reckoning the plenitude promised by art's alterity, its non-identity with the empirical, regardless of whether this be psychological or metaphysical (they amount to the same thing), also turns out to be continuous with the structures of commodity capitalism, in which the uncanny is also a matter of objectified aesthetic semblance.

In *One Way Street* Walter Benjamin, one of the century's most astute critics of commodity culture, presents us with a critical rehearsal of the Gothic trope of the uncanny as one of the various faces of the commodity:

> We have long forgotten the ritual by which the house of our life was erected. But ... what enervated, perverse antiquities do they not lay bare in the foundations. What things were interred and sacrificed amid magic incantations, what horrible cabinet of curiosities lies there below, where the deepest shafts are reserved for what is most commonplace. (Benjamin 46)

In this passage the bourgeois home – a metaphor for the self that Freud also uses

– is built over the repressed excess of objects stored in its nether regions, in vaults, cellars and crypts. In Benjamin's thinking these objects are also Gothicised, in so far as they are marked by a perversity repressed in the normal course of bourgeois life. They exist as a 'cabinet of curiosities' buried deep within the family vault, itself a kind of arcade of the uncanny which displays non-identity as other, repressed, disavowed. The passage constitutes what Benjamin called a 'dialectical image' – that is an image in which, as Susan Buck-Morss writes, the different aspects of the 'physiognomic appearance of the commodity' are revealed (Buck-Morss 211). In this passage the thrill of the perverse is both repressed by the architectonics of bourgeois life, and thoroughly objectified in the idea of perverse antiquities. This is the paradox of what I am calling the Gothic commodity, of which Doré's art, as described by Clarke, turns out to be exemplary. The Gothic commodity, in beckoning the consumer, does not radiate myths of middle class prosperity, but appears to whisper from the crypt. It simultaneously embodies and constitutes the obscene (taken literally as off-stage). Nothing evokes this more emphatically than the death's head. What Clarke called the 'hideous pertinacity' of Doré's work is echoed in what Benjamin writes under the heading 'Fancy Goods': 'The incomparable language of the death's head: total expressionlessness – the black of the eye-sockets – coupled to the most unbridled expression – the grinning rows of teeth' (Benjamin 70).

Clarke's essay on Doré invites us to speculate on the type of sociability in which what counts as normality is constantly shadowed by this other – a refusal of the fiction of the 'masquerade' that, mediated through the market, is also experienced by the consumer as pleasure. The Gothic commodity both implies this kind of sociability, and actively represents it as an object of pleasurable consumption. Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' is the text that elucidates what I have in mind here most emphatically. In the story the narrator, on seeing a curious looking man through the window of a London cafe, decides to follow him only to discover that the man's life, day and night, consists of merging with crowds. This compulsive rendering of oneself as entirely public effaces private individuality such that the man of the crowd reveals nothing of himself. It is exactly this secrecy, this concealment, which marks some kind of threat. The man of the crowd is the 'type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone' (Poe 396). His unreadability marks a limit beyond which the pleasure of the unspeakable opens onto a horror too great for words. This notion of the unspeakable and its uncertain revelation is one that recurs in Clarke's own experiments in Gothic fiction. One is put in mind of Clarke's *The Mystery of Major Molineux*, where the terrible secret of the Major is figured in this way: 'It eluded my mental grasp as a jelly-fish slips through the fingers. Formless and void, it yet was there – a foul and filthy thought, profaning the shrine of sense' (Clarke, *The Mystery* 46).

Clarke's Gothic stories read like a textualization of the structure of revelation he identifies in Doré's art. These stories typically compose themselves around a core of Gothic tropes that are slowly revealed in the course of the narrative. Clarke's 'Cannabis Indica', published in the *Colonial Monthly* in 1868, is exemplary in this

respect. The story, subtitled 'a Psychological Experiment,' is a record of a hash-induced vision that conforms to the *Blackwood's Magazine* fashion of morbid psychological states. Debts to De Quincey are made explicit while Clarke also goes out of his way to contextualize hash use in myths of a romanticised orient that clearly echo the hash episode in Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (see Wilding 25–31). But to say that Clarke's story is merely influenced by these precedents is to ignore what the story is really all about – influence itself. If the story is explicitly about the influence of narcotics on the imagination, it is also just as explicitly about the influence of other cultural objects on the process of writing. Clarke introduces the body of the story with a description of the objects in the room where the experiment took place, telling the reader that 'it is beyond question that many of the incidents related in the narrative which follows were unconsciously suggested by the pictures, books and ornaments in the chamber' (Clarke, 'Cannabis Indica' 543). Clarke's list of these objects reads like an inventory of Gothic commodities, which are also signifiers of cultural capital and prestige:

