Joyce Carol Oates Revisits the Schoolhouse Gothic

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The history of the gothic as a counter-Enlightenment discourse, albeit an ambivalent one, suggests the suitability, if not the inevitability, of the gothic portrayal of education and educators. Previously, I have designated representations of teachers, students and academic institutions that rely on gothic tropes such as the monster, the curse and the trap as 'Schoolhouse Gothic' (Truffin 2008). This genre includes imaginative works as diverse as Edgar Allan Poe's 'William Wilson' (1839); Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960); Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), *The Shining* (1977), *Rage* (1977) and 'Suffer the Little Children' (1972); Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992), and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992). It also includes non-fiction representations of schools and schooling by figures such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Henry Giroux and others. Works in this mode examine schooling in relationship to such central gothic preoccupations as the tyranny of history, the terrors of physical or mental confinement, reification, and miscreation. Considered together, they suggest that schools are haunted or cursed by persistent power inequities (of race, gender, class) and, ironically, by the Enlightenment itself, which was to rescue Western civilization from the darkness of the past but which had a dark side of its own, born of its compulsion to dissect, define and dominate nature and humanity alike.

No stranger to the gothic, Joyce Carol Oates has returned more than once to the school as a source and scene of horror in novels like *Zombie* (1995) and *Beasts* (2002), which use zombification and consumption as metaphors for the effects of formal education (Truffin 2013b). *The Accursed*, published in 2013 but conceived and partially drafted in the 1980s (shortly after Oates began teaching at Princeton),¹ both exemplifies and diverges from the Schoolhouse Gothic. Like other works in this mode, *The Accursed* portrays the university as a place of mystified power, physical isolation, social stress and emotional disintegration.

Unlike these works, however, school does not leave its primary student-figure, Josiah Slade, permanently damaged, vengeful and monstrous. Josiah's most significant literary ancestor is fellow Ivy League student Quentin Compson of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and neither character experiences physical or psychological abuse at the hands of his professors, nor victimizes others in retaliation. Both are compared, implicitly or explicitly, to the most famous of literary students, Hamlet,² and appear more melancholy and ineffectual than monstrous. Comparing the two brings into focus the political and economic implications of the Schoolhouse Gothic, an oblique feature of *Beasts* (Truffin 2008) but more prevalent in such works as Poe's 'William Wilson' and Tartt's *The Secret History*, which portray the democratizing promise of American schooling as a grimly parodic threat (Truffin 2013a). In comparison, *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Accursed* say less about democracy than about capitalism. Harvard represents for Quentin Compson an accursed future of loss and failure that must be avoided, a capitalistic nightmare inferior to the elegant, mythic Southern feudalism he has been raised to mourn, while Princeton represents for Josiah Slade an accursed capitalist past that can be replaced with a more promising socialist future. Quentin's breakdown is permanent and irrevocable, while Josiah's makes possible the development of a new, more ethical consciousness, one in which Enlightenment values such as intellectual curiosity, unsentimental objectivity and faith in human reason are recuperated and redirected, but only after being severed from their customary but accursed educational, political, religious and economic entanglements.

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The Accursed is a sprawling, summary-resistant tale of the so-called 'Crosswicks Curse' that plagued Princeton, New Jersey and the Ivy League university for which it is known from 1905–6. The Curse itself is named for the Crosswicks Manse, home of the fictional Slades, a privileged Princeton family whose fateful year the novel documents. Oates's narrative features a large cast of characters and weaves together the fictional and the historical, the realistic and the fantastic. Its fictitious author, M. W. Van Dyck II, eventually revealed to be the son of a Princeton philosophy professor who died trying to murder him when he was an infant, is pedantic, prudish, anxious about his authority as a historian and prone to interrupting the story to comment on the shortcomings of previous chroniclers, brag about obtaining and deciphering

a wide array of often bizarre primary sources, bemoan the challenges of writing the history of such a singular event and offer his personal opinions about various figures and topics in the narrative. The tale he constructs illustrates what could be called the central gothic formula: 'a fearful sense of inheritance in time [a curse] combined 'with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space [a trap], these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration' (Baldick 1992: xix). While curses in the gothic can be metaphorical in nature, Oates's titular curse appears to be literal, complete with ghosts, demons, vampires and hellish alternate dimensions that may be manifestations of supernatural intervention, psychosexual repression, mass hysteria or some combination of the three. As is typical in the Schoolhouse Gothic, the trap is the claustrophobic campus, here inseparable from the equally claustrophobic town after which it is named.

