**My Friend the Devil: Gothic Comics, the Whimsical Macabre and Rewriting William Blake in Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s *Satania***

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**Abstract**

This article develops the concept of the ‘whimsical macabre’, introduced in my book *Post-millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (2017) to refer to texts which deliberately fuse the comic and cute with the sinister, monstrous or grotesque. I propose that Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s graphic novel *Satania* (2016) extends the whimsical macabre in new directions, by drawing on the work of Romantic poet and artist William Blake, whose illustrated books are often cited as forerunners of modern comics. Byrewriting Blake’s visionary account of a journey into the infernal regions in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793) and alluding to *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789/1794), *Satania* reveals the serious ethical dimensions that underlie the whimsical macabre. In doing so, it interrogates and complicates the maturational narrative associated with children’s and young adult literature. The article concludes by suggesting that *Satania*’sheroine Charlie’s relationship with her demon draws on a Blakeian model of friendship in opposition, pointing towards a ‘reparative’ form of Gothic in which otherness is neither erased or expelled, but embraced and cherished.

**Keywords:**

William Blake; Gothic; graphic novels; hell; underworld; childhood; cute; horror; YA literature.

Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s *Satania,* first published in French as *Satanie* in 2016 and in an English translation by Joe Johnson in 2017, is a graphic novel that evokes a peculiar discomfort.[[1]](#endnote-1) In the journey to the underworld undergone by its youthful heroine, Charlie, conflicting binaries such as science and religion, human and other, good and evil are overturned and certainties challenged. Among these certainties is the nature of humanity itself: in the depths of what may be hell or may be a subterranean ecosystem that has followed an alternative evolutionary path, Charlie embarks on an interspecies relationship with a friendly demon. As Charlie and her group of mismatched companions struggle to come to terms with their new environment, they are confronted with the paucity of their existing ethical frameworks. This is foregrounded not only by discussions between the characters but also by excerpts from the diary of Father Monsore, a Catholic priest. The discomfort evoked by both the rapidly shifting moral certainties of the text and its central sexual encounter, however, is crucial to the radical shift in perceptions that it invites.

Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s comic comes into clearer focus when read alongside the works of Romantic poet, artist and visionary William Blake. Towards the end of *Satania*, Charlie is reunited with her missing brother Christopher, only to find he has become a crazed visionary. At the moment of his bodily dissolution, Christopher looks forward to a world beyond language, in Johnson’s translation, ‘where paradise and hell will be wed’.[[2]](#endnote-2) This phrase explicitly evokes Blake’s illustrated book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), which also describes a journey to the underworld. The book famously speculates that ‘If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite’, and advocates a new way of seeing in which binaries are not hierarchised but harmonised: ‘Opposition is true friendship.’[[3]](#endnote-3) Among the binaries interrogated are those of innocence and experience, the subject of Blake’s other famous work written at approximately the same time, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789/1794).[[4]](#endnote-4) Meaning in Blake is dialectical and involves struggle; as I will show, the difficulty of Blake’s work provides a critical framework for thinking about the difficulty of *Satania*. Kerascoët’s images, meanwhile, engage in a visual conversation with Blake’s illustrations and his innovative technique of relief etching, which enabled him to intertwine words and images on the same page, in a way that has been described as anticipating modern comics.

If reading *Satania* through Blake helps to untangle the labyrinthine red thread of its ethical premise (one of many intertextual references in the comic, in this instance to the Minotaur myth), then it also helps to illuminate a wider problem about how to read works that combine the aesthetics of childhood and horror. Childhood is defined in a variety of ways including legally and medically; this article defines it semantically as that which is excluded by the category of adulthood, which includes socially and historically specific terms such as ‘teenager’ and ‘young adult’. *Satania* sets up a clear division between adult and child, communicated by two featureless black pages signifying the passage of time, during which Charlie gives birth to her own children (123–4). Prior to this transition, Charlie begins the narrative as a pre-teen and her gradual sexual maturation is signalled by her changing body shape. However, the styleof the comic deliberately evokes the aesthetics of childhood, a category that it deliberately places in tension with the adult content, signalled by the ‘For Mature Readers’ label.

