

“Dressed up in the body of an old woman”: Gothic Conventions in Ingemann, Andersen, Blixen and Høeg

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ABSTRACT: Despite growing in prominence in the popular and critical mind in recent years, Gothic fiction has yet to be examined within the Danish literary canon. This paper attempts to fill that void by demonstrating an ongoing negotiation of Gothic conventions in select works by B.S. Ingemann, H.C. Andersen, Karen Blixen and Peter Høeg. In addition to reworking traditional Gothic conventions for a Danish context, these writers also draw attention to core features of the Gothic genre that have generally escaped critical attention, such as the peculiar surface-depth perspective that is played out on all levels of narration, setting and characterization. The excessive foregrounding of surfaces contributes to the extremely unstable sense of personal identity, which is the Gothic counternarrative’s most important contribution to the representation of the human predicament in the post-romantic consciousness and which clashes dramatically with the particular Danish discourse of “Dannelse.”

RÉSUMÉ: Malgré sa place grandissante dans l’esprit populaire et critique des dernières années, la fiction gothique danoise reste encore méconnue. Cet essai tente de remédier à la situation en démontrant une continuelle négociation des conventions gothiques dans certaines œuvres de B.S. Ingemann, H.C. Andersen, Karen Blixen et Peter Høeg. En plus d’adapter les conventions gothiques traditionnelles au contexte danois, ces auteurs attirent également l’attention sur les caractéristiques centrales du genre gothique qui ont souvent échappé à l’attention des critiques, comme ce jeu de surfaces et de profondeurs que l’on remarque à tous les niveaux de la narration. La mise en relief excessive des surfaces contribue à créer une perception extrêmement instable de la personnalité, constituant la plus importante contribution de la contre-narration gothique à la représentation de la précarité humaine dans la conscience post-romantique, et contrastant de manière dramatique avec le discours danois de « Dannelse ».

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The last twenty years have seen a virtual explosion of critical and popular interest in all things Gothic. This interest, which shows no signs of abating, extends far beyond the conventional Anglo-American literary canon and has generated an increased awareness of the Gothic impulse in other cultures. Scandinavian Gothic, however, remains relatively unexplored and vaguely defined, and Danish Gothic has been entirely neglected.¹ Given its predilection for realism, Scandinavia has arguably not had a very strong tradition of what are usually seen as fantasy modes, Gothic often being located by readers somewhere in this non-realist spectrum. However, a closer look and a clear sense of how this infamously malleable genre works reveals an ongoing negotiation of Gothic conventions by Danish writers, deftly employing the genre to comment on the crucial interface between “the real” and the artificially constructed. From its inception, Gothic has been envisioned as the ultimate transgression of boundaries between reality and illusion, depth and surface, originality and imitation—binaries which typically set off adjoining conflicts between reason and emotion, life and death, sanity and pathology, mind and body, self and other. These conventional conflicts serve, often in the most shocking ways, to frame a vehement testing of concepts of identity and self-formation, an exploration that is not at all removed from “reality.”

While Gothic is a rather obscure genre in the context of Scandinavian studies, it has evolved with accelerated force in the Anglo-American literary world since the publication of the first self-proclaimed Gothic novel in 1764/1765, Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. The subsequent transformations of the genre, which was already varied in its tumultuous 1764-1824 heyday, from Romantic to Victorian Gothic, from fin-de-siècle to Post-Modern Gothic, are reflected in the trajectory of what we might conveniently label “Danish Gothic,” a genre represented by a number of texts.

Of B.S. Ingemann’s tales from 1820 to 1850, only his Gothic rewriting of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Der Goldne Topf” [“The Golden Pot”] (1814) “Sphinxen” [The Sphinx] (1820) is anthologized today and none has been translated.² The lesser known “Moster Maria” [Auntie Maria] (1820), “Varulven” [“The Werewolf”] (1835), “Niels Dragon” (1847), “Glasskabet” [The Glass Cabinet] (1847), “Det Tilmurede Værelse” [The Bricked-Up Room] (1847), and “Skole-Kammeraterne” [The School Mates] (1850) also draw heavily on Gothic romances, echoing Ingemann’s own early Gothic ballads, and maintaining a dialectic between suspenseful terror and graphic horror, a rather surprising mode to work in for this national icon of benevolent Christianity.

H.C. Andersen may seem a controversial choice in this context: “Skyggen” [“The Shadow”] (1847) is a perfect example of his late romantic management of what smells like a Gothic tale of duplicitous doubles. Instead, it is his last tale, “Tante Tandpine” [“Auntie Toothache”] (1872) which most clearly articulates the

gruesomeness latent in many of his narratives, not least “De Røde Sko” [“The Red Shoes”] (1845). Andersen mirrors a Victorian Gothic in his late Biedermeier tale of societal and psychological forces encroaching upon the freedom of the artist, also a dominant theme in Karen Blixen’s tales.

Given its more appropriate English title, Blixen’s 1935 *Syv Fantastiske Fortællinger*—her 1934 *Seven Gothic Tales* published under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen—has been examined, albeit sparsely, in the light of this Anglo-American tradition, which the market-savvy Blixen avoided for the Danish publication in order to address what she rightly assumed was a more familiar tradition to the German-influenced Danes (Jacobsen 163).³ The often neglected ghost story “Et Familieselskab i Helsingør” [“The Supper at Elsinore”] relies on a sophisticated matrix of Gothic conventions, while “Drømmerne” [“The Dreamers”], “Syndfloden over Norderney” [“The Deluge at Norderney”] and “Aben” [“The Monkey”] participate more indirectly and parodically in the genre. “Karyatiderne” [“The Caryatids”] and “En Herregårdshistorie” [“A Country Tale”] from *Sidste Fortællinger* (1958) [*Last Tales* 1957] return to a classic Gothic mode, detailing the tyranny of the past. Published under another pseudonym, Pierre Andrézel, her 1944 paranoia extravaganza *Gengældelsens Veje* (1960) [*The Angelic Avengers*] (1946) is perhaps the only case of pure Gothic in Danish literature, comprising both a sincere female Bildungsroman and a tongue-in-cheek parody of the genre.

