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Window(s) to the World(s): Windows, Libraries, and Transgression in Gothic Literature

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'The only reality was the window-sill beneath my hands' (du Maurier 276)

This essay argues that the windows and libraries of the buildings in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* function as borders between the physical and spiritual, different races and classes, life and death. To demonstrate this, I will outline how these architectural features (along with other aspects of the estates, such as their use and layout) position the internal and inter-personal conflicts of the texts' characters between the poles of the abovementioned antitheses. As such the crossing of the windows in *Wuthering Heights* and *Rebecca* and the libraries (or lack thereof) in *Wuthering Heights* and *Dracula* are acts of transgression. It is important to clarify that, for ease of reading, in this essay the elder Catherine will be referred to as Catherine, while her daughter - as Cathy.

A central moment in Volume I of *Wuthering Heights* is Catherine's haunting of Lockwood in Chapter III. The haunting begins in accordance with the conventions of the Victorian ghost story: Lockwood's attention is drawn to the window by the 'teasing sound' of what he thinks is a branch tapping on the window, but in reality is Catherine's 'little, ice-cold hand' (25). As Alison Milbank outlines, Gothic novelists utilise 'realist techniques and the implementa of Victorian domesticity' to make 'the supernatural concrete and [elide] it with the natural, which thereby acquires materiality', what she calls the 'supernaturalised natural' (161). Identically, Catherine's ghost proves her existence, thus is made real, by interacting with the window. However, what makes the moment so impactful is the reciprocity of physicality, for not only does the ghost leave her mark on the house, but the house, as if in retaliation, leaves a mark on the ghost by drawing her blood. The house in which she 'felt so wildly wretched' in life, refuses her entrance by physically harming her (125). Therefore, Brontë transcends the 'supernaturalised natural' by stranding Catherine's ghost both through the house and by returning her to her physical body. What causes this distinctive materiality? As Milbank underlines, 'Catherine seeks reentry to the house through the very window of the

soul's exit at death'; ergo, I argue the window functions as a border separating not only the 'inside' from the 'outside', but 'life' from 'death', 'spiritual' from 'physical' (162). In effect, whatever passes this architectural threshold must become 'physical'. By crossing the window, Catherine momentarily returns to her flesh and blood and is punished for her transgression.

This immediacy between 'inside' and 'outside' is repeatedly reinforced by the architecture of Wuthering Heights, or, more specifically, by its function - it is a working farm, and, accordingly, it does not have a park like Thrushcross Grange does (Thompson). Thus, there is no transition between the house and the moors. The open window, therefore, opens this border, inviting the moors into the house: in Chapter XII, as she lays sick in her bed, wishing she 'were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free', Catherine orders Nelly to '[o]pen the window'; Catherine seeks reunion with the moors, the only place where she felt like herself (125-6). The only place where she could freely be with Heathcliff:

But it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day, and the after punishment grew a mere thing to laugh at. The curate might set as many chapters as he pleased for Catherine to get by heart, and Joseph might thrash Heathcliff til his arm ached; they forgot everything the minute they were together again [...] (46)

The 'outside' is elided with 'freedom', while the 'inside' - with 'entrapment' and 'oppression'. The open window lets in a 'cold blast', returning Catherine to the freedom of the moors (124).

The limited access to books in Wuthering Heights is another one of the ways in which the house confines Catherine and, especially, Heathcliff. That is due to the fact that, unlike Thrushcross Grange, Wuthering Heights does not have a library (Thompson). This is underlined in the narrative through Nelly, who, despite growing up in Wuthering Heights,

educated herself by reading the books in Thrushcross Grange's library (63). The absence of a library enables the policing of books and, consequently, of knowledge: after Mr Earnshaw's death, Hindley deprives Heathcliff 'from the instructions of the curate'; Catherine hides a 'secret stock' of books in her room; Heathcliff destroys Cathy's books and forbids Hareton to study (46, 301).

During Hindley's time, the policing of books enforces colonial dynamics. During Heathcliff's time - it subverts them. Susan Meyer argues that the scrutiny Heathcliff faces 'reduces [him] to his otherness and explicitly' places him in the 'position of the colonised other' (480-502). While she writes this in relation to the Lintons' comments in Chapter VI, I argue this is even more true about Hindley's prohibition. As Nelly states' Hindley's degradation of Heathcliff:

[...] had extinguished any curiosity he once possessed in the pursuit of knowledge, and any love for books or learning. His childhood sense of superiority, installed into him by the favours of old Mr Earnshaw, was faded away. He struggled long to keep up an equality with Catherine in her studies [...] Then personal appearance sympathised with mental deterioration [...] (68)

Hindley's prohibition renews the colonial order which his father had dismissed. Through restricting Heathcliff's access to knowledge, facilitated by the absence of a library, Hindley demotes him back to his 'proper' place in the Victorian racial hierarchy.

