

Cannibal and Transcendence Narratives in *Les Misérables*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Interview with the Vampire*

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Abstract:

This essay studies the interlocking cannibal and transcendence plotlines supplied by three Victorian texts to three neo-Victorian works, two of them musicals, and one of them a key twentieth-century reworking of perhaps the original nineteenth-century cannibal narrative, the vampire legend. Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's *Les Misérables* (1985) and Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's *Sweeney Todd* (1979) theatricalise this interlocking of narratives in surprisingly similar ways: Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) stages the cannibal and the transcendent impulses in a series of climaxes in and around the Théâtre des Vampires in Paris. Both the musicals and the novel break their deliberately theatrical frames in challenges to their audiences, raising in their similar ways the nineteenth-century question whether one can be Victorian without being a Romantic, and the twentieth-century question how one can be 'neo' as well as 'Victorian'.

Keywords: cannibal, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Interview with the Vampire*, *Les Misérables*, musicals, punishment, revolution, *Sweeney Todd*, theatre, transcendence.

When I went to graduate school in the 1960s I decided to be a Victorianist, because I felt like a Victorian. When John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) came out shortly thereafter, I saw I could be a neo-Victorianist too. I fell in love with the musicals *Les Misérables* (1985), by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg, and *Sweeney Todd* (1979), by Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler, in the 1980s, both of them, despite the fact that reviewers and later scholars seemed to fear and loathe the first and admire the second. A similar emotional binary surrounded the field of my first post-dissertation interest, the Victorian Gothic, then just resuscitated by Anne Rice's 1976 *Interview with the Vampire*, which was wildly successful as a consumer item and (yet) enthusiastically welcomed in the *New York Times Book Review* by the Victorianist critic Nina Auerbach.

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All three works stage a Victorian culture at grips with the ghosts of Romanticism, presenting a dark realism still reaching for the stars, matching what I shall call a cannibal narrative with a transcendence narrative. All three have an operatic feel to their form, the novel as well as the plays. And all three went straight to the heart of twentieth-century culture by resurrecting the great Victorian themes of power and powerlessness, policing and the policed, made timely anew by the international political, social and aesthetic revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, and by the way Michel Foucault's work, especially *Discipline and Punish* (1975), entered into the academic and especially Victorianist criticism of the 1980s. To teach and write in this neo-Victorian atmosphere was to feel the constant thrum of one of the greatest of W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's patter verses, the yearning call of the title character of *The Mikado* (1885) in transcendence mode – "My object all sublime, I shall achieve in time" – followed with his cannibal conclusion: the sublime object of desire is neither a God, a lover, or a social ideal; instead, "my object all sublime, I shall achieve in time/ To let the punishment fit the crime, / the punishment fit the crime!" (Gilbert 1885: 27). In *The Mikado*, the poignant search for this 'fit' dissolves in paradox and merriment, of course, but not without leaving some residue of that desire in the air, and not before the paradox provides a further sublime pun: "Every judge his own executioner" (Gilbert 1885: 4). Inevitably, when the judge-executioner cuts humanity to fit the law, the first person he needs to decapitate is – himself. It is a conundrum worked out in different ways for the policeman of *Les Misérables*, the formal judge and the victim-judge of *Sweeney Todd*, and the vampire society of *Interview with the Vampire*.

The nineteenth-century novel constructed punishment in two main ways: the Gothic portrayal of murder as self-murder, and the scientific portrayal of murder as a meeting of the victim's alter ego and the criminal's in the singular figure of the policeman. The function of social control in western society, as Foucault discloses it, is both particularised and obscured in the figure of the inspector, the representative of the police, recently professionalised and hauntingly diffused through dozens of institutions as discipline. In fact, D.A. Miller argued that in most novels the actual police are marginalised, confined to the world of "delinquency", where the police can only solve crimes of petty larceny or puny destructiveness, while at the centre of the plot, in what the reader is called to identify as the real world,

an “amateur supplement” of good-hearted and eventually wised-up middle-class persons engage the deeper consequences of criminal behaviour, eventually mitigating or absorbing or expelling them (Miller 1988: 3, 8). This wised-up middle class protagonist of the novel, Victorianism’s figure of transcendence, is for Miller postmodernism’s naively always-already co-opted and illusory ‘liberal subject’: he knows things and he means well, but he connives at the cannibal narrative, because he can only recognise himself as liberal, or a subject, by forgetting his implication in the carceral society that aspires to order the cannibal world. And he is us. For the Victorian novel openly seeks that transference, narration to reader, and is well equipped, by its “cultural hegemony and diffusion [...] to become the primary spiritual exercise of an entire age” (Miller 1988: 10).

We must forgive ourselves for this novel-centred portrait of the Victorians, bequeathed by a twentieth-century educational system charmed with the familiarity and teachability of the novel. We know from our own experience that theatre, in the sense of performance – live storytelling in multiple sensory platforms from street and stage and screen, from wire and wireless – is by far more central (and diffused), but we forget, until startled into consciousness by our students’ delight in these platforms, and our consequent fear of the death of ‘the book’. Lest we forget again, scholars like Jonas Barish and Joseph Litvak have reminded us that an ancient anti-theatrical prejudice common in societies anxious about ‘order’ reached a high level within the contesting genre of the Victorian novel itself, until the primacy of Shakespeare to English culture (and empire) allowed ‘drama’ to re-enter culture, even as suspicion about ‘theatre’ continues.