In *Post-millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (2017), I introduced the term ‘whimsical macabre’ to refer to texts which deliberately fuse the comic and cute with the sinister, monstrous or grotesque.[[5]](#endnote-5) This strategy, I suggested, is frequently used in Gothic comics and animation to challenge and critique conventional ideas of childhood and femininity and enable the expression of alternative youthful feminine subjectivities. Yet works that fall into this category are frequently denigrated or overlooked by critics, even those who otherwise champion Gothic, as they are perceived to be lacking in depth or otherwise of low cultural value. In this article, I propose that *Satania* works within a whimsical macabre aesthetic, as it confronts its youthful heroine with cute, furry demons in a realm of infinite horror. I argue, however, that by drawing on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, it reveals the serious ethical dimensions that underlie the whimsical macabre. In doing so, it interrogates and complicates the maturational narrative associated with children’s and young adult literature.

**Gothic comics and the whimsical macabre**

Scholarly work on Gothic comics is still in its infancy and is frequently centred on the group of writers and artists associated with the Vertigo imprint of DC Comics, which introduced complex, adult stories under a ‘For Mature Readers’ label.[[6]](#endnote-6) Julia Round’s *Gothic for Girls: Misty and British Comics* (2019) offers a significant expansion of the field into transient comics aimed at young female readers, focusing on the British title *Misty* (1978–80). Both Vertigo’s output and British girls’ comics of the 1970s, however, deploy a familiar Gothic aesthetic of terror and/or horror. Comics that fall into the category of what I call the whimsical macabre depart from this model by fusing familiar Gothic aesthetics with the playful, sweet and childlike.

The whimsical macabre is pervasive in contemporary culture; its origins can be found in the work of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers and illustrators Heinrich Hoffman, Edward Gorey and Charles Addams, and latterly it has found most complete expression in the oeuvre of film-maker Tim Burton. Often – but not exclusively – found in work aimed at child or teen audiences, it combines images that evoke an idealised or romanticised childhood, such as wide-eyed children and animals, cakes and candy, fairground rides, circuses, fairies, dolls and so on, with the gloomy, grotesque and morbid, often to comic or subversive effect. The tone of the whimsical macabre exists on a continuum from the gently comic sweetness of animated kids’ television shows such as *Ruby Gloom* (2006–8) or *Casper the Friendly Ghost* (1959–2012) through the candy-rush carnivalesque of *A Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) or *Adventure Time* (2010–18), to the gory, satirical and adult tone of comics such as Jhonen Vasquez’s *Lenore the Cute Little Dead Girl* (1999–present) or Dame Darcy’s *Meat Cake* (1992–2008). Notably, the whimsical macabre is a particularly prominent aesthetic in comics and animation, as the stylisation of these media and their historical association with children’s entertainment offers unique opportunities to combine cuteness and horror. It has a particularly striking iteration in *shōjo* or girls’ manga, such as the work of Moto Hagio (*The Poe Clan*, 1972-76), Yana Toboso (*Black Butler*, 2006-present), and, latterly, Junko Mizuno, who describes her psychedelic, erotic comics as ‘kawaii noir’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Manga is, of course, created in a different cultural context to the Western examples I have cited. Its widespread dissemination in western culture, however, as well as its creative reinterpretation of stylised images of that culture, mean that its juxtaposition of cuteness and Gothic can be considered a closely adjacent phenomenon. It is with Western adult works, however, which use imagery of childhood and specifically girlhood with deliberately subversive, desacralising and demythologising intent, that I would group *Satania*.

*Satania* is not the first work within a whimsical macabre aesthetic created by French writer Fabien Vehlmann and artists Kerascoët (husband-and-wife team Marie Pommepuy and Sébastien Cosset). Their earlier collaboration *Jolies Ténèbres* or, in its English translation by Helge Dascher, *Beautiful Darkness* (2009)*,* signals its position within this tradition even more explicitly in its depiction of a vicious power struggle between a group of miniature supernatural creatures over the decaying body of a dead girl lying in a wood. The creatures closely recall the marvellous beings of nineteenth-century British fairy painting, particularly that of Richard Dadd and John Anster Fitzgerald, veering between sweetness and horror. Reading *Beautiful Darkness* as a companion piece to *Satania* reveals the retrospective nature of these works – their backward gaze not only at childhood but also at past ways of addressing childhood. By placing themselves in conversation with earlier traditions of representation, they do not just embody but also interrogate the whimsical macabre.