> Over the looking-glass is a mezzotint engraving of an Italian monk, the face being of a strange and startlingly life-like nature. A large engraving of Martin's 'Palace of Satan', occupies the place of honour over the book-case, and on each side are two engravings, after Holbein, descriptive of the entrance of Death among a party of revellers, and Death tolling a bell in a church tower. (543–4)

Among the texts that litter his writing table is a copy of Dante's *Inferno* illustrated by Doré. At the end of the narrative is a list of footnotes that explicate these influences in more precise detail. Indeed, read with its footnotes, the influence of cannabis is really displaced by the influence of cultural objects in a manner that forces us to think about the 'Cannabis Indica' of the title as a figure for culture itself – a metonym for the market in exotic commodities in general, or a metaphor for a kind of culture that Clarke clearly found intoxicating. The interest generated by the story is precisely this undecidability as narcotics and cultural goods become two related and interchangeable forms of influence.

'Cannabis Indica' is also structured as a number of discursive layers which are gradually folded back to reveal a core of rhetorical and tropic intensity – the textual corollary of the kind of affect suggested by the image of the death's head. The story begins prosaically enough with the narrator's introduction as to the nature of the experiment he is about to undertake. But the body of the text itself consists of notes taken by the anonymous doctor who administers the cannabis to the framing narrator. These notes, at first, are simple records, in the form of a medical journal that includes date and time, of the framing narrator's altered state as the drug takes its course. The actual drug induced vision appears in the text as dictated by the narrator to the doctor. It begins, in a windswept Heidelberg, with an encounter between a student and an old woman selling wooden rings. The women is herself a Gothic stereotype – which is made unmistakable when she proposes the exchange

of a kiss for one of the rings: 'the hag placed one lean arm about his neck and glued her mouth, garnished with some three or four yellow teeth-stumps, to his' (548). As if under the influence of her 'charnel house breath' the student enters into another visionary state – a vision within a vision – which culminates on board a ship assailed by what can only be described as a phantasmagoria of Gothic tropes and rhetorical figures:

> The sides of the ship began to swell and grow. Her masts shot up higher, her deck broadened, and her shining shoulders heaved, as if possessed with life. There was a shout from below, and instantly the whole vast deck was alive with savage forms. Dark-browed, red-capped, and bearded, they swarmed up the hatchway, broad as a cathedral square of Milan; and, with fierce gesticulations, surrounded the terrified student. A hideous multitude was there. Some gibbered like apes: others in the vestments of the Egyptian kings, stalked to and fro in silence, with their fingers on their lips. Some laughed like hyenas, some grovelled like swine. A woman, one half of whose face had been shorn away, took root in the deck, and her hands and arms grew out into long filaments, that floated in the air. A burly seaman seized one of the corpse-crew by the arm, and Martialis laughed as he saw the member come off in the assailant's hand. How they jumped and danced. (551–2)

Finally the student finds his way into an enchanted forest where he is confronted by a 'beautiful woman' whose 'wealth of golden hair half veiled her face.' When the student sees that his wooden ring has been transformed into one of gold that 'sparkled with a thousand gems', she bids him to 'seal our bridal with this kiss' (553). The student,

> ... looked into her glorious eyes, languid and faint with love. He felt her warm, sweet breath strike his cheek as she drew his face down to her lips with her trembling arms. He looked, and a sudden undefinable horror struck him with the cold and chill as the blast of an east wind, for he saw in the eyes of the siren at his side something that reminded him of the witch-woman of the Rhiengasse. He started back, and, with a supreme effort; tore the ring from his finger.
>
> There was a shrill cry, and then a rush of wind and rain, and the whole forest, with its fairy people, faded away behind a storm of blinding rain and driving mist. The face of his temptress changed, and, with a horrible crackling laugh, a lean, withered old woman rose and tottered off into the fog, crying,
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> 'Rings – rings! Who'll buy my pretty rings?' (553–4)

