

## GOTHIC ENTRAPMENT WITHIN TEXTUALITY IN AUSTER'S *TRAVELS IN THE SCRIPTORIUM*

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### Abstract

"Gothic-postmodernism" builds upon the shared ontological inquiry into the nature of reality inherent in both the Gothic and postmodernism. By adapting most of the thematic and narrative elements of the Gothic to postmodernist fiction, this genre enables new interpretations of self-reflective literature, where the Gothic sublime manifests itself through textual erasure as Gothic-postmodernist horror. This article argues that *Travels in the Scriptorium* is Auster's significant contribution to Gothic-postmodernism, given its self-reflexivity as postmodernist metafiction and its Gothic aspirations in merging Gothic conventions with postmodern techniques. In Auster's exhaustive metafiction, postmodernism plays a pivotal role in the text's sublimity and the resultant horror of textuality, which creates a profound sense of awe and fear. This is achieved through the text's exploration of reality's fragmented nature, the manipulation of narrative form, and the meta-awareness of its own fictionality. These elements collectively create a sense of awe and terror, challenging the representation of fictional truth through the very medium of language.

**Keywords:** Gothic-Postmodernism; Textuality; Sublime; *Travels in the Scriptorium*; Uncanny

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## 1. Introduction

The interrelation between Gothic fiction and postmodernism lies in their mutual preoccupation with the writing process and textuality. The writing process as a theme in Gothic fiction is rich with layers of meaning, intertwining the act of creation with the core elements of terror and the supernatural. In this sense, Gothic fiction often exhibits a heightened awareness of its own narrative structure. This self-reflexivity is evident in how characters interact with texts within the narrative, blurring the line between fiction and reality. The writing process becomes a way to explore the act of storytelling itself, often revealing deeper psychological and existential themes. For instance, Frankenstein's act of creating the monster can be seen as a metaphor for the writing process. Just as Victor assembles the creature from disparate body parts, a writer constructs a narrative from various ideas and influences. Furthermore, characters in Gothic fiction often find themselves trapped within texts or influenced by written works, symbolizing their struggle with destiny and identity. This textual entrapment reflects their existential crises and the power of the written word to shape their reality. In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, for example, Eleanor Vance's experiences in Hill House are deeply influenced by her interpretation of the house's history and the stories she hears. Added to that is the fact that Gothic fiction frequently features unreliable narrators whose accounts of events are questionable, adding layers of complexity to the narrative. The writing process, in this case, is intertwined with the theme of narrative ambiguity and the challenge of discerning truth, as the governess's account of the supernatural occurrences at Bly, which is written in a manuscript that frames the entire story in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, reveals. Her reliability as a narrator is constantly in question, making the reader unsure whether the ghosts are real or figments of her imagination. This uncertainty is a hallmark of Gothic fiction, where the writing process itself becomes a source of suspense and dread.

Given that the writing process or the "focus on textuality" is a key theme in Gothic fiction, its "overt metafictional staging of textual engagement" is not unfamiliar to postmodernism (McRobert 2014, 297). In the realm of postmodernism, the writing process is prioritized over mere reading, as it emphasizes the construction of texts and the interplay of meanings within them. This perspective is clearly illustrated by Roland Barthes' (1977) assertion of the "death of the author," where the reader's interpretation takes precedence over the author's intent, and Patricia Waugh's (1984) discussion on metafiction, which highlights how texts are self-referential and conscious of their own creation. Central to this discussion is "Gothic's innate self-reflexivity," as Neil McRobert (2014) holds; it is the Gothic as a genre which has evolved and endured to share some of its fundamental elements with postmodernism. This is because the Gothic "has always had much to say about readers, writers, texts" and their relationship (297). Furthermore, the interplay between Gothic fiction and postmodernism is driven

by their shared ontological inquiries into the nature of reality. Postmodernism, by challenging what Jean-François Lyotard (1979/1984) called the “grand narratives,” no longer believes in a coherent, universal truth. Instead, it embraces narrative games create “synthetic worlds” unbound by “moral or metaphysical concerns.” This approach aligns with the Gothic’s challenge to the belief that “one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world” (Smith 2013, 141). However, it is crucial to note that postmodernism does not merely replicate Gothic themes and formal structures. Rather, it adapts and transforms key Gothic elements to resonate within the postmodern context. As Maria Beville (2022) suggests, the Gothic “can find new and relevant meanings in the postmodern context” (146), demonstrating the genre’s adaptability and ongoing relevance.

What Beville calls “Gothic-postmodernism” in her eponymous book (2009) is an integrated genre that plays with both the Gothic and the postmodernist fiction. Accordingly, “Gothic-postmodernism” is not merely “postmodern Gothic” or “Contemporary Gothic”. Rather, Gothic-postmodernism investigates postmodern texts that are characteristically Gothic, offering readers the potential to interrogate their own “unconscious fears, terrors, and anxieties” through new ways of representation (Beville 2009, 10). Hence the conventions that characterize Gothic-postmodernism “as a new and distinct literary genre”:

blurring of the borders ... between the real and the fictional, which results in narrative self-consciousness and an interplay between the supernatural and the metafictional; a concern with the sublime effects of terror and the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity; specific Gothic thematic devices of haunting, the doppelgänger, and a dualistic philosophy of good and evil; an atmosphere of mystery and suspense and a counter-narrative function. (Beville 2009, 15)

While each of these conventions appears individually in either Gothic or postmodernist fiction, not all works of fiction manage to be both Gothic and postmodernist. Additionally, elements such as “tales within tales, changes of narrators, and ... found manuscripts or interpolated histories” (Sedgwick 1986, 9), intensify the ontological doubts that are the main concerns not only in postmodernism but also in contemporary Gothic fiction. These works often feature “author-protagonists” (McRobert 2014, 298), reflecting the intricate interplay between Gothic and postmodernist narrative techniques and highlighting their shared fascination with the complexities of reality and perception.