There is a common argument within Gothic Studies that contemporary popular culture works to ameliorate Gothic monsters through a process of domesticisation, thus safely containing any threat they might pose. Fred Botting, troping on Derrida, argues that, ‘As monsters are sought out, radical difference is diminished: they become familiar, recognized, expected, “normal” rather than “monstrous” monstrosities, domesticated to the point of being pets’.[[8]](#endnote-8) For Botting, this constitutes a dilution of Gothic’s original force, as it means that Gothic loses its power to horrify, to disturb and to challenge the status quo; monsters become objects of consumption, fully integrated into capitalist culture. The normalisation of the monster can happen in a variety of ways, including providing them with a troubled interiority, making them objects of romantic desire, transforming them into comic characters, making them cute and cuddly, or a combination of these strategies. We can see this process at work in toys and stories aimed at children; it is the principle behind Casper the Friendly Ghost, for example, in his various incarnations, as well as, more recently, the plush toys of Lovecraft’s Cthulhu available from numerous sellers on the Internet. The scary thing is made into a pet or an imaginary friend and its threat is accordingly diminished. The title of this essay deliberately acknowledges this strategy: ‘My friend the devil’ loosely adapts two lines from Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which he refers to ‘My friend the Angel’, and ‘This Angel, who is now become a Devil, is my particular friend’.[[9]](#endnote-9) As I will demonstrate, however, friendship is not domesticisation. The model of friendship that Blake constructs in his work, and the friendship Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s heroine Charlie strikes up with a demon in her world, exceeds and complicates the model of domesticisation that Botting offers.

If children’s texts do sometimes domesticise the monster, what is going on in many whimsical macabre texts is traffic in the other direction – cuteness is travestied and defamiliarised by being subjected to horror imagery. Edward Gorey’s alphabet primer *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1963) is a quintessential example of this, as each letter of the alphabet names a different child who dies in a different horrible way. As I have previously argued, this allows a space for writers and artists to confront stereotypical images of childhood and, especially, girlhood in order to carve out more complex spaces of subjectivity. In the whimsical macabre, this confrontation often forms part of the work of a self-consciously resistant subcultural teen Goth femininity, and as such has close affinities with texts aimed at Young Adults. It also recalls the ‘Gothic for Girls’ identified by Round in 1970s British horror comic *Misty*, which in its reliance on ‘bildungsroman tales of self-growth’, creates a Gothic spin on the maturational narrative of children’s and YA fiction, in which the child moves successfully towards the state of adulthood.[[10]](#endnote-10) *Satania* carries a ‘For Mature Readers’ warning, but its teen heroine, maturational narrative and borrowings from adventure fiction give it a strong affinity with children’s and YA texts. In fact, the difficulty in placing *Satania* in an age-defined category is suggestive. By overturning sentimental images of childhood, the whimsical macabre mediates between cultural images of childhood and adulthood; it questions and challenges the boundaries placed between them.

**William Blake, children’s literature and comics**

William Blake is often thought of as anticipating both modern comics in his illustrated books and modern children’s literature in *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience.* Despite this formative role or perhaps partly because of it – both comics and children’s literature are marginalised genres – he remains a slightly uncomfortable figure in the English literary tradition. As Shirley Dent and Jason Whittaker suggest, ‘Blake may occupy a seat in the canon but it is a diabolical one’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Although widely taught and hugely popular, his work retains a dissident, countercultural charge based in his esoteric thought, his proto-psychedelic imagery and his revolutionary views in both politics and religion. In the twenty-first century, his work has begun to be re-evaluated in the context of the Gothic tradition; a major exhibition at Tate Britain in 2006 showed his visual art to be part of a developing conversation around Gothic aesthetics.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Many of Blake’s works take the form of illustrated books. He pioneered a process of relief etching, which enabled him to create prints in which writing is closely entwined with images. Much of the critical tradition on Blake is devoted to interpreting the relationship between word and image, which is often complex and exceeds the purposes of illustration as popularly understood; in *Blake’s Composite Art* (1978), W. J. T. Mitchell sees it as ‘an energetic rivalry, a dialogue or dialectic between vigorously independent modes of expression’.[[13]](#endnote-13) This combination of word and image has frequently been observed to anticipate modern comics. Matthew J. A. Green observes a number of shared features including the combination of word and image, ‘the emphasis placed on the graphic aspect of the written word’, and the way that ‘in moving through a series of images, comics readers must participate in the same type of imaginative suturing necessitated by Blake’s numerous and often disjunctive narrative and iconic transitions’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Martin Myrone draws attention to the way the muscular bodies and dynamic poses of Blake’s figures are echoed by those of modern superheroes.[[15]](#endnote-15) So far, however, the main focus of scholarship drawing connections between Blake and contemporary comics has been Blake’s influence on the celebrated comics writer Alan Moore, who references him directly in at least six of his works.[[16]](#endnote-16) The broader network of Blakeian influence on modern comics remains under-explored.

