CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PERVERSITY AS ONE OF THE FINE ARTS: CREATIVE ACTS OF DESTRUCTION IN ART AND LITERATURE

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Perversity is the muse of modern literature.

—Susan Sontag

The idea of considering art as the opposite of perversity has developed the concept of art as an illuminating truth possessed only by a few gifted persons who have a very uncommon sensitivity, which has the power to connect us to the basic goodness of creation and to establish very positive and emotional bonds with all the forms of life without losing hope in human kindness. In this perspective, art affirms that the essence of humanity is not that of terrible destruction of the other, but rather of spontaneous sympathy for human suffering. However, since Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Gothic fiction has always produced stories of transgression that show the creative process as a destructive practice common to Science and Art. These doubts about creation have nowadays originated a certain anxiety and nostalgia about the loss of some aesthetical and ethical values, which led some authors to criticize the creator's role. Gothic writers are particularly very willing to acknowledge that aggressiveness is inherent in artistic creation, because it possesses the same Dionysian force that is part of a very ambivalent Nature, simultaneously creative and destructive.

As C. G. Jung once said, "a creative person has little power over his own life. He is not free. He is captive and driven by his demon."[1] It was, perhaps, this demon's voice that we heard in the famous interview given by the widely known composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, when he said that what happened, in New York on September 11, was: "The greatest work of art there's ever been. That people rehearse like crazy for 10 years, totally fanatically for one concert,

and then die! Compared to this, we are nothing as composers." In an article published in *The Daily Telegraph* on the 20th September, 2002, Martin Blyth concluded that if we search for inappropriate responses to this terrorist attack, we scarcely need to look further than Ruth Padel's article *Art in a time of Terror* which appeared in a supplement of *The Independent* devoted to "The Day the World Was Supposed to Have Changed," where we can also find the astonishing answer quoted above. The video artist, John Maybury, was also not very successful, when he said that what he was seeing was artfully done. Similarly, the artist Damien Hirst congratulated the September 11 hijackers on turning the World Trade Centre into a "visually stunning" work of art "in its own right." Commenting on all these responses, Blyth concludes in his article that, according to the opinion of our leading artists, Bin Laden's historic piece of street theatre wins the Turner Prize for Terrorist Art.

This leads us to the question: do killers, artists, and terrorists need one another? This doubt inspired Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe to write *Crimes of Art and Terror*, where they explore the disturbing proximity of literary creativity to violence and even to political terror. They depart from the scandal provoked by Stockhausen's reference to the destruction of the World Trade Centre as a great work of art, and they try to show how political extremism and avant-garde artistic movements have fed upon each other for at least two centuries. This innovative work of criticism reveals how the desire beneath many romantic literary visions is that of a terrifying awakening that would destroy the West economical and cultural order. And, as we know, this is also the desire of what we call terrorism. Through a very original approach to the relations between terror and art, the two authors succeed in showing the readers some evidences of this fatal attraction by drawing some connections between Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Martin Scorsese's *King of Comedy*, or between the real-life Unabomber and the surrealist Joseph Cornell and the hero of Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*. They evoke a desperate culture of art through thematic dialogues among authors and filmmakers as varied as Don DeLillo, Joseph Conrad, Francis Ford Coppola, Jean Genet, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville and J. M. Synge, among others. When they were asked where the idea for this book came from, the authors said that it was one night they were watching John Cassavetes's film *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. This film is about an artist named Cosmo, who, hopelessly beset by the corrupting demands of the Mob and its ever-present accountant, must commit crimes in order to continue to do his artistic work. The authors commented that this film is an allegory of the serious artist in America, where he is subjected to the corrupting demands of the commercial institutions that drive society. The serious artist is a victim of the crimes he is forced to

commit in order to keep his art alive. In effect, the serious artist kills himself. In this way, the psychology of the artist-suicide and the suicide pilot are connected.

