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The Black Mass as Play: Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*

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Abstract

Literature—at least *serious* literature—is something that we work at. This is especially true within the academy. Literature departments are places where workers labour over texts carefully extracting and sharing meanings, for which they receive monetary reward. Specialised languages are developed to describe professional concerns. Over the last thirty years, the productions of mass culture, once regarded as too slight to warrant laborious explication, have been admitted to the academic workroom. Gothic studies—the specialist area that treats fearful and horrifying texts—has embraced the growing acceptability of devoting academic effort to texts that would once have fallen outside of the remit of “serious” study.

In the seventies, when Gothic studies was just beginning to establish itself, there was a perception that the Gothic was “merely a literature of surfaces and sensations”, and that any Gothic of substantial literary worth had transcended the genre (Thompson 1). Early specialists in the field noted this prejudice; David Punter wrote of the genre’s “difficulty in establishing respectable credentials” (403), while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick hoped her work would “make it easier for the reader of ‘respectable’ nineteenth-century novels to write ‘Gothic’ in the margin” (4).

Gothic studies has gathered a modicum of this longed-for respectability for the texts it treats by deploying the methodologies used within literature departments. This has yielded readings that are largely congruous with readings of other sorts of literature; the Gothic text tells us things about ourselves and the world we inhabit, about power, culture and history. Yet the Gothic remains a production of popular culture as much as it is of the valorised literary field. I do not wish to argue for a reintroduction of the great divide described by Andreas Huyssen, but instead to suggest that we have missed something important about the ways in which popular Gothics—and perhaps other sorts of popular text—function. What if the popular Gothic were not a type of work, but a kind of play? How might this change the way we read these texts?

Johan Huizinga noted that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. Every child knows perfectly well he is ‘only pretending’, or that it was ‘only for fun’” (8). If the Gothic sometimes offers playful texts, then those texts might direct readers not primarily towards the real, but away from it, at least for a limited time. This might help to account for the wicked spectacle offered by Dennis Wheatley’s *The Devil Rides Out*, and in particular, its presentation of the black mass.

The black mass is the parody of the Christian mass thought to be performed by witches and diabolists. Although it has doubtless been performed on rare occasions since the Middle Ages, the first black mass for which we have substantial documentary evidence was celebrated in Hampstead on Boxing Day 1918, by Montague Summers; it is a satisfying coincidence that Summers was one of the Gothic’s earliest scholars. We have record of Summer’s mass because it was watched by a non-participant, Anatole James, who was “bored to tears” as Summers recited tracts of Latin and practiced homosexual acts with a youth named Sullivan while James looked on (Medway 382-3). Summers claimed to be a Catholic priest, although there is some doubt as to the legitimacy of his ordination. The black mass ought to be officiated by a Catholic clergyman so the host may be transubstantiated before it is blasphemed. In doing so, the mass de-emphasises interpretive meaning and is an assault on the body of Christ rather than a mutilation of the symbol of Christ’s love and sacrifice. Thus, it is not conceived of primarily as a representational act but as actual violence. Nevertheless, Summers’ black mass seems like an elaborate form of sexual play more than spiritual warfare; by asking an acquaintance to observe the mass, Summers formulated the ritual as an erotic performance.

The black mass was a favourite trope of the English Gothic of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Dennis Wheatley’s *The Devil Rides Out* features an extended presentation of the mass; it was first published in 1934, but had achieved a kind of genre-specific canonicity by the nineteen-sixties, so that many Gothics produced and consumed in the sixties and seventies featured depictions of the black mass that drew from Wheatley’s original. Like Summers, Wheatley’s mass emphasised licentious sexual practice and, significantly, featured a voyeur or voyeurs watching the performance. Where James only wished Summers’ mass would end, Wheatley and his followers presented the mass as requiring interruption before it reaches a climax. This version of the mass recurs in most of Wheatley’s black magic novels, but it also appears in paperback romances, such as Susan Howatch’s 1973 *The Devil on Lammas Night*; it is reimagined in the literate and genuinely eerie short stories of Robert Aickman, which are just now thankfully coming back into print; it appears twice in Mervyn Peake’s Gormenghast books. Nor was the black mass confined to the written Gothic, appearing in films of the period too; *The Kiss of the Vampire* (1963), *The Witches* (1966), *Satan’s Skin*, aka *Blood on Satan’s Claw* (1970), *The Wicker Man* (1973), and *The Satanic Rites of Dracula* (1974) all feature celebrations of the Sabbath, as, of course do the filmed adaptations of Wheatley’s novels, *The Devil Rides Out* (1967) and *To the Devil a Daughter* (1975).