Blake’s influence on writing for children has been more widely discussed.[[17]](#endnote-17) His early poetry collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* has often been categorised as children’s literature, although that category was still unformed at the time Blake was writing. On a superficial reading, the poems appear to endorse a conventional Christian binary in which ‘innocence’ is valorised as man’s unfallen state while ‘experience’ marks the entry of evil into the world. However, when examined more closely, a more complex theology appears in which the two construct and reflect one another and *both* are needed to create a balanced human subject.

Many of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* reflect one another, showing two sides of the same coin, most famously, for example, the lamb in *Innocence* and the tiger in *Experience*: ‘Did he who made the Lamb make thee?’[[18]](#endnote-18) Similarly, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ in *Innocence* imagines a benevolent resurrection in which an angel releases the boys from servitude and leads them to a blissful heaven where their attention to duty is finally rewarded; ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ in *Experience*, however, cries out against the church, which profits from the exploitationof children. Nevertheless, the division set up in the titles of the two books is not as clearly cut as it seems: the sweep in *Experience* declares ‘I am happy & dance & sing*’*, retaining his childish joy despite the wrongs done to him; while his counterpart’s cry of ‘’Weep! ’weep! ’weep! ’weep!’ puts the voice of experience in the mouth of innocence.[[19]](#endnote-19) The book thus enacts a constant negotiation between the two states. Many of the *Songs of Innocence* in particular seem to demarcate a state of childhood purity from adult ‘experience’, yet as Edward Larrissy shows, they are contained by a Derridean *parergon* or frame that ‘express[es] the state they frame, but at the same time… reveal[s] the limitations of that state’.[[20]](#endnote-20) This occurs visually, through the page design that confines the songs within proliferating foliage that simultaneously expresses and contains them, and verbally, through the framing vision of adult speakers. The language of the *Songs* thus constantly works to infect innocence with what it excludes. The short lyric ‘Infant Joy’, a dialogue between a new-born baby and an adult, inducts the infant into the world of language by inviting it to name itself, and thus brings it to the brink of the fall and the ensuing taint of experience:

‘I have no name.

I am but two days old.’

What shall I call thee?

‘I happy am,

Joy is my name.’

Sweet joy befall thee![[21]](#endnote-21)

Ironically enough, a two-day-old child is unable to speak, so it is the adult’s projected voice that names the child and imposes its own experienced worldview upon it. (Interestingly, later editions of the poems often add speech marks to differentiate between the two voices but Blake’s original, in which the two are undifferentiated, reinforces this reading of the poem.) Blake thus suggests that we comprehend the joys of innocence only through experience.

With this insight Blake anticipates later arguments within children’s literature criticism that suggests that we can never access the ‘real’ child as they are always constructed from an adult perspective. As Karin Lesnik-Oberstein observes in her influential 1994 book *Children’s Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, ‘Childhood can speak only through the memories, observations, or selections and interpretations of adults’.[[22]](#endnote-22) In fact, she suggests, cultural depictions of childhood act as an other for adulthood, in much the same way that Edward Said suggests images of the Orient act as an other for the Occident. As such, depictions of childhood say more about the adult than they do about the child: ‘The concepts of adult and child interact in an immensely complicated process of adult self-definition’.[[23]](#endnote-23) In *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, the two sides of the binary constantly undo each other, resulting in an ongoing struggle over meaning. In this they are characteristic of Blake’s work: Dent and Whittaker suggest that ‘Blake himself struggles for meaning, and we as readers seldom have critical closure on the meanings of works’.[[24]](#endnote-24) This, they suggest, is precisely the quality that makes his work so open to appropriation and adaptation by others. The struggle between innocence and experience, with each constantly deconstructing and redefining each other, is also the struggle at the heart of the whimsical macabre.

