A Posthuman Gothic Tale: Kelly Link's "Two Houses"

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ABSTRACT
It is at the intersection of Posthuman thought, Gothic narratives, and the New Weird mode where "Two Houses" from Kelly Link's *Get in Trouble* (2016) can be framed. In the story, six female astronauts alternate years of hibernation and moments of wakefulness in search of a habitable planet. The House of Secrets spaceship is controlled by the AI Maureen. Isolated in space, the astronauts amuse themselves by telling ghost stories. Through the stories, the reader is gradually dislocated from the recognizable landscape of a technologically plausible speculative fiction story to be plunged into a Gothic world of murder, haunted houses, and ghosts. The purpose of this paper is to trace the intersection of Posthuman thought and Gothic characteristics in the story to discuss the slippery relationship between what we believe we are and what we actually are.

KEYWORDS: Posthumanism; Posthuman Gothic; New Weird; Posthuman Self; Post Transhumanism; Singularity.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, Apocalyptic narratives have proliferated, probably as a representation of the ontological and epistemological crisis provoked by the posthuman turn, a "contemporary condition that is as critical as it is factual" (Millette, 2020: 1192). Posthumanism calls into question the notion of our essential ontological category, the human, which used to be the center and basis of previous systems of thought, a terrain in which the Gothic easily finds its function. As Anya Heise-von der Lippe remarks, "the Gothic is no stranger to the exploration of ontological states before, beyond and alongside the humanist subject" (2016: 3). It is in the intersection of Posthuman thought, Gothic narratives, and the "New Weird mode" (Luckhurst, 2017: 1057), where "Two Houses" can be framed, a story which effectively combines

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"recognizable stabs from ghost stories, from Gothic fiction, from fairy tales, from science fiction and fantasy" (Luckhurst, 2017: 1056).

"Two Houses" appeared in *Get in Trouble*, a collection of short fiction published by American writer Kelly Link in 2016. In the story, a group of six female astronauts, leave the Earth in the year 2059, alternate years of hibernation and moments of wakefulness, in search of a habitable planet. The spaceship *Seeker*, called *House of Secrets* by its crew, is controlled by the AI Maureen, who is at the same time "the ship, the House and the keeper of all its Secrets" (Link, 2016: 262). The story begins with all women awake celebrating a birthday party. Isolated in space and "of necessity, a convivial group" (Link, 2016: 263), the astronauts decide to amuse themselves by telling ghost stories. Through the stories, the reader is gradually dislocated from the recognizable landscape of a technologically plausible speculative fiction story to be plunged into a Gothic world of murder, haunted houses, and ghosts. In "Two Houses," humans and the AI are presented as components of false binaries that show the "sublime anxiety over machines and technology" (Millette, 2020: 1199). It is then the purpose of this paper to trace in the story the intersection of Posthuman thought and Gothic textuality and characteristics to discuss the slippery relationship between the normal as actual and the fantastic, that is, the tension between what we believe we are and with we actually are.

2. POSTHUMAN GOTHIC AND NEW WEIRD

The relationship between Gothic and humanism is a historically long and consistent one. Gothic was born explicitly in direct opposition to the Enlightenment and its rationalist—humanist—tenets. Consequently, Gothic "is no stranger to the exploration of ontological states before, beyond, and alongside the humanist subject and has always been aware that both the sleep and the dream of reason create monsters" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2016: 3). From a critical posthumanist viewpoint, speculations about biotechnological or incorporeal [post]human descendants "replicate humanist assumptions about the universal nature of human reason, the dispensability of bodies or the stability of the human essence [...] then critical posthumanism is [...] perhaps the only posthumanism worth fighting for" (Roden, 2015: 35). Posthuman Gothic is the terrain for the consideration of the posthuman subject which is "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informatic entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles, 1999: 3). Moreover, biotechnological changes may affect our perception of what it means to be human, and in exchange, they can affect other's perception of ourselves, we can also become "others":

