

The Gothic Horrors of the Private Realm and the Return to the Public in John Polidori's *The Vampyre*

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Abstract This study of Polidori's story, *The Vampyre*, written at the beginning of the 19th century aims at relocating the social relevance of both the story and Gothic literature in the contentious zone between the private and public sphere. The story vacillates between private and public realms, drawing its vampiric theme from such vacillations. It expresses the horrors of vampiric intimacy inherent in private life, which opposes the moral character of the public realm. The most dangerous sites of private life are represented as the realm of the imagination and that of intersubjective intimacy. The story also contains several prominent Romantic tropes, including nature and orientalism, all pointing to the intimate dangers of the private realm. Lord Ruthven, Polidori's "vampire" is an explosive figure at the fraught intersection between a private life that demands secrecy for its private pleasures, and a public realm that demands exposure to regulate and control.

Keywords: Private Life, Public, Gaze, Intimacy, Gothic, Romance, Vampire

1 Introduction

This study of an odd vampire story from the early 19th century aims at relocating the social relevance of both the story and Gothic literature in the contentious zone between the private and public realms. The inspiration for my methodology originates in that particular school of criticism that posits the existence of a "Female Gothic" within Gothic literature.¹ The designation "Female Gothic" has functioned to validate (and canonize) the Gothic works of female authors by displaying their social relevance. This most successful school has been influential in demonstrating how Gothic fantasies could be interpreted as expressions of social concerns related to romantic love, domesticity and patriarchal control. The critics of Female Gothic normally attribute such concerns, fears and desires to the female protagonists of the fictions they analyze. But the same fears and desires may be thought to step outside the realm of fiction to implicate female authors and actual readers. In retrospect, it is possible to claim that Female Gothic has defined a field of social concerns that extends from the representations of mundane domesticity to the extravagant inventions of Gothic fiction, connecting a most fantastic end of the literary realm with social reality.

It must be remembered, however, that the early reappraisals of Gothic literature did not make much of the social implications of Gothic fiction. Indeed, prior to the rise of Gothic studies, the Romantically-inclined literary critics located the

¹ For a sampling of the literary criticism on Female Gothic, see Moers (1978), Hoeveler (1998), Clery (2000), Fleenor (1983). For an excellent overview, see Gary Kelly's introduction (2002), and Smith & Wallace (2009).

significance of Gothic literature in its metaphysical relevance.² The more philosophical the Gothic yarn, that is, the more prominent its mythical and symbolic structure, the more worthy that yarn did seem. The emergence of the criticism on Female Gothic set the record straight by subtly overturning the critical balance: it is not just the mythical structure of the Gothic work, but its being embedded in actual social relations that endowed it with critical relevance and interest. While we presently do not hear much of Female Gothic in Gothic studies, the social bent of current criticism is probably an indirect outcome of the contributions of gender-oriented scholarly work on Gothic literature in the last quarter of the 20th century. It may indeed be the case that Female Gothic has been as influential in its delineation of social relations of power as in its more explicit focus on gender relations.

Currently, it would be hard to speak of a consistent approach regarding the social implications of Gothic fiction except for the gender-based criticism that originated in the work on Female Gothic. The problem has remained, for instance, regarding how a social focus might be brought to bear on the fantastic contents of that kind of Gothic fiction, which may have seemed all the more fantastic, hence much less related to the actual world, because of its lack of any explicit focus on the female gender. This kind of fiction, usually written by male writers and with male protagonists, has given way to Robert Miles' designation "Male Gothic" in a critical anthology (2012:97). Miles is rather unclear about the history of this designation; while he vaguely refers to a few precedents (Fiedler 1960, Hume 1969), he appears to be its major proponent. Indeed, "Male Gothic" appears to be more Miles' own invention than the reflection of a pre-existing tendency in Gothic criticism. Miles construes the difference between Female/Male Gothic in "a series of antitheses: terror/horror; sensibility/sensation; poetic realism/irony; explained/unexplained supernatural; Radcliffe/Lewis" (97). From here, he arrives at a more general distinction related to class and gender: "the early female writers of the Gothic are primarily interested in rights, for their class, for their sex, and often both together; whereas the early writers of the male Gothic are more absorbed by the politics of identity" (97). Through the positing of a Male Gothic, Miles intends to propose a way by which the Gothic fantasies of male writers and the male protagonists in their fiction may be interpreted as reflections of those fears and desires related to the social construction of the male gender.