Blake’s interrogation of binaries is pursued at length in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which he proposes, ‘Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence’.[[25]](#endnote-25) The book is a visionary account of a journey into hell: part fantastic journey, part manifesto, part intellectual critique of eighteenth-century theologian Swedenborg, part mysticism. Plates 4-6 are written in the ‘voice of the Devil’, who insists, radically, that the Body cannot be distinguished from the Soul, that the senses are sacred and that ‘Energy is eternal Delight’.[[26]](#endnote-26) During a ‘memorable Fancy’, Blake recounts how he befriends an angel who is also, it turns out, a devil, travels with him to the ‘infinite Abyss’, and discovers that what makes a place heaven or hell is the metaphysics endorsed by the observer.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is an endlessly suggestive text that is nevertheless difficult to pin down. For Susan Matthews, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* ‘energetically resists establishing authority: it is insistently dialectical, working with contraries that oppose each other and that undo and reform meanings that shift continually’.[[28]](#endnote-28)

For Matthews, Blake’s restless resistance to authority is at odds with the deployment of his ideas in modern children’s literature, specifically Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Matthews proposes that Pullman’s fiction embeds Blake within the conventional maturational narrative of children’s fiction: in the third volume, *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), he replays the war on heaven envisaged by Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674) through a Blakeian lens, presenting it as a war pitting the embrace of experience over the preservation of innocence. Blake’s revaluing of experience, in Pullman’s version, enables children to embrace the condition of adulthood – and especially adult sexual knowledge – without shame or limitation. In this resolution of the Blakeian struggle, according to Matthews, Pullman risks a didacticism that is not present in Blake. In contrast, I suggest, Vehlmann and Kerascoët work in the dialectical way of Blake himself, drawing on his work in order to question and complicate the maturational narrative. This is a feature both of the Gothicism of their work and the graphic novel form. David Punter proposes that ‘What both Gothic and comics seem to suggest is that growing into adulthood may not in fact be a real process of maturation, but instead a collusion in the closing off of possibilities, a self-imposed blinkering’.[[29]](#endnote-29) The maturation of Vehlmann and Kerascoët’s heroine Charlie is, accordingly, profoundly ambivalent and compromised. *Satania* preserves Blake’s restless dialecticism, refusing to settle on one final meaning.

***Satania* and Blakeian dialectics**

Kerascoët’s visual styleis crucial in the evocation of Blakeian dialectics in *Satania*; it complements and counterpoints Vehlmann’s narrative. It does not, on a superficial glance, particularly look like Blake. The characters are drawn in a cartoonish style that Brian Nicholson describes as ‘lively, sketched out and improvisational’, recalling comics for children.[[30]](#endnote-30) Charlie in particular is stereotypically ‘cute’, although as Etelka Lehoczky suggests, ‘her black button eyes have an alienating effect’.[[31]](#endnote-31) These qualities, associated with children’s comics, are combined to often startling effect with saturated, psychedelic colour and sublime landscapes, reminiscent of French adult science fiction comics of the 1970s and 80s.[[32]](#endnote-32) In the first half of the comic, at least, the pages are extremely consistent in layout, rarely departing from a linear arrangement of three or four rows divided into one to three panels, clearly demarcated by regular gutters. This contrasts with Blake’s fluid mingling of word and image. In the unusual substitution of black gutters for white, however, signalling the subterranean location, a more complex meditation on comics form gradually emerges.

When the artwork is examined more carefully, details emerge that signal a closer intertextual relationship between Kerascoët’s artwork and Blake. The sea monster that swallows up the protagonists in a double-page spread (104–5, see figure 1) recalls the ‘monstrous serpent’ that approaches Blake ‘with all the fury of a spiritual existence’ in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: its upturned, toothy mouth and projecting tongue as well as its sinuous, undulating form and the luminous chaos around it create distinct visual echoes between the two texts.[[33]](#endnote-33) In this sequence, three of the characters take refuge inside a round organic structure full of larvae (103–5, see figure 1) that closely recalls Blake’s visual image of the Sick Rose from *Songs of Experience*, a round ball of petals with a weird little human worm emerging from its depths.[[34]](#endnote-34) Blake’s Rose is destroyed by the ‘dark secret love’ of the worm.[[35]](#endnote-35) Charlie, on the other hand, while initially overwhelmed with horror and disgust, learns to eat the worms to sustain herself and even wears them around her neck as a kind of trophy (113). In this reversal of Blake’s image, Charlie also reverses the inevitable tainting of innocence by experience, in a way that Blake may have appreciated.

[Figure 1: The sick rose and the monstrous serpent: *Satania* pp. 104–5, French edition. Reproduced by kind permission of Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët.]

