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The political gothic of dystopian romance. Joseph Shield Nicholson's *Thoth* (1888)

ABSTRACT

The text of *Thoth. A Romance*, a late nineteenth-century dystopia by Joseph Shield Nicholson, is here analysed as a generic amalgam characterised by conspicuous repetitiveness and the motif of multiplication of a circular pattern on the levels of plot, setting, imagery and characterisation. A meeting of the Gothic and the dystopian in the text results in an expansion of the former convention, politicisation of the Gothic and blending of the psychoanalytic with the dystopian.

Keywords: nineteenth century, dystopia, psychoanalysis, politics, Joseph Shield Nicholson

***Thoth's* thematic complexity**

Thoth (1888), written by an economist, mathematician and journalist Joseph Shield Nicholson, was the first of the author's three romances published alongside the substantial body of his non-fiction. Although the partially composed text was re-written twelve years later to replace the central plot line of male friendship with a heterosexual love story,¹ the main intention behind it remained unaltered: it was to warn the readers of the dangers of the unbridled might of human reason. As Nicholson informs us in the preface to the second edition:

The original idea was philosophical. I wished to illustrate the power of will and intellect working through generations with a definite design, and to show that this power might be used for the most repulsive object. The object I chose for my purpose was the destruction of the whole human race by means of pestilences, with the intention of replacing it with a race of men who had for generations been trained in the exercise of the highest intelligence. The new rule was to be a tyranny of intellect. (Nicholson, 1889, p. vi)

¹ The second edition of *Thoth* (1889) contains the final chapter from the original version of the work.

Although the author's description of the text suggests a typical dystopia cautioning against inordinate trust in humanity's powers of reasoning, given the characteristics of the genre in the nineteenth-century, *Thoth* is an unusual work of its kind. Set in the past rather than future, in ancient Greece, not the London of the twentieth or so century, it blends pre-Christian cultures with highly advanced technological and scientific innovation; a fairy-story setting of benevolent giants and paradisaical gardens with the motifs of world-conquest and institutional misogyny. Written a few years before Freudian psychoanalysis started taking shape as a theoretical and methodological approach, it lends itself particularly well to a psychoanalytic interpretation and combines interest in individual passions with considerations of eugenics and the misused potential of human reason.

A brief synopsis offers a glimpse of the thematic complexity of the story. At the time of the reign of Pericles, a Greek-Egyptian Thoth, vice-regent in a highly-advanced, beautiful city in a desert whose rulers remain in suspended animation, attempts to prevent further anthropological devolution of his people by breeding future generations from the genetically superior Greek girls. The once unsurpassed civilisation which had employed eugenics with much success is currently threatened with decay as the personal hatred of women developed by its heartbroken founder, Thoth the First, becomes law, and female breeders of the upper classes are imprisoned and engaged in various demeaning or purposeless tasks. Attempting the reform of women's reinstitution in society against the forefathers' decrees, Thoth arrives in Athens where he initiates a plague to induce girls to leave their home land for a new life abroad more willingly. Due to a naval catastrophe, a strong-willed young woman, Daphne, is the only female brought to the desert city where she reciprocally falls in love with the mysterious, menacing and melancholy Thoth. On discovering the plans of world-conquest devised by Thoth's ancestors and embraced also by him, Daphne succeeds in convincing her lover to destroy the forefathers and allow her departure for Athens. When he rejoins her, after the city is inexplicably swallowed by the surrounding desert, she rejects the man's love, unable to accept his role in the decimation of Athens – the decision which prompts his immediate suicide by drowning.

Generic cross-currents, politics and psychoanalysis in *Thoth*

The motives locate the work on the generic crossroads between the Gothic and the dystopian fiction, while also rooting it in the culture of the nineteenth century with its interest in eugenics, the macro-politics of conquest, and the potential dangers of progress. Contextualisation is expected in works of utopian variety and, as many critics point out, is relevant to the understanding of the Gothic as a genre by no means concerned only with the "timeless reality outside history" (Day, 1985, p. 33). Indeed, looking at some of the Gothic writing of the nineteenth century, especially of the somatic, anthropological type prominent during

the *fin de siècle*, it is hard to disagree that it relies on “fictional representation [...] shaped by historical circumstances” (Mighall, 2000, p. 165). This characteristic is partially explainable by the specificity of the era’s concerns: as Kelly Hurley rightly observes, “the topics pursued by nineteenth-century science were often as ‘gothic’ as those found within any novel” (2004, p. 20).