Josiah Slade is the grandson of prominent and beloved minister, former New Jersey Governor, and Princeton University president Winslow Slade, and heir to the Slade fortune, which came from 'railroads, real estate, manufacturing, and banking', and, further in the past, from 'the slave trade' (61). When the curse begins, Josiah has already graduated from Princeton, abandoned his studies at West Point out of restlessness and boredom and occupied himself with unknown pursuits out west before returning home with a vague notion that he might study German idealist philosophy at Heidelberg or pursue a career in law, medicine or journalism. The curse first strikes publicly at his sister's ill-fated wedding and appears to have arisen from a decades-old crime committed by his grandfather when *he* was a student.³ During the time of the curse, Josiah inadvertently kills his favourite professor while trying to prevent him from murdering his own infant son (the author), injures one of his literary heroes, suffers a mental breakdown caused in large part by his failure to protect his sister or defend the family honour from invisible enemies, embarks on an ill-advised polar expedition to escape voices telling him to cleanse Princeton in an apocalyptic fire and takes a suicidal plunge into the icy water to rescue his phantom sister from a demonic seducer. After the curse, he repudiates his family privilege, joining (along with his sister) an agrarian socialist commune sixty miles away from Princeton and marrying an artistically inclined childhood friend known in their home town as a scandalously independent woman.

Despite their very different fates, Oates's Josiah Slade and Faulkner's Quentin Compson share a series of instructive commonalities. Both come from prominent, 'aristocratic' families (one southern, one northeastern)⁴ and grow up in the shadow of legendary but morally compro-

mised grandfathers; both are willing to endure hellfire⁵ to defend the honour of their sexually fallen sisters⁶ but fail in their chivalric quests and experience psychological breakdowns as a result; both hear voices and drown themselves.⁷ In addition, both are students at Ivy League universities in the first decade of the twentieth century and suffer from a profound sense of guilt over this privilege. In fact, school is truly 'accursed' for each.

These similarities are unlikely to be accidental, given Oates's well-documented fascination and engagement with William Faulkner. She has described herself as being 'bowed over by Faulkner' (Milaazzo 1989: 5) and reported that as a high school student, she wrote 'a bloated trifurcated novel that had as its vague model *The Sound and The Fury*' (Johnson 2006: 78). In a 1982 interview,⁸ she described Faulkner as 'the most significant writer' among her contemporaries (Johnson 2006: 119). Scholars have noted Faulkner's influence on Oates; for example, Anna Sonser's *A Passion for Consumption: The Gothic Novel in America*, describes *Bellefleur* (1980), one of Oates's most famous and successful novels, as 'an imitative recasting' of *Absalom, Absalom*, 'an ironic inversion that engages the metanarrative that tells the "story" of America, its mythology, omissions, and distortions' (Sonser 2001: 54). In addition to actively imitating and imaginatively revising Faulkner's works in her own writing, she has taught at least one of the novels: *The Sound and The Fury* (Milaazzo 1989: 5).

Readers will not readily connect frightening schools, teachers and students with the writings of William Faulkner, who did not complete any formal education past the eleventh grade, though he attended classes at the University of Mississippi for three semesters before dropping out (Weinstein 2010: 87, 76). Instead, Faulkner's name calls to mind the decaying houses, farms and barns of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi and the haunted, luckless or depraved planters, servants and criminals who inhabit them. Indeed, biographer Philip Weinstein asserts that schools 'never play more than a negligible role' in Faulkner's works (2010: 46). Nevertheless, educators and schools that do appear in those works, both within and beyond Yoknapatawpha, are typically portrayed as cruel, corrupt or incarcerating. For example, before marrying Anse Bundren, Addie, the adulterous wife and distant mother of *As I Lay Dying* (1930), had been a schoolteacher whose only pleasure in the job was whipping the children in her care (Faulkner 1930: 169–70). Hapless schoolteacher Labove attempts to sexually assault young student Eula Varner, and Houston runs away from school and the woman who pushed him through it in *The Hamlet* (1940). A date to a school dance gone wrong becomes the occasion for horrific violence

for university student Temple Drake, who then condemns an innocent man to a terrible death, in *Sanctuary*. But the most gothic of Faulkner's schools is neither in nor near Yoknapatawpha: it is Harvard University, where Quentin Compson narrates *Absalom, Absalom* and commits suicide in *The Sound and The Fury*.