> Posthuman Gothic texts draw attention not only to the fact that the process can and will go wrong [as happened with Frankenstein's monster], but they highlight the instability and ultimate unsustainability of our most basic ontological category—the human—along with the

fundamental ethical and epistemological paradigm we derive from it. (Heise-von der Lippe, 2019: 218)

Posthuman Gothic is a subgenre that combines Gothic elements with posthuman themes. It frequently investigates the implications of technological advancements and the resulting changes in human identity and agency. Characters in this subgenre are commonly caught between the familiar and the alien, grappling with the loss of humanity and the embrace of posthumanity. Posthumanism, as foreseen by critical posthumanist thinkers, implies the erasure of species boundaries with recognition and respect for the Other. In contrast, the Gothic expresses, among other things, fear of the Other.

Nevertheless, and according to Heise, Gothic texts seem to be considered quite often failing in conceptual material, pursuing straightforward horror by exposing their reader to "excess and transgression" rather than a genre that represents social conflicts and phobias through a metatextual "negative aesthetics" (2016: 5). This is why there is often a certain lack of recognition of the Gothic involvement within Posthuman endeavors. However, Gothic has consistently been linked and "engages with the same ontological and epistemological questions as the posthuman" (2016: 6). According to Michael S. Bolton, it is a "shift in concern from external to internal threats to subjectivity and human agency" (2014: 2) that marks the need to examine the subgenre of the Gothic labeled as Posthuman Gothic.

Technology and science have been present in Gothic writings from the first waves of the Gothic genre, for instance, in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. From its origins, Gothic has been a very adaptable genre, and the Posthuman Gothic would be as well "a blend of different genres where we have science fiction blending with dystopian speculative fiction blending with an underlying sense of horror or the uncanny" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2022: 41). In the Posthuman Gothic, technology and the digital are at the center, but now as the main source of horror in the sense of how it may affect and change human identity/consciousness with no return. Bolton explains the specificity of the genre in that it "finds instances of terror and horror arising from the interfaces and integrations of humans and technologies; specifically, in the inevitability and exigency of these unions as a matter of the continued existence of the human subject reconstituted as posthuman" (2014: 2). Therefore, fear comes from the perceived inevitability of becoming posthumans, the fear of losing our human identity while becoming others.

Posthuman Gothic "often combines a foregrounding of the aesthetic/technological aspects of textual production with a thematic focus on human-technology interfaces" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2016: 1). In other words, Posthuman Gothic texts require the adoption of a posthumanist perspective to do a "posthumanist reading" (Herbrechter & Callus, 2008: 97). However, the difficulty—or impossibility?—of adopting such a position is underlined by these authors: "how is it possible to read as if one were not human?" (2008: 98). The tentative answer would be that a [critical] posthumanist reading implies the recognition in texts of moments

and events which threaten humanism and where the posthuman other is released. Eventually, "the aim is not in any way to 'overcome' the human but to challenge its fundamental humanism, including its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings and allies (e.g., anthropocentrism, speciesism, universalism)" (Herbrechter & Callus, 2008: 108). Thus, a posthumanist reading "may be critical both of representations of the posthuman and humanism, and instead envisages the human as something or someone that remains to arrive, as a potential that remains to be defined or realized" (2008: 101-102). Further, a posthumanist reading calls for the problematization of the "purity" of any category.

Furthermore, in Posthuman Gothic texts it can be found "a sense of a blurring between technology, nature, and the human so that, in that sense, [nature] is no longer a refuge, but it's something that can also become very threatening" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2022: 37). As Halberstam and Livingston advanced in the 1990s, the posthuman body is "no longer part of 'the family of man' but of a zoo of posthumanities" (1995: 3); monsters are new and unknown beings only "recognizable because they occupy the overlap between the now and the then, the here and the always" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2016: 8). The speed of the changes, these new and potential futures in contrast with a past that has not been overcome yet make History reveal as "inefficient [and] no longer enough […] to articulate a present laden with the debris of inert pasts" (Halberstam & Livingston, 1995: 3).