More than just a key trope, the black mass was a procedure characteristic of the English Gothic of the sixties; narratives were structured so as to lead towards its performance. All of the texts mentioned above repeat narrative and trope, but more importantly, they loosely repeat experience, both for readers and the characters depicted. While Summers’ black mass apparently made for tiresome viewing, textual representations of the black mass typically embrace the pageant and sensuality of the Catholic mass it perverts, involving music, incense and spectacle. Often animalistic sex, bestiality, infanticide or human sacrifice are staged, and are intended to fascinate rather than bore.

Although far from canonical in a literary sense, by 1969 Wheatley was an institution. He had sold 27 million books worldwide and around 70 percent of those had been within the British market. All of his 55 books were in print. A new Wheatley in hardcover would typically sell 30,000 copies, and paperback sales of his back catalogue stood at more than a million books a year. While Wheatley wrote thrillers in a range of different subgenres, at the end of the sixties it was his ‘black magic’ stories that were far and away the most popular. While moderately successful when first published, they developed their most substantial audience in the sixties. When *The Satanist* was published in paperback in 1966, it sold more than 100,000 copies in the first ten days. By 1973, five of these eight black magic titles had sold more than a million copies. The first of these was *The Devil Rides Out* which, although originally published in 1934, by 1973, helped by the Hammer film of 1967, had sold more than one and a half million copies, making it the most successful of the group (“Pooter”; Hedman and Alexandersson 20, 73). Wheatley’s black magic stories provide a good example of the way that texts persist and accumulate influence in a genre field, gaining genre-specific canonicity. Wheatley’s apparent influence on Gothic texts and films that followed, coupled with the sheer number of his books sold, indicate that he occupied a central position in the field, and that his approach to the genre became, for a time, a defining one.

Wheatley’s black magic stories apparently developed a new readership in the sixties. The black mass perhaps became legible as a salacious, nightmarish version of some imaginary hippy gathering. While Wheatley’s Satanists are villainous, there is a vaguely progressive air about them; they listen to unconventional music, dance in the nude, participate in unconventional sexual practice, and glut themselves on various intoxicants. This, after all, was the age of *Hair*, *Oh! Calcutta!* and *Oz* magazine, “an era of personal liberation, in the view of some critics, one of moral anarchy” (Morgan 149). Without suggesting that the Satanists represent hippies there is a contextual relevancy available to later readers that would have been missing in the thirties. The sexual zeitgeist would have allowed later readers to pornographically and pleasurably imagine the liberated sexuality of the era without having to approve of it.

Wheatley’s work has since become deeply, embarrassingly unfashionable. The books are racist, sexist, homophobic and committed to a basically fascistic vision of an imperial England, all of which will repel most casual readers. Nor do his works provide an especially good venue for academic criticism; all surface, they do not reward the labour of careful, deep reading.

The Devil Rides Out narrates the story of a group of friends locked in a battle with the wicked Satanist Mocata, “a pot-bellied, bald headed person of about sixty, with large, protuberant, fishy eyes, limp hands, and a most unattractive lisp” (11), based, apparently, on the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley (Ellis 145-6). Mocata hopes to start a conflict on the scale of the Great War by performing the appropriate devilish rituals. Led by the aged yet spry Duke de Richleau and garrulous American Rex van Ryn, the friends combat Mocata in three substantial set pieces, including their attempt to disrupt the black mass as it is performed in a secluded field in Wiltshire.

The Devil Rides Out is a ripping story. Wheatley’s narrative is urgent, and his simple prose suggests that the book is meant to be read quickly. Likewise, Wheatley’s protagonists do not experience in any real way the crises and collapses that so frequently trouble characters who struggle against the forces of darkness in Gothic narratives. Even when de Richlieu’s courage fails as he observes the Wiltshire Sabbat, this failure is temporary; Rex simply treats him as if he has been physically wounded, and the Duke soon rallies. *The Devil Rides Out* is remarkably free of trauma and its sequelae. The morbid psychological states which often interest the twentieth century Gothic are excluded here in favour of the kind of emotional fortitude found in adventure stories. The effect is remarkable. Wheatley retains a cheerful tone even as he depicts the appalling, and potentially repellent representations become entertainments.

Wheatley describes in remarkable detail the actions that his protagonists witness from their hidden vantage point. If the Gothic reader looks forward to gleeful blasphemy, then this is amply provided, in the sort of sardonic style that Lewis’ *The Monk* manages so well. A cross is half stomped into matchwood and inverted in the ground, the Christian host is profaned in a way too dreadful to be narrated, and the Duke informs us that the satanic priests are eating “a stillborn baby or perhaps some unfortunate child that they have stolen and murdered”. Rex is chilled by the sound of a human skull rattling around in their cauldron (117-20). The mass offers a special quality of experience, distinct from the everyday texture of life represented in the text. Ostensibly waiting for their chance to liberate their friend Simon from the action, the Duke and Rex are voyeurs, and readers participate in this voyeurism too.