As detailed by the essays in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (2004), the truth is that the Victorians went to various forms of theatre more than they read novels – more often, in greater numbers, and in more heterogeneous class and gender mixes than we once thought. Nineteenth-century fiction and theatre, both already hybrid genres, were “collaborative storytellers”, says Auerbach in that volume’s introductory essay: “Had they continued to collaborate, both would be stronger today” (Auerbach 2004: 5). Novels depicted painters and paintings, and they aspired to ‘paint’ with words, but the theatre seized to itself fiction, poetry, painting, music, and all the emerging technologies of light, sound and spectacle in a defiant and promiscuous display of hybridity. If the neo-Victorian musicals under study here play games with their prose fiction

origins, and the neo-Victorian vampires of Ann Rice's novel reach their apotheosis in the Parisian theatre which is also their dwelling place, jail, and place of punishment, their hybridity only echoes that of the Victorians.

This hybridity is not always seamless or without conflict, however; sometimes it may be double-tongued, like the hybridity inherent in terms like neo-Victorian, which as Nicole Terrien points out, combines history and literature in "a perfect representation of heritage" (Terrien 2011: 80). John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff's *Victorian Afterlife* (2000) shows a (neo-)Victorian criticism struggling to articulate the Victorians' own sense of an in-betweenness both paralyzing and fertile – Matthew Arnold's one-world-dead, another "powerless to be born" transmuted to one Victorianism driven to disciplining punishments, the other "unleashing" the drive to liberation and self-realisation (Arnold 1954c: 203, ll. 85-86; Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xviii). Their inevitable example for Victorian culture is the issue of sexuality; their source text, the one I shall close with, is *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

1. 'The Dog Eats the Dog'

As W.H. Auden told us in 'The Guilty Vicarage' (1948), long before Foucault or Miller, contemplating the flowering of the Victorian crime novel into the modern detective story, we like to see crime and punishment acted out for us, because it *is* a cannibal world, and we are all guilty. In this classic narrative everyone in the story is guilty or becomes guilty – of something (see Auden 1962: 153). But the detective's task is to bring to punishment the doer of only one particular crime. In that transcendent moment, Auden suggests, the others in the story, characters, narrator and readers, experience the illusion – or it would be better to say the theatrical sensation – of innocence.¹ Auden's post-Anglican-inflected theory of a world of diffused guilt, like Foucault's post Catholic-inflected theory of a world of diffused power, sheds considerable light on the twentieth century's continuing engagement with the whole complicated territory of Victorian cop-fascination, crime-envy, and God-terror. As Charles Dickens suggested in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65) – not least through the character of Noddy Boffin, the 'Golden Dustman' – the world is, not to put too fine a point on it, shit, and that story must be told, though it is a cannibal narrative heading for the sewers. As a process, this is nowhere clearer than in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), where the pragmatist Thénardier's "Oh, I could eat

the world!” (Hugo 1862: 747) rings over battlefield and tavern and wedding feast, loudest of all in the labyrinth of Parisian sewers, and the Thénardier of the twentieth-century musical is top dog in a “dog eats the dog” world (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 2, #13). But the heavens have entered into this world, and that story must be told too, a transcendence narrative paralleling or parodied by the cannibal one. The policeman carries his load of dreadful knowledge, but craves, or steals, justification from the stars.

When all this reaches its audience charged with the electricity of theatrics and the ambivalent energies of more recent revolutions, the rollercoaster from shit to the stars and back moves all the faster. It moves in similar ways too: in the two musicals I am looking at, practically the same storylines are borrowed from the nineteenth century, virtually the same choruses of Victorian street people sing both the raucous cannibal narrative and the yearning transcendence narrative, visually affected also by the hyper-photographed and televised street theatre of the European and American 1960s and 1970s.²

This is clearly the world of Sondheim and Wheeler’s *Sweeney Todd*. In the first scene Sweeney sings:

There’s a hole in the world
Like a great big pit
And it’s filled with people
Who are filled with shit,
And the vermin of the world
Inhabit it.
(Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 33)

When the transported barber, his wife seduced by the Judge who sentenced him, returns from Australia and finds his silver razors have been preserved by his neighbour, Mrs. Lovett, he seizes them as the instruments of a profession and an art, but also as a kind of badge and license – a license for vengeance. He will police the cannibal world on behalf of a larger philosophy, serving “a dark and a vengeful God [...] a dark and a hungry God”, slitting the throats of hypocrisy (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 25, 204). The musical hits its First Act peak when Sweeney, in a furiously sung lyric which the stage directions call “insanity”, claims that no humans are free from the secret crimes he has uncovered in the Judge, and therefore all

men, full of shit, require his disciplining razor, and, in the next song, are proper for Mrs. Lovett's pies (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 101). The next step, on the downward spiral, is the arrival of the special barber's chair, which chutes the bleeding bodies to the meat grinder in the basement, a sign of Sweeney's surrender to the machine in himself. By the second act, as Gilbertian judge and executioner both, he moves heedlessly past the righteous act of revenge against the Judge to kill even his wife and his helper Mrs. Lovett. And at the end, the boy who loved his last victim takes up the object all sublime, Sweeney's silver razor, and fits Sweeney's punishment to his crimes.