As well as these visual echoes, *Satania* alludes to Blake through its disintegration of the conventional comics grid. In the first half of the work this connection is far from explicit. An early sequence in which Charlie remembers her brother leaving appears rather to self-reflexively meditate on nostalgic and sentimental representations of childhood within the comics form itself and acknowledge the comic’s relationship with *bandes dessinées*. On a single page, Kerascoët abandon the clearly defined comics grid and jewel-bright colours set against a black background that have characterised the text thus far (18). The artists evoke an old-fashioned rustic landscape in washed-out pastels on an undefined grid where the white gutters merge with the sky. The effect is to give the panels the appearance of clouds drifting across the page. The shift to a more traditional, ‘painterly’ watercolour technique in this sequence uses comics style reflexively to signify memory and nostalgia, not only for the characters but also for the readers, who are invited to recall the wholesome reading-matter of an imagined childhood. This nostalgia is rudely interrupted by a grotesque urchin who taunts Charlie, ‘Your Mum sucks cocks in the crazyhouse!’, undermining the nostalgic vision of innocence (18). Charlie retaliates violently and her reverie is interrupted by the voices of the present. The lower right-hand panel returns to a defined but curved and irregular shape and an image of Charlie dozing, momentarily reversing the narrative levels and suggesting that the dream is the primary level and the narrative present is contained within it. In this sequence, the white page is defamiliarised and placed in explicit contrast to the darkness with which Charlie is surrounded in the present of the narrative. The dissolution of the gutter also gently anticipates the violence done to the comics grid in the second half of the narrative, when as I will show, the encounter with hell changes the perceptions of the protagonists and allows visionary or dream-like states to predominate.

[Figure 2: Father Monsore’s journal, *Satania*,p. 72, French edition. Reproduced by kind permission of Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët.]

As the graphic novel progresses, departures from the regular grid become more common. The sections representing Father Monsore’s diary entries use organic forms to divide the space of the page in a way that recalls Blake’s illustrated books; there is a striking visual similarity, for example, between ‘The Argument’ page of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and page 72 of *Satania* (see figure 2).[[36]](#endnote-36) The words themselves remain separated from the images by defined boxes, loosely evoking the pages of Monsore’s journal and indicating his mental separation from the world he describes. These boxes float freely, however, in a world loosely divided by plant-like forms. From this point on, form is used to signal psychological and spiritual development: increasingly, the rigid lines of the comics grid are abandoned as Monsore throws off the authoritarian shackles of conventional religion. The frame, in other words, starts to slip; the act of perception and narrative ordering (by characters, authors and readers) is foregrounded and shown to be deficient in communicating or comprehending this alternative reality. On pages 82–3 and at intervals thereafter, the gutters are replaced by a web of viscous matter that spreads around and over the panels, transforming them into irregular blob-shaped forms. Here, words and images engage in the ‘energetic rivalry’ that Mitchell identifies in Blake’s work; Monsore’s optimistic and godly interpretation of events desperately attempts to impose order on the content of the panels, which comically and disturbingly evades his efforts: Charlie is increasingly absorbed by and identified with her new world while Monsore himself is shown beating copulating demons with rather too much enthusiasm.

If, as Julia Round argues, the gutter ‘exists in a state of temporal disruption, as its contents cannot be realized until we have moved past it’, then in the sequences in which the grid dissolves, that disruption is spatial as well as temporal, and its contents spill over onto the page, a disruptive force that is visibly unleashed.[[37]](#endnote-37) For Round, the gutter acts in the same way as Derrida’s crypt, operating as a ‘sealed, secret place’ which operates partly as a metaphor for the unconscious but also as a place where the buried material of writing itself comes into being.[[38]](#endnote-38) However, as is clear from the beginning of the narrative when Charlie and her companions emerge from the cave complex into a mass grave of tumbled coffins and cadavers, then in the underworld, the concept of burial becomes meaningless; they are all already buried and the unconscious is free to erupt as and when it will.

In the course of Charlie’s descent into the earth, she discovers a race of creatures resembling shaggy apes with horns (see figure 2), who may or may not be devils but who, in Blakeian fashion, are uninhibited in enacting their desires and appear to experience energy as pure delight. The explorers refer to these creatures as ‘Satanians’. Charlie and Father Monsore observe the creatures, with Monsore comparing them to ‘Indians… in Westerns’, situating them as a threatening indigenous other towards whom, in colonialist narratives, pre-emptive violence is justified (70). Despite Monsore’s strategy of caution, Charlie violently initiates contact with one of the creatures, cutting off one of his horns (a gesture he appears to find endearing) and asserting her difference from the creatures by referring to her missing brother as ‘a human, like me’ (71). The rich reds and oranges in which the panels are coloured signify infernal vision: Charlie sees the creature as demonic, hellish, other. At this stage, she is clinging on to what she believes is her humanity.

