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**“You know not of what you speak”:
Language, Identity, and Xenophobia in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle: A Mystery* (1897)**

Minna Vuohelainen

“A sense of loathing”: The Rhetoric of Xenophobia

In the first book of Richard Marsh’s bestselling gothic novel *The Beetle: A Mystery* (1897),¹ the unemployed and homeless clerk Robert Holt is assaulted by a monstrous foreign presence, the eponymous Beetle. Holt describes his ordeal thus:

It was as though something in my mental organisation had been stricken by a sudden paralysis. It may seem childish to use such language; but I was overwrought, played out; physically speaking, at my last counter; and, in an instant, without the slightest warning, I was conscious of a very curious sensation, the like of which I had never felt before, and the like of which I pray that I never may feel again,—a sensation of panic fear. I remained rooted to the spot on which I stood, not daring to move, fearing to draw my breath. [...] My heart was palpitating in my bosom; I could hear it beat. I was trembling so that I could scarcely stand. I was overwhelmed by a fresh flood of terror. I stared in front of me with eyes in which, had it been light, would have been seen the frenzy of unreasoning fear. My ears were strained so that I listened with an acuteness of tension which was painful.²

Existing scholarly accounts of this novel have focused mainly on Marsh’s depiction of gender ambiguity and sadistic sexuality and, to a lesser extent, on his imperialist and Orientalist agenda

¹ For the publication history of the novel, see Minna Vuohelainen, “Introduction” in Richard Marsh, *The Beetle: A Mystery*, Ed. Minna Vuohelainen (Kansas City: Valancourt, 2008), xii-xvi.

² Richard Marsh, *The Beetle: A Mystery*, Ed. Minna Vuohelainen (Kansas City: Valancourt, 2008), 14-15. All subsequent citations refer to this edition and appear in the body of the text.

and engagement with fin-de-siècle London.³ The novel certainly supports such readings. The Beetle, a being of ambiguous ethnicity and gender and of considerable mesmeric powers, comes to London on a mission of revenge against a politician who has in his youth offended the forces of Isis in Egypt. The “remarkable tale” (207) which results from this “invasion” (17) is told, respectively, by multiple narrative voices belonging to figures representative of modernity: the unemployed clerk, Robert Holt; the upper-class scientist and inventor, Sydney Atherton; the potential New Woman, Marjorie Lindon; and the aristocratic detective, Augustus Champnell whose narrative also contains a first-person account by the rising politician, Paul Lessingham. Their narratives articulate fin-de-siècle anxieties concerning racial, cultural, and national identity.

However, Holt’s sensations of “shrinking, horror, [and] nausea” (16) and of “loathing” (34), provoked by contact with the alien monster, also mark *The Beetle* as using a xenophobic discourse which, in many respects, reflects contemporary medical debates on phobias, or chronic, irrational fears. This essay will explore how a phobic reaction to the alien is articulated in the novel through the use and loss of the command of language. As a split narrative, *The Beetle* is a fragmented text riddled with troubling silences, absences, and tenuous connections between episodes and events. Thus, the very shape of the novel calls attention to the importance

³ Rhys Garnett, “*Dracula* and *The Beetle*: Imperial and Sexual Guilt and Fear in Late Victorian Fantasy,” *Science Fiction Roots and Branches: Contemporary Critical Approaches*, Ed. Rhys Garnett and R.J. Ellis (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1990); Judith Halberstam, “Gothic Nation: *The Beetle* by Richard Marsh,” *Fictions of Unease: The Gothic from Otranto to The X-Files*, Ed. Andrew Smith, Diane Mason, and William Hughes (Bath: Sulis Press, 2002); Kelly Hurley, “‘The Inner Chambers of All Nameless Sin’: *The Beetle*, Gothic Female Sexuality, and Oriental Barbarism,” *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*, Ed. Lloyd Davis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Victoria Margree, “‘Both in Men’s Clothing’: Gender, Sovereignty and Insecurity in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*,” *Critical Survey* 19.2 (2007); Minna Vuohelainen, “‘Oh to Get Out of that Room!’: Outcast London and the Gothic Twist in the Popular Fiction of Richard Marsh,” *Victorian Space(s): Leeds Centre Working Papers in Victorian Studies VIII*, Ed. Karen Sayer (Leeds: Trinity and All Saints, University of Leeds, 2006); Julian Wolfreys, “Introduction” in Richard Marsh, *The Beetle*, Ed. Julian Wolfreys (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004); and “The Hieroglyphic Other: *The Beetle*, London and, the Abyssal Subject,” *A Mighty Mass of Brick and Smoke: Victorian and Edwardian Representations of London*, Ed. Lawrence Phillips (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).