The close connection between the impulse to create transgressive art and the impulse to commit violence is not only motivated by psychotic reasons because it's also deeply rooted in the romantic tradition of the artist as Satan—rebellious and anarchical, the bearer of transgression against all that oppresses. The fact is that both the criminal and the artist are always very attracted by their power to subvert a system based on a rational order that seems to forget the role of imagination. This seems to explain the thought expressed by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel in *Creativity and Perversion*, where she said that

> [...] the number of perverts involved in the field of art is probably much greater than the average for the population in general [...] It can be supposed [...] that the pervert inclines in some particular manner to the world of art.[2]

In addition to this idea, we can mention an interview given by Anthony Hopkins about his famous role in *Hannibal*, in which he said that what was interesting about Florence was the fact of being simultaneously one of the great Renaissance centres and a place where there were many historical events associated with blood, torture, hanging, brutality and cruelty in general. Hopkins also found the Florentines amazing, because they had always been able to conciliate great terrors with great art, which this actor considered a very curious juxtaposition.

One of the first Gothic writers to go deep into the subject of perversity was Edgar Allan Poe. In his short-story, "The Imp of Perverse," he defines perversity as being an irrational impulse without motivation that can lead to self-destruction. We can follow the narrator's advice and consider the following situation:

> We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain. [...] And because our reason violently deters us from the brink, *therefore*, do we the more impetuously approach it. There is no passion in nature so demoniacally impatient, as that of him, who shuddering upon the edge of a precipice, thus meditates a plunge. [...] Examine these and similar actions as we will, we shall find them resulting solely from the spirit of the *Perverse*. We perpetrate them merely because we feel that we should *not*.[3]

Baudelaire gave this story the French title "Le Démon de la Perversité," that was related to what the French poet called "primordial perversity of man," that innate and irresistible force that inevitably turns him into a murder, a suicide and a hangman. The reason Baudelaire distinguished this story among the others, can be explained by the fact that according to his opinion, it represented

a *genre de beauté nouveau*, able to reveal the terrors of evil that are like an imaginary substance which involves every nervous man leading him to evil. Also Freud dealt with the ambivalent nature of this impulse in his famous essay "Das Unheimliche," where he reflects on the repetitive character of an action based on instinctive impulses that cause a non-intentional recurrence of the same situation. These irrational acts are responsible for the individual's desire "to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character."[4]

This conscience was always very deeply felt by Poe in his work. A significant number of his short-stories portray several perverse behaviours, where his moral philosophy interpenetrates with his aesthetical ideal. In the article "An Irruption of the Archaic," Norman Ravvin interprets that primitive impulse as an act of transgression to reach the transcendence of the sacred:

> Both "The Black Cat" and "The Imp of the Perverse" investigate what Poe refers to as 'primitive' impulses—structures of motivation that bear an uncanny resemblance to the type of act Bataille sets out as the archaic impetus to reach the sacred through transgressive rites.[5]

In a chapter entitled "L' homme ne peut s'aimer jusqu'au bout s'il ne se condamne" from *La Littérature et le Mal*, Bataille defined the nature of that impulse that is characterized by the tendency of "to want what one doesn't want [...] and not want what one wants."[6] Trying to analyse the paradoxical nature of this human behaviour, that inexplicably leads the subject to self-destruction, "The Black Cat" presents one more confirmation of the idea above mentioned: "Who has not, hundred times, found himself committing a vile or silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*?"[7]

We can find throughout Poe's work many characters that behave like artists who fall victim of this impulse, whenever they try to transgress the limits of their existence. One of these examples is Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher." He has an artistic sensitivity and lives in a house that seems an art museum. Unlike many other Gothic villains, his perversity is not astute or shrewd, but tragic, because it was inherited, and no rational reason can explain it. It is a fatal evil that resulted from his uncommon and extremely intense sensitiveness and imagination. He is a victim of being born in an artists' family that gave birth to the "Flowers of Evil", that contaminated his spirit and developed his taste for a terrible beauty. The narrator describes this artistic familiar tendency saying that

> [...] his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested [...] in a passionate devotion to the intricacies

> perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognisable beauties, of musical science.[8]