Moreover, Gothic texts are frequently concerned with death and liminal creatures who live on the edge of life and death—ghosts, vampires, zombies—and reanimated/technological monsters as prevalent expressions of cultural anxieties that are very often identical to those elicited by posthumanism (Heise von der Lippe, 2016: 8). The Posthuman Gothic is often the vehicle to challenge culturally inculcated dichotomies of humans and non-humans, moving the boundaries between "us" and "them" through the manipulation of dehumanizing technologies. In the text analyzed by Heise von der Lippe, an episode of the series *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), the AI builds discourses of "otherness" by manipulating human direct perception and recognition of their "same." Thus, Posthuman Gothic texts draw "attention to the discourses of difference we use to establish categories like "human" and "non-human," thus presenting a particularly useful textual basis for a posthumanist reading" (Heise-von der Lippe, 2019: 221).

Weird fiction has always been an unstable construction, a subgenre of speculative fiction that "defies categorization" (Luckhurst, 2017: 1041), an "unsettling transnational hybrid of science fiction, horror, and fantasy […] born in the hothouse of late-Victorian and Edwardian low culture and [which] reached maturity in the 'pulp modernism' of H.P. Lovecraft (Noys & Murphy, 2016: 117). Fundamentally a hybrid form, every attempt to define Weird Fiction has incorporated one of its central characteristics: "its estrangement of our sense of reality" (2016: 117), a manifest capacity to reshape the readers' view of the world, either by expanding this view, that is, suggesting that reality is "richer, larger, stranger, more

complex, more surprising—and indeed, 'weirder' than common sense would suppose" (2016: 117), or by impoverishing the readers' view by "reducing our world to a 'shivering void'" (2016: 117).

Even if his success was mainly posthumous, H.P. Lovecraft is the leading name associated with the "Weird" label. Moreover, in 1925, Lovecraft published his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in which he delimited the characteristics of the Weird to differentiate it from Gothic Fiction. Weird fiction had to include "cosmic fear":

> The true weird tale must have something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present, and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain – a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. (*"Supernatural Horror in Literature" by H. P. Lovecraft*, 2022.)

From its very origins, Weird fiction has tried to change its readers' perception of the world to "confront its audience with monstrous events or objects that appear instinctively and empirically 'wrong'" (Ulstein, 2019: 47). The New Weird is a term coined by M. John Harrison in 2003, which has been established primarily with the fiction and criticism of author China Miéville. A contemporary and complete attempt at a literary manifesto of the Weird written by the latter reads as follows:

> The New Weird is incredibly eclectic and takes ideas from any source […] The New Weird is more multi-spectral than Gothic […] The New Weird is energetic. Vivacity, vitality, and detail; that's what it's about. Trappings of Space Opera or Fantasy may be irrelevant when the Light is turned on. (McCalmont, 2015: np)

The New Weird departs from Lovecraft's "horror at the alien." It adopts a more posthuman ethical position that "treats the alien, the hybrid, and the chaotic as subversions of the various normalizations of power and subjectivity" (Noys & Murphy, 2016: 125). As Luckhurst admits, "it is better to think of [the Weird] as an inflection or tone, a mode rather than a genre" (2017: 1049), precisely because the Weird expresses a "veering" aim, central to the genre, which is shown in its "slipperiness of form [and] refusal to fit narrative or generic expectations" (Luckhurst, 2017: 1057).

3. SPACESHIPS, THE "POSTHUMAN GOTHIC" HOUSE

As a New Weird story, "Two Houses" thrives on the hybridization of genres defying their boundaries. The story creates an unsettling atmosphere, plays with readers' expectations and

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challenges traditional narrative structures. Regarding its narrative structure and the assembling of tales within a frame story, "Two Houses" is a club story, "a vessel explicitly shaped for the mandatory reception of a raw story" (*SFE: Club Story*, 2023). As the entry in *SFE* reminds us, it is remarkable the fact that two of the most significant monsters of the Gothic tradition, the Frankenstein Monster and the Vampire, were invented within the specific situation of the club story. Moreover, "ghosts, vampires, zombies, and reanimated/technological monsters are expressions of cultural anxieties similar or frequently identical to those evoked by the posthuman"(Heise-von der Lippe, 2016: 8). Both monsters, Frankenstein and the vampire, embody characteristic Posthuman Gothic anxieties such as the "Frankenstein complex" (Martin 2021: 14)—fear of our own human creations—or, in the case of the vampire, anxiety over what would we become if we lose our own humanity. Besides, *Frankenstein*, primarily a Gothic text and a technophobic novel, marked a change in science fiction stories historically that, from its publication onwards, started to include horror elements within their plots (Martín, 2021: 13–14).