of language and the written record in defining and interpreting the chaos brought about by foreign invasion. This essay seeks to understand the xenophobic rhetoric in the novel through an analysis of how command, loss, and absence of language function in formulating a phobic commentary on the alien invader. Command of language is, arguably, central to the definition of Britishness in the novel. Throughout the novel, however, the alien monster places the British characters' ability to use language under threat, reducing them to irrational, xenophobic inarticulacy. As will be argued here, this threat to language represents anxieties over the possibility of an annihilation of British identity by the foreign presence—an interpretation which accords well with contemporary philological views on the centrality of language to thought, identity, and nationhood. Hence, the Beetle's presence in London poses a threat not only to the individual, but also more generally to British culture, including established boundaries of gender, class, and national identity.⁴

Fin-de-siècle medical accounts define phobia as “morbid fear” or “a symptom of nervous disease”⁵ which occurs “due to insanity or a diseased brain.”⁶ “[C]losely analogous to obsessions and imperative ideas,” phobias could “best be explained by postulating the existence of *loci minor resistentiæ* in neuropathic brains which do not offer normal resistance to nervous currents and therefore find themselves in a state of constant excitation and irritation.”⁷ Phobias were seen to affect certain subject groups, including “[w]eakly constituted, sickly, ailing, highly imaginative persons”; “those weakened by repeated or great loss of blood [or] general sickness”; “women during the periods of catamenia, pregnancy, confinement, of secretion of milk, and

⁴ It should be noted here that while the gender and sexuality of the monster contribute to its loathsomeness, no attempt will be made here to explore these related issues, which have been extensively discussed by the critics listed in footnote 3 above.

⁵ B. Ball, “On Claustrophobia,” *British Medical Journal* (6 September 1879): 371 (comment by Dr. G.M. Beard).

⁶ Josiah Morse, *The Psychology and Neurology of Fear* (Worcester, MA: Clark University Press, 1907), 37.

⁷ Morse, *The Psychology and Neurology of Fear*, 44.

excretion of lochia”; “children, adolescents, and adults whose education has been neglected, [or] whose mental education has been conducted on false principles”; “those whose mental irritability is increased by mental or bodily stimuli,” for example “drink” or “onanism, masturbation, and other sexual excesses”; “those who are already mentally depressed”; mentally anxious “professional men”; and “in general students and others who overtax their mental powers.”⁸

Thus, pre-existing mental or physical weaknesses were seen as likely to predispose a person to states of fear. The symptoms caused by such morbid fears were seen to include physical sensations such as “cold perspiration,” “tremor of lips and chin,” “pallid, startled, staring, flickering” countenance, “oppression of the chest,” “irregular, interrupted” pulse, “nausea,” and “[w]eak, heavy, shaking, collapsed, powerless, and paralytic” limbs.⁹ Of particular interest are the psychological effects of states of fear, which include sensations of “anxiety and pressure” in the brain, “the regular functions [of which] are interrupted”; “loss of memory and recollection” and “loss of speech”; “a succession of recurring periods of unconsciousness, alternating very rapidly with intervals of consciousness”; and “almost a perfect cessation of the function of the will, and a momentary general paralysis of all action.”¹⁰ These symptoms very closely mirror those experienced by Holt, a homeless tramp who is “overwrought, played out; physically speaking, at [his] last counter” (14-15). While the word “phobia” is never mentioned in the novel, *The Beetle* uses a linguistic register closely allied to medical discourses on phobia to articulate its characters’ reactions to the alien presence.