This is also the world of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's *Les Misérables* (1980), reshaped and spectacularised by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1985, with a deliberately Victorian theatrical energy born of its blockbusting 1980 production of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*. In the First Act's 'Confrontation', Inspector Javert insists that "[e]very man is born in sin" and reveals that "I am from the gutter too" (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #9), born jailed and shitten like his antagonist, Jean Valjean. In this scene Javert must defend his identity as a man "changed" from criminal to policeman by insisting that, unlike himself, his reversed-name alter ego Valjean "can never change" (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #9). But Valjean, a poor man criminalised in the black hole of the world, has transformed himself, on the example of the first act of mercy he met, rising from the number he bears in a Foucauldian world, 24601, into a succession of miraculous names and roles, within which he defends the weak and the innocent. And this musical too hits an early peak in the song 'Stars', when the policeman, steadily denying the story of human change going on before his eyes, lyrically turns himself into the image of his mechanical god, singing:

Stars, in your multitude [...]
 You are the sentinels [...]
 You know your place in the sky
 You hold your course and your aim
 And each in your season returns and returns,
 And is always the same.
 (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #14)

Reminiscent of George Meredith's portrait in 'Lucifer in Starlight' (1883) of the army of God's "unalterable law" (Meredith 2016: n.p., l. 14), this consoling vision is also fragile. Let one star step out of its place, admit into the world of disposable shit and immutable stars the idea that the thief or the revolutionary might sacrifice himself for another, and the policeman's identity will shatter, and he will execute himself. This is the cannibal narrative reflected in the paradoxical worship and dread of change: the Darwinian chain of consumptions and the mechanical chains of production. It is the dream that the dark sublime of human crime may be made (to) 'fit' by new social sciences of naming and punishing. For the transcendence narrative, the equivalents are the suffering child, the ruined maid, the outcast, and the dream of a merciful judge. These are Victorian themes, and of course both of these twentieth-century musicals cannibalise Victorian stories.

Sweeney Todd started life as a serialised penny-dreadful, and came to life in the Victorian theatre as *The String of Pearls* in 1847, harking back to a long tradition of Gothic criminality associated with Fleet Street. Victor Hugo's epic novel moves from Waterloo to the 'second' French Revolution of 1830, and like *The String of Pearls*, it bequeathed to its neo-Victorian musical a series of key tropes. Instead of razors it offers the memory of the guillotine: as the barber's health-promising but actually death-dealing chair, it offers – revolution itself. Every body politic feels the regular need for a barber, a little bloodletting, a shaving of its excesses, but eventually, mysteriously, the process leads from the barber's chair to the meat grinder and then to the dung heap.³

2. 'City on Fire'

Like the Victorian stories they borrow, *Sweeney Todd* and *Les Misérables* are looking to find a 'take' on revolution, somewhere between horror and transcendence. Both are reflecting on the violence of change – the revolutionary political changes of the 1830s and 1840s,⁴ and the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. Hugo's novel, like many a novel on the English side of the channel – *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *North and South* (1854-5), *Felix Holt the Radical* (1866) – ponders at length the (often invisible) distinction between a revolution and a riot, even while glorifying the historical process by which revolutionary violence assists the triumph of 'right' over mere 'fact'. *Les Misérables* insistently celebrates a French

revolution – the 1830s, the 1960s – which failed politically but whose energies still resonate in the work of contemporary philosophers and culture critics. Sondheim’s musical thriller stages ‘revolution’ unmistakably as a riot. When the hero enters the insane asylum, where the young heroine Joanna is confined, and rescues her, the ‘lunatics’ burst into the open to define the world anew:

City on fire!
Rats in the streets
And the lunatics yelling at the moon!
(Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 187)

Sweeney Todd stays closer to the cannibal end of the spectrum on revolution, and *Les Misérables* to the transcendence end – true to their origins, as Scott Freer has suggested (citing Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* [1960] instead of *Les Misérables*), in the Bakhtinian/Dickensian “carnavalesque” respectively of frenzied and utopian joy – and the Dionysian dystopia of the Dance of Death (Freer 2008-2009: 63). In the Royal Shakespeare Company’s musical as in Hugo’s novel, the criminal hero meets an example of selfless love around every corner – a cleric, a mother, a freedom fighter – and this diverts him from immersion in the cannibal world incapable of change, “the world where the dog eats the dog” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 2, #13). In Sondheim’s musical the gusto of Victorian melodrama and music hall bring to life a world where history mainly records “who gets eaten and who gets to eat” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 110). Love does blossom in unlikely places there, and survives even in its self-prostitution and insanity, but Sweeney’s love for his golden haired daughter is as damaged and damaging as the Judge’s perversion. While Sweeney swings his deadly razor in the second act, the young hero Anthony Hope approaches Johanna disguised as the wigmaker-cohort of the insane asylum’s director, Fogg. The latter carries “a huge pair of scissors” to cut and sell her hair (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 184) – another Victorian trope the musical shares with *Les Misérables*. Johanna escapes Fogg’s close shave, but Todd’s comes even closer: by the end of the play, his razor moving almost passionlessly from the Judge to the next occupant of his chair, he is just about to slit his own daughter’s throat when distracted by another blast from the whistles signalling riot in the city on fire.

The young lovers survive in both musicals. But this conventional demonstration of transcendence is actually muted even in *Les Misérables*: as in *King Lear*, something unspeakably weighty, and ripe, has gone out of the world with the death of the agonised Javert and the magical Valjean, leaving the lovers alive but ordinary, and still contending with the cannibal Thénardiens for the privilege of defining ‘the world’. Winking near the end of the play at an audience they conceive as fundamentally complicit with their cannibal ways, these two harvesters of the shit go to the lovers’ wedding still on the take: “We know where the wind is blowing”, they sing, “money is the stuff we smell. And when we’re rich as Croesus, Jesus! Won’t we see you all in hell!” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 2, #17). They may figure as the villains, but both Hugo’s novel and the neo-Victorian musical preserve the typically schizoid Victorian presentation of property and industry: the Thénardiens flourish diabolically up the ladder from beggar-thief to (fake) merchant princes upon the leavings of corpses, but even the redeemed Valjean cannot keep from making money as well as doing charity during his transformations.