After running away from the confinement of Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff returns having 'achieved much dexterity' in 'the same instruments [of power] - language, manipulation, legal deeds, marriage connections, money - with which his marginalisation had been enforced in the past' (Khair, 161). His education is a transgression of the colonial order which Hindley tried to force him into; it enables him to appropriate the weapons of his

oppressors and use them against them. Weapons which Stoker's vampire will later perfect. Heathcliff then further crosses the colonial boundaries by restricting white characters' access to books and, consequently, to knowledge. In doing so, he perpetuates the cycle of oppression, subjecting the next generation to the same treatment he had faced. Consequently, this new generation will transgress these boundaries. The weaponising of knowledge, in service of and in transgression against racial hierarchy, is directly enabled by the absence of a library.

Architectural features are also weaponised in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. There, the presence of a library allows for knowledge to breach the boundaries enforced by colonial constructs and to explore the tension between the West (represented by Jonathan Harker) and the Eastern Other (represented by Dracula). When first visiting the count's library Jonathan's attention is drawn by the objects inside it:

In the library I found myself, to my great delight, a vast number of English books, whole shelves full of them, and bound volumes of magazines and newspapers. A table at the center littered with English magazines and newspapers [...] The books were of the most varied kind [...] all relating to England and English life and customs and manners. There were even such books of references as [...] the Army and Navy Lists and [...] the Law List. (26)

Beyond exemplifying Dracula's knowledge, these objects represent his colonial ambitions: Stoker's novel explores his age's 'most important and pervasive narrative of decline, a narrative of reverse colonization' explicitly interested 'in the decline of the British empire'; as such, Dracula's 'vampirism is interwoven with his status as a conqueror and invader' (Arata, 623-8). In light of this, his studies of England's language, customs, military and legal aspects resemble a preparation for conquest. The atlas shows Dracula marking key locations

in England - his new estate and the Yorkshire coast (31). In the Victorian imagination, the very space of the library is underpinned by colonial aspiration, for it ‘aspires to a condition of expansion’ and ‘plentitude’ (Fielding, 757). The library filled with books about England incarnates, and partially realises, Dracula’s colonial ambitions. As such, it outlines the new image of the Eastern Other, one that is equally knowledgeable and capable of colonial violence as the British Empire. In entering the library, Jonathan embarks on a space steeped in the threat of reverse colonisation.

As previously stated, *Dracula* elides ‘vampirism’ with ‘invasion’. Therefore, I argue that, in Stoker’s novel, the library is presented as a ‘vampiric’ space. As Penny Fielding outlines: ‘The space of the library is contained, yet timeless, and the systems it generates are all geared to the preservation of the collection-as-world.’ (756). Ergo, the library mirrors the vampire’s immortality and atemporality. This is also true as the objects contained in it (books, atlases, newspapers and magazines) are archives, freezing the temporality of knowledge, events, image and thought and preserving them across time and space. On the other hand, they also exemplify Dracula’s grasp on contemporary media, unexpected (at least in the British imagination) for someone from Transylvania. The library assimilates all aspects of Dracula’s nature: his knowledge, colonial ambition, immortality and transgression as an Eastern Other who weaponises knowledge.

Beyond this, the library is a space within which Dracula weaponises learning itself as one of the methods for mentally torturing Jonathan: over several nights, Dracula keeps Jonathan until late in the library to either discuss the deal, ask him to teach him more about England or to help him practice his English. When Jonathan compliments him on how ‘thoroughly’ and ‘excellently’ he speaks English, Dracula remarks: ‘Well I know that, did I move and speak in your London, none there are who would not know me for a stranger [...] Here I am noble [...] But a stranger in a strange land, he is no one [...]’ (27). Dracula

diminishes not only his knowledge, but also his status - a Transylvanian *boyar* is no one in the heart of the British Empire. As such, he fully identifies with his otherness, placing Jonathan as his superior, his 'teacher'. This appeals to the Victorian image of colonialism that 'portrays British imperialism as a benevolent tool for bringing civilisation to the world's benighted peoples' (Campanella). Initially, Jonathan is eager to fulfill his role as an 'enlightener' because, as an educated English man, he recognises his inherent duty to educate the primitive Other. However, as Jonathan himself remarks and the wealth of resources in the library affirms, Dracula's knowledge is impressive: 'For a man who was never in the country, and who did not evidently do much in the way of business, his knowledge and acumen were wonderful' (38). The library directly confronts the British colonial might. Through it Dracula is affirmed as Jonathan's intellectual equal, if not as his superior. The library's function as a space of learning is weaponised against the white, educated man to drain his energy. This vampiric library embodies the danger and transgression of the Eastern Other.