Miles' designation reveals an implicit wish to read the Gothic fantasies of male writers as social commentaries in the way "Female Gothic" has been read as commentaries on the social construction of gender. Even then, however, the social

² For an example of this approach, see G. R. Thompson's collection of essays *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism* (1974) and especially S. L. Varnado's essay, in which questions of mythical symbolism, the sublime and the numinous are addressed. For an enthusiastic understanding of the numinous in Gothic literature, see Devendra P. Varma's chapter on "the quest of the numinous" (1957:206-231). For further studies that relate the Gothic with the Romantics, see Hume (1969), and Platzner and Hume (1971). For the reception of the Gothic works by the Romantics, see Gamer (2000).

concerns of "Male Gothic" as formulated by Miles come out as significantly deficient compared with those of "Female Gothic." One must not underestimate the dichotomizing potential of a gender-based classification that pits "Male" against "Female Gothic" in attempting to articulate the social relevance of Gothic fiction. There is no reason whatsoever why "Male Gothic" must be read differently than "Female Gothic." The focus on gender does provide a way to explore the larger social implications of Gothic fiction, but as I would like to exemplify by way of a close reading of Polidori's story, *The Vampyre*, the social implications of Gothic fiction may be understood more thoroughly by way of a critical perspective that investigates the contentious relationship between the private and public realms. The wider focus on the dialectic between the private and the public in Gothic fiction may show how even the most fantastic Gothic narratives display a consistent engagement with the social field, including the field defined by gender relations.

An odd story of secrets and scandals, written by a male author and with two prominent male characters, John Polidori's *The Vampyre* seems to be a perfect fit for Miles' category of "Male Gothic." There has been very little critical interest in *The Vampyre*, which is rather curious given that it is commonly regarded as the progenitor of all Gothic vampire literature. The story is a dream-like moral tale that reflects the anxieties of its male protagonist, Aubrey, torn between his enchanted private life and his commitment to public conventions. In a self-imposed alienating movement from the public realm, Aubrey is swayed to various recesses of private life, including his own imagination, isolated scenes of nature and the intimate quarters of friendship, but such recesses are revealed to be frighteningly ambiguous particularly when it comes to the exercise of moral judgment. *The Vampyre* vacillates between the private and public realms, drawing its vampiric theme from such vacillations. It displays the horrors of vampiric intimacy that originates in private life and opposes public morality.

Based on Polidori's turbulent friendship with the actual Lord Byron, Lord Ruthven is often read as the quintessential Byronic hero. The biographical reference to this Byronic "source" has become a staple mark in the few and mostly perfunctory criticisms of *The Vampyre*. Polidori's story was long identified with Lord Byron; indeed, it was first published under Lord Byron's name in 1819, which is considered to be one of the most lurid events in English literary history. This false attribution, along with its Byronic theme, significantly contributed to the popularity of Polidori's story.³ Since its scandalous publication, the Byronic source has been a most important determinant, often a negative one, in the critical appraisals of the story. More recent studies have moved away from biographical considerations in order to underscore the story's considerable literary merits. Ken Gelder complains about critics who view the story "as a crude narrative written under the influence of a greater and more subtle talent", and therefore "ignore the ironic mode of Polidori's story" (1994:31). S. J. J. Bainbridge strongly articulates the critical import of

³ See Macdonald (1991), Bishop (1991) and Switzer (1955) for the story's biographical origins and publication history. See Bruffee (1971) for a comparative study between *The Vampyre* and Byron's unfinished story, *The Fragment*.

Polidori's story, viewing it "not only as a pivotal text in the literature of vampirism but also as an examination of the nature of Byronism, a critique of the Romantic imagination...and an early example of the double narrative" (2006:31).⁴ Bishop regards Byron's unfinished story, *The Fragment*, with which *The Vampyre* is often compared, as "a doleful piece of prose completely lacking the power of Polidori's work", while stressing that "*The Vampyre* is a pivotal and extraordinarily influential work...in which Polidori transformed the vampire of Eastern European mythology...into a travelling, handsome, amoral, aristocratic lethal seducer perfectly at home in high society and the London salons" (2005:x).