Usher's perversity turns himself into a victim of this terrible influence that determines his destiny. The main source of evil, in this short story, comes from the negative effects caused by pure aesthetical ideals, because Usher's aesthetic studies are characterized by a perverse idealism, which the narrator describes saying that "an excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphurous lustre over all."[9] As Hoffmann concludes in *Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe*, Usher turns himself into the paradigm of the artist as *isolato*, being his art the prophecy of a condemnation, where the feeling of anguish about our modernity is expressed. Like Dracula and Melmoth, Usher is the symbol of the cursed individual destined to be possessed not only by a curse but also by a very human and tragic inevitability, which defines his perversity and his glory. As count Dracula reminds us: "glories of the great races are as a tale that is told."[10] Also noticing that this tale is a perfect illustration of what Freud named *unheimlich*, Wuletich-Brinberg saw it specially associated with a certain tragic meaning, observing that "mingling with the uncanny are other, antithetical effects, effects never so unambigously expressed in Poe's works, effects of grandeur, even of nobility and tragedy."[11] All this is due to a mad obsession with art, a gift and at the same time a destiny remembered by the inhabitants and by the stones of the House of Usher, in that beautiful and terrible night, irradiating an extraordinary paradoxical terror suggestive of the ambiguity of human experience in an absurd world: "a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty."[12] Therefore, Usher's aesthetic perversity is at its essence tragic and part of this sublime Nature.

As an innate and primitive inclination "to violate which is *Law*,"[13] perversity is at the origin of an artistic sensitiveness that favours the irrational and it's not able to integrate the rational side trying, on the contrary, to destroy reason, being Usher the perverse artist that takes aesthetic pleasure in doing that. It is as if, by being an artist, Usher had a deeper conscience that perversity is natural to man and completely inescapable. Poe defined it as "an innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something."[14] The inhumanity of the perverse is also something quite human. To be destructive, to be murderous, is also to be human. This fact led Schopenhauer to conclude, in his essay "The Art of Literature," that

> in appreciating a genius, criticism should not deal with the errors in his productions or with the poorer of his works, and then proceed to rate him low; it should attend only to the qualities in which he most excels. For in the sphere of intellect, as in other spheres, weakness and perversity cleave so firmly to human nature that even the most brilliant mind is not wholly and at all times free from

> them. Hence the great errors to be found even in the works of the greatest men; or as Horace puts it, *quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus*.[15]

These are the words of the great pessimist, who believed in the best and expected the worst from writers and artists, never ceasing to apply his caustic wit to literature and the literary scene.

The impulse to destroy lies at the heart of an extreme dark romantic impulse that we see in evidence since the late eighteenth century. Crimes of imaginative transgression have never been considered crimes, but there are many Gothic stories where the love of beauty can have very perverse effects. Since "The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne and "The Oval Portrait" by Edgar Allan Poe, American Gothic fiction, perhaps influenced by the example of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, has been recurrently interested in exploring and rewriting themes which deal with paradoxical acts of creation, where very highly cultivated people (writers, artists and scientists) suffer from a psychic disintegration, that turn them into doubles. The duplicity of their personality leads them to play the role of creators and destroyers, artists and murderers, heroes and villains. That's why *Frankenstein* can be a central metaphor for the Gothic genre that thematises and demonises its own creative process. This fact was deeply apprehended by Maggie Kilgour, who referred to the creator/creature as Gothic doubles, stating that "Frankenstein looks back to Lewis's representation of creation as murderous, and forward to later nineteenth-century writers who demonise their own creation; in *Dorian Gray*, Henry Wotten is described as an aesthetic dissector."[16] This explains the concept of creation as a new combination from past creations rather than as a pure original invention. That is why Kilgour compares the Gothic creation to a Frankensteinian process of deconstruction and recreation. The isolated artist, like Victor Frankenstein, is a detached individual who works alone to recreate the past and to recuperate a lost unity. His art involves a dialectic process of alienation and restoration, dismemberment and remembrance, transgression and rewriting.