Though, undoubtedly, elements of the Gothic are employed in many nineteenth-century dystopias² with the purpose of depicting the horrors of an impoverished, corrupt society, as they do in other types of fiction at the time – for instance, Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* or *Bleak House* – they are not likely to use the Gothic structure as a consistently prominent, continuous narrative frame, as is the case with *Thoth*.³ By the same token, though Gothic (especially the writings from the last decades of the eighteenth century) can be seen as a genre related to the historical revolutionary impulses – de Sade’s, then Hazlitt’s related views⁴ later reiterated with a change by Williams’s recognition of the revolutionary quality as characteristic of female Gothic (1995, p. 138), its explicit engagement with the political is not part of the tradition.

The great variety in the genre notwithstanding, its involvement with the contemporary reality tends to be of a rather general type: inferentially conveying the society’s predominant fears and fascinations, making use of topical motifs from the culture at the time. Where Nicholson’s novel stands out is in its direct employment of the political – not discoverable as an undercurrent – but existing as an integral part of the plot. Notably, this feature, which is clearly linked to the dystopian nature of the text, does not erase its Gothicity, but rather amplifies it, extending the central concerns of the narrative. In the rather eventful story, the psychoanalytic aspects – the struggle of the son with the sins of the father, his attempt to re-instate a mother figure, and the heroine’s survival against the background of a misogynistic city – are paired with the dystopian traits – the opposition of a reformer against the erroneous system of the forefathers and the woman’s manipulation of a tyrant away from his scheme of world annihilation.

² I adopt the understanding of a dystopia as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (Sargent, 1994, p. 9)

³ A dystopia which approaches this usage is the American, racist *A Sojourn in the City of Amalgamation in the Year of our Lord 19--*. (1835) by Jerome Bonaparte Holgate (pseudonym Oliver Bolokitten), which employs elements of the Gothic throughout, then gives prominence to the Gothic plotline in the last section of the novel.

⁴ Robert Miles points to the interesting difference between the two approaches by pointing out that “His [Hazlitt’s] formulation suggests that the Gothic derived its interest for readers, not because it was a necessary art of a revolutionary age (de Sade’s argument), or because it was itself revolutionary (the view of the anti-Jacobins), but because there was a widespread perception that all old structures were in a tottering condition, such as, for instance, castles, or the constitution, with its feudal, Gothic foundations” (2002, p. 44).

At the same time, the reliance of both narrative strands on the Gothic is dictated by the centrality of woman, which proves pivotal for the personal as well as the political.

Genre-blending and the motif of circularity

As the Gothic tends to look to the past and inward, explicitly exploring the horrors affecting an individual psyche (and only implicitly the anxieties of the era), and the dystopian looks outward to a future world, attempting to trace in the present the shape of the threats to come⁵, their pairing may result in a work which displays simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal tendencies⁶. Assuming that a rudimentary Gothic plot can be understood as an enactment of the struggle of an entrapped individual against powerful outside forces at least partially incomprehensible and beyond their control, a feature which Gothic seems to share both with tragedy and many literary dystopias, *Thoth* appears as a quintessentially cross-generic work whose involvement with the pattern present within both the aesthetic paradigms causes its reiteration in all basic components of the text. The outcome is a generic amalgam characterised by conspicuous repetitiousness and the motif of multiplication of a circular pattern on the levels of plot, setting, imagery and characterisation.