While *The Accursed* presents a global, multifaceted view of 1905 Princeton University, *The Sound and the Fury* portrays 1910 Harvard University exclusively through Quentin's eyes and as partially responsible for Quentin's death. For Quentin, Harvard represents at once the 'dream' of his emotionally unavailable mother (Faulkner 1929: 113), the loss of the family land particularly cherished by his mentally stunted brother Benry (110), the place that 'form[ed] [the] character' (70) of his sister Caddy's manipulative fiancé Herbert Head, a source of guilt and humiliation, and 'a fine dead sound' (110). Quentin's obsession with his sister's purity, combined with his incestuous desire for her, cause him to behave differently from skirt-chasing classmates, who then tease him by calling his room-mate Shreve his 'husband' (50, 108). His morbid, guilty preoccupations also lead him to a quixotic fight with the strong, handsome, nouveau riche Gerald Bland. Ultimately, Harvard comes to symbolize for Quentin not a cursed past, but a (paradoxically) cursed future, the defeat of an elegant past at the hands of a crude modernity.

The section of Faulkner's novel narrated by Quentin takes place on the day of his suicide, and, although it moves unpredictably back and forth between the past and present, it remains a linear narrative punctuated by the coercive, oppressive bells of Harvard.⁹ Quentin's section opens in the morning as he contemplates his watch, remembers his father's aphorisms on the absurdity of fighting time, and endures Shreve's interrogation about his plans, accompanied by the reminder that the bell indicating the start of chapel will ring in two minutes. When the bell does ring, Quentin notes that 'it stayed in the air, more felt than heard, for a long time. Like all the bells that ever rang still ringing in the long dying light-rays and Jesus and Saint Francis talking about his sister' (50). While the bells evoke in Quentin memories of Caddy's ill-fated wedding, among other things, they also symbolize time, Harvard and the whole slew of cultural expectations that Quentin strenuously resists. They also call to mind uncomfortable childhood moments in which his 'insides' would 'move . . . in school when the bell rang' because his countdown to release 'never could come out even with the bell' (56), and he would lose track of his lesson and risk humiliation. Before committing suicide, Quentin embarks on a day trip designed as an escape from what Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* would suggest are the surveillance tactics of the university and of society at large – tactics known to

produce the likes of banker Herbert Head – culminating in the ultimate escape of suicide, defined as the state of being 'dead in Harvard' (110). During the course of the day, he identifies with the uncatchable fish sought by the three boys at the lake and tells them that it 'deserves to be let alone' (76) and becomes agitated at the sound of the bells. Quentin's association of the bells at Harvard with the bells at Caddy's wedding makes thematic sense in that both signal the loss of the mythical past for which Quentin longs, leading him to muse, 'Somewhere I heard bells once. Mississippi or Massachusetts. I was. I am not' (110). His suicide is the concurrent denial of Caddy's wedding (his primal loss), of Harvard and, finally, of modernity itself, all of which are equivalent to non-being. Confronted by the forces of surveillance impinging upon him, he retreats into the feudal past and rejects the self and the future that Harvard offers. In the end, he grimly notes that calculating the amount of weight in flatirons required to drown himself is 'the only opportunity [he] seemed to have for the application of Harvard' (55).

Although Oates's portrayal of Princeton University is more layered than Faulkner's portrayal of Harvard, Princeton is as 'accursed' for Josiah Slade as Harvard is for Quentin Compson. The university represents, however, a blighted past that Josiah must reject rather than a cursed future he must annihilate himself to prevent. *The Accursed* depicts the Princeton of 1905 as a place of mystified but anxious white male authority characterized by a terror of encroaching modernity not unlike Quentin's. This fearful future is marked especially in Oates's portrayal by the threatening demands of 'Jews', 'Negroes', 'hysterical females demanding "rights"' and teachers of 'heretical evolutionism' and 'atheistical socialism' (Oates 2013: 662), groups whose demands are both feared and derided by every authority figure in the novel, including the ones with reputations for being politically or culturally progressive. Woodrow Wilson, the president of Princeton during the Crosswicks Curse and a central character in the novel, repeats with pride that the university will incorporate 'no new ideas' into its curriculum (213, 313), signalling the commitment of the academy to defend tradition at all costs. Oates depicts the university as inseparable from the town and its entrenched class hierarchies and as serving a critical function in preserving and perpetuating those hierarchies, replicated in a student body which, while 'naturally gracious and schooled in courtesy' (200), concerns itself less with intellectual discovery than with getting into, while cruelly banishing others from, exclusive 'eating clubs', and with perpetrating 'unspeakable' hazing practices discussed in hushed tones throughout the novel (181–6, 477–8). The university's stance of intellectual detachment enables it to give an apparently rational defence

of irrational prejudices, as well as a veneer of respectability. In addition, its much-celebrated integration of learning and faith appears in the novel as pathological enmeshment, where vulnerabilities or deficiencies in one are hastily shored up by the other in an endless cycle that unleashes terror upon university and town alike.