Blixen’s parodic homage to Gothic conventions has been cleverly parodied by Peter Høeg in his postmodern bricolage tales, which resemble the architecturally incongruent haunted house in his “Forholdsregler mod alderdommen” [Precautions against Old Age] constructed from choice bits and pieces from past traditions. This tale as well as “Medlidenhed med børnene i Vaden By” [“Pity for the Children of Vaden Town”] and “Fortælling om et ægteskab” [“Story of a Marriage”] from *Fortællinger om Natten* (1990) [*Tales of the Night* 1998] all play elegant tricks with Gothic conventions, while the nightmarish schoolhouse Gothic *De Måske Egnede* (1993) [*Borderliners* 1994] rearticulates the generically mandatory questioning of the rationality, progress and degree of civilization in enlightened modernity.

What then do these texts, spanning almost two centuries, have in common in order for the argument to be made that they participate in the same literary tradition? The intertwined questions of inclusion and definition are hotly contested in the critical debate, particularly as the Gothic phenomenon has grown ubiquitous in recent years, infecting other genres and media to the point where the term seems both reduced and broadened to a certain eerie ambiance and threatening darkness or slightly better, a group of settings, atmospheres, character patterns and stylistic idiosyncrasies that work together as a representation of the darker side of life: of death, decay, evil, perversion, pathologies, unsanctioned desires, sensory disorientation, the supernatural, the abject and the monstrous. An extreme counter-narrative, Gothic has since the eighteenth century

consistently shadowed normative ideals of self, society and literature, while continually destabilizing established boundaries between legitimate literary forms and trivial entertainment. Once a discourse at the dark margins of culture, Gothic is currently hailed as a subversive cultural force by critics from multiple theoretical positions, which share a focus on the repressive mechanisms and marginalization processes at play in Gothic fiction as well as in its reception history, bound up with middle class consumption patterns—and often rightly so. However, there is a sense now that Gothic, due to its own inherent tensions, both formal and ideological, can be mobilized to meet any given cultural or critical need. To establish a viable Danish Gothic tradition requires a rethinking of what Gothic is, or rather, how it works, in order to go beyond mechanically descriptive conclusions of exemplarity leading to identification, or a too-inclusive model, which neglects the very characteristics of the genre for the purpose of discovering, or even forcing, an underlying psychological, political or religious meaning in its supposed depths. A logical place to begin is in the extensive repetition of recognizable conventions, a rather interesting paradox for such a mobile genre. How exactly do these conventions work?

Gothic is a “literature of terror,” as David Punter has named it. The central fear revolves around transgressions of the individual’s physical and psychological integrity, undertaken by both characters and setting. The conventional inter-human relation consists of a pattern of flight and pursuit, usually embodied in variations on the persecuted maiden and the tyrannical villain, threatening to violate all established boundaries. Usually forgotten is the fact that the relation of pursued and pursuer, often informed by a sexually tinged paranoia, can be rather ambiguous, suggesting the reversible dynamics and role-play found in sadomasochism, and displaying not a Manichean binary of inherent good vs. evil, but rather a case of monstrous properties spreading through contagion. In *Gengældelsens Veje*, the previously persecuted maiden cries out: “Eller ogsaa ... betyder det, at det er os, der jager dem! Og at vi ikke slipper dem, før de er døde!” (1960 169), or in Blixen’s own translation: “The tables have turned and now we are chasing them. The canary birds are out of their cage, and on their track. And they will never leave the blood-trail till they have hunted them down, till they are dead” (1946 200).⁴ The avenging victims become relentless pursuers after prolonged exposure to evil, gradually alienated from themselves through a transmission of qualities. Høeg’s *De Måske Egnede* repeats the pattern in the most violently physical manner, while Ingemann’s Arnold, continually on the run in “Sphinxen,” must ask whether he or his double is a murderer. These narratives explore doublings between the victims on the one hand, in such pairs as close friends or siblings, and their shadowing victimizer on the other, as is also seen in numerous tales by Poe, Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794), Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), and Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions* (1824). The collapse of distinctions

between self and other, subject and object, has informed the genre since its inception.

Contributing to the key Gothic fear of encroachment upon one's personal and political autonomy is the scene of this dramatic struggle: usually an old castle, either literally or metaphorically haunted, but always dark and spine-chilling. The haunted castle has become the defining convention of the genre. Usually envisaged as an antiquated and dilapidated space of repression and confinement, it takes many different architectural forms, which are often convoluted and darks. Replacing the the underground vaults and torture chambers of eighteenth-century feudal castles are convents, old farm houses, schools, parsonages, crumbling ancestral mansions and constricting mid-nineteenth-century living rooms. Ingemann, Andersen, Blixen and Høeg cover a wide range of suddenly threatening spaces, as spectres of a repressed past resurface along with disturbing family secrets, and ideological and psychological conflicts. These real or imagined threats to the self are often acted out in a way that makes the house itself seem alive—blurring the boundaries between imagination and pathology in “Sphixen” and “Tante Tandpine,” subtly playing on age-old notions of sympathy in “Et Familieselskab” (echoing Poe’s “House of Usher”), blatantly exploiting the shock effects the genre so easily affords in *Gengældens Veje* in “det Morderhus, der lukkede sig om dem til alle sider” [the house of murder, which closed around them on all sides] (1960 161; 1946 188) and creating a paranoia-inducing panopticon through modern surveillance technology in Høeg’s *De Måske Egnede*. Through defamiliarization and dark inversion, subject and object coincide; the everyday world in the house as home is rendered disturbing and strange, while the uncanny becomes commonplace. Gothic personal identity is about this bewildering reorientation of the self in the world.