It is possible to attain a better understanding of Polidori's complex representation of the vampire by deemphasizing its Byronic source and analyzing the perspective of the story's protagonist, Aubrey, who constitutes Lord Ruthven as a romantic object that reflects his private fears and desires. Unlike Stoker's Dracula, who is the personification of a geographically distant, culturally alien evil,⁵ Lord Ruthven is a homegrown English aristocrat, a close friend of Aubrey and his intimate object of fantasy. In the conservative moral universe of the story, one does not have to travel to Transylvania to import a foreign vampire. The vampire is always there in our intimate circle, and when that circle is made to shrink considerably, in our own private imagination. Lord Ruthven, the story's vampire, is a symptom of Aubrey's own vampiric private life that must be brought under the public gaze.

2 The Singularities and Follies of Private Life

Polidori depicts Lord Ruthven as explosive figure at the fraught intersection between a private life that demands secrecy for its enjoyment and a public realm that demands exposure for regulation and control. The opening lines emphasize Ruthven's "singular" resistance to being publicly known: "it happened that in the midst of the dissipations attendant upon a London winter, there appeared at the various parties of the leaders of the *ton* a nobleman, more remarkable for his singularities, than his rank" (Polidori 1819/ 2009:1). Urban society is represented as a site of "dissipations" that invoke moral deception, decadence and hypocrisy. The conceited tone of the narrator hints at a vantage point from which dissipations may be readily identified. No one should be allowed to escape the implicit public gaze, which, like the omniscient narrator, has the power to penetrate the surfaces of these winter gatherings and identify its dissipations. But the public gaze, embodied in the voice of the narrator, faces an obstacle in Ruthven whose mysterious singularities resist public conventions. In a visual gesture of defiance, Lord Ruthven's own evasive gaze shuts out and reflects back the seeking public gaze:

⁴ A notable attempt at historical contextualization of the story beyond its biographical aspects has been made by Gavin Budge (2004), who reads the story as an implicit critique of aristocratic values in the intellectual context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England, which attests to the rise of Common Sense philosophy.

⁵ For a further comparison between Romantic era-vampires, whose paragon is Polidori's "vampyre", and the more contemporary vampires, ushered in by Stoker's late Victorian Count Dracula, see Auerbach (1995:14-27). See Stiles et al. (2010:803) for an interesting take on the persistent similarities between the two sets of vampires.

He gazed upon the mirth around him, as if he could not participate therein. Apparently, the light laughter of the fair only attracted his attention, that he might by a look quell it, and throw fear into those breasts where thoughtlessness reigned. Those who felt this sensation of awe, could not explain whence it arose: some attributed it to the dead grey eye, which, fixing upon the object's face, did not seem to penetrate, and at one glance to pierce through to the inward workings of the heart; but fell upon the cheek with a leaden ray that weighed upon the skin it could not pass. (1)

The passage evokes the sublime effect of Ruthven's gaze ("sensation of awe") through a series of ambiguous statements related to the body parts (breast, eye, face, heart, cheek, skin). The gaze fixes itself on the surface of the "object's face", refusing to penetrate or "pierce through to the inward workings of the heart." It falls "upon the cheek with a leaden ray that weighed upon the skin it could not pass." The ray issuing from Ruthven's "dead grey eye" does not cut through the objects of its gaze; instead, it merely exerts a pressure on the skin or "weigh[s] upon" it. The non-permeating gaze is hostile to the life, and one might say, to the vitality of the public that interweaves surface with depth, cheek with heart, inside with outside. Ruthven's alien gaze repels the inward workings of its objects, overlooking its signs of depth or interiority tritely symbolized by the "heart" in the passage. This singular gaze aggravates the separation between the private and public realms, and promises a singular, *truly* private life indifferent to and hidden from the public gaze.