Josiah's privileged background and family money protect him from even the (relatively light) hazing that Quentin experiences and prevent him from seeing this dark underbelly of Princeton until the curse strikes. In contrast to the narrator of *The Accursed*, who simply 'will not speak' of his undergraduate days at Princeton except to report that he would commit suicide rather than relive them (479), Josiah had been a 'sought-after' freshman (214), not unlike Quentin, whom Mrs Bland pursues as a friend for her son out of respect for the 'blundering sense of noblesse oblige' (Faulkner 1929: 58) she associates with his background. Josiah had been, in fact, 'the envy and awe of all' after receiving and 'ignoring', in his Slade arrogance, an invitation to join Ivy, the most exclusive eating club on campus (Oates 214). His friends, identified as 'few', came from 'elsewhere' in the school, outside the covered cliques and clubs (214). In many ways, Josiah is an ideal student in that he 'merited' high grades' and was 'at times, even a brilliant . . . student' (84) and in that 'friendship and popularity had not seemed to him the point of college' (214). After Josiah graduates, however, the curse and the suffering that it brings to the Slade family force him to rethink everything about his identity and his education.

Josiah's sense of self, deeply bound to family history and tradition, begins to disintegrate when that family and those traditions appear radically altered amidst the ravages of the Crosswicks Curse. More significant for the purposes of the current argument, however, is the part of Josiah's identity rooted in his relationship with Dr Pearce van Dyck, the narrator's father and Josiah's favourite professor. Josiah feels less 'comfortable' with his own father Augustus than with van Dyck, a long-time friend of Josiah's family and 'a specialist in Kantian idealism', who is 'taciturn by nature, scholarly and earnest' (84) and known for 'expecting a great deal of his students, and grading them severely' (312). In other words, Josiah resembles many Schoolhouse Gothic protagonists in that he strongly desires the approval of a professor who is clearly marked as a parental figure (Truffin 2008). Part of what attracts Josiah to this professor is his lack of sentimentality, which Josiah associates with van Dyck's chosen discipline, philosophy, in which 'one cuts through subterfuge . . . one goes for the jugular' (84). When a ghost appears on Slade property, Josiah picks up some unusual flowers near the sighting of the apparition and brings them to van Dyck, an amateur botanist. Van Dyck tries to

identify them and explain their pungent odour and rapid decomposition. Josiah does not initially tell him where he found the flowers but basks in his professor's confident pronouncements, which 'seemed the very essence of the philosophical temperament: to wrench some sort of sense out of senselessness', an effort that 'gives the illusion of comfort' (85-86). Van Dyck's identification of the flower as a calla lily turns out to be wrong, and the flower is eventually revealed as a toxic 'Angel Trumpet' capable of producing 'a gradual deterioration' of the brain characterized by 'paranoid suspicions and rage' (426). Shortly after Josiah brings the desiccated flowers to his professor, van Dyck begins to do what so many Princetonians do in the course of the novel: he 'turns' (370). The line between 'turning' and simply having one's true self revealed is, however, never very clear in *The Accursed*.