To make sense of the confounding visceral imagery and primal human relations, critics have often resorted to psychoanalysis, itself arguably a Gothic narrative. Through the psychoanalytical approach, scholarly validity and formal coherence have with increasing sophistication been conferred upon this once academically marginal, but commercially popular literary form. However, while Gothic is clearly expressive of fears, anxieties, and complex psychological issues, reading it only as a Freudian allegory, as about something else located in its convoluted depths, tends to dismiss its most striking characteristic—that it is “a writing of excess,” in Fred Botting’s famous words, and that its primary mechanisms take place on the surface, as the props, stagy settings, and thrilling effects threaten to appropriate the narrative (Botting 1995 1, Sedgwick 1981 255–56, Spooner 2006 25).⁵ Not only is this important in the context of identifying a distinct Danish Gothic tradition and what exactly makes these texts seem so alien against the drab background of Scandinavian realism; it is also an obvious but neglected aspect of Gothic fiction in general, although fully present in it since Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). This inaugural text contains all the central

elements of Gothic fiction: the haunted castle, the persecution of various innocents through dark, labyrinthine passages, the dysfunctional family and the related theme of rightful inheritance, as well as a general atmosphere of depravity and violence. In order to get to “the meaning” of this campy narrative, its equally central elements are often dismissed: its melodramatic extravagances of plot, histrionic gestures, hyperbolic rhetorical style, and stagy effects such as portraits and statues that come alive as giant pieces of armour drop from the sky. This highly visual theatricality set the tone for the genre. Andersen’s images of actually and potentially severed limbs in “De Røde Sko” and “Tante Tandpine” show a delight in the physical shock, an affinity shared by Ingemann, who relies on prop-heavy effects such as closet doors opening, skeletons bursting out of their concealment, the dead returning from the grave, bloody knives found in haunted castles, mysterious visions and revealing portraits. Høeg’s predilection for mirrors is anticipated by their use as one of Ingemann’s props. Blixen, too, has her fair share of ghosts and skulls, albeit framed more existentially as a futile peeling away of layers in search of a human core.

Added to these Gothic effects are veils, cloaks, cowls, curtains and other means of concealment and dramatic revelation. These are often employed to heighten the suspense of the customary revelation when the veil is lifted to reveal true familial identity, a dominant theme in Gothic romances. The motif is found in some variations in Blixen’s *Gengældelsens Veje* and “Et Familieselskab,” while it is doubled in the veiled trompe l’oeil portrait of the veiled, ghostly mother in Ingemann’s “Sphinxen” (1820 67). Many of Høeg’s *Fortællinger om natten* revolve around disguises and shocking revelations of true identity or the collapse of the distinction between public and private stages at curtain call. As the genre was shaped by Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis in the 1790s, the effect afforded by veils and veil-like constructions snowballed into a more existential questioning of what defines human identity: how art fashions nature, how surfaces shape self and text (Sedgwick 1981 255–58, Kilgour 130). It is my argument that Danish Gothic texts in particular, toning down more traditionally terrifying Gothic conventions, draw attention to these surface effects. It is almost as if they are propelled by a *horror vacui* which fills a fundamental emptiness with decadent artifice and convoluted ornamentation on the levels of both plot and narration. This is of course the very foundation of Blixen’s oeuvre but Ingemann, Andersen and Høeg, too, contribute to this shaking of the foundations of “reality,” which is described as a devouring and “føleligt vakuum” [a palpable vacuum] in Høeg’s “Spejlbillede af en ung mand i balance” [“Reflection of a Young Man in Balance”] (1990 282; 1998 276). The empty repetition *en abyme* of Arnold’s imagined reflection of himself in Ingemann’s “Sphinxen”—literally a nobody as indicated by his repeated question “hvem er jeg?” [who am I?—is connected across the centuries to Høeg’s tale.

Det øjeblik vi betragter verden, begynder den at forandre sig. Og vi selv med den. At se på virkeligheden er ikke at begribe en struktur. Det er at underkaste sig og at indlede en uoverskuelig forvandling ... Jeg så et spejl. Derefter uendelig mange spejle der spejlede hinandens tomhed... En verden der er en illusion ... en verden der ikke eksisterer, men drømmes af et væsen, der heller ikke eksisterer.
(1990 281-82)

As soon as we lay eyes on the world it starts to change. And we with it. Viewing reality does not mean making sense of a setup. It means surrendering oneself and triggering an unfathomable transformation ... I saw a mirror. Then an infinite number of mirrors reflecting each other's emptiness ... A world which does not exist, but is dreamt up by a creature which in turn does not exist.
(1998 276)

While this narrative is not exactly Gothic, its ontology does inform many of the Danish tales by adding a literal level of circularity in the reciprocal process of creation between the mirror and its creator—in which does agency lie? And what sort of orientation in the world is the result of this illusory self under “uoverskuelig forvandling” [unfathomable transformation] governed by this fragmenting aesthetics of surface in the depthless image?