If Lord Ruthven represents the sublime mysteries of private life, Aubrey represents its predictable pitfalls. Polidori depicts Aubrey as a dreamy neophyte who prefers the call of his private imagination to publicly constituted judgment:

[Aubrey] cultivated more his imagination than his judgment. He had, hence, that high romantic feeling of honour and candour, which daily ruins so many milliners' apprentices. He believed all to sympathise with virtue, and thought that vice was thrown in by Providence merely for the picturesque effect of the scene, as we see in romances: he thought that the misery of a cottage merely consisted in the vesting of clothes, which were as warm, but which were better adapted to the painter's eye by their irregular folds and various coloured patches. He thought, in fine, that the dreams of the poets were the realities of life. (2)

Aubrey's illusion of virtue stems not from an apprenticeship in the public realm but from a vacuous and potentially ruinous "high romantic feeling of honour and candour." But Aubrey severely lacks the profundity of moral feeling and is already a prey to decadence: he turns vice into an attribute of his private imagination, treating it as a private object of contemplation or a "picturesque effect of the scene, as we see in romances." He aestheticizes moral judgment by merely engaging with the surfaces of the miserable cottage, "the vesting of clothes", and "their irregular folds and various coloured patches." "The painter's eye" resonates with Ruthven's "dead grey eye", suggesting an affinity between Aubrey and the vampire. Both Ruthven and Aubrey flout public conventions with their excessive privacy, which, in the conservative worldview of the narrative, is superficial, vacuous and perverted.

Polidori emphasizes Aubrey's private follies through the repeated use of the word "romance", which assumes differing meanings in the passages that depict Aubrey. The first use associates Aubrey's view of vice with "the picturesque effect of the scene, as we see in romances" (2). Here, romance stands for a literary genre that treats vice and virtue as aesthetic objects of contemplation severed from public realities. The second use, where Aubrey is "attached...to the romance of his solitary hours", associates romance once again with a private life isolated from the public realm as well as with baseless imaginings, dreams and daydreams (3). Romance in this use refers to the state of being enchanted with interiority and overly invested in the literary genre of romance. The "congeries of pleasing pictures" contained in "the romance of solitary hours" relate to Aubrey's "painterly eye", which depicts vice picturesquely but falsely (3).

In the third and most ambiguous use of the word, "romance" refers to both the romance genre and romantic love: we learn that Aubrey "soon formed this object [Ruthven] into the hero of a romance, and determined to observe the offspring of his fancy, rather than the person before him" (3). A sense of homoeroticism pervades Polidori's language: Aubrey may be said to fall in love and into enchantment with the mysteriously singular Lord Ruthven.⁶ But Aubrey's romance also invokes the romance of one's own private self. The "object" of this romance, the narrator emphasizes, is little more than the projection or "offspring" of Aubrey's own fancy, which further suggests the kinship and doubling between Aubrey and Ruthven.⁷ In all these different uses, romance functions as the antonym of "real life" which denotes public life (3). To be involved in a romance is to distance oneself from public life and escape into the private realm. In one extreme instance romance becomes the romance of the "solitary hours", which implies the private realm of interiority, introspective reflection, dream and daydream. In a less extreme instance, romance refers to a relatively *more private* realm on the margins of public life: the intimate realm of inter-subjectivity or private company that Aubrey seeks in love, friendship and sexuality.

3 Aubrey's Ambivalent Private Gaze and The "Vampyre"

Polidori's vampire is a reflection of Aubrey's enchanted but morally ambiguous privacy away from the surveillance of the public gaze. It is indeed possible to view the evasive Lord Ruthven as the phantasmagoric "offspring" of Aubrey's private fears and desires throughout the entire narrative. In Aubrey's solitary travel to Greece, the vampire becomes the symbolic vessel of Aubrey's potentially decadent fantasies in relation to a native maiden by the mythically-inflected name of Ianthe. The sensual descriptions of Ianthe hint at the sexual interest in Aubrey's contemplation of her and even suggest the possibility of an illicit liaison between them, but Aubrey naturally sides with virtue. Such sexual undertones, however,

⁶ An excellent queer reading of *The Vampyre* has been offered by Mair Rigby (2004). Also interesting in this context are the various polysexual triangulations of desire Peter Leonard Paolucci identifies in the story (2000:89-91).