For the author-protagonist, the author as protagonist, or the protagonist as author, the writing experience embodies “a form of Gothic terror,” as Roberts Miles (1993) aptly describes. This suggests that the act of writing reflects Gothic core perils such as “claustrophobia, incarceration, torture, rape, and the dissolution of identity” (13). Author-protagonists, deeply embedded in the Gothic text’s creation, experience anguish and distress that highlight essential features of the genre where they function simultaneously as authors and characters. This dual

role emphasizes their unique contribution to Gothic fiction's thematic depth. In contemporary Gothic texts, writing serves not just as a narrative device but also as a metafictional commentary on the production of these texts. Miles refers to this as "belated Gothic," which signifies texts that are self-aware, acknowledging both "the discursive subtext of the Gothic" and their relationship to it (13). This concept of "belated Gothic" is a clear representation of postmodern "metafiction," a term coined by William H. Gass (1970) and expanded by Waugh (1984), highlighting the increased self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty in fiction since the 1960s. Adhering to Gothic structure, these texts often portray "a monstrous version of James M. Hutcheon's concept of the metafictional," emphasizing "the production and reception of fiction as the location of horror" (McRobert 2014, 298). This use of Gothic conventions serves to "expose the preoccupations and fears that pervade postmodernist literature and culture" (Beville 2009, 55). In Gothic-postmodernist works, as Beville further asserts, the ideologies of Gothic and postmodernism coexist symbiotically, creating "a manifestation of terror in the self-questioning realm of non-identity that is the locus of the Gothic-postmodernist protagonist" (56). This synergy underscores the genre's unique capability to mirror contemporary anxieties and offer cultural critiques.

In Gothic-postmodernist texts, the postmodern subject serves as the focal point, depicted through "an impressionistic" portrait as "the phantom of the hyperreal self; ... not merely a manifestation of abjection, but ... the epitome of anti-essentialism and as a counter-narrative, a reversal of the perceived progressive unity of Western culture" (Beville 2009, 87). This portrayal emphasizes that, rather than being rational and integrated, the postmodern subject exists in a state of "ontological oscillation" (McHale 1987, 32). Beville describes this as "a state of existential hypostasis," where the subject's physicality is "hauntological, ethereal and his spiritual presence is absence." This existence between "life and death, knowing and not knowing, existence and nonexistence, text and nothing" (Beville 2009, 79) highlights the complex and often contradictory nature of the postmodern subject. Such a paradoxical existence presents the postmodern subject with the sublime fear of possible non-being in the face of possible being. This is compounded by the concept of "under erasure" (McHale 1987, 12), where the author-protagonist can freely project a world or fictionalize reality within the text, making the subject's identity fluid and perpetually in flux. The plurality of interpretations that arise in defining the postmodern subject often contradict or nullify each other, further emphasizing the inherent tension and fluidity within postmodern identity. Ultimately, this dichotomy encapsulates the perpetual struggle for coherence in an inherently fragmented reality, reflecting the deep existential and ontological concerns of the postmodern condition. The Gothic-postmodernist framework allows for a rich exploration of these themes, providing a unique lens through which contemporary anxieties and cultural critiques can be examined.

Highlighting the Gothic-postmodernist features of *City of Glass*, Beville asserts that postmodernism is "partly responsible for" the "hauntological, terrified characters" of Paul Auster (Beville 2009, 17). In a broader context, the uncanny

situations of the protagonists in Auster's postmodernist metafiction deserve closer examination, particularly in *Travels in the Scriptorium* (henceforward *TIS*), where the author-protagonist navigates a disorienting world of textual loops. This setting emphasizes how Auster's metafiction draws its Gothic elements from its textuality, creating what can be termed the Austerian textual dread—the profound confusion experienced by the author-protagonist within the cyclical reading-writing process. Auster's rather extreme exploration of the relationship between the author and the text, framed within Gothic-postmodernism, significantly contributes to the genre, even if this was not his conscious intention. This analysis highlights the intricate interplay between Gothic and postmodern elements in *TIS*, enhancing our appreciation of Auster's distinctive narrative style. This perspective sheds light on how postmodernism influences the creation of haunted and terrified characters in Auster's fiction. The Gothic-postmodernist aspects of his narratives, particularly in *TIS*, illustrate the vertiginous confusion of the author-protagonist trapped in an endless cycle of creation and interpretation. This intertwining of Gothic and postmodernist themes underscores Auster's unique ability to evoke existential dread through a complex narrative structure.

## 2. The gothic entrapment within textuality in *Travels in the Scriptorium*

*TIS* recounts the story of Mr. Blank, a confused old man whose identity remains a mystery. Initially, he finds himself trapped in an unfamiliar chamber with no recollection of how he arrived there. Determined to uncover the truth about his confinement, he examines the room, looking like a cell, and scrutinizes the objects on a nearby desk, including a manuscript and a set of photographs. As the day unfolds, various individuals, seemingly acquaintances from his past, visit him in his cell. Their vague hints at his identity only deepen his confusion. Some visitors inform him that he is in custody due to his misdeeds against others. Meanwhile, an invisible observer meticulously monitors Blank's every move, capturing his actions on camera and recording his sounds with a microphone. His relentless attempts to uncover the truth about his past and his current predicament are constantly met with frustration. Ultimately, on opening a manuscript to read, he is shocked to discover that it recounts his own story from the beginning of the novel. A first-person narrator ends the book by revealing that Blank's routine activities repeat in a cyclical manner on a daily basis.