The encounter resumes some fifteen pages later, with a distinct shift in power relations between Charlie and the Satanian. Here, violence is not imposed on the other but becomes intertwined with sexual pleasure. As Charlie threatens the creature, she realises that he is purring, and that he is reacting with enjoyment to being hit and scratched. At the same time, she retains agency to resist his reciprocal violence, telling him, ‘No biting, stupid beast! No biting!’ (85). Vibrant pinks and greens suggest Charlie has attuned to a new way of seeing – even, in Blake’s formulation, cleansed the doors of perception. Her recognition of the creature’s desire is a transformative moment of reciprocal exchange which redefines her view of herself – visualised in a close-up panel – as well as of him (85). This leads to an opening out of the landscape into a paradisal, perhaps even Edenic vista in which Charlie and the demon are tiny figures at home in the landscape (85). This frame is in explicit contrast to the opening frame of the preceding sequence, where the creatures loomed ominously above (71). In the first sequence, the reader is positioned below the creatures looking up at them and their silhouettes dominate the landscape; in the closing frame of page 85, they look down on a vista in which the figures have receded to become almost indistinguishable from their surroundings. This is a literal change of perspective, which the reader is encouraged to share.

In her reciprocation of the creature’s desire, Charlie begins to cast off the guilt and shame she brings with her from her troubled childhood and discover the joys of the body, which Blake (in the voice of the Devil) refuses to detach from joys of the soul.[[39]](#endnote-39) She literally faces her demons – but she also, in following desire and self-fulfilment, follows the ‘Proverbs of Hell’ provocatively listed by Blake: ‘He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence’; ‘The soul of sweet delight can never be defil’d’.[[40]](#endnote-40) Her act of lying down with the beast resembles that of Lyca, Blake’s ‘Little Girl Lost’ in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, who fearlessly lies down with lions and tigers that do not harm her. In its embrace of radical otherness, Charlie’s relationship with her demon fulfils Blake’s line, ‘Opposition is true Friendship’.[[41]](#endnote-41) The balance of contrary opposing forces is, for Blake, the formula for harmony.

In striking contrast to the harmonious relationship between Charlie and the demon, Charlie’s missing brother, significantly named Christopher and visually Christ-like, seeks to deconstruct existing binaries in a perversely authoritarian and hierarchical way. When Charlie eventually finds him in the subterranean hellscape, he has become a terrifying fanatic in search of spurious transcendence, who seeks blind obedience to his rule. It is he who insists on the maturation narrative, telling her to ‘Stop acting like a child now’ (120). For Blake, of course, acting like a child is not necessarily a bad thing: it can restore wonder and joy. Charlie is saved from Christopher by her devil friend’s self-sacrifice: another reversal, and another of the Proverbs of Hell: ‘The most sublime act is to set another before you’.[[42]](#endnote-42) As in Blake, good and evil are a matter of perspective: ‘All deities reside in the human breast.’[[43]](#endnote-43)

The final two pages of the graphic novel, nevertheless, remain troubling. Charlie has grown into an adult woman who appears to have found independence, love and tenderness with her half-demon children. However, she also appears never to be able to leave hell: many years have passed and she is still searching for the exit. Hell is refigured in the eyes of her children as a version of Eden, in which Charlie plays the role of Satan the tempter trying – ineffectually – to engineer the *felix culpa* or fortunate fall. ‘So you don't have any curiosity?’ she says to them; ‘I want you to have that choice’ (126). She is now the adult whose experience impinges on their radical innocence. The reader is left with more questions than answers.

The ending of *Satania* is thus resolutely Blakeian in its struggle for meaning. As in Matthews’s statement quoted earlier, ‘it is insistently dialectical, working with contraries that oppose each other and that undo and reform meanings that shift continually’. In *Satania*, moral absolutes are placed under question and what is demonic is a matter of perspective. Resisting the didactic imperative of children’s literature, Vehlmann and Kerascoët follow Blake in questioning the schematic division of innocence and experience. The two continually frame and modify each other; each creates the conditions for the other’s existence. Blake’s formula of opposition as true friendship, moreover, speaks back to the model of monstrous domesticisation in contemporary Gothic Studies. Ideal friendship, according to this formula, involves an embrace of radical otherness that does not seek to impose one’s own vision upon the other partner but allows each to exist in equilibrium. This openness to the other offers a radical new way of experiencing horror – one that preserves and accepts the monster’s alterity, finding in it a source of joy and pleasure. This approach is one that echoes through many whimsical macabre texts, suggesting that the conjunction of cuteness and horror is not inevitably a weakening of horror’s original force; rather it is an aesthetic in its own right, with its roots in Romantic renegotiations of childhood as well as in the Gothic. Charlie’s friendship with her demon points towards a ‘reparative’ form of Gothic in which otherness is neither erased or expelled, but embraced and cherished.