⁷ See Brainbridge 2006, pp.26-31 and Budge 2004, p. 224 on the theme of doubling in *The Vampyre*.

bring the virtuous Aubrey close to the profligate Ruthven. In a revealing scene, we see Aubrey pursue his antiquarian interests in the company of Ianthe, studying the partially exposed ruins of faded civilizations. Aubrey seems increasingly more interested in contemplating Ianthe:

Under the same roof as himself, existed a being, so beautiful and delicate, that she might have formed the model for a painter wishing to portray on canvas the promised hope of the faithful in Mahomet's paradise, save that her eyes spoke to much mind for any one to think that she could belong to those who had no souls. As she danced upon the plain, or tripped along the mountain's side, one would have thought the gazelle a poor type of her beauties; for who would have exchanged her eye, apparently the eye of animated nature, for that sleepy luxurious look of the animal suited but to the taste of an epicure. The light step of Ianthe often accompanied Aubrey in his search after antiquities, and often would the unconscious girl, engaged in the pursuit of a Kashmere butterfly, show the whole beauty of her form, floating as it were upon the wind, to the eager gaze of him, who forgot the letters he had just decyphered upon an almost effaced tablet, in the contemplation of her sylph-like figure. (7)

This is a scene of pure romance, which Aubrey paints with the hues of exoticism and orientalism. In their brief interpretations of the orientalist theme in the representation of Ianthe, both Ken Gelder (1994:33) and Gavin Budge (2004:221) read Polidori's simile of the gazelle intertextually as a reworking of the gazelle motif in Byron's "The Giaour." Budge views such reworking as an expression of Polidori's implicit criticism of the aristocratic epicureanism in Byron's poetics. Both critics, however, fail to note the ambivalence of Aubrey's contemplation of Ianthe and the potential doubling between Aubrey and the "vampyre" intimated in Aubrey's gaze although Budge explicitly refers to the theme of doubling suggested in Aubrey's perception of Lord Ruthven (2004:224). The orientalist tropes in the passage ("Mahomet's paradise", "the gazelle" and "the pursuit after the Kashmere butterfly") strongly evoke the sexuality in Aubrey's aesthetic contemplation of Ianthe. These unsettling and potentially decadent tropes are immediately tempered by other, more familiar and less luxurious tropes that drive away the intimation of any sexual overcharge. Aubrey first turns Ianthe into the central figure of an imaginary orientalist painting, portraying her "on canvas" as "the promised hope of the faithful in Mahomet's paradise." But "faith" in relation to "Mahomet's paradise" proves to be too unstable a reference: "the promised hope" seems to suggest more the idea of sexuality than spirituality. As Ronald D. Morrison notes, "even as Polidori's narrator asks readers to see Ianthe as an innocent creature, he also asks them to visualize her as a *hourī*, a virgin nymph in an Islamic heaven. Her very innocence is figured as sexual ripeness" (1997).

Such sexual suggestions prove to be too much; "the promised hope" in Aubrey's portrayal of Ianthe must be emptied of its sexual suggestions, which means that Aubrey's painting must be revised and brought in line with a more familiar, more righteous sensibility. This happens through another gesture of orientalism, which seeks to demonstrate that Ianthe cannot be a Muslim: "her eye spoke too much mind for any one to think that she could belong to those who had no souls" (Polidori 1819/ 2009:7). Mahomet's paradise seems too exotic a location, too far from the

Christian (public) eye, and is therefore not entirely fit as a setting for Ianthe, which it inappropriately sexualizes. Ianthe must oppose the sexual gaze implicit in the conception of paradise in a purportedly soulless religion, and this happens when her "eye" begins to "speak too much mind", suggesting the mindful soul of enlightened religion or simply enlightenment. Ianthe is hence saved from over-sexualization by her speaking "eye", which makes her interior transparent and available to the public gaze while reinstating her virtue. To be sure, Ianthe's speaking eye directly contrasts with the un-speaking one of Lord Ruthven, who may on that account well "belong to those who had no souls."