*TIS* offers readers an intricate plot featuring stock characters whose anti-adventures in a circular text create nothing but vertigo. The textual loop is absurd, achieving no conclusion but the repetition of Blank's life in the scriptorium, as if within a Chinese-box structure. Essentially, *TIS* as a challenging example of postmodernist metafiction explores the textuality or selfhood of the text as fabulation. Beville notes that "selfhood in a postmodernist sense deals not only with the self that is the reader and the self that is the author, but also, the 'self' that is the novel." This feature serves as a significant "point of conjunction between

postmodernism and the Gothic” regarding the “metafictional characteristics of most of the early Gothic stories, particularly the frame tale and ‘textual self-consciousness’” (Beville 2009, 47). Although postmodernist fiction exhibits these characteristics in many examples, its shared elements with the Gothic are essentially reflected in a different context. Addressing ontological doubts, McHale’s concept of “the ontological dominant” (1987, 10) reveals how the self-consciousness of the text manifests as “the fabulous” (Beville 2009, 47). This underscores what makes *TIS* a striking example of Gothic-postmodern metafiction: not only its inherent textuality but also its incorporation of Gothic elements in a postmodern sense. The interplay of these elements highlights the complexity and depth of Auster’s work, providing a rich terrain for exploring the intersection of Gothic and postmodernist themes.

### *2.1. The uncanny structure of the scriptorium as a prison*

Sigmund Freud (1919/1981) defines “the uncanny” as encompassing “what is frightening,” “what arouses dread and horror,” and inducing “feelings of repulsion and distress” (219). He argues that the uncanny is “frightening precisely because it is not known” (220). This suggests that objects or situations evoke fear due to their unfamiliarity, as even familiar things can become frightening and uncanny when perceived differently (221). Expanding on this, as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle contend (2009), the uncanny involves “a sense of unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar,” or vice versa. The core uncertainty principle imbues the uncanny with a shapeshifting power in various situations, manifesting in strange repetitions of feelings, situations, and events such as *déjà vu* or *doppelgängers*. It plays with “odd coincidences” to suggest that some events “are fated to happen,” animates the lifeless through “animism” and “anthropomorphism,” and presents characters in trance-states or madness through “automatism.” Additionally, the uncanny plays with the concept of life in death through claustrophobia and *vivisepture* (35-38). This multifaceted nature of the uncanny, as seen in *TIS*, underscores its profound impact on the human psyche, blurring the lines between reality and the surreal. This is evident in Blank’s experiences within the scriptorium, where his surroundings and repetitive actions create a sense of eerie familiarity tinged with dread. It deepens our understanding of fear and fascination by highlighting how the familiar can become a source of terror when it takes on unfamiliar or unsettling qualities.

Although there is no definitive archaeological evidence, a scriptorium was likely a room in medieval European monasteries used by scribes for copying and illuminating manuscripts. Alison Stones (2014) suggests it might have been “a place where scribes were working,” manuscripts were kept, or even produced, as writing and reading were necessary skills for the monks (113). In *TIS*, Blank is portrayed as a parody of a medieval monk copying a manuscript. In his case, the manuscript recounts the life story of another monk who, in a twist, turns out



to be himself repeatedly navigating the scriptorium, which becomes his textual prison. Such “writing life,” for Sherry Truffin (2014) describes this “writing life” as “a Gothic trap: if the author is identified with his text, if he exists only in writing, then [the] writer’s block is the threat of annihilation ... [as] is the successful completion of the text.” A trapped writer, through the writing act, has no escape but to “prolong the act of creation without regard to its product and mull the narcissistic or solipsistic nature of his activity.” The text, as a written creation, “becomes a miscreation who, like Frankenstein’s monster, comes back to haunt and menace him” (57). According to Robert D. Hume, “the key characteristic of the Gothic novel is not its devices but its atmosphere ... of brooding terror” (1969, 286). This sense of hauntology in Gothic-postmodernist fiction, as Beville observes (2009, 17), is central to Blank’s situation in the scriptorium, rendering his existence as uncanny. This blending of Gothic and postmodern elements significantly deepens the thematic richness and psychological complexity of Auster’s narrative.

“Perhaps he has always been here,” the narrator tells us about Blank and his *déjà vu*, “perhaps this is where he has lived since the day he was born” (Auster 2006, 2). Textually speaking, Blank has always been in the scriptorium, and in due time he will adapt to it. But for now, the uncanny situation is undoubtedly relevant. According to Freud (1981), “The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny” concerning the objects and phenomena in it (221). In Gothic-postmodernism, “the uncanny experiences” are “intimated by the text” (Beville 2009, 87). This means that not only does the protagonist face the uncanny, but the reader also encounters the text with doubt and uncertainty regarding textual truth. Freud (1981) suggests that “one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton” (227). Blank’s repetitive body motion in the scriptorium, mirroring that of someone programmed to act in a specific way, and the entire text’s cyclical nature, where it ends as it begins, give the impression that Blank is continuously retuned to perform the same activities. This ouroboros of Blank’s life in an unknown place renders the scriptorium an uncanny place, as Blank has become an essential part of it.