Sensations of “abject terror” (80) among characters in the novel are related to the Beetle’s foreign origins which, it is implied, render the monster particularly loathsome, indeed

⁸ M. Roth, *A Few Notes on Fear and Fright, and the Diseases They Cause and Cure; also on the Means of Preventing and Curing the Effects of These Emotions* (London and Manchester: Henry Turner, [1872]), 7-8.

⁹ Roth, *A Few Notes*, 2-3.

¹⁰ Roth, *A Few Notes*, 2-4.

animalistic and parasitic. It could, then, be argued that the characters' phobic reactions sparked by the Beetle are specifically the result of xenophobia. The word "xenophobia" did not enter the English language until 1909, but its antecedents were present in the nineteenth century in expressions of Germanophobia, Francophobia, Anglophobia and, most commonly, Russophobia.¹¹ These terms articulated in a concise way a set of fears and anxieties inspired by a specific cultural or national grouping. The later, related term, xenophobia, by contrast, is much less definite in its all-embracing irrational fear of *all* foreigners. Thus, xenophobia is arguably tied to the imperial and migrational conditions of the fin de siècle which, as discussed below, witnessed increasing contact between the British and a number of foreign peoples. The designation "phobia" arguably defines such fears as irrational and morbid, suggesting that a phobic reaction to foreign cultures might be read as pathological rather than natural. In Marsh's novel, the "paroxysm of fear" (172) and "antipathy" inspired by contact with the alien are indeed recognized as representative of "a rooted, and, apparently, illogical dislike" (174); yet the novel's British protagonists cannot escape from their "nauseous consciousness of the presence of something evil" (42). Arguably, if phobic reactions are to be read as signs of irrationality or disease, their true origin lies not with the alien presence but within the British psyche. While the British characters describe the foreigner as monstrous, the narrative subtly undermines their authority by emphasizing the irrationality of the phobic impulse.

"So unnatural, so inhuman": Invasion Gothic and Xenophobia

The Beetle fits, in many ways, Patrick Brantlinger's concept of imperial gothic, or a mixture of gothic and male adventure romance, in which civilization is placed at risk of

¹¹ The first recorded use of 'Anglophobia' occurred in 1793, of 'Russophobia' in 1836, of 'Francophobia' in 1870, and of 'Germanophobia' in 1887. *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, online version, June 2011 [accessed 30 June, 2011]).

contagion from primitive, atavistic forces. In these tales, Brantlinger adds, the dark side of human nature is revealed in a collision of the modern with the archaic.¹² As noted above, the events in *The Beetle* are triggered by Paul Lessingham's encounter with a dangerous but alluring priestess of Isis in Egypt: Lessingham is lured into the native quarters of Cairo and there drugged and abducted by the mesmeric Oriental woman who reduces him to helplessness while engaging in "orgies of nameless horrors" (213) which appear to involve the violation and sacrifice of white women. For Lessingham, the Oriental woman is something less than human: "so unnatural, so inhuman" is she that he contemplates "destroy[ing] her with as little sense of moral turpitude as if she had been some noxious insect" (211). Eventually, Lessingham attempts to strangle his captor, who indeed turns into a gigantic scarab at the point of death, disturbing his mental balance and giving him an understandable "antipathy to beetles" (174). Lessingham's encounter with the alien results, then, in a phobic conflation of the foreign with the parasitic.