The narrative focus shifts from Rex and de Richlieu’s observation of the mass, to the wayward medium Tanith’s independent, bespelled arrival at the ritual site, before returning to the two men. This arrangement allows Wheatley to extend his description of the gathering, reiterating the same events from different characters’ perspectives. This would be unusual if the text were simply a thriller, and relied on the ongoing release of new information to maintain narrative interest. Instead, readers have the opportunity to “view” the salacious activity of the Satanists a second time. This repetition delays the climactic action of the scene, where the Duke

and Rex rescue Simon by driving a car into the midst of the ritual. Moreover, the repetition suggests that the “thrill” on offer is not necessarily related to plot—it offers us nothing new—but instead to simply seeing the rite performed.

Tanith, although conveyed to the mass by some dark power, is delayed and she too becomes a part of the mass’ audience. She

saw the Satanists... tumbling upon each other in the disgusting nudity of their ritual dance. Old Madame D’Urfé, huge-buttocked and swollen, prancing by some satanic power with all the vigour of a young girl who had only just reached maturity; the Babu, dark-skinned, fleshy, hideous; the American woman, scraggy, lean-flanked and hag-like with empty, hanging breasts; the Eurasian, waving the severed stump of his arm in the air as he gavotted beside the unwieldy figure of the Irish bard, whose paunch stood out like the grotesque belly of a Chinese god. (132)

The reader will remember that Madame D’Urfé is French, and that the cultists are dancing before the Goat of Mendes, who masquerades as Malagasy, earlier described by de Richlieu as “a ‘bad black’ if ever I saw one” (11). The human body is obsessively and grotesquely racialized; Wheatley is simultaneously at his most politically vile and aesthetically Goya-like. The physically grotesque meshes with the crudely sexual and racist. The Irishman is typed as a “bard” and somehow acquires a second racial classification, the Indian is horrible seemingly because of his race, and Madame D’Urfé is repulsive because her sexuality is framed as inappropriate to her age. The dancing crone is defined in terms of a younger, presumably sexually appealing, woman; even as she is denigrated, the reader is presented with a contrary image. As the sexuality of the Satanists is excoriated, titillation is offered. Readers may take whatever pleasure they like from the representations while simultaneously condemning them, or even affecting revulsion.

A binary opposition is set up between de Richlieu’s company, who are cultured and moneyed, and the Satanists, who might masquerade as civilised, but reveal their savagery at the Sabbat. Their race becomes a further symptom of their lack of civilised qualities. The Duke complains to Rex that “there is little difference between this modern Satanism and Voodoo... We might almost be witnessing some heathen ceremony in an African jungle!” (115). The Satanists become “a trampling mass of bestial animal figures” dancing to music where, “Instead of melody, it was a harsh, discordant jumble of notes and broken chords which beat into the head with a horrible nerve-racking intensity and set the teeth continually on edge” (121). Music and melody are cultural constructions as much as they are mathematical ones. The breakdown of music suggests a breakdown of culture, more specifically, of Western cultural norms. The Satanists feast, with no “knives, forks, spoons or glasses”, but instead drink straight from bottles and eat using their hands (118). This is hardly transgression on the scale of devouring an infant, but emphasises that Satanism is understood to represent the antithesis of civilization, specifically, of a conservative Englishness. Bad table manners are always a sign of wickedness.

This sort of reading is useful in that it describes the prejudices and politics of the text. It allows us to see the black mass as meaningful and places it within a wider discursive tradition making sense of a grotesque dance that combines a variety of almost arbitrary transgressive actions, staged in a Wiltshire field. This style of reading seems to confirm the approach to genre text that Fredric Jameson has espoused (117-9), which understands the text as reinforcing a hegemonic worldview within its readership. This is the kind of reading the academy often works to produce; it recognises the mass as standing for something more than the simple fact of its performance, and develops a coherent account of what the mass represents. The labour of reading discerns the work the text does out in the world.