The double nature of the creative impulse has always been deeply perceived by certain famous writers, very close to Poe's aesthetic sensitiveness, in what concerns the power to confront certain negative aspects inherent in the creative minds. Usually, they assume these destructive impulses very ironically and they deal with them very openly, as if they could help them to support their artistic authenticity. Such was the case of Herman Melville, when, referring to *Moby Dick*, confessed that he had written a very wicked book, but he felt spotless as a lamb. Charles Brockden Brown, the so called pioneer of American Gothic fiction, was also sensitive to the most interesting traits of human behaviour in his characters, underlying their perverse tendencies, which had the power to attract the readers' attention: "The chief point is not the virtue of a character.

The prime regard is to the genius and force of mind that is displayed. Great energy employed in the promotion of vicious purposes constitutes a very useful spectacle."[17]

As we have been noticing, these "vicious purposes" can be recognized as an important part of the artist's personality, who is never free from their effects. In one of his interviews, Stephen King showed he was very aware of this fact, when he stated that the werewolf in us is never far from the surface and that he himself could have used a telescopic riffle instead of a word processor to destroy his own demons. His following statement is revealing:

> That destructive side of me has a great outlet in my books. It's the werewolf in me, I guess, but I love fire, I love destruction. It's great and it's black and it's exciting.[18]

Even when referring to his novel *The Stand*, King said he enjoyed the opportunity he had there to scrub the whole human race, because it was funny. In *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia notices that this aggressiveness is inherent in every form of artistic creativity; she argues that "Art is order. But order is not necessarily just, kind or beautiful."[19] According to Paglia, art is as ambivalent as Nature, which possesses a powerful Dionysian force and it is simultaneously creative and destructive.

This same duplicity is felt by the artist himself, who sometimes feels terribly divided and in an internal conflict with his dark side, a battle that is never completely lost or won. To be under the influence of Demons and Angels is part of the search for the source of artistic inspiration, as Edward Hirsch concludes in his enlightening work, *The Demon and the Angel*, where he defends that these entities are vital spirits of creative imagination, who embody an irrational splendour and act as liberating agents. Considering them essential to the creative process, Hirsch describes these spiritual presences as fundamental inner disturbances, fissures of being, ways of putting the self at risk, because they are extremities of the human imagination. They can be dangerous, but they are at the very origin of art, as Rilke once noticed, when he wrote:

> Works of art always spring from those who have faced the danger, gone to the very end of an experience, to the point beyond which no human being can go. The further one dares to go, the more decent, the more personal, the more unique a life becomes.[20]

The dark side of the intervention of this disturbing demonic influence was deeply expressed in Baudelaire's poem "La Destruction," where we can feel the presence of that perverse impulse of the unconscious that completely commands the poet's inspiration, seducing him into a dangerous love for self-destruction.

In "Assommons les pauvres," Baudelaire presents a contrast between Socrates's demon—who acts as a good conscience warning the philosopher of the differences between right and wrong—and his more modern demon, a kind of satanic voice that instigates the poet to evil actions, such as attacking and beating up poor and innocent people, and consequently getting punished on account of his own destructive impulses.

Nowadays, some of the best portraits of perversity in art can be found either in contemporary Gothic fiction or in certain artists' biographies, where some real hidden details of the artists' life are unexpectedly revealed. One of these examples is Joyce Carol Oates' *Beasts*, where we can find a charismatic sculptress and a painter, who are masters in the art of perversity that makes them to commit certain atrocities as if they were artistic acts of creation. Gillian Bauer is a middle-aged woman who recalls her love for a former creative writing teacher, an obsession that took place when she was a twenty-year-old college student. Andre Harrow singles out girls from his class, and invites them at his house under the official pretext that they will become assistant to his imposing French wife, Dorcas, a sculptress who had impressed the students in the campus with her crude, primitive and huge totems that she exhibited under the motto "WE ARE BEASTS AND THIS IS OUR CONSOLATION." These disturbing works, that represented crude naked figures, were a metaphor to the erotic and perverse rituals performed by the artistic couple at home, through the manipulation of some students to whom D. H. Lawrence was quoted as an inspiration to justify the teacher's secret activities. Through a close contact with a dangerous creative madness, Gillian loses her innocence and learns, by her own experience, the full meaning of Dorcas's provocative motto as well as his teacher's theory that "the material of nightmare is the material of potentially great art."[21] A story about human degradation, *Beasts* expresses Oates's pessimistic views on human nature, because not only the professor and his wife become beasts by letting their instincts take the lead, but also the young university girls are deeply dehumanized.