Circularity of plot and the circumpunct

The essential inward-outward hermeneutic axis of the novel is easily observable on the level of plot: as the psychological concerns are allied with the dystopian paradigm, the motif of the personal threatening the political, applicable to both, lies at the heart of all the interlinked circular plot-lines. The first Thoth's personal revenge on woman, repeated in the relationships of all the citizens, endangers the city's well-being, causes a gradual devolution of his race of would-be world-conquerors, and therefore jeopardises his plan of global domination. His descendant's love towards Daphne, while reflecting the father's experience, causes the annihilation of the rightful king and the ancestors. Daphne's desire towards Thoth, mirroring the unhappy love of his mother, has the capacity to threaten her resolution to prevent the destruction of humankind. While the multiplication and circularity which pervade the text may well be read in psychoanalytic terms as a re-enactment of the trauma originated in the suppression of woman, in the

⁵ It is worth remembering that the intimate concern with the psyche of an individual submerged in an inimical regime does not become a staple of dystopias until the twentieth century.

⁶ In a different analytical context, while discussing in detail the links between the sublime and the Gothic, Andrew Smith notes an "outward" direction in the nineteenth-century Gothic which he describes as a move from the natural to the urban, as well as from private to public, where "isolated experience is reconstructed for public transmission" (2000, p. 98) expressed through fascination with linguistic practices and cultural experiences.

broader, biological context, they may refer to the abuse of the laws of nature. By allowing politics dictated by personal passion for revenge to interfere with the eugenic programme of the city, Thoth initiates multiplication without progress. The gradual decay of the genetic stock due to the consistent abuse of the female breeders dissociates multiplication from evolution and threatens the regression of Thoth's race to its pre-superior stage. The omnipresent imagery of circularity is thus married to the double-coded notion of entrapment – the repetition compulsion of the individual character's psyche, as well as the fateful, dystopian circularity of history; while the personal trauma and municipal politics remain fully complementary.

These plot patterns are reflected on the level of imagery in the salient geometrical motif of a circumpunct primarily connected with female imprisonment and closely linked with both the Gothic and the dystopian paradigms. Daphne is stranded in a misogynistic city surrounded by a vast desert, whose ideology is graphically represented by the figure of a woman encircled by deriding statues of men and paintings depicting the degradation of women: "On the beautiful statue in the middle of the apartment a number of stony figures looked down with sneering hatred. This grouping she might possibly have thought accidental, but the pictures left no doubt as to the design of the whole chamber" (Nicholson, 1889, p. 85). Her own situation is not only reflected historically in the parallel stories of the previous royal consorts humiliated or killed by the king, but also in the many high-class breeders imprisoned in their separate rooms where mental and physical torturous training is to condition them to bear intelligent and able children. Finally, her final escape from danger is presaged in the story told by a pygmy servant in which the girl, stranded in the centre of a fountain with her boat out of reach, is saved by, as she believes, Thoth himself. The much-echoed motif of an entrapped damsel in distress emblematic of the Gothic doubles as an indicator of the centrality of woman for the city's development – the biological factor with political implications.

Simultaneously, the pattern of the circumpunct is meaningfully reversed on one occasion: the spatial arrangement of the spheres of disempowerment – the focalised female figure enclosed by deriding men – is inverted in the ancestors' sepulchre where the founder is surrounded by concentric circles of his progeny – the would-be world-conquerors. By direct repetition, the design brings home the notion of centrality of power as bound with the notion of vulnerability and powerlessness, the paradox evoking the centripetal-centrifugal motif of the text which will eventually be illustrated by the final elaborate plot twists and the key figures' careful positioning in space: the female outsider from Athens virtually imprisoned in the city will destroy its centre of power, which will be swallowed by the surrounding desert almost as soon as she leaves its circumference.

Thoth's politicised unconscious

A consideration of the concept of the centre in the novel suggests that for Thoth's city, as well as for the protagonist, woman's function corresponds exactly to that of the Lacanian unconscious, constituting the kernel of being. Needless to say, it is also the pivot point on which the narrative's plot line turns away from world-domination to the annihilation of the ambitious city and its champions; and for the male protagonist, from the purely political existence to love-life. Typically for the text's persistent pattern of multiple reference, Thoth's repressed unconscious – his emotionality later awakened by Daphne – is matched in the literal suppression of the female by the consciously-scientific, rational society. Unsurprisingly, the hubris of the technophobic dystopia is associated with the concept of nature culturally strongly bonded with the notion of woman. Much like in Mary Shelley's seminal text, where male intellect employs science in the name of the blasphemous God-like creativity, Nicholson's work seems to posit woman – understood as nature, instinct, and man's other – as the inevitable balancing principle which checks male aspirations, and whose persistent reduction or elimination must result in catastrophe. Logically, the return of the repressed in the form of Daphne means a dramatic character-change for Thoth – and the destruction of his civilisation.