Blank can also be seen as a parody of the *isolato*, the introspective Romantic wanderer in nature. However, he is trapped in a cell with nothing particular to ponder: “The room is his world now,” the narrator says, “Blank is old and enfeebled, but as long as he remains in the room with the shuttered window and the locked door, he can never die, never disappear, never be anything but the words I am writing on this page” (Auster 129-130). The “page” the narrator refers to seems to represent the scriptorium, the prison in which Blank is held. In other words, Blank’s experience as a textual being is being written and re-written by a narrator who appears to belong to the novel’s textual world, represented by the scriptorium as a place for writing. For Beville, postmodernism can be evaluated as being

“dedicated to excess,” similar to Gothic fiction (2009, 11). The excess of textuality in *TIS*, as reflected by Blank’s textual life in the scriptorium, extends beyond the postmodernist text in a way that makes it uncanny. Macandrew (1979) argues that “settings turn out to be part of characterization and methods of narration to be principles of structure” since moods, tones, and emotions bear “anger or fear or tranquility” that fill the novel’s universe, as filtered by the protagonist (109). In other words, all aspects of setting like weather, scenery, and design, are “expressive of character” (110). Thus, it is not only Blank who contributes to the scriptorium’s uncanny nature but also the scriptorium that manifests Blank’s uncanny identity as a textual being. This interconnectedness highlights how Auster uses setting to reflect and amplify the protagonist’s internal state, creating a deeply immersive and unsettling narrative atmosphere.

## 2.2. *The ontological suspense of a textual being*

Suspense in the Gothic sense is akin to existential anxiety, presenting the subject with a plethora of possibilities for being and acting. Traditionally, the element of suspense in Gothic fiction stems from “the causes and effects of terror”. However, in a postmodernist context, it is characterized by the “suspension of being in which endless possibilities may be presented” (Beville 2009, 27). This distinction emphasizes the existential anxiety prevalent in both genres. This means that the potential for what may happen next always causes existential anxiety in Gothic fiction’s characters. According to Beville (2009), we inhabit “a world with limited access to ‘the real,’ and accordingly, to the unreal” (32). This precarious balance between reality and unreality generates a fear of plunging into the void of either, highlighting the existential dread in postmodern Gothic narratives.

Auster’s use of suspense in *TIS* hinges on the eternal repetition of the same situation, with no promising resolution. It is an absurdist scenario where nothing ever changes, akin to a spinning spiral. At the core of *TIS* lies the Nietzschean concept of “the eternal recurrence of the same,”<sup>1</sup> a profound philosophical idea that generates cosmic fear in those who comprehend it. Nietzsche described this state as “existence as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness,” which he considered “the most extreme form of nihilism: the nothing” (1901/1986, 55). When Blank realizes that the manuscript represents his eternal recurrence, the narrator does not comment on Blank’s state of mind to reveal whether he accepts his fate. Instead, he simply continues to repeat his actions, as the narrative suggests. This reflects the perpetual and cyclical nature of his existence, echoing the postmodern and Gothic themes of eternal recurrence and existential dread. There follows only a scene of his anger and frustration:

In an outburst of pent-up anger and frustration, he tosses the manuscript over his shoulder with a violent flick of the wrist, not even bothering to turn around to see where it lands. As it flutters through the air and then



thuds to the floor behind him, he pounds his fist on the desk and says in a loud voice: When is this nonsense going to end? (Auster 2006, 129)

For the narrator, “it will never end” (129). This statement signals that the cycle will persist as long as the book is read. This perpetual loop underscores the relentless nature of the narrative, entrapping both the protagonist and the reader in an unending cycle of repetition. The book’s conclusion implies that each reading restarts the cycle, highlighting the ceaseless nature of the protagonist’s existence and the reader’s engagement with the story.

Meanwhile, the textual suspense in *TIS* hints at its physicality as a textual phenomenon. Postmodernism, in this sense, challenges “the nature of existence and concepts of reality” by foregrounding such issues as “the fictionality and textuality of those realities” (Beville 2009, 11). The claim that postmodernism foregrounds writing over reading reflects a shift in focus from the consumption of texts to their production and the processes involved. Barthes in “The Death of the Author” (1967) famously argues that the identity and intentions of the author are irrelevant to the interpretation of a text, and the text is seen as a space where multiple interpretations can coexist. Accordingly, the meaning of a text becomes a collaborative creation between the writer and the reader, with the writer’s original intent being just one of many possible interpretations. Metafiction acts as the proper tool in postmodernist fiction when the text is to self-consciously address the act of writing and its own fictional nature. This technique foregrounds the writing process, highlighting the constructed nature of narratives and the artificiality of storytelling conventions. In John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), for example, the narrator frequently breaks the fourth wall, discussing the act of writing the novel and even offering multiple endings. Likewise, intertextuality, where texts reference, quote, or allude to other texts, emphasizes the interconnectedness of literary works and the ongoing dialogue between them, which is facilitated by the act of writing. In this sense, Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* manifests a series of incomplete stories, each referencing other literary works, thereby highlighting the act of writing by creating a mosaic of interconnected texts.