Yet despite the good sense and political necessity of this approach, my suggestion is that these observations are secondary to the primary function of the text because they cannot account for the reading experience offered by the Sabbat and the rest of the text. Regardless of text’s prejudices, *The Devil Rides Out* is not a book about race. It is a book about Satanists. As Jo Walton has observed, competent genre readers effortlessly grasp this kind of distinction, prioritising certain readings and elements of the text over others (33-5). Failing to account for the reading strategy presumed by author and audience risks overemphasising what is less significant in a text while missing more important elements. Crucially, a reading that emphasises the political implications of the Sabbat attributes *meaning* to the ritual; yet the ritual’s ability to hold meaning is not what is most important about it. By attributing meaning to the Sabbat, we miss the fact of the Sabbat itself; it has become a metaphor rather than a thing unto itself, a demonstration of racist politics rather than one of the central necessities of a black magic story.

Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon claim that ritual is usually read as having a social purpose or a cultural meaning, but that these readings presume that ritual is interested in presenting the world truthfully, as it is. Seligman and his co-authors take exception to this, arguing that ritual does not represent society or culture as they are and that ritual is “a subjunctive—the creation of an order as if it were truly the case” (20). Rather than simply reflecting history, society and culture, ritual responds to the disappointment of the real; the farmer performs a rite to “ensure” the bounty of the harvest not because the rite symbolises the true order of things, but as a consolation because sometimes the harvest fails. Interestingly, the Duke’s analysis of the Satanists’ motivations closely accords with Seligman et al.’s understanding of the need for ritual to console our anxieties and disappointments. For the cultists, the mass is “a release of all their pent-up emotions, and suppressed complexes, engendered by brooding over imagined injustice, lust for power, bitter hatred of rivals in love or some other type of success or good fortune” (121). The Satanists perform the mass as a response to the disappointment of the participant’s lives; they are ugly, uncivil outsiders and according to the Duke, “probably epileptics... nearly all... abnormal” (121). The mass allows them to feel, at least for a limited time, as if they are genuinely powerful, people who ought to be feared rather than despised, able to command the interest and favour of their infernal lord, to receive sexual attention despite their uncomeliness.

Seligman et al. go on to argue ritual “must be understood as inherently nondiscursive—semantic content is far secondary to subjunctive creation.” Ritual “cannot be analysed as a coherent system of beliefs” (26). If this is so, we cannot expect the black mass to necessarily say anything coherent about Satanism, let alone racism. In fact, *The Devil Rides Out* tends not to focus on the meaning of the black mass, but on its performance. The perceivable facts of the mass are given, often in instructional detail, but any sense of what they might stand for remains unexplained in the text. Indeed, taken individually, it is hard to make sense or meaning out of each of the Sabbat’s components. Why must a skull rattle around a cauldron? Why must a child be killed and eaten? If communion forms the most significant part of the Christian mass, we could presume that the desecration of the host might be the most meaningful part of the rite, but given the extensive description accorded the mass as a whole, the parody of communion is dealt with surprisingly quickly, receiving only three sentences. The Duke describes the act as “the most appalling sacrilege”, but it is left at that as the celebrants stomp the host into the ground (120). The action itself is emphasised over anything it might mean.

Most of Wheatley’s readers will, I think, be untroubled by this. As Pierre Bourdieu noted, “the regularities inherent in an arbitrary condition... tend to appear as necessary, even natural, since they are the basis of the schemes of perception and appreciation through which they are apprehended” (53-4). Rather than stretching towards an interpretation of the Sabbat, readers simply accept it a necessary condition of a “black magic story”. While the genre and its tropes are constructed, they tend to appear as “natural” to readers. The Satanists perform the black mass because that is what Satanists do. The representation does not even have to be compelling in literary terms; it simply has to be a “proper” black mass. Richard Schechner argues that, when we are concerned with ritual, “Propriety”, that is, seeing the ritual properly executed, “is more important than artistry in the Euro-American sense” (178).

Rather than describing the meaning of the ritual, Wheatley prefers to linger over the Satanist’s actions, their gluttonous feasting and dancing, their nudity. Again, these are actions that hold sensual qualities for their performers that exceed the simply discursive. Through their ritual behaviour they enter into atavistic and ecstatic states beyond everyday human consciousness. They are “hardly human... Their brains are diseased and their mentality is that of the hags and the warlocks of the middle ages...” and are “governed apparently by a desire to throw themselves back into a state of bestiality...” (117-8). They finally reach a state of “maniacal exaltation” and participate in an “intoxicated nightmare” (135). While the mass is being celebrated, the Satanists become an undifferentiated mass, their everyday identities and individuality subsumed into the subjunctive world created by the ritual. Simon, a willing participant, becomes lost amongst them, his individual identity given over to the collective, subjunctive state created by the group. Rex and the Duke are outside of this subjunctive world, expressing revulsion, but voyeuristically looking on; they retain their individual identities. Tanith is caught between the role played by Simon, and the one played by the Duke and Rex, as she risks shifting from observer to participant, her journey to the Sabbat being driven on by “evil powers” (135).