The next orientalist trope in the passage is the simile of the gazelle, to whose beauty Ianthe's beauty is compared. The same sense of ambiguity, however, persists in the use of this second trope. The narrator seems divided between the sexual implications of the simile and the moral imperative to turn his depiction into a picture of virtue. Such ambivalence becomes oddly apparent in the immediate qualification of the gazelle-simile and in the return to Ianthe's virtuous eye. According to the narrator, Ianthe's beauty surpasses that of the gazelle, and this is best attested in the superiority of her eye. The look in the eye of the oriental gazelle is "sleepy", "luxurious", and "suited but to the taste of an epicure" unlike Ianthe's eye, which, being "the eye of animated nature", does not reflect any sexual sense of abandon.

The sexualisation of the orientalist trope, which calls to mind an "epicure[an]" kind of aestheticism, therefore, is countered by the use of the more familiar trope of "nature" whose connotations, unlike those of the exotic gazelle, are under stricter control. "Animated nature" relates Ianthe to those sublime aspects of nature that Romanticism loves to bring to the fore, taking away the suggestion of mindless, "sleepy" luxuriousness engendered by the gazelle. The animated-ness in Ianthe's eye evokes the animus as an abstract principle of life cognate with the soul. It therefore refers back to the previous sentence where the same eye reflects "too much mind", demonstrating the immaterial depths of what must be a non-Islamic soul. The ensuing pursuit of the Kashmere butterfly further sexualizes Ianthe's figure, "showing the whole beauty of her form" and causing distractions from the solemn work of the antiquarian. The sense of sexuality in Aubrey's "eager gaze" is unmistakable but is somewhat mitigated by the Latinate "sylph" that underscores the figure's air-like ephemerality as much as its beauty (7).

In all these qualifications of the orientalist tropes, the narrator appears to negotiate his desire for Ianthe by constantly revising his private gaze at the object so that the gaze, vulnerable to the waywardly sexual suggestions of these foreign tropes in the isolated quarters of nature, could be brought in line with the presently missing public eye. In doing so, the narrator disavows the blind-spot of purely sexual and potentially soulless desire symbolized by Lord Ruthven's un-speaking eye and implicit in his own gaze at Ianthe. The disavowal results in narrative instability and in the shift from the natural to the supernatural. The shift coincides with Ianthe's description of the exotic rituals of her native land, which mentions the supernatural figure of the "vampire" for the first time:

[Ianthe] would then describe to him the circling dance upon the open plain, would paint to him in all the glowing colours of youthful memory, the marriage pomp she remembered viewing in her infancy; and then, turning to subjects that had evidently made a greater impression upon her mind, would tell him all the supernatural tales of her nurse...she told him the tale of the living vampyre. (7)

The passage is saturated with romantic and exotic sensibility: it moves from the circling dances in nature to the "marriage pomp", which Ianthe remembers nostalgically. The "pomp", however naturalized, suggests public matrimonial ceremonies, which cannot be very far from those in Aubrey's native England. Nature turns to culture; Ianthe's animated nature begins to remind Aubrey of the public institution of marriage. In contemplating the sylph-like figure of Ianthe, who may hardly be a concubine in "Mahomet's paradise", Aubrey must also be contemplating the possibility of marriage with her, most likely a Christian one. By all accounts, Ianthe appears a more suitable candidate for a spouse than all those females found amidst the dissipations of winter parties in England; her multiple charms include "innocence, youth, and beauty, unaffected by crowded drawing rooms, and stifling balls" (7).

The natural match between Aubrey's vision and Ianthe's virtue must naturally result in marriage, a possibility that Aubrey seems to have given some thought to: "while he ridiculed the idea of a young man of English habits, marrying an uneducated Greek girl, still he found himself more and more attached to the almost fairy form before him" (8). The sentence may be read in two entirely different ways: Aubrey, a gentleman, is so attracted to Ianthe that he may somehow break the conventions defined by English habits and end up marrying the village girl; or, despite having realized the impossibility ("ridiculed the idea") of their marriage, Aubrey cannot help feeling sexually attracted by Ianthe. This second interpretation points to the possibility of a decadent outcome evident in the entire section on Ianthe: Aubrey contemplates not just the idea of marriage but also the idea of sexuality outside marriage.