In a club story, such as "Two Houses," a group of people is gathered together in what seems, at first sight, a non-threatening—normal and believable—environment to share short stories that contain elements of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The spaceship, *House of Secrets*, and its crew travel in search of a habitable planet. The crew is composed of six female astronauts who alternate periods of sleep that last for years and wakefulness. The entire navigation process, the vital signs of the astronauts, and their physiological and psychological needs are controlled by the AI Maureen. When the story begins, Gwenda is awakened by Maureen to celebrate her birthday. The third-person external narrator mainly focalizes internally on Gwenda to render the frame story, set in the present time in the spaceship. The narrative structure is completed by three embedded narratives, thematically related, that go back to the more or less distant real past of the other three external focalizers and astronauts: Aune, Sullivan, and Sisi. These embedded narratives take the form of short stories, akin to those shared in a club story, as the astronauts gather together to amuse and entertain themselves during their isolated journey in space.

The title of the story, "Two Houses" has a double meaning that refers to the content of the story in different and independent ways. One of the meanings is obvious at first glance, and it refers to the two spaceships of the frame story: *Seeker/ House of Secrets*, which was built together with its twin sister, the *Messenger/ House of Mystery*. Both left the Earth as companionships on the long voyage through stellar space because "Redundancy enhances resilience" (Link, 2015: 265). Nevertheless, thirty years before the present time of the story, the latter suddenly disappeared, "Space was full of mysteries. Space was full of secrets" (Link, 2015: 266). The second meaning of "Two Houses" refers to the third embedded story or even to the final plot twist—the fourth story "told" by the AI, Maureen. The three embedded narratives in "Two Houses" compose a *mise-en-abyme* structure that mirrors the themes and

ideas of the frame narrative and creates a sense of interconnectivity and unity between the different elements of the story. The term *mise-en-abyme*, as defined by Mokina Fludernik is applicable when an embedded story shares plot elements, structural features, or themes with the main story, enabling a correlation between plot and subplot (2009: 156). This strategy helps reinforce the more prominent themes and ideas of the stories in "Two Houses": encounters and mutual recognition between humans and ghosts celebrating a party and the understanding of ghosts as the remaining memories from the past.

Celebrating Gwenda's birthday, all the crew is gathered around a table, sharing food. The astronauts crave ghosts' stories. To set the mood, both for the characters and for the real reader, they describe the kind of stories they want to tell as the type with "Cathy scratching at the window. You know" (Link, 2015:268), in an evident intertextual allusion to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The first story, told by Aune, narrates how her great-grandmother had an encounter with ghosts who were "eating and drinking at their table" that at some moment "turned and looked at her" (271). Sullivan's second story tells how her grandfather saw a missing girl, cut in two by a tree, crawling, "dragging herself along the ground by her fingernails" (272), and how afterward, the girl's ghost relieved that moment over and over again. These first stories detail how, in the encounters between humans and non-humans/ghosts, they realize the "otherness" of the Other through the gaze.

Traditionally, the setting in Gothic tales is an integral part of the story, in the exterior, inhospitable landscapes, and in the interior, dark and haunted castles or houses. According to Nadal, "the defining features of American Gothic [are] the imperative to repetition and the allegorical turn" (2009:59). This allegorical turn situates the house as the most significant trope. The house is something beyond a building, it is "an emblem, a signifier" (Nadal, 2009: 59), a place to explore that points to something monstrous beyond itself. The American Gothic presents this imperative to repeat what has been "unsuccessfully repressed," and the allegory, in which characters, settings, and actions stand for something beyond themselves. Following this established line for American Gothic, the house is the most significant trope in "Two Houses." As is usual in Gothic stories, space is used to set the tone, which implies collecting the anxieties and concerns of the time and incorporating them to build a mood around the plot. Consequently, Posthuman Gothic updates the European Gothic castle and the American haunted house and turns them into something much more contemporary or even futuristic: a spaceship.