The philosophy professor's uncompromising rationalism and philosophical detachment deeply appeal to Josiah but come to manifest themselves in horrific ways that lead to van Dyck's death and Josiah's terrible, Oedipal guilt. As disappearances, demon sightings and murders begin to happen with regularity in Princeton, van Dyck's wife Johanna becomes pregnant with a child that van Dyck tells Josiah cannot be his own (314).¹⁰ The professor invites Josiah to observe and admire an intricate 'Scheme of Clues' (317) he has created in order to track manifestations of the curse and the activities of mysterious and possibly demonic interlopers, including Annabelle Slade's seducer. Van Dyck explains that the chart represents his attempt to bring the ratiocination of his hero Sherlock Holmes to bear on the Crosswicks Curse. When Josiah protests that the Holmes mysteries are not real, van Dyck responds with 'disapproval' at being challenged by 'a former, favorite student' (316) who should, in the professor's mind, regard him as a 'protector, mentor - savior' (403). The professor defends his fictional hero by describing the Holmes tales as 'distillations' of life's 'messy, impenetrable mysteries' that are, in fact, 'superior' to real life (316). After some time passes, and the van Dycks have temporarily relocated to an isolated and purportedly haunted property belonging to Johanna's family, Johanna invites Josiah to visit as a way of distracting her increasingly insane husband from his chart. The philosophy professor then receives a nocturnal visit from Sherlock Holmes himself, presumably a hallucination brought on by the toxic flower Josiah brought to his office. Holmes admonishes van Dyck to eschew the 'contemptible' 'life of emotion and sentiment' (408) so as to clear his mind and see that his son is 'the spawn of a demon' (414) that the professor must kill even if doing so means murdering his wife as well (415). Holmes enlists the professor's 'beloved Kant' in making his case that 'local law' must sometimes be 'transcended' (415).

Van Dyck moves to attack the child with a hot poker, and Josiah, awakened by Johanna's screams and mysteriously admonished by his sister Annabelle's voice, rushes to the nursery, grabs the hot poker with his bare hands, and knocks his professor to the floor. Van Dyck soon dies from a head injury, adding to Josiah's considerable burden of accumulated guilt and filling him with despair for betraying a man who had 'trusted' him 'as a son' and for turning from van Dyck's 'admirable pupil' to his 'executioner' (424). Although Josiah does not publicly admit to bringing the poisonous flowers to van Dyck's office (426) and is found 'blameless' in his professor's death (434), Josiah becomes increasingly paranoid that 'all of Princeton [is] observing him, and passing judgment', as though he bore the 'mark of Cain' (434). Killing the professor he most loved and admired, even in defence of a helpless baby, irrevocably alters both Josiah's self-concept and his relationship to Princeton.

The Curse of the Gothic Self

Unlike Quentin Compson, for whom a 'Harvard self' is a contradiction in terms, Josiah Slade flails helplessly as his Princeton identity slowly disintegrates. His violent encounter with Dr van Dyck, whose philosophical detachment had become both a mask and a justification for murderous impulses, is paradigmatic of his relationship to Princeton. The Crosswicks Curse exposes a nightmare world that reveals the worst in everyone he has been trained to respect and exposes the dark side of everything that Josiah has been trained to be – proud, refined, paternalistic, detached.

The Crosswicks Curse destroys the complacency and pride that came with Josiah's wealth, status and elite education. During his sister Annabelle's absence from Princeton, she appears to have been suffering in a hellish alternate dimension, the 'Bog Kingdom', where servants have overthrown aristocrats and subjected them to degrading, deadly service and horrific abuse (261–78). Instead of interpreting her experience as a nightmare revolution and an affirmation of the inherited order, she resolves to 'consecrate' herself 'to freeing . . . fellow-sufferers' (277) and after she returns (and dies giving birth to a deformed and possibly monstrous child, who also dies), Josiah begins to read the works of socialist writers like Jack London and Upton Sinclair. Josiah is alarmed to discover that Sinclair's most famous work, *The Jungle* (1906), exposes the unsanitary conditions and shocking labour practices in meat-packing plants owned by Slade family friends. After reading *The Jungle*, he realizes with great mortification that his expensive education has left him

wholly ignorant of basic realities such as the sources of his own wealth as well as the wealth of the rest of his set (292). Although he experiences 'envy' and 'a yearning for his lost youth' (289) while watching Princeton undergraduates go about their studies, Josiah feels an increasing 'revulsion for his Slade-self, seeing this individual through the eyes of others, as one of privilege and shame in equal measure' (293).