The theme of transgression is also channeled in the architecture of the estate in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, although this time once again via the estate's windows. However, while in *Wuthering Heights*, power over the estates is fickle and suffering is all-encompassing, Manderley has an undisputed mistress. Rebecca, even in death, has unquestionable control over the estate. Her presence is felt in every room she had been in, in every object she had touched - they all act as relics, simultaneously commemorating her life and perpetuating her power beyond the grave. Nowhere is Rebecca's presence more saturated than in her bedroom. The narrator visits it first in Chapter XIV, but she already knows 'that the position of the room would make it the one [she] wanted, whose windows looked out upon the lawns to the sea' (185). She knows this because in Chapter VII Mrs Danvers repeatedly states it. Mrs Danvers weaponises the house's layout to craft a power imbalance between the current and the old Mrs de Winter: she unfavourably compares the 'smaller

rooms' of the east wing (where Maxim instructs the narrator's bedroom to be, in the wing which 'he'd never used' before) to the 'bedroom in the big suite twice as large' that belonged to Rebecca; she further emphasises the difference in scale by informing the narrator that it was impossible to move Maxim's 'big wardrobe' through the new bedroom's 'narrow doorways' (80-3). The difference in scale renders the bedroom inferior, making the narrator believe that she is in competition with Rebecca, one which she is losing. Maxim installing her in the wing from which one 'would not know the sea was anywhere near', while giving Rebecca a bedroom whose 'windows look down across the lawns to the sea', seemingly proves this point (79, 83). The narrator is denied the sea she loves by her husband, who has seemingly placed her in a 'second-rate room', befitting a 'second-rate person' (83). Through the unfavourable contrast between the narrator's bedroom and Rebecca's, the house's layout constructs the feeling of inferiority that haunts the narrator through the novel. The windows looking at the sea become not just a luxury, but a status symbol that can only be enjoyed by the real Mrs de Winter. And now that Rebecca is gone, these windows stay shut.

When entering the room in Chapter XIV the narrator is shocked to find a 'fully furnished' room, 'as though in use' (185). However, bathed in the 'false and yellow' electric light, the room resembles 'a setting on the stage' rather than of a real, lived-in room, a reminder that its late owner 'would never come back' (186). Invited by the faint sound of the sea, the narrator opens the window. This act has two purposes: firstly, it opposes Mrs Danvers; secondly, it is an attempt at reclaiming her role as Mrs de Winter and fulfilling her purpose of rejuvenating the household. However, instead of affirming her position, the 'greater air of reality' the room gains makes her feel like an 'uninvited guest' that 'had strolled into [the] hostess's bedroom by mistake' (186-7). In opening the window the narrator, rather than resuscitating the room, only exacerbates its atemporality, solidifying Rebecca's

position as ‘mistress’ and hers as an intruding ‘outsider’. This foreshadows the implied end of the aristocratic line, symbolised by the burning of Manderley at the end of the novel.

This window has a central role in Chapter XVIII when Mrs Danvers tries to convince the narrator to commit suicide by jumping out of it - ‘a quick, kind way’ to die compared to drowning (276). Speaking of Rebecca’s death, I mentioned earlier that the opening of the window is in opposition to Mrs Danvers - that is because she is the one taking care of Rebecca’s room and, therefore, she is the one who made the decision to shut the window. Why? Because she believes that Rebecca died at sea, therefore, by shutting it out, Mrs Danvers completes the illusion that Rebecca ‘would come back into the room’ (186). Therefore, much like in Brontë’s novel, the window acts as a border between life and death, the physical and the spiritual. The window is open, so is the border. This intrusion is represented by the fog filling the open window: according to Hanna Maryam the Gothic fog ‘accentuates [...] the senses of mystery’ and ‘horror’ by preventing ‘clarity and knowledge’ through enforcing ‘a metaphorical “blindness” ’; both the narrator’s view and judgement are clouded by the fog, and she finds comfort in this ‘blindness’: ‘If I jumped I should not see the stones rise up to meet me, the fog would hide them from me.’ (276-7). The thickening fog makes death seem increasingly inviting, exacerbating the feeling of tension and dread. The open window allows the mist to fully surround the narrator, melting the room into the outside. However, it is also the thing that grounds her: ‘The only reality was the window-sill beneath my hands [...]’ (276). By equating the window-still with reality du Maurier presents it as the final threshold between ‘life’ and ‘death’. An immediacy similar to the one in *Wuthering Heights* - if the narrator ventures outside, death awaits her.

I hope to have demonstrated in this analysis that in the three novels architectural features serve to convey the theme of transgression. The windows and libraries in *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula* and *Rebecca* can be read as functional boundaries in which the antithesis of

East and West, inside and outside, life and death are consistently negotiated, played with and ultimately breached.

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