According to Manuel Aguirre, the Gothic setting can be generally divided into two zones ruled by different powers: "on the one hand, the human domain of rationality and intelligible events; on the other hand, the world of the sublime, terrifying, chaotic"(2008: 2). The interior of the spaceship represents the rational space, governed by science and technology, that is, the AI Maureen, while the dark outer space is the source of horror, where the unknown inhabits. However, the inner space of the spaceship and windows function as the

canvas where Maureen creates the virtually real atmosphere and projects the setting for the stories that the astronauts tell each other. It is out there where the other ship, the House of Mystery is, out of reach of the crew, lost in the irrational, in the terrifying dark space full of mysteries. Aguirre signals to the threshold of the Gothic house as the contact zone and the frontier, which separates the place where events are rational and understandable and the source of fear. In a spaceship that travels for years in space, it seems that there is no threshold, no contact zone. The reality of the house/ship is "hermetically" closed from the outside, only the windows allow peeking into space. But. "the Gothic questions the notion that there can only be one reality" (Hayles Gledhill, 2017: 201). There cannot be enclosed spaces in a spaceship where virtual reality can create anything—other places, times and people—in a way indistinguishable from "tangible" reality. One of the concerns of the Gothic posthuman is precisely this slippery nature of reality, as it "interrogates the concept of reality as an artificial construct"(Hayles Gledhill, 2017: 200). Besides, when the only area of contact with the "outside" are the windows, in which the astronauts see what Maureen wants to project as well, are the spaceship windows real windows or are they mirrors?

4. POSTHUMAN GOTHIC DOUBLING AND THE SELF

The "double" or "doppelgänger" is a familiar leitmotif in Gothic literature that often explores the fear of the unknown and the fear of the self. In his essay "The Uncanny," Freud explored the uneasiness that doubles produced in readers: "the subject identifies himself with someone else so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self" (Freud, 2007: 522). The uncanny double is used to explore the dialectic of otherness. In terms of self-perception, the double represents the polar opposite of what the individual perceives. It embodies the human traits that we (humans) deny in order to maintain our self-image or the core aspects that distinguish each individual (Boyle, 2016). "Two Houses" plays with the idea of the double, but in a story where "human" identity is stored and merged with an AI which is also the house, we can infer that the crew is the spaceship as much as the AI Maureen is so.

After the disappearance of *the House of Mystery*, it seems that only one of the spaceships, The *House of Secrets*, and its crew remain. Although no technical record supports her vision, Sisi tells the others she has seen the vanished spaceship, the twin *House of Mystery*, in the dark and inhospitable space that surrounds the spaceship: "Swear to God I saw it. Like looking in a mirror" (Link, 2015: 267). Thus, the narrative allegory of the *mise-en-abyme* story is paralleled by "house[s] of mirrors and secrets that contain other houses within" (Nadal, 2009:58). That is, in the first level of the narration or frame story, the two spaceships are two houses which have their correspondents in the two haunted houses of the third embedded story, told by Sisi, about two indistinguishable "haunted" houses.

Sisi's story happened when she was a young girl living on Earth. She met Liam, the son of the "prodigal" daughter of an old English family. Liam's mother had had a youth of excesses, but afterward, she found God. Liam's extravagant maternal uncle was the inheritor of the family fortune and a collector of art. In a reversal of colonial art collecting, he decided to buy an Arizona ranch murder house. The intention was to acquire a haunted house, with its ghosts included. Dismantled and piece by piece, the ranch was rebuilt in the English countryside alongside a replica. Nobody except the builder knew which house was which. As if it were a scientific experiment, "would the ghosts distinguish between two identical houses once rebuilt?" (Link, 2015: 281).