In *Portrait of a Killer—Jack the Ripper Case Closed*, Patricia Cornwell suggests that Walter Sickert, the painter, was Jack, the Ripper. The reason for Sickert being suspected is that he was believed to have made sketches and paintings of the Ripper crimes. Cornwell's investigation has centred on Sickert's impressionist art. She asserts that several of his paintings seem to contain inside knowledge of the Whitechapel killer and the murders. Cornwell argues that Walter Sickert inserted clues and symbols about the Ripper case into his drawings and paintings. Some of these clues are so similar to the actual crime scenes that only the true murderer could have painted them. She has found similar watermarks, as well as similar names, phrases and drawings in both the 'Ripper' correspondence and the Sickert letters. Pointing out that Sickert liked

to paint prostitutes and that this should be considered as evidence can not convince us entirely, because we know that, at that time, many artists like Degas, Renoir and Lautrec also used prostitutes as models. Nevertheless, Cornwell's theory has some merit. She believed Sickert was a brilliant and creative psychopath, a talented artist and a murder, the most original and creative killer of all time. In *Portrait of a Killer*, she says: "I saw a diabolically creative mind, and I saw evil. I began adding layer after layer of circumstantial evidence to the physical evidence discovered by modern forensic science and expert minds."[22] Her true conviction is that, as an artist, Sickert was in a superior and untouchable position. This can explain why none of his contemporaries tried to find the reasons that led him to represent so many scenes of violence and to be obsessed with famous crimes, including those of Jack the Ripper. In spite of being sure there are many artistic explanations for all of Sickert's works, Cornwell is driven by a powerful intuition that enables her to see unsettling parallels between Sickert's paintings and Ripper's crimes. She states that "what I see when I look at them is morbidity, violence, and a hatred of women."[23] Cornwell also compares Sickert to Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, characterizing him as a Proteus that had a double personality. In her opinion, Sickert was a learned man who may have had the IQ of a genius. In spite of being a talented artist whose work is respected, Cornwell thinks that his art shows no tender touches and no dreams, because he was more a 'Mathematicus' and a technician than a sensitive artist. His precise way of thinking and calculating led Cornwell to compare his mathematical method to Jack the Ripper's machinations. This gives her a certain authority to conclude that "Artistic and scholarly analysis aside, most of Sickert's sprawling nudes look mutilated and dead."[24]

Seeing murder as art is not new. The writer and opium-eater Thomas De Quincey identified murder as a fine art in his work *Murder as One of the Fine Arts* (1827), but De Quincey's interest was in the appeal that famous crimes held for common people, not in the mass murder of common people. That refinement has waited until now. Contemporary Gothic writers can feel, perhaps, the urgency to respond to some artists' conclusion that the September 11 attacks had great aesthetic significance, were "visually stunning," "wonderful" in their originality, and even "great works of art" that deserve recognition and congratulations. Gothic fiction has always been influenced by Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime to represent artistic transgression. If everything that is terrible is also sublime, perversity can turn into something beautiful. This creative ambivalence means that we live in a time when art is often indistinguishable from perversity. Perversion was implicit in modern art from the beginning, and remains a vital factor in it today. In fact, one can regard modern art as the history of the representation of perversion. What makes it new

or modern is its perversity, both in attitude and in form. And this also happens with Gothic fiction. Curiosity about perversion, supposedly the most original and imaginative sexuality, motivates many modern artists. Certainly some of the most famous, innovative works deal with perversion, more or less openly. They also tend to be structurally perverse, at least by traditional standards. But there is a perverse effect of dealing artistically with perversity, which can be translated by Nietzsche's most famous aphorism: "if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you."