This preamble to the novel, dated twenty years before the main thrust of the narrative, is buried towards the end of the text. The majority of *The Beetle*, in fact, takes place in contemporary London which has suffered an invasion from an obnoxious representative of Isis, possibly the priestess herself. The reduction to irrationality and the challenge to modernity that Brantlinger associates with imperial gothic here take place in "the heart of civilised London" (266), not some far corner of the Empire. Hence, this essay will propose that *The Beetle* stands as an example not of *imperial* gothic but of what will tentatively be called *invasion* gothic. This brand of gothic will here be defined as a mixture of urban gothic and fashionable invasion narrative, articulated in an essentially xenophobic discourse. Invasion gothic sees British identity, security, and superiority placed under threat from a foreign, often supernatural, monster,

¹² Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 227-30.

which reveals insecurities, anxieties, and phobic responses already latent within the British nation; these pre-existing weaknesses, which arguably amount to a disease, predispose Britain to a foreign invasion.¹³ While, then, the events are rooted abroad, their outcome is played out in the Western world; specifically, in the imperial metropolis of London, which suffers a frightful invasion from an alien force. This characteristic mixture of supernatural, foreign invasion and native weakness within a dark, menacing, but contemporary London is articulated by a phobic, gothic rhetoric.

As H.L. Malchow notes, nineteenth-century gothic and racial discourses were closely connected and greatly influenced one another.¹⁴ Like all gothic fiction, invasion gothic draws on contemporary developments, in particular the extensive debate over what was known at the fin de siècle as the “Alien Question.” The end of the nineteenth century witnessed increasing contacts between the British and people of other ethnic origins. Both within the growing Empire and at home, the British were increasingly brought into day-to-day contact with imperial subject peoples and immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia. By the 1880s, large numbers of Eastern European Jews had settled in London’s East End, and their presence provoked an extensive debate over Britain’s immigration policy.¹⁵ These “undesirable aliens” were seen as a threat to the host nation, on whom they were seen to prey financially and sexually. “Isn’t there some superstition about evil befalling whoever shelters a homeless stranger?” Marjorie London wonders in Marsh’s novel (130) in an echo of the contemporary fear of racial miscegenation.

¹³ Other examples of invasion gothic texts from this period would include Marsh’s novels *The Goddess: A Demon* (1900) and *The Joss: A Reversion* (1901); Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897); George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894); Marie Corelli’s *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895); and Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894).

¹⁴ H.L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁵ David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994); “The Importance of Being English: Jewish Immigration and the Decay of Liberal England,” *Metropolis: London. Histories and Representations since 1800*, Ed. David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

Various branches of anthropology—racial, cultural, criminal, sexual—were developed in response to such ethnic mixing, with knowledge of other cultures, peoples, or modes of behavior as their chief goal. In the wake of evolutionary biology, the new “Science of Man” placed peoples and cultures on an evolutionary ladder which appeared to indicate a teleological progression from “primitive” culture towards white European civilization. Anthropology could be used reassuringly to classify different cultures, and taxonomies of skin color, facial features, and cultural habit were formulated to determine each group’s place on the evolutionary ladder.¹⁶ Such taxonomies were connected, on the one hand, to the imperialist rhetoric of the mission to “civilize” supposedly more backward peoples; on the other, they presented the worrying possibility that racial miscegenation at home might result in the degeneration of the white British “race.” Arguably, xenophobic reactions to other cultures could be seen to mirror such anthropological classifications, with the defining characteristic of each nation reduced to the military or cultural threat it was perceived to pose.

Furthermore, Kenan Malik notes that in the nineteenth century the “notion of race” could also be evoked to discuss “differences *within* a particular society,” so that “[w]hat we would now consider to be class or social distinctions were seen as racial ones.”¹⁷ Malik argues that “[t]he very process by which nationhood was constructed in Europe [...] revealed the internal divisions within the nation.”¹⁸ Thus, indigenous class distinctions split the home culture itself into various “races,” which, when mingling with immigrants, might produce yet another racial grouping. In their pursuit of the Beetle, the upper-class characters in Marsh’s novel come to realize that London is a city of ethnic tribes: their dealings with East-End slum-dwellers are

¹⁶ Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1996), 87.

¹⁷ Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, 81.