In Sondheim’s musical thriller, Sweeney is the policeman-philosopher and Mrs. Lovett is the capitalist, middle-class to the core. She smells money in the wind from the moment Sweeney wins five pounds in a contest with a rival barber. She approves the logic of his first killing on business principles:

TODD

He tried to blackmail me, half my earnings forever.

MRS. LOVETT

Oh well, that’s a different matter! What a relief, dear! For a moment I thought you’d lost your marbles.

(Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 92-93)

This sets up the delicious climax when, contemplating the usual murderer’s difficulty as to what to do with the body, she comes up with a new idea for a pie filling:

Business needs a lift—

Debts to be erased—

Think of it as thrift, [...]

If you get my drift.
(Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 104)

She is still counting her profits and planning their seaside retirement when the unslakeably hungry Sweeney pitches her into her own oven as pie-bait.

3. Facing the Other: “til we meet face to face”

In the very starkest terms, *Les Misérables* presents its double narrative as two versions of ‘facing’. The cannibal narrative is the story of two beings struggling for an imagined single quantum of identity. Javert vows, “I never shall yield til we meet face to face” in the first act’s darkly transcendent ‘Stars’, imagining a final ecstatic mutual gaze between himself and Valjean, “resting” together in the realm of Law: “that I may see him, safe behind bars” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #14). In the second act, however, he recognises not his double but his alternative, and no mutuality is possible: “There is nothing on earth that we share”, he has to believe; “it is either Valjean or Javert” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #14).

The novel and the musical strongly support the anti-cannibal plotline, the transcendence narrative, but again, even transcendence has its capitalist aspect: the clergyman, who tells the police he gave to Valjean the silver candlesticks which he actually stole, says, “I have bought your soul for God” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #2). Facing a man who calls him brother, Valjean welcomes and expands both the kinship and the Otherness. Though he is often tempted to see nothing, or the pursuing Law, in the face of the Other, he always returns to enable the Otherness in the people he encounters; he addresses and supports the yearning girl within the prostitute mother Fantine, the confident woman in the girl Cosette, the stable future in the hot-headed revolutionary Marius, even the policeman in the obsessed Javert. In kinship he frees the captured Javert at the barricades at mid-play. Granting him his law-representing Otherness towards the end of the play, he agrees to present himself to Javert, criminal to policeman, if Javert will allow him to rescue his daughter’s lover first. And Javert agrees.

The policeman is maddened enough by Valjean’s offer: “How can I live in the debt of a thief!” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 1, #14). But what really rocks his world is his own good deed in the second face-to-face encounter. If he has followed the criminal’s lead and allowed him mercy, the stars really have stepped out of their place. Rather than stay in that

complex new world of judgment with mercy he chooses the logic of the cannibal world, self-consumption. The first act song ‘Stars’ emphasised the middle-class audience’s identification with the obsessed policeman, satisfying our recognition of his/our passion for order as both a middle-class object all sublime, and its own punishment, reprising this as self-punishment in the second act. Meanwhile Valjean, submitting himself to the self-enhancing self-sacrifices of the Victorian transcendence narrative, dies at the end with the anticipated satisfaction of the final face-to-face experience: “to love another person is to see the face of God” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 2, #18).

Sweeney Todd’s plot also plays with ‘facings’. The cannibal plot is built on face-to-face mis-recognitions, which always have the flavour of a demonic competition. In an early recognition scene, Mrs. Lovett tells the returned ‘Sweeney Todd’ the neighbourhood’s version of the story of the transported barber, Benjamin Barker, forcing his admission of his identity. In the stage directions the two stand and “gaze at each other” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 40). She speaks “[c]oolly” while his speech is “[f]righteningly vehement” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 40): he will have his uses, if only as a customer, while the only face he wants to see is his lost wife’s. Since she wants Sweeney, Mrs. Lovett makes him think his wife is dead, and starts him on his murdering way. Ironically, Sweeney has already looked into his wife’s face in the first moments of the play, when a ragged beggar woman approached him:

BEGGAR WOMAN

[...] Hey, don’t I know you, mister?
(She peers intently at him)

TODD

Must you glare at me, woman? Off with you, off, I say!
(Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 30)

She, it seems, has half recognised him, but after years of idealising dreams about the lost beauty Lucy he cannot find her in the beggar woman’s face until the tale’s end. There, having slit her throat in his haste to get justice on the Judge, he glimpses her face as her body is about to go into Mrs. Lovett’s

oven, and, after pushing the lying substitute Mrs. Lovett into her own oven, invites his own death.

The transcendence narrative centred on the young lovers begins, as a long chapter in Hugo's *Les Misérables* assures us it always must, with a single glance (Hugo 1987: 896). Anthony has been singing "Lady look at me", while the isolated Joanna communes with her own troubles, gazing "into the middle distance" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 45). The stage directions affirm that at the end of the song "their eyes meet and the song dies on their lips. A hushed moment" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 46). The dark edge of this passion is confirmed later, when the seller of the caged birds that Joanna has been comparing herself with offers a very much post-Maya-Angelou explanation for why the caged birds sing: "We blind 'em, sir [...] and, not knowing night from day, they sing and sing without stopping, pretty creatures" (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 48). Realists in the cannibal world pride themselves on knowing night from day. *Sweeney Todd's* singing lovers make another world together, but the price of transcendence seems to be the insight of blindness.