Many critics, notably Robert Miles, argue that Gothic narratives, often set on the cusp between an older age and a new world, delineate and condense the anxieties of transitional times. The great theme of Romanticism is the loss of the Golden Age, the mythological childhood, from which man has fallen. This is perhaps why Gothic comes to Denmark some fifty years after its inception in England: the Gothic theme of the end of innocence, and of personal and cultural unity, articulates perfectly the quandaries of the new human being emerging in the Romantic age. Thus, Ingemann and Andersen, and Blixen taking this age for her own, confront the daunting task of defining a new self severed from previous frameworks—a project which continues to govern the post-romantic consciousness. In many of their narratives, the lost unity and still haunting presence of the past are conveyed in recurring images of falling, of fragmentation, isolation, disorientation, drowning, being buried alive or devoured by various monstrous beings. It seems that the Gothic idea of a family curse is widened to encompass the family of man, doomed to fall and fail, as illustrated in Satania Infernalis's biblical imagery of the original fall in “Tante Tandpine,” and the constant disoriented falling of Arnold, who “som Adam efter Faldet,” [like Adam after the Fall] (my translation, as also below) is left “udenfor sit Paradiis som Tilskuer” [outside his Paradise as a spectator] separated from a previously known, clearly defined reality, and expected to create his own (46). In the “broader Gothic notion of personal identity ... life begins with a blank,” as Sedgwick puts it (1981 261). Identity is not discovered within or from an identifiable point of origin, but must be found or constructed.

Rather than a blank slate signalling freedom of invention, childhood is far from a golden age of pre-lapsarian bliss in Gothic narratives, which for their effect rely on the construction of the personal and cultural past as sites of terror. Andersen and Ingemann are both heavily inspired by the works of German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, and it is of course Hoffmann's childhood nightmare "Der Sandmann" (1817) that provided the foundation for Freud's "Das Unheimliche" ["The Uncanny"] (1919), a work immensely influential on Gothic criticism. While we want to go beyond the psychoanalytical model, which dismisses the Gothic imagery of the surface to analyze a supposedly individual, originary self buried beneath, what is useful in this context is the dissolution of classical notions of a stable, unified subject, albeit divided only into a three-part model rather than the fragmented, polyvalent Gothic subject. Equally important is the location of the source of terror in the home, the family, everyday life, through the key concept of the "return of the repressed." What has been repressed, on both personal and cultural levels, inevitably comes back to haunt the subject in unfamiliar—yet familiar—shapes and disguises: homely yet othered, propelling the subject into an epistemological crisis when this defamiliarization renders everything uncertain and uninterpretable, including the self and the family as extension of self, while this ambivalence is exacerbated by the confusion of who exactly lurks behind the veil, curtain or locked door, hidden from their supposed origins. The uncanny is associated specifically with the dynamics in the family in Freud's analysis, and Gothic fiction is riddled with confusing familial relations: Blixen's tales are characterized by a complete absence of conventional nuclear families, while Ingemann, Andersen and Høeg describe orphans and broken homes. Most of their protagonists deal with painful losses and interruptions in the maturation process towards becoming a complete being, so that a "true" identity must be continually negotiated. Relations are either too close or too distant, pointing through theatrical exaggeration to the unnatural roles everyone plays: in Gothic fiction, "individual identity ... is social and relational rather than original or private" (Sedgwick 1980 255). Gothic highlights the process of self formation that takes place through the relation to the other as a site of self-making and at the same time, uncannily, a source of self-division.

The sundering dialectic of attraction and repulsion, desire and prohibition, inherent in the family constellation, drives the plots in "Et Familienselskab" and "Tante Tandpine." Informing a Byronically torn *Zerissenheit*, it is fatal in the "circulus vitiosus" [vicious circle] of the three siblings in "Et Familienselskab" (Blixen 253; Dinesen 268), and entirely demonized in "Tandpine" in the odd, sexually tense relationship between the artist and his maternal aunt, at times indistinguishable from her monstrous form of *Satania Infernalis*. The Auntie/Satania character testifies to the simultaneous nurturing and destructive aspect of the claustrophobic family unit, as the maternal aunt ruins his health materially by dissolving his teeth into a dark absence, and her nightly form

threatens to further chip away at the already impotent student with her dentist tool hand. The bourgeois living room, the privileged site of Danish culture and mentality during and since the age of Biedermeier, is transformed into the obscure torture chamber of classic Gothic, no longer a refuge but synonymous with the very threatening forces it was constructed to keep at bay. In *Gengældelsens Veje*, the living room in the farmhouse, cursed by a crime committed during the Revolution, is the scene for the spectacular Liebestod of the Pennhallows, self-proclaimed parental figures turned Gothic villains. Høeg's "Fortælling om et Ægteskab" and Blixen's "Familieselskab" also both have the past return to haunt the living room in the form of a curse, combining "a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space" for the special Gothic impression of "a sickening descent into disintegration" (Baldick xix). Reliving a complex love-hate relationship with strong incestuous undercurrents, Blixen's two spinsters conjure up their long-dead brother in a dark living room facing Hamlet's Kronborg, another dramatic stage for the proto-typical Gothic ghost story of dysfunctional, even murderous familial relations. Høeg's couple is doomed to enact a happy version of their sadistic marriage in their living room as both private space and stage for an audience looking in when the curtain is drawn. A Gothic convention is thus used to break down the boundaries between inside and outside, surface and content. Cloaking familiar images of domesticity in Gothic forms does not disguise but rather discloses what is already strange, in these cases the assumption of the stability of the Freudian bourgeois self, which relies for its formation on the introverted constellation of the nuclear family as it emerged in the early nineteenth century and on the reconciliation of the predatory relations within this unit, required for the production of a healthy social order.