One of the most famous modern artists that could have been influenced by this perverse effect is Picasso, as his granddaughter, Marina Picasso, confessed in a recently published work entitled *Picasso, My Grandfather*, where the darkest and most unknown aspects of the artist's difficult personality are exposed and revealed. Stating that she only experienced herself as 'Picasso's granddaughter,' without having an identity of her own, Marina inevitably had to present a portrait of the artist as the centre of a universe around whom everyone felt gravitating. That is why she concluded that "Picasso's quest for the absolute entailed an implacable will to power. His extraordinary work demanded human sacrifices. He engulfed anyone who got near him, and drove them to despair."[25] According to this biographical narrative, the widely known artist didn't care much about his grandchildren, refusing very often to receive them under the pretext that *le Maître* was working or sleeping. This behaviour could have led his grandson to commit suicide by drinking a bottle of bleach six days after Picasso died. His own mother was conscious of her son's difficult temperament having once stated that "no woman can ever be happy with my son Pablo."[26] Consequently, Marina describes her grandfather as a diabolical man who was incapable of love, being someone who was an expert in combining power, mortification and incommunicability. According to her description, he was like an inaccessible demiurge that treated people as if they were something he could manipulate according to his unpredictable moods. He cared more for his beloved goat Esméralda than for his family. While that lucky animal could do anything she wanted in the house, testing her horns against the furniture and leaving her droppings on the drawings and canvases on the floor, his grandchildren felt like intruders at his home, because when they visited him they were often received by someone who delivered the sentence: "The Sun does not want to be disturbed."[27] Paul, his son, is compared to a piece, among many, of the Picasso puzzle, just like each of the paintings. Comparing Picasso to a vampire, Marina stated that "He needed blood to sign each of his paintings: my father's blood, my brother's, my mother's, my grandmother's, and mine; the blood of all those who loved him—people who thought that they loved a human being, whereas instead they loved Picasso."[28] It seems that the dark side of the genius is as real as his astonishing creative capacity. Daniel Spoto also came to this

conclusion in his polemic biographical work about Hitchcock, entitled *The Dark Side of the Genius*. Here we are acquainted with the director's confession that he had always been very interested in the Jekyll and Hyde-mentality, defining *Shadow of a Doubt*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Psycho* and *Frenzy* as his best films about the doubling or splitting of personality. According to Donald Spoto, these films were able to express

> the increasingly obsessive Jekyll-Hyde mentality in Hitchcock himself, a man who was capable of generosity towards relatives and servants, and of a savage obsession with beautiful women from whom he felt forever isolated.[29]

This explains his own curiosity for subjects connected with perversion, evil and psychopathology, which were often objectified in his characters through that same logic he appreciated in Poe's stories: they were able to develop an intimate relationship between reader or viewer and the hero for whom they always wanted to substitute themselves, since people were only interested in themselves or in stories that could happen to them. Such close identification with the psychological profile of a character was certainly one of the factors that stimulated the projection of Hitchcock's personality into the most strange and obsessive types of individuals by whom he could have felt repelled, but also fatally attracted, because they were undeniable products of his own creation. As Maggie Kilgour stated in her essay "The Artist as Goth:"

> Creator and created are thus united by a chain of opposition and identification, as each sees himself as the innocent victim of the other's hostility, and the other as the cause responsible for all evil.[30]

This was probably the reason that led Spoto to explore the roots of Hitchcock's obsessions with food, murder and idealized love, so that his duplicity could be revealed through the most bizarre and perverse behaviours, so essential to the understanding of his films and genius.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud had already dedicated his attention to these perverse and irresistible impulses, underlining the constitutive tendency in man to aggressiveness:

> The bit of truth behind all this—one so eagerly denied—is that men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment.[31]

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he also suspected that there were other instincts, beyond the self-preservation ones, operating in the *ego*. He called

them instincts of life and death, primitive drives that explain the dualistic view of instinctual life and man's destructive desires, which are born from a fight between Eros and Thanatos that translates the struggle for existence. To consider evil as the foundation of being is also an idea defended by Georges Bataille, in *La Littérature et le Mal*, where he states that:

> Evil, in this coincidence of the contraries, is no longer fatally opposed to the natural order, that is within the limits of reason. Death, in being the condition of life, [that is to say] Evil that is connected in its essence to death, is also, in an ambiguous way, a foundation of being. A being is not designed for Evil, but it should, if it can, not let itself be enclosed within the limits of reason.[32]

Gothic fiction has often been considered a transgressive literary mode. Consequently, its narratives deal with characters that are interested in surpassing forbidden boundaries to gratify their most perverse desires. Gothic writers from several literary periods have been aware of this innate propensity in man and in themselves as artists. Their deep conscience about this fact has impelled them again and again to recreate this theme in stories of transgression that present the creative process as a destructive practice. This rewriting method has given these authors the possibility to reflect on a certain romantic crisis of the artistic identity, transforming their fictions into self-reflexive narratives about many uncertainties inherent in the creative activity. Contemporary criticism has also been attentive to the necessity of perceiving a persistent ambivalence in the nature of the artistic creation, in order to consider the creative literary act as an aesthetic and ethical act of self-reflection. In his essay "The Aesthetic, Cognitive and Ethical—Criticism and Discoursive Responsibility," Seán Burke argues that only an ethical discourse can face the dominant crisis of knowledge in our time. Considering that criticism is born from the intersection between forms of aesthetic, cognitive and ethical knowledge, Burke concludes:

> Criticism interposes practical reason between the claims of the aesthetic and the cognitive. As activity, it does not derive from an impulse to create but from an impulse to intervene between a text and its reception. If we were to seek the source of this interventionist imperative we would not find it in the aesthetic or cognitive realms. For these reasons, criticism is neither an art nor a science, but an ethical realm and a realm of the ethical.[33]

A similar belief guided the present selection of authors, who intervened in their time recreating characters not merely as fictional figures, but as if they were authors of evil, whose perverse acts have the virtue and the power to make us reflect on the dilemma of literary and artistic responsibility.

Notes

[1] Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 357.
[2] Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (London: Free Association Books, 1985), 14.
[3] Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 829.
[4] Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche," in *Art and Literature - The Penguin Freud Library* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 361.
[5] Ravvin Norman, "An Irruption of the Archaic: Poe and the Grotesque," in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, Vol. 25*, 11.
[6] Georges Bataille, *La Littérature et le Mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 27.
[7] Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 599.
[8] Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 318.
[9] Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 324.
[10] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), 43.
[11] Sybil Wuletich-Brinberg, *Poe: The Rational of the Uncanny* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 143.
[12] Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 330.
[13] Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 827.
[14] Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 827.
[15] Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Art of Literature* (London: Echo Library, 2006), 62.
[16] Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 198.
[17] Charles Brockden Brown, "Advertisement for Skywalk, or The Man Unknown to Himself," *Philadelphia Weekly Magazine* I (17 March 1798), 202.
[18] George Beahm, ed., *The Stephen King Companion* (London: Futura, 1991), 35.
[19] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 29.
[20] Quoted by Edward Hirsch in *The Demon and the Angel: Searching for the Source of Artistic Inspiration* (New York: Harcourt, 2003), 157.
[21] Joyce Carol Oates, *Beasts* (London: Orion, 2003), 71.
[22] Patricia Cornwell, *Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper—Case Closed* (London: Time Warner, 2005), 14.
[23] Cornwell, *Portrait of a Killer*, 14.
[24] Cornwell, *Portrait of a Killer*, 150.
[25] Marina Picasso, *Picasso, My Grandfather* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), 2.
[26] Picasso, *Picasso*, 33.
[27] Picasso, *Picasso*, 5.
[28] Picasso, *Picasso*, 2.
[29] Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (London: Plexus, 1994), 184.
[30] Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of the Gothic Novel*, 209.
[31] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Dover, 1994), 40.
[32] Bataille, *La Littérature et le Mal*, 27.

[33] Seán Burke, "The Aesthetic, the Cognitive, and the Ethical: Criticism and Discursive Responsibility," in *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism*, ed. Dabid Fuller and Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 216.