4. Contemporary Portraits: "the very spirit of your age"

In 1897 Bram Stoker's *Dracula* violently yoked together the nineteenth century's cannibal and transcendence narratives into one figure all sublime, an undead life performing the human. But it was Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) that put the Victorian key on the neo-Victorian table for twentieth-century readers, providing a multi-layered example of Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben's argument that in neo-Victorian Gothic we have the "quintessence" of neo-Victorianism itself, a linked effort to understand the contemporary self by "reliving the [...] nightmares and traumas" of its nineteenth-century Doppelgänger (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4). "I'm at odds with everything and always have been! I have never belonged anywhere", cries the Victorian vampire Louis to Armand, the four-hundred-year-old vampire who has been waiting decades for him at the Théâtre des Vampires in Paris, and Armand replies, enraptured, "This is the very spirit of your age. Don't you see that? [...] You reflect its broken heart" (Rice 1977: 286-287).

It is no accident that Rice's most sophisticated vampires have a home in the theatre. *Dracula*, the most famous icon of cannibal transcendence, was born out of the enthralled relationship of actor-manager

Bram Stoker and his mesmerizing leading man Henry Irving, and lives on, Undead, to this day: as Auerbach reminded us in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995), each age gets the vampire it wants. The Victorian audience wanted a vampire who lit desire in others; we neo-Victorians want our Victorian torch to have been a tormented torch-singer as well. But then the Victorians, writers and readers both, were divided too, wandering, like the speaker of ‘Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse’, “between two worlds, one dead / the other powerless to be born” (Arnold 1954c: 203, ll. 85-86) – or rather, between several old worlds (Greek, Roman, Saxon, feudal) newly enlivened by enthusiastic or nostalgic historians and novelists, and the threatening life of the era rushing toward them. Experiencing all this, comments the vampire Armand, hardly any of his kind find they actually have the “stamina” for the immortality they have been granted (Rice 1977: 283).

Rice’s vampires have the choices that faced Matthew Arnold’s anxious speakers and Alfred Tennyson’s too: to abscond from the fray, or to find some way to join the “action” streaming past ‘Locksley Hall’, ride the rails “down the ringing grooves of change” (Tennyson 1953: 94, l. 98; 96, l. 182). In his four hundred years of Undead life, Armand has seen many a vampire unable to ‘mix himself’ with this action, and surrender instead to suicidal rage or despair. His own survival tactic has been to enter into each succeeding age through a romantically authentic relationship with a person bearing its spirit, and live a fresh life as long as that relationship lasts, awaiting the inevitable change of ages, and relationships, with a stoic’s, or perhaps a modernist’s, resignation to an element of distantiation, of theatricalism, to every authenticity. Invited to join him on these terms, Louis lives his divided nineteenth-century self, his “broken heart”, through the desirous and destructive events in the novel’s Paris, with that delicious Victorian war between his “inveterate conscience” and his capacity for love and hunger for knowledge and experience (Rice 1977: 336) providing food for Armand, and a mimetic part for (part of) him to play. The relationship continues into the mid-twentieth century, until Louis’s brokenness fuses into what he believes is a permanent aridness, and Armand must therefore seek a new partner for this new age. Meanwhile Louis, cleaving to that extremity of *acidie*, which paradoxically stamps him as human and Victorian, tells his interviewer at the end of the novel that he now seeks only the “courage to end” his despised vampire life (Rice 1977: 338).

From William Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age; Or, Contemporary Portraits* (1825) onwards, nineteenth-century writers frequently invoke the phrase, trying to represent as hopeful transitions their painfully felt binaries of faith and doubt, mind and body, the organic and the mechanical, the utopian and the utilitarian, the authentic and the performative, the transcendent and the cannibalist. The vampire's story, as Karl Marx asserted early in chapter 10 of *Capital* (1867), allowed for potent representations of all manner of dead things sucking the lifeblood of the living (Marx 1976: 342); the vampire, Gina Wisker notes, is inherently "performative" (Wisker 2012: 228). Rice's Victorian/neo-Victorian Louis, telling his tale to an American flower child but humanly born a second son to plantation owners in antebellum New Orleans, adds to these Continental possibilities the damnation-flavoured ego of Puritan America.

It has to have been an Original Sin therefore that called Louis to the Fall into his vampire nature. True to the spirit of his age, it was his Victorian doubt of the supernatural visions of his brother Paul, compounded partly of familial Catholicism and partly of the voodoo culture of the plantation's Afro-Caribbean slaves, that caused Paul's leap to his death, Louis's own resulting death wish, and the obligingly immediate attack/embrace of the vampire Lestat. Now Louis knows the Undead life which is both cannibal and transcendent – the mix that is actually human. Vampire nature is inescapably cannibal: Lestat watches mordantly while Louis strives, as humanity does, to occlude the murderously literal demands of his, and our, position in the food chain with a diet of rats and chickens, but Falls/Ascends to his natural place. Vampire nature is also mythically transcendent, not supernatural, exactly, but preternatural, possessing the gifts theologians attribute to humans before the Fall – longevity, mobility, beauty, acute sensation and cerebration, and the kind of sublimely passionate indifference, "detachment but with feeling", that allows one "to think of two things at the same time" (Rice 1977: 62), a three-dimensionality that erases self-division.