The marriage of the dystopian with the Gothic results in a radical expansion of the Gothic textual pattern, consistent with the outward-bound orientation of dystopias. While, admittedly, Gothic can be understood as “overdetermined by the rule of the family” (Williams, 1995, p. 22)⁷, the father-son conflict in *Thoth* becomes subordinate to the question of political reform; and the power of a patriarchal family structure – the staple of the Gothic romances – here embraces the entire city where it is present in the form of lawful misogyny. The original early Gothic setting of a haunted castle or house here takes the form of a city haunted by ancestral dreams and ancestors' sins; and the metaphysical and supernatural become the multiform achievements of science – the “ghosts” of the city are the forefathers in suspended animation, the “monsters” – the eugenically-bred giant and dwarf classes and abused females. Similarly, the multiplied “madwomen in the attic”, that is the high-class breeders locked in their separate cells of a municipal building, carry the Gothic over into the political as a dark family secret becomes official policy and madness is a result of city-provided “nurture”. Needless to say, the rationalisation and logical explanation of the evil forces (identified with the female Gothic tradition) agrees better with dystopias' proclivity to verisimilitude. The key threat to the Gothic heroine is also altered, conforming to the dystopian convention: rather than serving to quench the lust of a reprobate, she is to produce superior offspring – carnal passion is replaced by eugenic ambition, and nefarious

⁷ As Williams believes, “Literally and metaphorically, Gothic plots are family plots, Gothic romances are family romances” (1995, pp. 22-23)

impulses carry global threats. Finally, since the Athenian Daphne stands for the entire civilised world (an association succinctly suggested by one of the chapter titles which refers to the heroine and Thoth – “Greek and Barbarian”), the Gothic dystopia’s other damsel in distress is civilisation as the author knows it threatened by the reign of corrupt reason.

In a particularly semiotically-dense scene, the influence of the dystopian is discernible when the likeness sent from lover to lover – a picture from Thoth delivered to Daphne when she is recovering from the shock of discovering the city’s misogyny – contains not only the image of the sender but a visualisation of his planned political reform: “It represented in the most accurate manner the room of the statue, with the walls bare and the image garlanded [...] But the chief interest in the picture lay in the fact that Thoth himself was represented as gazing on the statue with the most profound reverence, as if supplicating for pardon” (Nicholson, 1889, p. 89). The missive can be read simultaneously as an unusual love-letter, a lover’s promise, a re-affirmation of the woman’s safety, and, given the fact that it is sent before Thoth becomes aware of his love for Daphne, an externalisation of his latent unconscious desires. Moreover, while in one capacity it foreshadows the consequences of Thoth’s love of woman – his prioritisation of Daphne will lead to the eradication of his city (represented by the bare walls), in another, it is a political manifesto illustrating his intentions of reinstating woman as a respected member of society. Noticeably, here also, the repetition of a circumpunct and the tension between the centrifugal and centripetal directions come to the fore. Daphne is looking at an image of Thoth gazing at a female statue – representing femininity as well as herself – which results in her paradoxical positioning as both the outside observer and the insider observed; and brings the attitude of admiration – expressed by Thoth’s likeness – and the attitude of derision only very recently found in the original circle of shame – uncannily close.

The politics of characterisation

Unavoidably, in the novel, the change in characterisation resulting from the influence of a political genre is also notable. Although Daphne in her capacity as a Gothic-romantic heroine struggle with her own contradictory desires and kindle love in the dispassionate Thoth, in time she graduates to a damsel in distress who saves both herself and the world from personal and political danger.