While Radcliffian terror and Lewisian horror are associated with more physical threats to the self, the epistemologically confounding uncanny erupts when things are inexplicably the same and different. Unstable familial relations dissolve the identifying masks that distinguish one person from another in the established roles that uphold individual, family and society. When one person wears several masks, particularly in the texts that deal with doubles, incestuous relations or malicious parental figures, it results in a profound identity crisis for the protagonist. "Sphinxen," "Moster Maria," "Altartavlen," "Tandpine," "Karyatiderne," "Et Familieselskab," *Gengældelsens Veje* and *De Måske Egnede* all represent this collapse of identity referents. While in some texts this uncanny conjoining of identity and alterity only propels further trauma, in others, such as "Familieselskab" and "Karyatiderne" it is sought out as an attempted merger with doubles, siblings, ghosts or other projected or mirrored selves, both identical and different, to bypass the problematic relation between self and other and become, with the least amount of resistance, "other than oneself," yet "more completely oneself" (Miyoshi 11).

Still charting this easy transition from liberating autonomy of the mind to alienating solipsism, yet other Gothic narratives describe this merger as attempted with an actual Other. This generates many sensational effects when characters dress to assume other identities. A simple disguise transforms Kasparsen, the actor, into the murdered Cardinal in Blixen's "Norderney," and the foul-mouthed assistant into the eloquent but deceased Monsieur Andress in Høeg's take on "Norderney," "Vaden By." Both of these metamorphoses frame the identity crises of the adolescent protagonists, Høeg's Kristoffer and Blixen's Calypso, as the world around them comes to an apocalyptic end. Likewise, in the gender-confused *Gengældelsens Veje*, the Pennhallow, *he* "en gammel Dame i Herreklæder" [an old lady in men's clothing] and *she* "hans kone en gammel Mand i Dametøj" [his wife an old man in ladies wear] (Andrézel 1960 84), both dress up easily in the clothes of their two captive girls.⁶ Zosine's outburst, "Vi lever ikke mere," [We are no longer alive] at the realization of the masquerade indicates the instant and complete obliteration of their identities, in the same way that Monsieur Andress and the Cardinal have been done away with by their imitators in voracious, violent take-overs (1960 201; 1946 240). The threatening atmosphere of sexual depravity and sadomasochistic dynamics in Gothic often stems from a fundamental doubt that there can be a relation which is not based on the complete domination, even destruction, of the self or the Other, defamiliarizing by exaggeration the closeness of "normal" human relationships required by modern society.

As an example, Mrs. Pennhallow, self-effacing appendix to her brother-husband, seems to be always devouring her foster daughter Lucan with her piercing gaze. Zosine describes it graphically: "Naar Fru Pennhallow sluger dig saadan med sine runde, graa øjne, prøver hun at suge noget af din Skønhed over fra dit Ansigt til sit eget" [Perhaps, when our old foster-mother cannot take her eyes off you, she is trying to draw [literally 'suck'] the beauty from your face into her own] (1960 84; 1946 98).⁷ The Gothic trope of ocular vampirism and piercing gazes is often associated with demonic villains such as Godwin's Falkland, Hogg's Gil-Martin, Stoker's Dracula, and du Maurier's Svengali. However, "et Ægtepar, der lever meget lykkeligt sammen ... kommer til at ligne hinanden," [a married couple who live very happily together ... end up looking alike] and so through contagion, Mrs. Pennhallow, described as "en tør og træt gammel Herre" [a stale and tired old gentleman] becomes equally the Gothic villain that her brother-husband is (1960 84). Her attempt to assume Lucan's identity by merely looking at her shows that external aspects in this universe constitute identity to a much greater extent than interior qualities, and so in the economy of Gothic identity, the formation of both femininity and masculinity are tied to the mechanics of appearance. At the same time, this penetrating, devouring gaze, which characterizes other figures as well, notably Fanny in "Et Familieselskab," also shows a frequent drive towards interiority, as if to transcend the limits of the body to test this ontology of surface.

The same tension between the recognition of exteriority and the urge for plenitude, authentic meaning and genuine self-expression, which Spooner identifies with Gothic's twin impulse in Romanticism, governs today's most prominent form of the Gothic Weltanschauung in postmodern Goth subculture (Spooner 2006 28). The modern Goth strand of Gothic is usually dismissed by critics as unreflective cookie-cutter non-conformism, which does not subvert any established political paradigms. That may be, but such argumentation shows a misunderstanding of how the Gothic sensibility works: the meaning is not behind the clichés or elaborate costumes but in their coded forms, as one recognizable prop conjures up an entire framework of identity and one costume articulates the subject, in its role as victim or victimizer. Literary Gothic and the subculture that has emerged from it share a hyper-visual, theatrical nature, an obsession with stylized selves that are deliberately clichéd and one-dimensional, created from an existential awareness of a fundamental nothingness at the core, as I have mentioned, by means of elaborate artifice, convoluted ornamentation, and patchwork referencing. For both text and body as scripted and inscribed surfaces, this means a continual deferring of the gaze from penetrating the surface to find true depth in the quest for wholeness at the centre of the Gothic drive.