To be sure, the decadence that lurks behind Aubrey's vision of romance cannot be admitted and must be disavowed by way of projecting it on to the figure of the "vampire" who represents all the intimate horrors, and publicly unacceptable pleasures, of private life including wayward sexual fantasies. The beginnings of this projection may be traced in Ianthe's reminiscence of the native "marriage pomp:" nature ("the eye of animated nature") turns to culture ("marriage pomp") and then to the supernatural ("the tale of the living vampyre"), which functions as that dark field of hidden nature or private life, implicit but invisible in Aubrey's vision of romance.

"The tale of the living vampyre" may then be interpreted as a horror story that reflects Aubrey's anxieties about marriage and about sexuality without the prospect of marriage. Ruthven performs as Aubrey's Gothic double, that is, as a sexual predator who wins the hearts of virtuous young women and has sex with them without ever intending to marry them. In the most Gothic scene of the story, which

takes place in a desolate hovel that Aubrey chances upon during one of his excursions in "the entangled forest", the vampire, who is implied to be Lord Ruthven, rapes and murders Ianthe (9). It is the time after sunset, which, in England, would have been twilight and therefore light. But "in these southern climes" where "twilight is...almost unknown", there is only the usual darkness lifted occasionally by "the blue forked lightning" (9).

Polidori's description of the scene skilfully manipulates the hovel's obscure setting and lighting before it ends with the abrupt intrusion of the public gaze and its stark light. Hearing a woman shriek, Aubrey enters the hovel; a fistfight ensues between Aubrey and the vampire in the "utter darkness": "his enemy threw himself upon him, and kneeling upon his breast, had placed his hands upon his throat, when the glare of many torches perpetrating through the hole that gave light in the day, disturbed him" (10). The ambiguous use of the male pronoun "he" faintly hints at the identity of Aubrey and Lord Ruthven. The sudden burst of light or "the glare of many torches" is rather unexpected given the hovel's desolateness. We are told that Aubrey, while fighting the vampire, "was soon heard by those without" who arrive at the scene with their torches (10). The isolated "neighbourhood of the hovel" must be a not-so-isolated, actual neighbourhood where the noises inside may be heard from without. In an excessively strange remark, these torches "gave light in the day", metaphorically substituting the unreliable sun that withdraws its light entirely from the southern climes as soon as it sets. Nature turns to *techne*: the public torches begin to connote the technologies of surveillance and vigilance. They penetrate the terror-breeding, supernatural darkness of privacy complicit with "nature" and even with the Mediterranean sun, whose provision of light cannot be relied upon.

The torch-bearers, described indefinitely as "they", bring a sense of closure to the scene by throwing their public light on the scandalous circumstances in the hovel. Aubrey momentarily falls out of the public light, finding himself "left in darkness" (10). The scene continues to use the light in a curious manner: when the light returns, it does not fall on Ianthe's corpse described as an "airy form", but "burst[s] upon him" (10). More than illuminating any exterior scene, the light seems to illuminate Aubrey's interior. The entire scene may be taking place in Aubrey's own imagination; in perceiving Ianthe's "airy form", Aubrey may be imagining her. The "airy form" spiritualizes Ianthe, evacuating her of all the previous orientalist extravagances. A sense of guilt, typical of most Gothic fiction, infiltrates the scene: the lifeless corpse may be reminding Aubrey of his private sexual gaze, which he still hides from his own view, exteriorizing it as the sublime gaze of the murderous Lord Ruthven, the "vampyre."

4 The Oath and Vampiric Intimacy

Nature proves to be unreliable: that vaunted realm of private aesthetic experience, seen in the right public light, is dangerously close to decadent epicureanism and devoid of the protection of the public gaze. Aubrey returns to England, which also signals his return to the public and to his public commitments. But the return does not lead to any relief from the dangers of private life. In the final part of the story,

Polidori continues to underscore the follies of private life, and especially those that originate in the realm of intersubjective intimacy and impinge on the exercise of public responsibilities.