In the course of the story Daphne progressively adopts the political functions which, unknown to her, had commanded her existence since the decision to leave Athens. Before his plan for reform is dominated by love, Thoth views the heroine as a diplomatic tool – one who will help convince the elders that the end of misogyny must result in producing a superior race and enabling a political advantage over the rest of humanity, as well as one who will produce such offspring herself to prove the hypothesis. As the city’s governing principles are revealed to

her, Daphne becomes a Machiavellian figure manipulating the lover into trust, successfully resisting personal desires, vanquishing his plans of conquest, and, rather importantly in view of the Victorian cult of domesticity, rejecting both the potential husband and the offer of motherhood of future generations to embrace the political responsibilities towards humanity in general.

In agreement with the text's centripetal-centrifugal orientation, the multiplication of the heroine's functions coincides with the equally dramatic reduction of those of the hero. Thoth, whose ambition was to extend his power over the globe, regresses from the dystopian polymath – brilliant scientist, world-conqueror, unconditionally-obeyed ruler, social revolutionary – to a scorned, suicidal lover, in a manner of speaking abstracting himself from dystopia and embracing a role in a romance. In view of the above, the apparent characterisation of Daphne as a stand-in for the emotional and the natural needs to be reevaluated: the heroine is associated simultaneously with creation and destruction; power and powerlessness. Importantly, she is not exclusively an antithesis of the scientific, active, determined intellect represented by Thoth. From the beginning of the text she is depicted as ambitious, willing to take risks, take care of her own survival, interested in choosing a life suitable for herself though not widely accepted socially. As we learn:

she was strong of will, and rather ruled than obeyed her parents; and she not only obstinately refused an honourable marriage, but spoke bitterly of the small esteem and respect in which the Athenians held their lawful wives; and she upheld as a model Aspasia, her compatriot, the friend of Pericles, and in all but name his honoured wife. For, while the lawful wives of the noblest Athenians were cooped up like children in their own apartments, Aspasia enjoyed perfect freedom. (Nicholson, 1889, p. 28)

Daphne is also associated with clear judgement, acumen and self-control which she displays when her lover is incapable of doing so. Towards the end of the novel, the heroine, proves the only fully *rational* character who is able to recognize danger, see the necessity of resisting emotional impulses in the face of the larger political necessity, who invents and successfully implements the plan to destroy the menacing city, and remains loyal to humanity by rejecting personal desires.

Conclusion

Nicholson's authorial intention quoted at the beginning of this text appears to describe a fraction of the complex and confusing end product, making it quite tempting to speculate, as psychoanalytic and post-structuralist critics would encourage, on the work's covert content. Likewise, the author's re-writing of the central plot, which he saw simply as promising a more compelling narrative, may well be read in the light of the social changes of late nineteenth-century culture. The novel was, after all, written not only at the time when technophobia had fertile

ground for development, but also when in view of the feminists' contesting claims on the "natural" characteristics and functions of women, the notion femininity was becoming more difficult to define. In *Thoth*, the politicised Gothic heroine gains the status of an unconscious – the desert city's ultimate other ultimately contained, the novel's pivotal element, affects everything in the city and in the text. It is by observing how the work and the world within it are affected by the feminine presence that the readers may brook its latent power. Therefore, one possible reading of the text "against itself" would suggest its concern with the power of femininity defined more broadly than the dominant nineteenth-century cultural ambience would allow. Intending to write a text about the dangers of misused intellect, Nicholson also wrote one which is about the unpredictability, indispensability, powerfulness, and rationality of a female.

Importantly, while the merging with a political genre causes an expansion of the textual patterns of the Gothic, it is the latter which is responsible for the structural centrality of the female character – by no means a traditional feature of most nineteenth-century dystopias. The aforementioned rudimentary pattern of a struggle of an entrapped individual against outside forces which the Gothic and the dystopian share – be it the literal setting of a castle or dungeon or the metaphorical confinement by the apparently inevitable historical patterns – finds in *Thoth* an apposite medium in the form of the female. Eventually, the genre-blending which manifests through the centrifugal-centripetal tensions in the novel results in an enriching complementarity which allows for a psychoanalytic reading of the dystopian/political, a critical "interiorisation" of a kind, and a considerable "externalization" of the Gothic through its politicisation.

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