The lack of depth apparent in Gothic bodies and selves seems only to provoke a continual, violent testing of the validity of the surface (Spooner 2004 10). There is an obvious connection, beyond the obsession with transience and decaying materiality, from early Gothic's interrogation of bodily boundaries, in the form of rape, incest, violence, torture, and sadomasochistic relations, to the more visual self-inflicted violation and submission of the pierced, perforated and penetrated body in the aesthetic of Goth chic. For Ingemann and Andersen, such testing of the perimeters of the body is shaped as a series of physical transformations, from the magical animalistic style of their fantastic narratives and fairy tales, to complete disintegration in the Gothic mode, as they populate their stories with werewolves, the living dead, ghosts, corpses, trolls, monstrous and fragmented bodies that morph into other unstable shapes, later echoed in Blixen's playful "Aben."⁸ Less romantic in spirit are the blank white skulls that are the supposed core of the self in her "Den gamle vandrende ridder" ["The Old Chevalier"] and "Et Familieselskab," akin to Ingemann's defleshed corpses in "Skole-Kammeraterne." Horrifyingly physical are the naked, tortured, degraded bodies in *De Måske Egnede*, and Rosa's self-mutilation in *Gengældelsens Veje* as she brands her own skin, penetrating and devaluing that surface before anyone else can. "Part of the capacity of Gothic texts to disturb derives from their presentation of the body as lacking wholeness and integrity, as a surface which can be modified or transformed," unstable, manipulable and negotiable like its extension, clothing, our second skin, and acquiring the suppleness of a text (Spooner 2004 9-10). This general instability means that skin, clothes and other surfaces, rendered sites of transgression, cease to divide inside from outside, self from other, in an unnatural

and uncanny collapse of distinctions (Halberstam 7). If skin, as the ultimate boundary and surface of the self, is supposed to house the body, it becomes another haunted castle, no longer protecting or shielding the self: “One need not be a chamber to be haunted,” as Emily Dickinson envisaged it in her famous “Poem 670.”

Gothic narratives “turn bodies and minds inside out in their search for monstrosities” (Halberstam 72). In “Et Familieselskab,” the exterior of the monstrous, unnatural spinster, Fanny, displays “en uhyggelig lille Vanførhed” [an uncanny little disfigurement] (1961 227; 1934 238) and “et frygteligt grumt Næb” [a terrible, cruel beak] (1961 237; 1934 250), adding to her self-identification as an old scarecrow (1961 242; 1934 265). However, although she leads a schizoid existence she resists a simple inner-outer dualism, which would produce a deep-structured subjectivity: “Som [de gamle Grenaderer] iførte hendes Sjæl sig den gamle Uniform. Fra dette øjeblik af var det kun for et Syns Skyld, og for Spøg, at hun tog sig ud som en gammel Dame” [Her soul [like the French troops] donned the old uniform. It was for the benefit of the onlookers only ... that she was dressed up in the body of an old woman] (1961 242; 1934 265). The fact that her body is described elsewhere as a coffin (1961 254; 1934 269), and here as a garment, incongruent with her self, would indicate a true self hiding beneath, but her innermost core is yet another surface, dressed up in another gender. The simple dualisms of the Freudian surface-depth model implies something predictable to be interpreted under the surface in the depths that are supposed to be the locus of the original, individual self, but Fanny’s example is far from unique in indicating that the “authentic” selves supposedly concealed underneath the multiplicity of masks, disguises and garments, both literal and metaphorical, are simply not there. The continual oscillation between Auntie Toothache and Satania Infernalis, not to mention Blixen’s Aunt Cathinka and her monkey in “Aben,” attest to this friction of surfaces: can we really determine who is disguised or contained under the skin of whom? Is it clear which is inner and which is outer being?

The multiformed ego in continual flux is perhaps demonstrated best in Blixen’s elusive Pellegrina, in whom one might say that “disguise becomes equivalent to self” rendering “subjectivity a surface effect,” patterns identified by Halberstam in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (64). When the sensational Gothic veil is dramatically rent, it often discloses only another illusion: there is no human core or essence revealed after Pellegrina’s fall, nothing anchoring the continual chain of metamorphoses by this ghostly cipher told by others, voiding the question of self-realization. The narratives in which the most important characters turn out to be actually absent, their bodies dissolved into decorporealized ghosts, such as “Et Familieselskab,” “Forholdsregler” and *De Måske Egnede*, underline the lack of authentic presence behind the continuum of effects. Surface attributes are transferable, “contagious metonymically,” as Sedgwick has established (1981 255). “Simultaneously, contagion flattens or

empties out that which is inside or within, transforming it to one more link in the signifying chain” (Spooner 2004 7), which renders the question of agency complex. The uncannily manly Carlotta in “Vejene omkring Pisa” and Mrs. Pennhallow in *Gengældelsens Veje* instantly re-gender and seemingly humanize themselves by donning women’s sartorial props, demonstrating this transmission of qualities from clothing to body. Andersen demonizes this process in *Satania Infernalis*, as the disembodied matchstick figure drawn child-like as “Noget, der skal ligne et Menneske” [something that is supposed to look like a person], reminiscent of Andersen’s famous paper cuttings as a mere outline based on empty spaces, has gendered identity conferred upon her by her clothing: “et Slags Kjøletøi, meget tyndt, meget fiint, men det viste, at den hørte til Hunkjønnen” [a sort of gown, very thin, but this showed that the figure was female] (2004 418). Likewise, Ingemann’s confused orphan Arnold is suddenly rendered regal, made into a somebody, by the metonymical crown and sceptre, reflected *en abyme* in the mirror construction, foreshadowing the process of instant transformation run amok in Andersen’s “De Røde Sko,” in which the accessory ends up articulating the captive subject.