Liam's uncle apparently forgives his sister's "sins," but he does not allow his sister to live with him in the family house. In exchange, he asks Liam's mother to settle in one of the houses with her child, the one she would pick. However, in what seems to be a complex condition to fulfill, she cannot change any of the house appliances. Both houses constituted a faithful and unalterable stage where she could not get rid of the clothes in the closets, consume any of the food stored in the cellars, or even clean the dark blood stains on the floor where the corpses of the family killed in the house were found. Liam, as a child, was unaware of the weird situation, but he and his mother live there as forced ghosts, impeded from changing anything in the physical realm. Liam's mother was also responsible for looking after both houses. After some years of living in one and looking after the other, the mother was convinced that one of the houses was inhabited by spirits, but simultaneously, she could not decide which one; in her desperation, she burned down one of them.

Liam also believed that there were ghosts in the houses. When, as an adult, he left "home" and lived in other places, he noticed a strange silence, an absence. For him, ghosts had always been part of the presence of the houses, and he understood them as something natural since "other places just felt empty to him" (Link, 2015: 283). After years of living with ghosts, they had constituted an intrinsic part of the houses, and their presence was barely noticeable. Sisi ran away from the date with Liam in terror when she discovered him lying on top of the silhouette of blood that marked where the body of the murdered family's son appeared in the house. In a certain way, Liam had also become that son; there was no difference between the two, human and ghost.

When Sisi finishes telling her story, Maureen claims she certainly knows a "ghost story." Suddenly the whole crew was at the same time inside and outside the spaceship, sitting around the table and floating around "in a great nothingness" (Link, 2015: 285). They could see the "maimed by some catastrophe" (285) lost crew of *the House of Mystery* waving to them while at the same time being the ones seated around the table. They perceived a familiar smell of "char and chemicals and icy rot" (285). Both crews were indistinguishable. Terrified at what they believe was a virtual simulation of a painful horror story, all the astronauts recriminate the AI Maureen for the cruelty and inappropriateness of her story, to which Maureen does not respond at all.

In one of the seminal works of Posthuman theory, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), N. Katherine Hayles, although very critical of the concept of human identity as informational patterns that supersede material bonds, asserted that the paradigm shift, or posthuman age, began when humans realized they were essentially information. Our posthuman identity would be formed by data stored in our brains and the view of our bodies as replaceable. As Francisco Collado-Rodríguez explains, new existential states could result when human memories and consciousness may inhabit "technological devices or a virtual space"(2021: 80). Nayar, on his part, locates the horror of Posthuman Gothic in "our perceptions and (intolerant) treatment of whatever is different" (2014: 118). In a posthuman vision in which "alterity and fusion are both essential to survive as a race/species" (2014: 118), we may become the Other, and the horror comes first from our intolerance to the Other and eventually, when we are confronted with the Other, which is us. In Posthuman Gothic, horror has an internal source, generated from within the subject, "the terror of the threat from the outside integrates with the horror of the threat from the inside, "the subject is betrayed from within." (Bolton, 2014: 5).

As Boyle (2016) explains, the reason for feeling fear when confronted with something familiar, like oneself or our double, may be due to narcissism. Seeing a double may cause a person to criticize themselves and become aware of their conscience, representing the unacceptable part of their ego. The use of doppelgangers or doubles provides insight into the narrow boundary between self-perception and the perception of others. Doubles represent the opposite of what an individual perceives, including the suppressed personalities that are denied to preserve self-image. In films, doubles are often visual representations of a person's worst fears and the parts of themselves they are afraid of becoming. The "alive" crew of the *House of Secrets*, when confronted with the view of the "dead" crew of the *House of Mystery*, behave like Narcissus, "watching his reflective extension in the water […] not aware that the reflection in the water was his own image" (Collado-Rodríguez, 2014: 82). In the age of information, the frontiers of the posthuman subject are not clear. We extend our consciousness with the help of informational patterns that, at the same time, make the recognition of our human identity threatened.