In Gothic fiction, the foregrounding of writing over reading manifests in various ways such as narrative framing. Gothic stories often use manuscripts, letters, and diaries as narrative devices, emphasizing the act of writing and the power it holds over the narrative. In this light, Blank’s story of initiation always wavers; he exists as a blank space that the narrator fills at will. By the end of the novel, the narrator(s) reveal themselves as “figments” of Blank’s mind (Auster 2006, 129), giving an uncanny sense of anthropomorphism if one considers the neural activities of imagination brought to life to speak for themselves. This raises a fundamental question: if the entire story is told from the perspective of Blank’s figments or imagination, then who is imagining it or who is writing his story? From the first-person point of view, Blank’s story is narrated by Blank’s figments about Blank, imagining Blank ad infinitum. This ontological wavering

induces nausea in Blank, who throws the manuscript aside, pondering his end. Upon recognizing the horror of his textual existence, his suspension is not lifted but eternally sealed, realizing he is buried alive in a textual prison, a fact further deepening his existential dread about his textual state of being.

### 2.3. *Vivisepulture as textual custody*

Live burial or vivisepulture in Gothic fiction serves as a powerful metaphor for being “massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access” (Sedgwick 1986, 12). This object of desire can range from one’s past and freedom to the beloved or even life itself. Live burial as an event is a crucial element for creating horror in Gothic fiction, as it symbolizes the ultimate form of entrapment and loss of freedom. At its core, live burial embodies claustrophobia within “narratives of persecution and imprisonment” (Hughes 2018, 47). Such narratives place the suffering subject “in a state of confusion and chaos” (Botting 2009, 185), emphasizing the psychological torment and existential dread that are hallmarks of Gothic literature. The theme of entrapment is prevalent in these stories, highlighting the terror of being physically and metaphorically confined.

Monika Fludernik (2019) identifies three significant manifestations associated with imprisonment narratives that exemplify “carceral topography”: the door, the wall, and the window (27). Traditionally, such topography has included walls and doors without spyholes. However, in the context of *TIS*, security cameras now breach in the intact privacy of claustrophobic places. Fludernik highlights windows as “the only permeable surface of the carceral topography, and it is this that lends them their symbolic significance” (27). To Blank’s surprise, even the windows in his cell are sealed, preventing any light from penetrating. This ontological suspense as a textual being means Blank’s live burial is a form of textual entrapment, an element in postmodernist fiction that aligns with “paranoid Gothic.” William Hughes (2018) defines “paranoid Gothic” as a tradition within Gothic literature depicting “characters acting within situations of epistemological uncertainty,” featuring maze-like, uncanny environments where characters are “being pursued or persecuted for reasons of which they are wholly ignorant” (117). This concept is essential to understanding Blank’s claustrophobic life and paranoid situation in *TIS*, exemplifying his live burial within the text.

The claustrophobic nature of Blank’s life in custody and his paranoid situation symbolize his live burial. The narrator’s decision to leave Blank to experience a live burial in the text parallels Montresor’s actions in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” where the unreliable narrator leads his friend Fortunato to his death chamber.

Blank is thus condemned to live through vivisepulture. The ending in *TIS*, as Sedgwick (1986) describes, is “where the book simply seems to die from exhaustion” (11). The narrator appears in the last two pages of the novel to interrupt the textual loop of Blank’s life, as if the repetition of Blank’s story is already exhausting the narrator. This relentless and cyclical nature of Blank’s

entrapment further highlight the interplay between Gothic and postmodern themes, emphasizing the profound psychological and existential dread inherent in Auster's narrative.

The impossibility of escape in *TIS* is symbolized by the mysterious door of the cell, which Blank doubts whether it is locked but makes no attempt to test. The windows are shut and sealed, and the narrator declares that Blank "can never die" in this room (Auster 2006, 129). This textual confinement represents a life sentence for Blank, his entrapment within the cell serving as both his vivisection, or premature burial, and a replacement for his death due to his very existence as a textual being. Blank's mental condition appears to have necessitated his isolation from the human world, excommunicating him from both his physicality and his humanity. There is a paradox in Blank's world regarding its spatiotemporal dimensions; while there is a clear sense of place where Blank resides, there is no sense of time since his life is infinite. Beville (2009) explains that this "paradox of place and timelessness bears a sense of haunting typical of Gothic fiction" (147), enhancing the eerie and claustrophobic atmosphere of Blank's entrapment.

#### *2.4. The existential horror of the found manuscript and the embedded doppelgänger*

Found objects in Gothic literature, especially manuscripts, often contribute significantly to the uncanny aspect of Gothic situations. Found manuscripts or documents are common tropes in Gothic fiction, often serving as keys to unraveling the mystery or curse at the story's heart. These texts within texts add a layer of metafictional complexity, as they are both part of the narrative and a commentary on the act of writing. For instance, the epistolary form of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* emphasizes the act of writing and collecting narratives, highlighting how the characters' understanding of events is mediated through their documentation. The fragmented nature of these texts contributes to the overall sense of horror and mystery. In particular, when the found object is a document, previously lost or unknown to everyone, it can serve various purposes: it might bestow the protagonist with their identity or social status, act as a guideline or manual for some specific purpose during their adventures, or even, according to Hughes (2018), "simply explain and bring closure to some troubling incident" (74). Found manuscripts, in particular, can also be used in framing a work, as seen in postmodernist metafiction. In this context, the manuscript as a narrative frame is "an entrapment horrifically located within the confines of text" (Beville 2009, 79). This not only complicates the narrative structure but also makes it uncanny, giving the entire work "a dreamlike quality" (Galens 2002, 139). According to Fred Botting (2005), mixing narratives causes uncanny effects by introducing "narrative play and ambivalence," intensifying horror (110). Narrative breaks, such as when manuscripts interrupt the main narrative level of the story or its diegesis, are "ungrounded in any reality," thereby creating "a threat of sublime excess, of a new darkness of multiple and labyrinthine narratives" that

threatens the subject's identity (111). This blending of narratives underscores the complex and layered nature of Gothic and postmodernist storytelling, enhancing the overall sense of unease and horror.