Interview with the Vampire traces Louis's journey through the nineteenth century from Romantic desire to late Victorian decadence, towards a series of explosive climaxes in the *Théâtre des Vampires* in Paris. Here vampires take charge of the dimension Auerbach noted in the nineteenth-century movement of Romantic and gothic vampires between stage and page that resulted in the hybrid vampire of Bram Stoker: after *Dracula*, vampires become "charismatic stage performers", seducers of

larger audiences, for “theatrical technology has suffused them with a spectral aura and popular mythology bestowed on them mystic lunar affinities” (Auerbach 1995: 7). Lestat, pragmatic enforcer of ‘nature’, guides Louis through a cannibal ascent from eating rats to drinking blood, toward that narrative’s next damning plateau, or tableau, the ‘making’ of another vampire. In an ancient homosocial ritual designed to keep Louis from leaving him, Lestat entraps the agonised new vampire into a faux maternal, blasphemously God-like, three-way exchange of fluids that transforms the seven-year old Claudia into an even more agonised child-vampire, radiantly gifted, ravenously hungry for mental and sensual experience – who will never have the body to deliver that experience, and will always need Louis and Lestat as her protectors. Bound to the enraged Claudia by a metaphysical passion forbidden physical expression, Louis seeks answers to the intolerable plight of self-division, finding momentary relief in helping Claudia kill, as they think, the all-parenting vampire Lestat. Their subsequent quest for more knowledgeable mentors passes first through Dracula country, where they find only the occasional lonely Undead maddened into unintelligibility by the long struggle through coffin lid and grave mound, and ends in Paris. There the vampire who recognises and craves Louis as ‘the spirit of the age’ begins his seduction with an introduction to the Grand-Guignol-like Théâtre des Vampires and its long-running production, for entirely human audiences, of something resembling the ‘Dance of Death’, or perhaps ‘Death and the Maiden’.

The show is a musical, of course, late Victorian, patterned on Charles Baudelaire and Algernon Charles Swinburne and Oscar Wilde – its opening a synaesthesia of light, costume and ritualised movement, pantomimed comedy and pathos, all governed by music. A beautiful human girl wanders in among the drifting ‘actor’ vampires and is transfixed by the *mise en scène*, opened to her unconscious desires, stripped of her guard and her clothes, and invited to/as the feast. The dreamy words speak of love’s sublimation of death, but more deeply of mortality’s sublime, the long human creation of transcendent meaning-making out of cannibal death, and the ur-fantasy of possessing death, conscious death, dead and conscious of it (see Rice 1977: 223) – that is, Vampire Life. Death is a ‘trickster’ vampire roleplaying a human roleplaying a vampire. Love is a girl selected out of the streets for the show, and shared out among the worshipping vampires as if she were the chalice of a dark communion. While the human girl dies just

offstage, her body no doubt to be disposed of without fuss and without the final interchange of fluids that would make her a participant in this communion, the breathless stillness of the audience testifies to its own communion for several seconds. Excited applause gives way quickly to sophisticated chatter, and in Rice's own narratively Symbolist staging only "a white glove gleamed on a green cushion" as evidence of the actual hysteria that drives the crowd to the exits (Rice 1977: 226).

An appalled and enthralled Louis watches this production and registers these twin masquerades, vampire players and sophisticated but desiring humans, before going backstage with the vampire who invited him, and covets him as "the spirit of this age" (Rice 1977: 287). It is a backstage which widens into a vast surreal space, containing not only the dwellings and meeting rooms of the vampire community but also the most brutal and macabre painted, sculpted and printed imaginings of generations of human artists – the terror face of transcendence. Human creations all, from Pieter Brueghel, Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, and the engravers of Victorian Paris: these are the foundation of the *Théâtre des Vampires*. Human artworks look down on the plotting of the vampire community in succeeding days, as the unkillable Lestat informs them that Louis and Claudia had broken the 'only' law of vampire existence – do not kill your own kind.

Amid these scenes of human (self)punishment, the prosecuting Lestat demands the killing of the chief of his would-be killers. Claudia and the consenting vampire judges, several with their own Sweeney-like agendas, kidnap Claudia and Louis into the backstage space reserved for real and not just theatrical punishment. Louis is confined and then released, the better to observe that vampire Law has locked Claudia into the courtyard where a Disciplining Sun has reduced his beloved child to ashes. Afterwards, "a consuming cry" rising within him (Rice 1977: 304), Louis turns impresario himself, burning down the *Théâtre des Vampires* and most of its dwellers in a spectacle only he witnesses, in the moments before he must shut himself into his own coffin against the murdering dawn. For his Romantic instinct to destroy himself in despair is not, finally, proof against the Victorian hunger for knowledge, of the beautiful/cannibal world, and of his cannibal/transcendent self.

5. “Hypocrite lecteur...”

Novel that it is, *Interview with the Vampire* pulls in a third aspect of theatre besides the *monstre* of the monster and the centring presence of a real stage. Like *Sweeney Todd* and *Les Misérables* it breaches the fourth wall of its ‘frame’. Both musicals conclude with the same magical moment of theatre when the people of the story return from their graves, face front, and pour their unspeakable knowledge into the audience in the music of a final reprise. Critics quite like the continual and final reprises of *Sweeney Todd*, and claim to be bored by those of *Les Misérables*, a matter of taste perhaps. But there is significance as well as sentiment when the revolutionaries of *Les Misérables* reprise the first-act anthem ‘Do You Hear the People Sing’, addressed by one eighteenth-century true believer to a group of dilettante companions, as a second act challenge directed from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. In the ‘Finale’ the disinherited or poverty-stricken characters return from the dead to face the people in the seats bought with disposable income, envisioning a breaking down of the invisible wall that separates them, “when tomorrow comes” (Boublil and Schönberg 1987: Disc 2, #18), as of course, in chronological time it has come, though in moral time it is still to come.