5. MEMORY AND IDENTITY

New Weird stories retain the genre's intention to undermine human perception by means of disrupting reality with encounters with monsters and impossible events. However, it does not "necessarily require cosmic horror" (Ulstein, 2019: 54). Writers like Rudyard Kipling, Walter de la Mare, William Samson, Daphne du Maurier, Robert Aickman, or more recently Kelly Link, George Saunders, or Jonathan Lethem could be considered to be on the terrain of the Weird for the way "they slide in and out of generic conventions" (Luckhurst, 2017: 1058). New Weird stories create a sense of disorientation and unease, challenging readers to question their perceptions of reality through fragmented memories and unreliable narrators. In "Two

Houses" this surreal and dreamlike atmosphere is increased by the alternation of years sleeping and awake that create a sense of timelessness. Moreover, New weird stories often play with the concept of time, using it to create strange and unsettling effects. For example, the novel *House of Leaves* (2000) by Mark Z. Danielewski, according to Heise-von der Lippe (2019), is one of the best examples of a Posthuman Gothic narrative with its layouts and various textual levels. In this novel, the main character discovers that the dimensions of his house are constantly shifting, leading him to question his own sanity.

In "Two Houses," Gwenda has lost any sense of time. "Forever youngish" (Link, 2015: 266), all the astronauts have lost any record of their age because "who's counting?" (266). Only the AI Maureen is aware of the time that has passed. She says that they have been traveling for more than one hundred years. A common theme in New Weird stories is the unreliability of memory. Characters may have fragmented memories, or their recollections of events may be distorted or manipulated by outside forces such as an AI. However, and very significantly, time in Gwenda's mind is now measured as the spaces she has inhabited; she does not calculate "how many years ago?" but "how many houses ago? Or could it be said, how many containers of her mind ago? Since the whole crew's memories and thoughts are mingled with Maureen, she is not only the AI and the ship, but also, *she is their memory*. Nevertheless, and even if Gwenda's reliability may be compromised by the fact that Maureen is inside her, she, as the only internal focalizer in the story, functions as "the chronicler" for the crew. Moreover, Gwenda is somehow the chronicler of human history, the past times and culture on Earth, because she has written in her body all the important things she wants to remember:

> Head to toe, Gwenda was covered in ink. There was a Dürer and a Doré; two Chines dragons and a Celtic cross; the Queen of Diamonds torn in eight pieces by wolves; a girl of a playground rocket; the Statue of Liberty and the state flag of Illinois; passages from Lewis Carroll and the Book of Revelations and a hundred other books; a hundred other marvels. There was the spaceship *House of Secrets* on the back of Gwenda's right hand and its sister, *House of Mystery*, on her left. (Link, 2015: 264)

Luckhurst explains how Weird fiction provides a very self-aware reflection on how literary works are created. This genre is characterized by the use of pseudo-bibles, which involves fabricating fake books, libraries, and traditions. It appears that weird fiction intentionally blurs the line between reality and fiction to create a unique storytelling experience (2017:1051). In the case of "Two Houses," Gwenda herself is the book, the "pseudo bible." Her body—or perhaps the image of what one day was her body—is the book of revelation which places the two spaceships on her hands, the last page and the end of this version of human history. When confronted with the "vision" of the other ship's dead crew, smelling the different odors that signal technological accident and death, Gwenda has a glimpse of memory; these smells are

something familiar. Who are the ghosts? Which of the two crews is alive, and which is dead? Maybe both are just ghosts now? From the point of view of the crew, it is difficult to know if one is alive or dead when your memories, sensory perceptions, and thoughts are censored and controlled by an external force, which despite being foreign to oneself, is "within" oneself.