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**Notes**

1. *Satania* was originally intended to be published as two separate episodes. The first episode was issued by Dargaud in 2011 as *Voyage en Satanie*, but the second episode was cancelled by the publisher. Both episodes were published together as a graphic novel entitled *Satanie* by the Métamorphose imprint of Editions Soleil in 2016, with some new material added. This article treats the collected version as the definitive text. See Fabien Vehlmann, ‘Miracle en Satanie’, https://vehlmann.blogspot.com/2015/07/miracle-en-satanie.html (accessed 24 May 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Fabien Vehlmann and Kerascoët, *Satania*, trans. by Joe Johnson (New York: NBM, 2017), p. 120. All subsequent quotations are from this edition. Page numbers will follow in brackets in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* in *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 148–60 (pp. 154, 157). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Blake published *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 and the revised and expanded *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Catherine Spooner, *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), *passim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See for example Matthew J. A. Green (ed.), *Alan Moore and the Gothic Tradition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Japanese artist Junko Mizuno’s “gothic-cute” art on show in Cumbria’, *BBC News*, 12 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cumbria-50028011> (accessed 23 May 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Fred Botting (2014), ‘Post-Millennial Monsters: Monstrosity-no-more’, in Glennis Byron and Dale Townshend (eds.), *The Gothic World*, London: Routledge, p. 498–509 (p. 500). See also Jacques Derrida, ‘Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other small Seismisms’ in David Carroll (ed.), *The States of ‘Theory’: History, Arts and Critical Discourse*, New York, Columbia University Press: 1992, p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Blake, *Marriage*,pp. 156, 158. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Round, *Gothic for Girls*, p. 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Shirley Dent and Jason Whittaker, *Radical Blake: Influence and Afterlife* *from 1827* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Martin Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares: Fuseli, Blake and the Romantic Imagination* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 4 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Matthew J. A. Green, ‘The end of the world. That’s a bad thing right?: form and function from William Blake to Alan Moore’, inSteve Clark, T. Conolly and Jason Whittaker, eds., *Blake 2.0: William Blake in twentieth-century art, music and culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 175–86 (p. 178). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Myrone, *Gothic Nightmares*, pp. 73, 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See for example Green, ‘“The End of the World”’; Roger Whitson, ‘Panelling Parallax: The Fearful Symmetry of William Blake and Alan Moore’, *ImageTexT* 3.2 (2007), <https://imagetextjournal.com/panelling-parallax-the-fearful-symmetry-of-william-blake-and-alan-moore/> (accessed 1 November 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. See, for example, Andrew O’Malley, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children’s Literature in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 128–131. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, in *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 111–26, 210–21 (p. 214.) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Blake, *Songs*,pp. 212, 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Edward Larrissy, *William Blake* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Blake, *Songs*,p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children’s Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 26. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children’s Literature*,p. 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Dent and Whittaker, *Radical Blake*,p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 155, 156. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Susan Matthews, ‘Rouzing the Faculties to Act: Pullman’s Blake for Children’ in Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott (eds.), *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p. 132. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. David Punter, ‘Foreword’ to Julia Round, *Gothic in Comics and Graphic Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Brian Nicholson, ‘Satania’, *The Comics Journal*, 21 November 2017, <https://www.tcj.com/reviews/satania/> (accessed 24 May 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Etelka Lehoczky, ‘French Graphic Novel 'Satania' Breaks New Ground — Underground’, *NPR*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/31/560097229/french-graphic-novel-satania-breaks-new-ground-underground?t=1653392949081> (accessed 24 May 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See, for example, the *Valérian and Laureline* series (1967–2010) created by Pierre Christin and Jean-Claude Mézières. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. William Blake, *Marriage*, p. 156; William Blake, *The Complete Illuminated Books* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Blake, *Complete Illuminated Books*, p. 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Blake, *Songs*,p. 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Blake, *Complete Illuminated Books*, p. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Round, *Gothic in Comics*,p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Round, *Gothic in Comics*,p. 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Blake, *Marriage*,pp. 151, 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 151. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Blake, *Marriage*,p. 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)