The Crosswicks Curse also brings religious disillusionment. Although Josiah is sceptical by nature and has 'long abandoned the hope of acquiring his grandfather Winslow's combining of faith and intelligence' (294), Winslow's reasonable, moderate, post-Enlightenment Presbyterianism is an integral part of Josiah's upbringing and sensibility. As a young child, he had even 'imagined' Winslow to be 'God himself' (36). By the end of the novel, however, Winslow has confessed to murdering a young girl and allowing another man to be executed for the crime, an old injustice that appears to have triggered the Crosswicks Curse. This blatant hypocrisy, however, represents only the simplest part of the novel's commentary on institutional religion and its enmeshment in industry, politics and education. The novel's epilogue suggests that Winslow regarded the curse as God's punishment for experiencing true love for his grandchildren and failing to live up to a dark 'Covenant' (649). In a bizarre final sermon that Winslow spoke about but died before he could deliver, a sermon the author claims to have acquired years later at an estate auction, Winslow declares that after his crime, God revealed to him that he treasures men most 'WHEN THEY GROVEL IN DESPAIR' and 'TAKE NO SOLACE IN HUMAN LOVE' (665, capitalization in original here and following). At this time, God also agreed to protect Winslow from disgrace and punishment if he would 'PREACH DISCORD WHILE EMPLOYING A VOCABULARY OF LOVE' (659) and 'DISGUISE THE WORKINGS OF EVIL ON EARTH WITH A PACIFIST SMILE' (657). In other words, just as the novel presents Dr van Dyck's philosophical detachment in a horrific light, it also highlights the role religious moderates of the period played in perpetuating injustice. The epilogue also adds to the novel's commentary on class by intimating that Winslow's nightmarish vision of God may be a product of the distortions that come with pride and privilege. Winslow writes in his sermon, 'I AM A SLADE, AND ORDAINED BY GOD; AND GUILTY OF NO CRIME; FOR ALL THAT FALLS FROM MY HAND MUST BE GOD'S OWN DESIRE, AND CANNOT BE DEEMED SIN' (654). *The Accused* simultaneously indicts religious moderates whose reasonableness and caution mask a deeper complicity with institutional evil and a wealthy class whose extreme sense of entitlement allows for no distinction between its behaviour and God's will. Neither identity remains an option for Josiah.

Given the hypocrisy and violence lurking within Josiah's 'dream-like' town and 'enchanted' university (291), it is little wonder that he becomes increasingly 'altered and strange' (287) as the 'jeering voices' in his head instruct him to 'purify' Princeton with a 'torch' (305). Like Quentin Compson, he is plagued by fantasies of suicide. Unlike Quentin, he struggles mightily against them rather than calmly and quietly succumbing (521–2). To escape Princeton, he joins an ill-conceived and under-resourced expedition to the South Pole reminiscent of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), explaining in a letter to his parents that 'the Southern sky has no history, . . . & no memory; no mind' (538). Early in the journey, he obtains a brief respite from the voices, but they eventually return, urging him to commit all manner of heinous and self-destructive acts, from seducing and murdering the captain of the ship (provocatively named 'Oates') to plunging into the arctic waters so that he might investigate the sea like a proper 'man of science' (540–1). Increasingly, he sees the 'Ice Kingdom' as his own 'Scheme of Clues', and he is visited by visions of his grandfather, his philosophy professor and many other figures from his past. When he finally plummets into the sea, he does so in the belief that he is rescuing Annabelle from the ice (548–9), marking even his suicide as a gesture of hope. That hope is fully realized when the Crosswicks Curse is lifted, an event that coincides with the moment that Josiah's recently deceased cousin Todd defeats Annabelle's demonic seducer in a game of draughts in the Bog Kingdom, as well as the moment that Winslow Slade dies at the front of a crowded church eager to hear the simultaneously esteemed and cursed Princetonian deliver a sermon. At this time, all of Winslow Slade's grandchildren are miraculously restored to life (641). Having experienced a complete breakdown of identity, however, Josiah leaves his Princeton self behind forever.

Despite the myriad similarities between Quentin Compson and Josiah Slade, their stories imply quite different views of history, modernity, gender, class and learning. Quentin, incapable of empathy and lost in a world of abstractions (family honour, southern womanhood, *noblesse oblige*) rendered meaningless by history, succumbs to narcissism and madness. His story dramatizes the pathos of losing a cherished, though untenable and defeated, way of life that Harvard, 'a fine dead sound' (110), cannot replace. He neither sees nor desires a future, particularly one exemplified by the crass ways and tastes of nouveau riche Harvard classmates like Gerald Bland. In contrast, Josiah 'discover[s] that a traditional way of thinking, whether of theology, intercollegiate sports, or the eating clubs on Prospect Avenue, was disagreeable to him' (313) and rejects the 'accursed' customs and habits of his upbringing and educa-

tion. Instead of surrendering to religious fatalism or melancholy, adopting a narrow and imperious but acceptably 'masculine' rationalism, clinging to fantasies of racial superiority and inherited privilege or pursuing success on bourgeois capitalist terms, Josiah embraces an agrarian socialism and takes his place in a community committed to promoting social justice and caring for (rather than dominating) one another and the earth (646–8).