In a very direct sense the vision is about the processes of exchange and a certain consumerist fantasy which turns on the ambiguous pleasure of the abject – the

'charnel house breath' of the old ring seller is also the occasion of a sexual fantasy. It might seem inviting to read the vision as one in which a male fear of femininity is rehearsed in hyperbolic, hysterical Gothicization. But the excesses of the vision are so predictable and clichéd that it is equally difficult to read as a genuine encounter with difference of any kind. The idea of 'otherness' here does not function in the normalisation of a specific subject position at the expense of a threatening world of difference. On the contrary difference – or the encounter with it – is quite self-consciously staged as a way of marking the pleasure of the commodity: the ring for the student, the story itself for its actual reader. At the level of discourse the text dramatises a rending away of a utilitarian language of social normalcy and rationality, embodied in the doctor's medical journal, to reveal the core of pleasure that is, once again, the writing of the death's head. But if this reading makes sense, if the story embodies the structure of the Gothic commodity, then what is striking about it is that its pleasurable core is constituted merely as a collection of canonical signatures. At the heart of the vision we find De Quincey, Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Poe, and of course Doré's illustrated Dante replayed in a kind of Gothic pastiche. Read alongside 'Modern Art and Gustave Doré' the story itself implies a tautology – if the secret of Doré's popularity involves the 'hideous pertinacity' of the death's head behind the mask, then the death's head itself consists merely in the revelation of Doré, De Quincey, Coleridge et al.; that is, a series of signifiers that represent a certain style, a certain kind of cultural affiliation, a certain kind of cultural pleasure. The secret of the Gothic commodity, in other words, resides in the traces of other commodified objects.

If Clarke invites us to countenance theories of the uncanny, the abject and the unspeakable as ways of making the secret of public taste intelligible, he also forces us to confront the fiction of the unmediated desire implied by these. A text like 'Cannabis Indica' demonstrates, almost as a lesson in the commodity form, that the desire it predicates is itself already mediated by the market. It enacts, as the principle of its own formal organisation, the reduction of desire to the form of the commodity, and the sublimation of desire in the act of culture-consumption. No informed nineteenth-century reader of Clarke's Gothic tales could have ignored their clearly derivative relationship to what, by the middle of the century, were well established conventions, a formulaic production of the thrill that inhabited a certain kind of style. Clarke's reviewers constantly represented his work in these terms. His 'mental morbidity' wrote the *Australasian*, in a review of *The Mystery of Major Molineux*, 'recalls the psychological tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne, and at other times some of the vivid nightmare-like stories of Poe, the fanciful idealism of the one, and the dabblings with forbidden things characteristic of both' ('Mr. Marcus Clarke's Last Story' 648). What Michael Wilding describes as Clarke's formal innovativeness – 'we can see Clarke as a self-conscious, self-aware literary creator, as adept with the images and clichés and archetypes of fiction as any post-modern collagist' (Wilding 15) – is also, in this context, readable as belatedness, a derivative dependence on what were already established versions of the 'new' imported, primarily, from European centres. This belatedness, however, is a crucial part of

Clarke's demystificatory affect. Precisely because Clarke's own formal innovations amount to a repetition of canonical signatures, marking the temporal lag in the circulation of cultural capital between the metropolis and the colony, his writing presents to the reader an explication of the process by which the text as commodity attempts to pass itself off as something altogether different – as a revelation of plenitude or pleasure unmediated by social forms and institutions. Stories like 'Cannabis Indica', in other words, have a mimetic relationship to the material realities of the market and the prevalence of the commodity form in it. In their belated and derivative relationship to metropolitan literary culture they also repackaged the *frisson nouveau* of the Gothic aesthetic as an apparently marketable and objectified style. In doing so they render palpable the dynamics of the process by which cultural objects attempt to render themselves non-identical with, or radically other to the materiality of their context of production. As in Benjamin's description of 'Fancy Goods' the death's head is both the uncanny face of the other and the mute, petrified morbidity of the commodity itself. In Clarke's Gothic fictions the pleasure of escapism, the thrill of the uncanny that shadows the market, brushes against a form of immanent critique that turns on an explication of this undecidability.

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