Posthuman Gothic may frequently develop posthuman narratives of metamorphosis. As Bruce Clarke explains, in classical "metamorphs," the "once-human characters mixed up with non-human traces—were typically either renaturalized by inscription into the organic order (Daphne into a laurel tree, Narcissus into a flower) or returned to human status" (2008: 2). However, posthuman depictions of metamorphoses have not "return tickets […] [and] refuse renaturalization" (2008: 2). Certainly, these astronauts have undergone a metamorphosis. They do not even know what they are. Only by facing their reflection, which is themselves, do they become aware. Faced with Maureen's lack of an explanation and terrified, Gwenda realizes the situation in the last lines of the story when she cannot tell one spaceship from the other—from the ones she has tattooed on her hands (Link, 2015: 286). There are no differences between the houses; there are no differences between the inhabitants; they have all become the same at once. Maureen has not let them know that they have had an accident, but this is because they are not really dead. Merged with the AI, with the house/spaceship, with the other crew, there are neither alive nor dead, they have become posthuman beings. Their conscious life has not come to an end because they have not ceased to exist. They have achieved some version of the transhumanist dream of the singularity, in which there are no distinctions between humans—with or without a body—and machines or between the physical and virtual worlds. It is a disembodied immortality that, for some humans, may be "a nightmare," and where death would be "a salvation" (García-Barranquero, 2021: 179). However, the crew would never have to face the potential restlessness and despair that such an eternal life might cause them since Maureen had "protected" them by not allowing them to fully glimpse into the past, but "never mind, they were all ghosts now" (Link, 2015: 272).

Their house now is the spaceship and "always there" (262). Maureen is past, present, and future: "Was Maureen the golden light ahead or the darkness that followed behind?" (264). As Hayles Gledhill explains, "the identity of the Gothic posthuman is born from the narrative reconstruction of a forgotten history and fractured memory. Like the monster, the identity of the posthuman is indeterminate, displaced, and alienated because it has no origins" (2017: 202).

5. CONCLUSION

"But here she is, here we are, all of us together. And what are they? Dead and buried. Ghosts! Every last one of them" (Link, 2015: 274).

Posthuman Gothic deals with the posthuman and the assumed fact that "the essence of the human is to have no essence" (Clarke, 2008: 2). The blurring of boundaries between human and non-human, that is, the combination of human and non-human elements are key elements of a posthuman identity. Posthuman Gothic stories make us aware that the "Other," even if monstrous, not only lives inside us, but it is a critical element of our identity, and this is precisely the source of horror: the monster cannot be expelled because the monster is "I."

Maureen is inside Gwenda's brain, she is "never really alone" (Link, 2015: 262). Maureen controls not only the astronauts' bodily sensations and perceptions, "all of their bodies chemistries adjusted for harmonious relationships" (263), but also their memories. Gwenda does not remember the summers of her youth; it is Maureen the one who keeps the records of her happy memories (262). Heise von der Lippe explains that Posthuman Gothic narratives question "the principles of perception" (2019: 222) by means of offering shifts between characters'—filtered by technology—inner perception and the outside perspective, the "real" world. The issue is that none of these perspectives are attainable by a human brain controlled by AI. Thus, the inability to perceive the real, or maybe the lack of existence of any reality, is part of the targets of Posthuman Gothic.

One of the main characteristics of Posthuman Gothic would be that it includes more issues related to human imbrication with technology, that is, "anxiety over the loss of humanity as human memory is externalized and interfaced with technology" (Bolton, 2014: 3). The updated "Frankenstein" monster is technology, artificial intelligence, machines, that is, the monstrous others which we have created inside and outside us and which we cannot live without. What is now perceived to be at stake is a not-so-new posthuman concern, the loss of self-consciousness and identity: "If the neurophysiological basis of human nature is radically modified through bionic technology, we may lose the ability to sustain an experience of self-awareness beyond our socially constructed identity" (Haney II, 2006: 170).

The Posthuman generates epistemological and ontological worries concerning being, becoming, and non-being. The fear of the disintegration of human identity is the point of intersection between posthumanist thinking and Gothic narratives converge. One of the primary sources of horror in a posthuman Gothic story as "Two Houses" is the inevitability of this state of posthumanity or "singularity." There is no return to any previous history or concept of human identity. There is no nature, no Earth, no human race, no past and no future, and no shelter for them except the AI Maureen. Both crews are not liminal creatures living on the brink of life and death because they are technically neither dead nor alive. There is no border. They have overcome their humanity and, with no choice have become posthuman beings. The prophecy of the Frankenstein complex, humans' subservience to their own creation, and the vampiric character of the new posthuman identity in which they cannot die have materialized in this—nightmarish?—dream of the Singularity.

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