The tension between agency and determinism in the dissolution of the interior / exterior binary points to Judith Butler’s discussion of the production of effects of self. Where identity according to Butler is produced by non-voluntarist reiteration, Gothic identity is formed instantly and precariously, through contagion, by proximity or touch. The hyper-theatrical exterior focus in Gothic—and Goth—on performance, show, costume, disguise, drag and stylization identifies through exaggeration and defamiliarization the staged and highly unnatural nature of gender and self as a chain of performative citations and quotes, “a persistent impersonation that passes as the real” (Butler viii). Often as well, Gothic, torn between progressive explorations of transgression and conservative punishments of deviation from a norm that is reinstated at the end of the narrative, identifies the structural features of the societal forms masked as “reality” which shape the context for its figurations of identity within the constraints of the discursively given. Through repetition of conventions, inversion, supernatural distortion, and deliberate confusion, Gothic reveals gender and gendered identity to be “a free-floating artifice,” an act “that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of ‘the natural’ that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (Butler 6 and 146-47).⁹

The fragmentation of self on multiple levels in Gothic is a response to bourgeois models of identity, calling into question the concept of “Dannelse” which is so extremely important in a Danish context. “Dannelse” is the linear progress of a unique, innate self, which grows into a sense of organic unity between self and world, through exercise of restraint and education—education in the sense of developing and extracting innate qualities in a transition from inside to

outside. While some Gothic texts can be seen as darker versions of the normative “Dannelsesroman,” in the education-themed *Gengældelsens Veje* and *De Måske Egnede* most obviously, Gothic usually inverts the idea of the desirable unity into fragmentation: both novels figure ghosts as attempts to escape the structural and artificial confines of selfhood superimposed by a rigidly authoritarian educational system. Generally, “normal” human relationships are critiqued by being pushed to destructive extremes, growth is replaced by disintegration, linear identity by a bricolage of disguises and quotes. Further underlining identity as fiction and the consequently profound scepticism regarding the originality, agency and unity of the self is the constant referencing and rehearsal of already written scripts by Gothic writers and characters. The themes of storytelling and writing are crucial to all four Danish writers in question, and the vast quantity of writer-protagonists in these and in Romantic Fantastic and Gothic texts in general is, of course, not coincidental, engaged as they are in writing their way to a firmer grasp of self and reality. What begins as potential artistic and personal freedom in the age of Romanticism turns into a questioning of creativity and originality, as we also see in the artistic Bildungs-narrative of Aladdin vs. Nouredin, omnipresent in Danish literature since Oehlenschläger. Protagonists resort to artifice, imitation, performative role-play and unlimited quotation in the attempt to construct a complete, conformist self, but they are then unable to distinguish between self and other: Blixen’s characters often confuse themselves with fictional figures, and Ingemann’s Arnold thinks he is Hoffmann’s Anselmus in “Der Goldne Topf,” not knowing whether he is writing his story or it is writing him. Texts of the past, sometimes even the present, become another force encroaching upon, even annihilating the self, as happens for the student in “Tante Tandpine” and the sisters in “Et Familieselskab.”

The multiple quotes and references, even in early Gothic, demonstrate with a strong metafictional charge that texts as well as selves are imitative, relational constructs which can only refer to yet other constructs, and not to an essential meaning. The Chinese box structure of illusions within illusions is also manifest at the narrative level, which Blixen uses in her convoluted stories-within-stories to create a textual labyrinth reminiscent of the haunted castle she rarely creates in physical form, and which Andersen interestingly uses in “Tandpine” to collapse the distinction between inner and outer frames by a slip of the tongue, again deferring the penetrating gaze that is on a quest for the real essence in the depths of the story. “Sphinxen,” “Pulcinellen,” “Tandpine,” “Norderney,” “Et Familieselskab,” “Drømmerne,” “Vaden By,” “Rejse ind i et mørkt hjerte” all disclose only more fictions in a continual circuit. This is of course the nature of all texts, but by adapting Gothic conventions of non-originality, impossible creativity, and negative transcendence, Danish writers are able to point more clearly to the consumptive nature of all literature and all identities, particularly as they, then, steal from a non-Danish genre. Gothic texts are buried within and

feed off each other, so as to create a self-referential semiotic system of familiar images, conventions, recycled and revised narrative structures, and inter-textual allusions well-known to the Gothic reader. Such short-hand codes are another component in the formation of one-dimensional characters created by references and ghostly signifiers, but not by an originary essence. Frankenstein's monster, dressed up in the bodies of multiple others, is often used as an apt image for such consumptive texts and identities, its precarious patchwork nature demonizing its own parasitical creation and haunted absence of identity (Kilgour 190). Detailing multiple destructive forces, Gothic is "not fantasy in need of psychoanalysis," but rather "a series of contemporaneously understood forms, devices, codes, figurations, for the expression of the fragmented subject," and of the alterity of subjectivity (Miles 4). This is not least because the heterogeneous Gothic form in itself has a parasitical, cannibalistic relation to other narratives, split between realism and romance and without its own proper identity.

The endemic fakery and imitation at the heart of Gothic is particularly acute for later writers such as Blixen and Peter Høeg, who must engage with numerous texts in a tradition spanning more than 200 years, but even Ingemann and Andersen overtly rewrite other texts in the nineteenth century. In addition, they usually set their anachronistic stories in the past, playing tricks with our notion of authenticity by participating in a genre that has been self-consciously fake from its clichéd inception in 1764, building on false Renaissance ideas about the Middle Ages, again based on erroneous perceptions of the historical Goths, as Jerrold Hogle has pointed out. Like the symbols of the past it plunders, Gothic has now taken its place in a system of commodities, its images and discourses reproduced for mass-consumerism as spooky-kitsch Halloween decorations, its complex identities copied and renegotiated by Goths. Whether or not that means it has been emptied of meaning is a continuing debate, but it certainly seems that for Ingemann, Andersen, Blixen and Høeg, the articulation of identity is not possible without the Gothic emphasis on surface, spectacle and performativity, which is of course immensely relevant for the simulated, post-heteronormative hyper-reality of today. The fact that there is no original Gothic, but a counterfeit concept centred on the surface, is of course reflected in the construction of the human, or rather post-human, in that fiction, as well as in its figuration of truth, which cannot lie within, but—like the writing that is supposed to express it—is dressed up in excess. Unlike realism, Gothic "calls attention to itself as costume," as Halberstam formulates it (61): Gothic is literature as cross-dressing, but it is precisely through its uncanny extravagances, supernatural events and persistent foregrounding of surfaces that we are able to acknowledge the very real impossibility of a true reconciliation of "the real" and the artificially constructed, originality and imitation, self and other, into the well-balanced, organic whole, of identity or text, that is central to the Danish "Dannelsesprojekt" and most constructions of the Danish literary canon.