*TIS* exhibits what Botting calls a "sublimely textual form" (2005, 111). Blank is executed, both in terms of performance and sacrifice, by his textuality; he is "entombed, encrypted, archived within a fiction preceding and exceeding his own" (Boulter 2011, 55). This illustrates how Auster describes his characters in such settings: Blank is "free to wander" while he is "most lost and confused" (as cited in Hutchisson 2013, 40). In postmodernist fiction, the narrator is often a "the disembodied narrator, a dislocated voice ... remains unnamable and unknowable, existing merely as a fragmented consciousness," as Beville describes (2009, 78). Blank can only find his identity in the manuscripts through his infinite doubles, who are reborn in the vertigo of the self-repeating frame tales. Encountering these doubles is profoundly shocking for Blank; it is as if he looks into a mirror that leads to another internal mirror. The presence of another self is unsettling for Blank. The manuscript acts as a metaphorical umbilical cord connecting Blank with his double. Freud (1981) notes that vivisection "is the most uncanny thing of all" to some people, as it "is only a transformation of ... intra-uterine existence"<sup>2</sup> (244). Caroline Rupprecht (2013) in *Womb Fantasies* argues that the womb represents a metaphorical space reflecting the trauma of postmodern existence. Thus, the manuscript bearing another Blank within awaits the Blank outside to join with the Blank inside by opening it. This double represents another self in another dimension, stretching Blank's life eternally and imprisoning his being through other framed manuscripts.

Although, according to Freud (1986), the double, at one stage of a person's mental development, is linked to a narcissistic assurance of life against death, its very presence challenges the unity and integrity of the self before the other. Freud thus considers the double as "the uncanny harbinger of death" (235), "a thing of terror" (236) that disrupts the hero's centrality in their story world. Nevertheless, the double is also "a promise of immortality" despite being a messenger of death (Bennett and Royle 2009, 41). Hughes (2018) identifies the "doppelgänger condition" as another element of paranoid Gothic, where the horror of the double continuously pursues the victim, adding to the existential terror experienced by characters like Blank (117). In Alison Milbank's opinion, "Gothic tropes of repetition, whether of plot or description, evoke the uncanny," putting the protagonist "at the extremity of psychic disturbance not merely for the circular closure of uncanny repetition" but causing them to bear "the hermeneutic fracture of a fallen world" on their body (2009, 240). In *TIS*, Blank embodies this antithesis as he is both the reader and the writer. His mirror image, his double, is a reflection of his constant repetition of life, experiencing death and rebirth simultaneously, and being robbed of his former life while being doubled in a new one. This concept is further highlighted by the Gothic fact that "Time and experience become doubled in Gothic fiction through the use of *déjà vu*"

(Galens 2002, 145). At the beginning of the novel, Blank is thus introduced to the reader as such:

It is unclear to him exactly where he is. In the room, yes, but in what building is the room located? In a house? In a hospital? In a prison? He can't remember how long he has been here or the nature of the circumstances that precipitated his removal to this place. Perhaps he has always been here; perhaps this is where he has lived since the day he was born. (Auster 2006, 2)

That Blank does not remember his identity each time his narrative is repeated is due to the narrator's power over him. The uncanny narrator, with its unreliability, erases Blank's memory to provide a clean slate for new thoughts to be written repeatedly. The narrator also acts partly as a "fictional editor." Hughes (2018) notes that "fictional editors" are prevalent in Gothic fiction, typically aiming to bring "credibility and order" to narratives that merge the unfamiliar (uncanny) with the familiar. Being an editor, therefore, means "to exercise power over a text" (70). This dominant power makes fictional editors unreliable as they manage the story events and characters in a specific order. Considering this, the narrator in *TIS* has rendered Blank into a clinical case exhibiting both "echopraxia" and "echolalia"<sup>3</sup>—involuntary imitations of others' actions and sounds, respectively (Ganos et al. 2012, 1222). Freud (1981) describes this as "an unintended recurrence of the same situation," like wandering in in a dark, unfamiliar room and repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture (237). Essentially, the narrator forces Blank to repeat himself each time by making him read the cursed manuscript within an embedded frame tale. The moment he recognizes that he is being repeated within a frame tale, he becomes like a Kafkaesque insect, forced to accept his metamorphosis—in Blank's case, this constant repetition into his double. This postmodern subject, as Beville describes, "has multiplied and fractured, diluted into a decentred and repetitive narrative: a counter-narrative" (2009, 105). This narrative highlights the power dynamics at play and the psychological torment experienced by Blank, deepening the postmodern critique of identity and reality. The interplay between the narrator's control and Blank's endless repetition highlights the complex and layered nature of Gothic-postmodernist storytelling, enhancing the overall sense of unease.