Sweeney Todd makes a similar point more roughly in its final reprise. The opening number directs the audience to “Attend the tale” told by anonymous balladeers, hinting at the grim paradoxes of the protagonist’s demonic orderliness and prowess, then sings Sweeney out of his grave, and breaks from ballad to drama: “What happened then – well, that’s the play, / And he wouldn’t want us to give it away” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 23, 25). At the end, the boy who inherits Sweeney’s razor and dispatches him in turn then welcomes back the company, still manifesting their fictional identity, to reprise the tale of Sweeney changed from past tense to present tense, and drive home the point of his Undead Life to the audience: not only is that monster “there beside you” in your seat, but Sweeney is *inside* you too – “To seek revenge may lead to hell, / But everyone does it and seldom as well / As Sweeney” (Sondheim and Wheeler 1991: 204).

Interview with the Vampire is structured as a tape-recorded conversation, a kind of radio drama, between two young men, the vampire Louis, who lived and tells the tale, and the interviewing San Francisco boy, fresh from the Haight Ashbury summers of love and drugs, who now wants to live the tale, but with an ending closer to that of *Les Misérables* than the

Sweeney Todd downer that Louis insists he now endures. The dramatic arc of the relationship is clear. Early information-gathering or story-steering questions from the interviewer soon give way to eagerly participatory dialogue about the nature of vampire life, and during the climaxes in and around the Théâtre des Vampires – the impassioned debates about divinity and damnation, the intolerable triangle of desire among Louis, Armand and Claudia and its aftermath in the murder of Claudia, Louis’s revenge and his despair at how little this resolves – the interviewer’s awed silence matches the enforced silence of the reader.

And so, if the theatrics of Rice’s novel ‘work’, then so does the interviewer’s scream of resistance, hysterical as the flight of the audience from the Théâtre des Vampires, when the teller of the tale concludes his story with the cold and dark reason for his move to warm and vibrant San Francisco: “I wanted to be where [...] nothing mattered. And that’s the end of it. There’s nothing else” (Rice 1977: 338). If the theatrics of the novel work, the reader echoes the boy’s Victorian “No! [...] It didn’t have to end like that”, and his neo-Victorian reprise – “You don’t even understand the meaning of your own story [...] give it all one more chance. One more chance in me!” (Rice 1977: 338, 340). When the Gothic works, as the Victorians understood quite well, we want to become the monster, and be punished for it, sublimely, with damnation. The Victorian in Louis wanted to tell a cautionary story; the neo-Victorian in him accepts, wryly, the failure of the storyteller and the success of the story. The audience wants into the story and so does the youth, insisting on a bite from the repentant vampire. When he wakes from his faint finding himself still ordinary, still an audience and not the new star, no wonder the boy rushes off to New Orleans to compel a reprise from the unrepentant one, Lestat, confident in a new ending “when tomorrow comes”.⁵

In his otherwise often penetrating reading of *Interview with the Vampire*, titled with Baudelairean indictment ‘Hypocrite Vampire...’, the Gothic critic Fred Botting assures us that while the phenomenon of vampire romance is worth writing about, the novel itself is formally unreflective and uninteresting, clumsy in its Victorian social history, vapid in its pathos – insufficiently, in the inevitable word, postmodern (Botting 2008: 75, 76, 81, 84). Marginally readable as a rather conscious parable of the consumption that ends in the ennui of consumerism, *Interview with the Vampire* and its

ilk harbour the disease of romance, and collapse, coughing, into their own bestsellerdom.

Well, maybe. But the scepticism he applies to Rice's recreation of the nineteenth century – all these clichés of 'the spirit of the age', the self as inherently 'outcast', the nostalgia for a unifying 'faith' – is what the Victorians applied to the Romantics. Arnold lamented in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' that the Romantics may have felt deeply but "did not know enough" to be as age-conscious, outcast, and lost-faith-seeking, as were the Victorians (Arnold 1954d: 354). This provoked an evasive rebuttal from the twentieth century: "Someone said the dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did. Precisely: and they are what we know" (Eliot 1920: 52). T.S. Eliot's famous essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', called for a negotiation between "tradition" and the "individual" (talent), between the hyper-"personal" way we know the made-ness and lostness of our own certainties and seekings, and the way the writers we read knew theirs (Eliot 1920: 58). We escape to these writers, Eliot explains, for the experience of "impersonality" that their distance offers, while of course, maintaining a certain subtle superiority, for "only those who have personality know what it means to want to escape from it" (Eliot 1920: 58).

This position-maintenance struggle also marks the neo-Victorian creative act: how can one write as both 'neo' and 'Victorian' without the fall towards Romance: how, as the editors of *Victorian Afterlife* pertinently put it, to keep from "vampirizing", or worse "fetishizing" the Victorian past as the site of cultural emergence it named itself (Sadoff and Kucich 2000: xvi, xv). How to escape from (with) personality to the mastering tradition, how to know it while knowing more than it knows – or less... how not to let the Victorians have the last word.

One of the inaugurating texts of neo-Victorian fiction attempts this through an act of 'facing' that recalls the identity struggles, the counterpointing clash, of the antagonists of *Les Misérables*, Valjean/Javert. As John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* nears its conclusion, the narrator "stares" at his central male character with "a positively cannibalistic intensity", his gaze a "bizarre blend of the inquisitive and the magistral; of the ironic and the solliciting" (Fowles 1969: 405). The novelist both desires and judges his subject, his *semblable*, his puppet. Under his gaze, Charles Smithson becomes two men also facing each other, one who will discover

and accept love, and his lover, another who will discover her and... do the opposite. Two sides of the same coin. Theatre, as the two musicals suggest, can stage this self-confrontation as a living simultaneity and, if it likes, kill off one, or both, and bring them back alive, and facing. The novelist, scratching his Victorian beard, trapped in the linearity of his genre's pagination, ponders the equally plausible Romantic/Victorian and modern futures (that is, endings) he can see for his character, and flips a despairingly postmodern coin to determine which shall have the inevitably dominant, and self-revealing, position of the ending (see Fowles 1969: 406). Heads: the Romantic/mid-Victorian. Tails... the modern, the one we do read last.