NOTES

1. Mattias Fyhr has carefully investigated Gothic conventions in modern Swedish culture, building on a detailed theoretical apparatus in *De mörka labyrinterna: gotiken i litteratur, film, musik och rollspel*, while Yvonne Leffler identifies Gothic with the Swedish “skräckromantik” and the sensation novel, rendering the label too inclusive in *I skräckens lustgård: skräckromantik i svenska 1800-talsromaner*. Thorgeir Haugen’s anthology *Litterære skygger: norsk fantastisk litteratur* on the Norwegian Fantastic includes chapters on Gothic conventions in nineteenth-century Norwegian writers, without discriminating much between Gothic and fantastic, although Haugen provides a helpful introduction. In Denmark, Ib Johansen has explored the fantastic and Gothic genres at length, focusing, however, on the fantastic when it comes to Danish writers—a very reasonable strategy that even Karen Blixen adhered to. In addition, the first issue of the journal *Ny Poetik* (1993) has been dedicated to the Gothic as a distinctive literary form, but without exploring Danish undertakings in the genre. Paying homage to Eino Railo, Päivi Mehtonen and Matti Savolainen have edited the Finnish *Haamulinna perillisiä. Artikkeleita kauhufiktiosta 1760-luvulta 1990-luvulle* [*Inheritors of the Haunted Castle. Essays on Horror Fiction from the 1760s to the 1990s*] and are currently working on an anthology with the preliminary title *Gothic Anxieties*, which will focus on the transgression of boundaries and borders in Gothic and logically, then, views Gothic as an international phenomenon with contributions on Scandinavian Gothic as well as on the conventional canon.
2. Translations of titles are provided throughout the text, but for the non-Danish reader’s convenience the following is a list of all titles referred to in alphabetical order. Following house style, the list distinguishes between published translations, which are presented in italics or within quotation marks, and unpublished translation which lack these notational devices:

“Aben” [“The Monkey”]
 “Altertavlen i Sorø” [The Altarpiece in Sorø]
De Måske Egnede [*Borderliners*]
 “De Røde Sko” [“The Red Shoes”]
 “Den gamle vandrende ridder” [“The Old Chevalier”]
 “Det Tilmurede Værelse” [The Bricked-Up Room]
 “Drømmerne” [“The Dreamers”]
 “En Herregårdshistorie” [“A Country Tale”]
 “Et Familieselskab i Helsingør” [“The Supper at Elsinore”]
 “Forholdsregler mod alderdommen” [Precautions against Old Age]
 “Fortælling om et ægteskab” [“Story of a Marriage”]
Fortællinger om Natten [*Tales of the Night*]
Gengældelsens Veje [*The Angelic Avengers*]
 “Glasskabet” [The Glass Cabinet]
 “Karyatiderne” [“The Caryatids”]

“Medlidenhed med børnene i Vaden By” [“Pity for the Children of Vaden Town”]
 “Moster Maria” [Auntie Maria]
 “Niels Dragon” [Niels Dragon]
 “Pulcinellen” [The Punchinello]
 “Rejse ind i et mørkt hjerte” [“Journey into a Dark Heart”]
 “Skole-Kammeraterne” [The School Mates]
 “Skyggen” [“The Shadow”]
 “Spejlbillede af en ung mand i balance” [“Reflection of a young man in Balance”]
 “Sphinxen” [The Sphinx]
 “Syndfloden over Norderney” [“The Deluge at Norderney”]
Syv Fantastiske Fortællinger [Seven Gothic Tales]
 “Tante Tandpine” [“Auntie Toothache”]
 “Varulven” [The Werewolf]

3. Venturing beyond the identification of Gothic antecedents, Susan Hardy Aiken has delivered the most detailed exploration of Blixen’s use of Gothic conventions, particularly as they relate to post-structuralist theory in *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative*.
4. Blixen’s Danish and English texts are rewritings, rather than translations, and are infamously discrepant. I have given the corresponding quotes when possible.
5. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was the first critic to fully explore rather than dismiss the convention of the surface, with particular reference to Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), *The Italian* (1797) and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), but Catherine Spooner and Judith Halberstam have developed her ideas extensively, including also their relevance to Gothic art and cinema.
6. This key passage is omitted from Blixen’s own English version.
7. The ocular consumption is also partly a calculation of Lucan’s monetary value and is enhanced by Mr. Pennhallow’s designs to sell the girls into a life in white slavery, a more material consumption foreshadowed by his uncle’s cannibalistic eating of black slaves in the Caribbean.
8. The extent of this exploration makes it hard to believe in the often religiously inflected status quo Ingemann and Andersen end up affirming in their Romantic world view, one radically different from that of Høeg and Blixen.
9. Dag Heede has meticulously detailed examples of cross-dressing, drag, performativity and gender trouble in Blixen, in *Det Umenneskelige*, but without exploring the Gothic framework in detail.

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