## *2.6. The sublime horror of textual embalmment and the uncanny status of textuality*

The postmodern subject is a construct shaped by the ontological oscillation encountered through the process of linguistic production. According to Barthes, the writer is "born simultaneously with the text" and "is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (Barthes 1977, 145). This means that the writer's identity is intrinsically tied to the act of writing itself. Beville (2009)

suggests that Gothic-postmodernism presents us with “sublime terror” (15), where the mutual engagement of the writer and their writing leads to “world of endless reduplications” (96), highlighting the perpetual and unsettling nature of the text’s reality. The “sublime experience,” in Beville’s view, involves “how far can the artist go in representing that unrepresentable” (202). This concept is closely related to Lyotard’s theory of “the unrepresentable,”<sup>4</sup> which posits that the sublime occurs when our imagination cannot succeed “to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept” (1979/1984, 78). The notion of the unrepresentable underscores the struggle to articulate the sublime, as it involves pushing the boundaries of representation to capture that which cannot be easily conveyed. This highlights the tension between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, which is a central theme in both Gothic and postmodernist literature. In Lyotard’s view,

We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to “make visible” this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience); ... They can be said to be unrepresentable. (1979/1984, 78)

In contrast to the modern rendering of the sublime, which “allows the unrepresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents” (78), Lyotard introduces the concept of the unrepresentable within the act of presentation itself. The postmodern approach aims to create new forms of presentation, not for the sake of enjoyment, but to emphasize the concept of the unrepresentable more strongly. This highlights the innovative and boundary-pushing nature of postmodern art and literature, emphasizing its departure from traditional norms. At this juncture, Lyotard connects the postmodern sublime and the uncanny. The postmodern text renders the act of writing uncanny by contrasting the established conventions of language with language itself. Unlike traditional texts, postmodernist texts operate without “pre-established rules” or “familiar categories” govern a postmodernist text. Therefore, the postmodern artist or writer works without rules “to formulate the rules of what will have been done” (81). Pamela S. Anderson explains that the postmodern rendering of the sublime includes “the pleasure in irreconcilable conflict over this unrepresentable in presentation” (2011, 219). By seeking to present the unrepresentable, postmodern artists push the boundaries of representation, creating works that evoke a deeper sense of the sublime.

The sublime in *TIS* manifests as the textual horror Blank experiences upon recognizing his true status as a textual product. This status, structured like an ouroboros, or a strange loop, or a Klein bottle,<sup>5</sup> defies imagination and presentation. According to Edmund Burke, “whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime”<sup>6</sup> (1757/1998, 86).



Blank himself is an empty space, a vessel where other characters are rewritten, manifests intertextual pot and a pastiche of Auster's fictional characters up to that point (see Butler and Gurr 2008, 199). He is akin to Victor Frankenstein's monster, composed of various parts. When Blank opens the manuscript on his desk and reads his own story as it repeats, it is as if he is looking at his corpse in the grave of the manuscript. This moment of "terrified" awareness is, as Beville describes, "terror as a sublime experience in the sense of a liminal state of existence," questioning the truthfulness of his situation (2009, 27). For Blank, this scenario is claustrophobic and liminal, as he exists both inside and outside the manuscript. This duality amplifies the sense of entrapment and existential dread that permeates his narrative, reflecting the complex interplay between Gothic and postmodern elements in Auster's work. Blank's sublime fear is thus his "terror of textuality," as described by David Punter:

one of the roots of terror is incarnation; or rather, the terror of incarnation, the fear that bits and pieces of our own psyche - or body - will receive the gift of 'organisation' and be returned to us as a fantasised organic whole. We might want to refer this terror back to the terror of textuality in general; the fear that these words on the page might spring to life. (2009, 246)

Blank's entrapment in a textual loop emphasizes the structure of his writing scriptorium and its structure. Stephen Bernstein highlights that Auster's usage of "real or metaphoric" locked rooms "should lead us toward a developed understanding of the meaning of the sublime in his work" (1995, 95-96). In *TIS*, the scriptorium serves as both a real prison and a metaphor for the textual world of the book. Blank's revolt against the endless textual mirroring represents abjection, leaving the story open for another similar day in his life. Furthermore, Blank is treated in the scriptorium as an automaton and must take pills as "part of the treatment" on a daily basis (Auster 2006, 14). This aspect of his condition creates an uncanny trance-state. During his daily visits with nurse Anna, Blank states, "I can't remember if I slept or not," to which Anna responds, "that means the treatment is working" (13). This perpetual treatment and entrapment further underscore the eerie and uncanny nature of Blank's existence.

Blank is doomed to remain in the scriptorium forever. At the novel's beginning, as he attempts to read a typed manuscript on his desk—a typescript that eerily mirrors his own capture—fear has "taken hold of him" as "something he cannot account for" (Auster 2006, 8). When he stops reading the typescript, "[h]is fear has been replaced by confusion, and while he has grasped every word of the text so far, he has no idea what to make of it" (10). Blank's doomed survival is uncanny, reflecting his essence and existence.

Royle (2003) describes the uncanny as encompasses "feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced." This recognition leads to "a critical disturbance of what is proper," including "one's so-called 'own' name" and the names of others, places, and events (1). Blank's

name, indicative of blankness, symbolizes his lack of identity. As long as he remains Blank, as suggested by the manuscript in the scriptorium, he embodies the unrepresentable. This unrepresentability signifies both his life and death, making his existence in the scriptorium a state of death in life and life in death. In such a vegetative state, the uncanny, if identified, becomes a moment of epiphany in one's life, as Punter posits:

The uncanny comes to remind us that there is no obvious beginning, to life or to thought, that we are composed of prior traces, some of them available for conscious memory but most of them sunk in a primal past which is not recoverable by conscious means but which continues to influence, and perhaps even determine, our sense of our place in the world. (2007, 132)

Blank's double in the typed manuscript recounts how his "first days in the cell were interrupted by numerous beatings" and that he cannot remember how many times he has lost consciousness and "failed to notice when a particular sun might have risen or another might have set" (Auster 2006, 9). This passage emphasizes Blank's perpetual entrapment in the scriptorium, mirroring his internal existential crisis and highlighting the profound and unsettling nature of his fragmented identity.