The greatest of such follies is the private oath which Aubrey previously made to Lord Ruthven and which urges him not to reveal anyone what he knows of him in private. Enchanted and incapacitated by the oath, Aubrey fails to warn his sister (and the public) about Ruthven's crimes and to foil her engagement to Ruthven. Kenneth A. Bruffee claims that by insisting on being loyal to the oath, Aubrey is following "a simple traditional code of honor" determined on "chivalric grounds" (1971: 471). This interesting claim suggests an additional layer of "romance", i.e. the chivalric romance of the medieval world, which haunts the story in the form of Aubrey's romance of private life remote from public realities and based on senseless anachronistic idealizations. Polidori's representation of the oath corroborates Nina Auerbach's observation:

Intimacy and friendship are the lures of Romantic vampirism...The oath is frightening because it involves not raw power, but honor and reciprocity...The oath signifies...a bond between companions that is shared and chosen, one far from the Dracula-like mesmeric coercion we associate with vampires today. (1995:14)

Auerbach is here making a distinction between Romantic and late Victorian, Dracula-like vampires. The mesmeric coercion of these latter vampires, according to Auerbach, creates the impression of an external threat symptomatic of unconscious fears and desires. *The Vampyre*, however, confounds any sharp distinctions between the unconscious and consciousness. As Auerbach rightfully states, Aubrey's oath is consciously "shared and chosen", but, contrary to Auerbach's argument, it is simultaneously mesmerizing. The ambiguity of the oath derives from the ambiguity of the private realm, which cannot be readily compartmentalized into neat categories of "conscious life" and "unconscious desires", and must therefore be viewed as a continuum of private experiences ranging from conscious to unconscious.

As Aubrey's private oath takes precedence over his responsibility towards his sister, the story reverts to one of its primal fears strongly suggested in the scenes of nature with Ianthe, namely, sexuality outside marriage. Lord Ruthven succeeds in thwarting Aubrey's efforts to warn his sister on the day of her matrimony, whispering to his ear: "remember your oath, and know, if not my bride to day, your sister is dishonoured. Women are frail!" (Polidori 1819/ 2009:20). Public surveillance, and even the public "pomp" of marriage, may not guarantee adequate protection from wily sexual predators like Ruthven. In an unusual shift of perspective, the narrator affords a glimpse of Ruthven's private life as he seduces Aubrey's sister:

Who could resist his power? His tongue had dangers and toils to recount—could speak of himself as of an individual having no sympathy with any being on the crowded earth, save

with her to whom he addressed himself...in fine, he knew so well to use the serpent's art, or such was the will of fate, that he gained her affections. (20)

This is the first time we have a somewhat clear view of the private Lord Ruthven, who is exercising his seductive powers using the medium of intimate speech, another trope of Romanticism used here for Gothic effect. Intimate speech allows Ruthven to isolate his addressee from "the crowded earth", which connotes the public world of "crowded drawing rooms" (7). The "crowded earth" of the drawing room opposes the isolated nature of vampiric intimacy, in which the clichéd serpent, that creature of insidious nature, practices its hissing/whispering art of seduction and perversion.

In order to fight the serpent's art and break the enchantment of intimacy, a general address to the crowded earth becomes necessary. *The Vampyre's* last sentence deals with the question of public address: "Lord Ruthven has disappeared, and Aubrey's sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!" (21) While Aubrey fails to warn the public against the dangers of intimacy, the story finds its rightful, albeit scandalous address in the capitalized and exclaimed "VAMPYRE", which gives the story its public title and the world one of its most enduring villains. The private whisper must be overcome by a public shout that renders the whispering, serpentine threat of vampiric intimacy visible. Through the device of a capital declaration or loud address, the story issues a general warning to the public: protect your women, who are naturally "frail", and your men, whose frailty is their private imagination, from the advances of vampiric intimacy! No secret private life must be allowed to survive the public gaze; hence, the private "VAMPYRE" is duly revealed and returned to the public.

The *social* significance of the story and, more generally, of Gothic fiction may then be placed in the ambiguous and indeterminable form of the *socius*, which etymologically implies the company (or the intimacy) of another without making it explicit whether such company must be private or public, hidden or exposed. There is something terribly wrong in Ruthven's and Aubrey's *socius*, whose intimate secrets must be exposed and transferred from the private to the public realm. This must be done to save the moral fabric of the society that determines how we exercise our imagination, make ethical judgments, seek intimacy, befriend and wed. *The Vampyre* may hence be read as a social critique of the secretive and potentially dangerous intimacies of the private realm. It is through the public exposures and explosions of private horrors and secrets that Polidori's story, and much Gothic literature, dwell on social reality.

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