These three relationships to the Sabbat suggest some of the strategies available to its readers. Like Rex and the Duke, we seem to observe the black mass as voyeurs, and still have the option of disapproving of it, but like Simon, the act of continuing to read means that we are participating in the representation of this perversity. Having committed to reading a “black magic story”, the reader’s procession towards the black mass is inevitable, as with Tanith’s procession towards it. Yet, just as Tanith is compelled towards it, readers are allowed to experience the Sabbat without necessarily having to see themselves as *wanting* to experience it. This facilitates a ludic, undiscursive reading experience; readers are not encouraged to seriously reflect on what the Sabbat means or why it might be a source of vicarious pleasure. They do not have to take responsibility for it. As much as the Satanists create a subjunctive world for their own ends, readers are creating a similar world for themselves to participate in. The mass—an incoherent jumble of sex and violence—becomes an imaginative refuge from the everyday world which is too regulated, chaste and well-behaved.

Despite having substantial precedent in folklore and Gothic literature (see Medway), the black mass as it is represented in *The Devil Rides Out* is largely an invention. The rituals performed by occultists like Crowley were never understood by their participants as being black masses, and it was not until the foundation of the Church of Satan in San Francisco in the later nineteen-sixties that it seems the black mass was performed with the regularity or uniformity characteristic of ritual. Instead, its celebration was limited to eccentrics and dabblers like Summers. Thus, as an imaginary ritual, the black mass can be whatever its writers and readers need it to be, providing the opportunity to stage those actions and experiences required by the kind of text in which it appears. Because it is the product of the requirements of the text, it becomes a venue in which those things crucial to the text are staged; forbidden sexual congress, macabre ceremony, violence, the appearance of intoxicating and noisome scents, weird violet lights, blue candle flames and the goat itself. As we observe the Sabbat, the subjunctive of the ritual aligns with the subjunctive of the text itself; the same ‘as if’ is experienced by both the represented worshippers and the readers. The black mass offers an analogue for the black magic story, providing, almost in digest form, the images and experiences associated with the genre at the time.

Seligman et al. distinguish between modes that they term the sincere and the ritualistic. Sincerity describes an approach to reading the world that emphasises the individual subject, authenticity, and the need to get at “real” thought and feeling. Ritual, on the other hand, prefers community, convention and performance. The

"sincere mode of behavior seeks to replace the 'mere convention' of ritual with a genuine and thoughtful state of internal conviction" (103). Where the sincere is meaningful, the ritualistic is practically oriented. In *The Devil Rides Out*, the black mass, a largely unreal practice, must be regarded as insincere. More important than any "meaning" we might extract from the rite is the simple fact of participation. The individuality and agency of the participants is apparently diminished in the mass, and their regular sense of themselves is recovered only as the Duke and Rex desperately drive the Duke's Hispano into the ritual so as to halt it. The car's lights dispel the subjunctive darkness and reduce the unified group to a gathering of confused individuals, breaking the spell of naughtily enabling darkness.

Just as the meaningful aspect of the mass is de-emphasised for ritual participants, for readers, self and discursive ability are de-emphasised in favour of an immersive, involving reading experience; we keep reading the mass without pausing to really consider the mass itself. It would reduce our pleasure in and engagement with the text to do so; the mass would be revealed as obnoxious, unpleasant and nonsensical. When we read the black mass we tend to put our day-to-day values, both moral and aesthetic, to one side, bracketing our sincere individuality in favour of participation in the text.

If there is little point in trying to interpret Wheatley's black mass due to its weakly discursive nature, then this raises questions of how to approach the text. Simply, the "work" of interpretation seems unnecessary; Wheatley's black mass asks to be regarded as a form of play. Simply, *The Devil Rides Out* is a venue for a particular kind of readerly play, apart from the more substantial, sincere concerns that occupy most literary criticism. As Huizinga argued that, "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration... [A significant] characteristic of play [is] its secludedness, its limitedness" (9). Likewise, by seeing the mass as a kind of play, we can understand why, despite the provocative and transgressive acts it represents, it is not especially harrowing as a reading experience. Play "lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil.... The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply..." (Huizinga 6). The mass might well offer barbarism and infanticide, but it does not offer these to its readers "seriously". The subjunctive created by the black mass for its participants on the page is approximately equivalent to the subjunctive Wheatley's text proposes to his readers. The Sabbath offers a tawdry, intoxicated vision, full of strange performances, weird lights, queer music and druggy incenses, a darkened carnival apart from the real that is, despite its apparent transgressive qualities and wretchedness, "only playing".

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