Although the novel concludes on a decidedly anti-capitalist note, Oates does not canonize the socialists who play a role in the tale. In fact, she depicts Upton Sinclair as earnest but pedantic and devoted to an asceticism that is destructive to his own health as well as that of his young wife, who contemplates suicide and eventually leaves Upton and returns with their son to her well-to-do family (141–58, 239–55, 460). Worse, she portrays Jack London as a narcissistic, hyper-masculine alcoholic whose socialism is compromised by fantasies of racial superiority (487–529). When Josiah meets the very drunk London in a restaurant after a socialist rally planned by Sinclair, London wrongly accuses Josiah of sending cover 'signals' to his lady-friend, and a fight ensues in which Josiah ends up knocking London to the floor just as he did to his beloved professor, though London does not die from his head injury (526–7). Despite the failings of these characters, as well as the fact that 2013 is hardly a historical vantage point from which the socialist vision of the early twentieth century can be portrayed without irony, that vision is presented within her novel as the only real alternative to a sordid and corrupt Princeton.

Significantly, Oates presents Josiah's new socialist consciousness as one that recuperates certain aspects of the Enlightenment humanist tradition typically rendered horrific in the *Schoolhouse Gothic*. The qualities that made Josiah Slade an ideal student – his curiosity, his earnest but unsentimental bookishness, his habits of observation and analysis, his sceptical nature, his Enlightenment faith in the human mind – do not destroy him and the people around him, as they do in most works of the *Schoolhouse Gothic*. Instead, those qualities enable him to play a significant role in making the 'Helicon Home Colony' a success, 'self-sustaining, and even profitable', as he and his comrades teach themselves 'such disciplines as agronomics, organic agriculture, animal husbandry, and greenhouse-horticulture' (647). His Enlightenment frame of mind is, however, divorced from the corrupting influences and interests of Princeton society and its esteemed university. The end of the novel provides scant details but paints an idyllic picture marred only by 'an arson-set fire' (648) targeting the colony, a fire survived by all of the principals. The novel proper ends with the 'double wedding' of Josiah

and Wilhelmmina and Annabelle and Yaeger Ruggles,'¹¹ at which Upton Sinclair proclaims, 'It is the dawn of a new day! *Revolution now!*' (648, italics in original). Although an epilogue containing Winslow's disturbing sermon follows this exultant scene, Josiah is left secure and happy. Instead of continuing his prestigious formal education, as he once seemed destined to do, he chooses to join a community of learners devoted to one another and to nature. As such, he represents a new development in the Schoolhouse Gothic: the student who escapes the curse of institutional schooling and breaks its cycle of terror.

Marianne Juhl and Bo Hakon Jørgensen have described the Gothic novel as 'a protest against bourgeois rationalism which claims that human reason can master nature as well as itself' (Juhl and Jørgensen 1993: 90). Such a formulation identifies the dark underbelly of the Enlightenment not as human reason itself, but as human reason enmeshed in capitalist exploitation, bent on domination and unchecked by the equally human capacity for respect or empathy. It is precisely this type of 'bourgeois rationalism' that Josiah rejects. We could attribute his achievement to hero worship on the part of an unreliable narrator who owes Josiah his very life and may wish to remove his rescuer, ideologically and physically, from a town and university he regards as hopelessly compromised. We could also credit Josiah's renunciations to the fantastic elements of the novel in which he appears, a novel unbound to strictures of realism that might render his choices implausible. While these formal considerations do ironize Josiah's portrayal, the fact remains that in *The Accursed*, Joyce Carol Oates has granted a student character an uncharacteristically happy ending that sharply contrasts with the bleak fates suffered by most of his fellow Princetonians and by other students in her own Schoolhouse Gothic canon (Truffin 2008, 2013b). By imagining an alternative socialist future for this character, she foregrounds political and economic considerations that gothic and Schoolhouse Gothic texts typically incorporate but sometimes downplay or obscure. At the novel's conclusion, Josiah has embraced not the familiar, seductive *posture* of neutrality that masks a deeper complicity with the capitalist status quo, but rather a healthy rationalism directed towards achieving harmony with the environment and with others. He has repudiated the inherited wealth, corrosive elitism, destructive competition and mystified institutional power of his time – and challenged students and educators alike to imagine how we might do the same in our own.

Plate 1: Washington Allston (1779–1843), *Tragic Figure in Chains*, 1800. Watercolour on paper mounted on panel. 31.3 x 23.5 cm (12 7/8 x 9 5/8 inches). Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts.