On a larger scale, one can imagine the implied author of *TIS* sitting at his desk and writing "the world that is the book," as Alikei Varvogli (2001) describes Auster's postmodernist metafiction. This perspective, which portrays the novel as a child of its author rather than a fatherless text, imbues the story with responsibilities and a sense of authorship. *TIS* incorporates many elements that make it Gothic in the postmodern sense. In this context, the implied author occupies the position of the editor or mastermind in Gothic fiction, who derives meaning from the textual pain imposed on the blank page. Such dynamic underscores the intricate relationship between creator and creation, emphasizing the power and control the author has over the narrative and characters.

## Conclusion

The Gothic, as a self-reflexive genre, delves into our unconscious fears and anxieties, as well as our concerns about our position in the world. This self-reflexivity aligns it closely with postmodernism, which also focuses on narrative self-awareness and the examination of reality through linguistic and textual means. Postmodernism, with its narrative games and ontological investigations into the nature of reality, serves as a fitting medium for the survival of basic Gothic conventions, defamiliarizing what is taken for granted. Redefining the Gothic to include seemingly incongruent genres necessitates reconsideration. In this context, "Gothic-postmodernism" has paved the way for understanding postmodernist fiction in groundbreaking ways, highlighting the horror of the postmodern condition and the fundamental confinements of the postmodern subject. Gothic elements as narrative transgression, shifts in point of view, haunting

characters from the past, shadow worlds, frame tales, claustrophobic places, and repetitious situations all appear in *TIS*, contributing to its gothic atmosphere. What defines *TIS* as Gothic-postmodernist fiction is how these devices manifest as postmodern narrative techniques, presenting a subject through linguistic indeterminacy and narrative exhaustion. Thus, the solid postmodernist approach to narrative self-awareness and the perplexing metafictional status of *TIS* parody the conventions of the Gothic, effectively postmodernizing the genre.

Mr. Blank is *TIS* is a protean character who constantly metamorphoses into a framed version of himself within the text's loop. Excluding the last two pages of the novel, it does not matter where one begins to read as every situation is bound to repeat at least twice. This textual prison of the scriptorium, in which Blank is trapped, represents the castle of torture in traditional Gothic fiction, differing only in appearance. He is primarily trapped in the subjective world of his figments and can never exist beyond them, as they are his only certainty. The narrator overpowers Blank through the narrative, intensifying his claustrophobia and sublime fear of textual confinement. The narrator condemns Blank to a life of vivisepture within vivisepture, a Gothic entrapment within textuality. In this sense, his life is an endless cycle dictated by the manuscript he reads, representing a prison that transcends physical barriers. This textual confinement not only underscores the theme of existential entrapment but also illustrates the relentless nature of the Gothic-postmodern condition. The narrative's structure, with its metafictional elements and constant repetition, creates a labyrinthine world where Blank's identity is perpetually in flux, underscoring the interplay between Gothic and postmodern themes. This entrapment is not only physical but also existential, capturing the essence of Gothic horror in the context of a textual universe.

### Notes

1. Nietzsche's concept of "eternal recurrence of the same" suggests a thought experiment in which all events in the universe will recur infinitely in the exact same sequence, challenging individuals to live in a way that they would embrace this eternal repetition. Introduced in *The Gay Science* and developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it can evoke cosmic fear due to the realization of reliving every moment endlessly, confronting individuals with the weight of their choices and the potential monotony of existence. The cosmic fear associated with Nietzsche's concept parallels the existential dread found in Gothic literature, where characters frequently face their deepest fears and the uncanny.
2. According to Freud (1981), the fear of being buried alive, known as *taphophobia*, is linked to deeper, unconscious memories of intra-uterine existence. Freud believed that these memories are repressed and buried in the subconscious, but they can resurface in the form of certain fears and fantasies. Freud described intra-uterine existence as a state of repose, warmth, and exclusion of external stimuli, similar to the conditions experienced in the womb. He argued that this state is reactivated during sleep, where people often adopt a fetal posture, seeking the comfort and security reminiscent of their time in the womb.
3. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "echopraxia" as "pathological repetition of the actions of other people as if echoing them" and "echolalia" as "the often pathological repetition of what is said by other people as if echoing them."

4. In *The Postmodern Condition* and "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," Lyotard argues that in the postmodern era, traditional grand narratives and universal truths have lost their credibility. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the limits of representation and the presence of what cannot be fully captured or expressed. Lyotard critiques the idea that reality can be accurately represented through rational or scientific means. His theory of "the unrepresentable" thus challenges us to recognize the limitations of our representational frameworks and to remain open to the complexities and ambiguities of experience.
5. For Brian McHale (1987), these figures illustrate the complex and self-referential nature of postmodern narratives to stand for cyclical and self-contained structure (ouroboros), narrative structures that repeat or circle back to earlier points (strange loops), and narratives that blur boundaries and defy conventional distinctions between different levels of reality or fiction (a Klein Bottle).
6. For Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the nature of the sublime and the beautiful are distinct aesthetic categories. In the quote provided above, Burke is emphasizing that the sublime is closely associated with terror and the capacity to evoke fear. He argues that the sublime arises from experiences that are vast, powerful, and overwhelming, often invoking a sense of awe or fear.

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