The Romantic/mid-Victorian transcendence ending occurs; the lovers find and embrace one another. The modern ending succeeds, in both senses of the word; the lovers find each other, each poised on the knife-edge of "the existentialist [...] anxiety of freedom", and choose separation (Fowles 1969: 340-341). Yet each ending contains its own postmodernist undoing as well. The female protagonist may be willing to suggest in the first ending that the child she bore and hid from her lover confirms her "nature" as female and love-lorn, but it is Sara's robust "I am not to be understood [...] I am not to be understood even by myself" that we remember most (Fowles 1969: 452). From his aristocratic scorn for the commercialism/consumerism of his England and from exposure to the matter-of-fact freedoms of America, the male protagonist may have developed a willingness to endure the bleakness that resisting what he sees as Sarah's manipulation of her own 'mystery' will entail. But there is a sly transcendence also in Charles's self-congratulating "celibacy of the heart [...] integrity [...] true uniqueness" (Fowles 1969: 466, 465).

The Victorians do have the last word in this neo-Victorian novel: Fowles has earlier quoted Arnold's characterisation of the cannibal world in the last stanza of 'To Marguerite – Continued' and now repeats, without quotations marks, the poem's final line as his own last line, "the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea (Arnold 1954b: 126; Fowles 1969: 467). But not even Charles's transcendence or the narrator's clear, if unspoken, ironic recognition that his protagonist's new kind of transcendence re-stages the old kinds erases their sense of gain. Or ours. For these two narratives are always at hand, hand in hand. The transcendence narrative seeks always both to contain the cannibal and to reframe its parents. The Romantic, enthralled by boundless Meaning, is enfolded by the sadder (because

disciplined) but wiser (because the Romantic is what he Knows) Victorian. Both are preserved in the liberated postmodern neo-Victorian, daunted for sure by the revealed fragility of Knowing, and the fungibility of Meaning, yet strangely elated at having (that is, getting) to do it (write it, act it) all over again.

Notes

1. Auden pursues this argument in 'The Guilty Vicarage', first published in *Harper's Magazine* in 1948. Among his other memorable phrases there, appropriate to the tasks of vampires, Sweeney Todd, and at least one face of revolutions, is the proposal that "[m]urder is negative creation" (Auden 1962: 152).
2. The Civil Rights, free speech, anti-war, feminist, and gay rights movements of these decades constituted a set of revolutions which in America generated both transcendently solemn mass spectacles and violent gestures from Weathermen, Black Panthers, and unnerved Police at Chicago (1968) and Kent State (1972). As Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg conceptualised the album that became *Les Misérables* in 1980, French culture was still vibrating from the May Days of 1968 in Paris, when French students, joined by workers, philosophers and artists, left schools and factories to protest not just the repressive politics of de Gaulle but contemporary capitalism and consumerism in general. When the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the musical opened in London in 1985, the French were preparing a set of spectacles for the 14 July 1989 celebration of the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, which included a grand opening of the Bastille Opera. (A 2015 neo-Victorian production of Puccini's *La Bohème* in Boston set the story during the 1968 May Days.)
3. George Dibdin-Pitt's dramatisation of *The String of Pearls*, with its subtitle *The Fiend of Fleet Street*, solidified two beloved London myths, the barber who cuts throats and the cook who cannibalises her customers. The play had no character development, just the requisite 'tubs of blood' for the Victorian audience, and a newly Gothic take on the criminal hero. Hugo's novel offered Carlylean musings and rantings about the height of man's transcendent reach and the depth of his cannibal falls. While the novel fights fiercely for its humane ideals, the author feels pretty much like Gilbert and Sullivan did about the dream of a 'fit' between crime and punishment: the Law sent Jean

- Valjean to prison for five years for stealing a loaf of bread for his nephew, and tacked on another fourteen years for insufficient response to its discipline.
4. The revolutionary ethos of the 1790s emerged a generation later in England and France as the pace of political change lagged behind the economic and social changes that produced a rising middle class. Journalists and businessmen joined the working-class anti-Bourbon protests that produced the July 1830 revolution in Paris, and the barricades went up again in 1848 as the promises made by its constitutional monarchy were abandoned (see Merriman 1996: 173-192). In 1832 English Parliamentary Reform finally kick-started the march toward true ‘representation’ with the extension of the franchise to most of the middle class, but the excluded workingmen who drew up ‘The People’s Charter’ in 1838 and gathered in a mass meeting of more than a hundred thousand in 1848 to present it to Parliament had to wait until the Third Reform Act of 1884 admitted most men (but not women) to the electorate (see Schama 2002: 181-90).
 5. Tomorrow comes for the interviewer in the third of Rice’s vampire novels, *The Queen of the Damned* (1988), when the boy, Daniel Malloy, having pursued Lestat and eventually Armand still seeking the Dark Gift, receives it. Louis receives his ‘tomorrow’ in the most recent of the series, *Prince Lestat* (2014), when his despairing struggle to understand the contradictions that made him “the spirit of his age” gives way to a confidence that “the old dead dualities”, still dormant, are nevertheless part of the “goodness, actual goodness” towards which “the Road of the People of Darkness” is tending (Rice 2014: 450, 448). The novel, inevitably, promises a continuation of the chronicles along that “Road”.

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