Plate 2: Jackson Pollock (1912–56), *Gothic*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 215.5 x 142.1 cm (7' 5/8 x 56 inches). Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lee Krasner.

Plate 6: Kara Walker (b. 1969), *Grib for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace*, 2004. Cut paper. Dimensions variable. Tate Gallery. Acquisition presented by the American Fund for the Tate London, 2009.

Plate 7: Banks Violette (b. 1973), *Untitled (model for a future disaster)*, 2003. Steel, drum hardware, polystyrene, polyurethane and tinted epoxy. 83.8 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm (33 x 48 x 48 inches). Over Holland Collection. Courtesy Team Gallery, New York.

Notes

I would like to thank Reed Lawson, who aided in preliminary research on *The Sound and The Fury* while serving as an undergraduate Research Assistant at Campbell University.

1. See Smith 2013.
2. For references to Hamlet in descriptions of Josiah, see Oates 73–4, 137, 288, and 462. For commentary on Quentin as 'the Southern Hamlet', see Brooks 1952, Taylor 1963: 137–40, Sykes 1990. For an examination of the role of the university in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the ways in which the 'gentrification of learning' (207) in the early modern period destabilized concepts of nobility and helped facilitate Hamlet's tragedy, see Hanson 2011.
3. During a period of great personal and academic stress, the young Winslow Slade walks miles away from Princeton, drinks heavily at a pub, and is lured by a thief into a sexual encounter with a young, poor, mixed-race woman, whom he strangles to death and abandons. The thief is subsequently hanged for the crime. This episode emerges in two different confessions, the second of which announces that the first was only partially true (Oates 2013: 441–8, 649–57).
4. For discussion of *The Sound and The Fury* as a commentary on the Southern 'aristocracy', see Hanson 1994 and Bauer 2000. *The Accursed* identifies the Slade family as American 'aristocracy' (ironic as the term may be) by placing George Washington and other founding fathers at the family home, Crosswicks Manse, and going as far as to say that 'It was in the Manse ... that the fate of the young Republic was determined' (49).
5. See Faulkner 1929: 50–1, Oates 174.
6. Further, the sexual impurity is symbolized in both cases by a pair of muddy drawers, though the young Quentin carefully observes young Caddy's soiled pants, while the adult Josiah is not present for the muddying of the bride-to-be Annabelle's petticoat (Faulkner 1929: 25, Oates 126). To defend the family honour, both Quentin and Josiah plan to confront their sisters' seducers with pistols, though Josiah never actually finds Annabelle's (possibly supernatural) despoiler (Faulkner 1929: 101–2, Oates 167–79).
7. See Roberts 1995: 117–88 for a consideration of Quentin's similarities not only to Hamlet, but also to Hamlet's lover, Ophelia. Such a comparison could be usefully considered in relationship to Josiah as well.
8. This interview took place around the time that Oates first conceived and drafted *The Accursed* (Smith 2013).
9. Quentin's narrative, which obsessively returns to the problematics of time, has been particularly instrumental in instigating and sustaining the long critical tradition – from Jean Paul Sartre on – of theorizing Faulknerian time in terms borrowed from Henri Bergson, who argued that time measured rationally or scientifically interfered with authentic, experiential human time and thus represented an artificial hindrance to the direct intuition of knowledge (Benet 1965: 99).
10. This child is the fictitious author of *The Accursed*.

11. Yaeger, a distant cousin of Woodrow Wilson, had been a Latin preceptor (teaching assistant) at Princeton until he pressed the university president to speak out against lynching, revealing his own mixed-race heritage in the process. Wilson, shocked at discovering black blood in the family line, quietly arranged to have Yaeger dismissed from his post at the university.

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Contents

Introduction *Joel Faflak and Jason Haslam*

1

Part I: Gothic Histories, Gothic Identities

1. Gothic Monstrosity: Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* and the Trope of the Bestial Indian
Christine Yao

25

2. Slavery and American Gothic: The Ghost of the Future
Jason Haslam

44

3. Ethno-gothic: Repurposing Genre in Contemporary
American Literature
Arthur Redding

60

Part II: Gothic Genres, Gothic Sites

4. Southern Gothic
Christopher Lloyd
5. The Devil in the Slum: American Urban Gothic
Andrew Loman

79

6. Joyce Carol Oates Revisits the Schoolhouse Gothic
Sherry R. Triffin

110

Part III: Gothic Media

7. American Gothic Television
Julia M. Wright

129