¹⁸ Malik, *The Meaning of Race*, 81.

seriously hampered by their inability to communicate effectively with their own countrymen whose Cockney accents are incompatible with upper-class English accents, and whom they regard with evident suspicion as culturally and racially alien. Yet the novel also recognizes indigenous Londoners' xenophobic reactions to foreigners. For these lower-class Cockneys, the Beetle is a "Harab" (272), "a dirty foreigner, who [goes] about in a bed-gown through the public streets" (246) and speaks in "that queer foreign way them Harab parties 'as of talkin'" (280). Marsh's ironic commentary highlights the ignorance, prejudices, and faulty use of the English language of the lowest class of Londoners, setting them up as a race apart from the classes above them.

The bulk of Marsh's novel, significantly, takes place in contemporary London, a monster city of six million people where social problems were magnified by the *fin de siècle*. London produces the conditions which enable the Beetle's invasion, while simultaneously facilitating a xenophobic reaction in a population already predisposed, according to contemporary commentators, to nervous ailments and irrational fears. The phobic experience was for contemporary medical men intimately connected to the very condition of modernity itself. Modern urban existence—with its noise, anonymity, and hectic pace—was seen as conducive to nervous illnesses, including phobias.¹⁹ Marsh's novel begins with scenes that condemn Britain for its lack of care for its own citizens, particularly in the city.²⁰ A nameless and homeless tramp curses Britain as "a——fine country" (9) at the very beginning of the novel, which also sees Holt as "a stranger" (10) within an environment in which he should be at home. Instead the imperial metropolis, a melting pot of migrants, accommodates foreign presences, even ones as objectionable as the Beetle; its busy streets and remote suburbs provide such undesirables with

¹⁹ Frederick William Alexander, "Claustrophobia': Cause and Cure (Reprinted from the *Medical Times*)" (London: No publisher, [1925]: 1-2.

²⁰ Margree, "'Both in Men's Clothing,'" 64.

the anonymity and seclusion they require; it supplies discontented and vulnerable victims for them to prey upon; and its extensive system of public transport allows them to traverse the city with impunity. Modern London offers no protection from the alien presence, in many ways appearing to aid the monster's invasion.

“Providence does sometimes write a man's character in his face”: Language, Character, and Knowledge

While nineteenth-century fears over racial degeneration have been well rehearsed,²¹ the threat of linguistic degeneration is relatively unexplored in gothic criticism. Hans Aarsleff notes that studies of ethnography and anthropology were often connected with the study of language in the nineteenth century.²² At the end of the eighteenth century Sir William Jones argued that it was impossible to know a people without understanding their language,²³ and during the Romantic period philologists asserted that the character of the people, including a record of its knowledge, beliefs, and superstitions, was articulated through the vernacular.²⁴ In accordance with anthropological procedures, August von Schlegel's early-nineteenth-century linguistic system placed languages in an order of supposed superiority, with Western, “isolating” languages (such as English) at the top of the tree, followed by inferior, “inflecting” and “agglutinating” languages (such as Arabic and the languages of the ancient Near East,

²¹ See, for example, William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²² Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press and London: Athlone Press, 1983), 207-08.

²³ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 126.

²⁴ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 144-47.

respectively).²⁵ Gwyneth Tyson Roberts argues that according to this teleological system of language development, “a ‘highly-developed’ language was a clear marker of a ‘highly-developed’ society, and a ‘highly-developed’ society would of course have a ‘highly-developed’ language.”²⁶ Nineteenth-century language study, thus, agreed with contemporary anthropology in suggesting a progression from primitive to more sophisticated society and culture, with the English language, the British set of cultural values, and the British “race” at the top of the evolutionary ladder. Thus, Richard Chenevix Trench had argued in 1851 that language was a “faithful [...] record of the good and of the evil which in time past have been working in the minds and hearts of men.”²⁷ He termed language “a moral barometer, which indicates and permanently marks the rise or fall of a nation’s life,” and argued that “[t]o study a people’s language will be to study *them*, and to study them at best advantage: there where they represent themselves to us under fewest disguises, most nearly as they are.”²⁸ Trench went on to equate the study of language with “the love of our country expressing itself in one particular direction,” since “a clear, a strong, an harmonious, a noble language” was a sure marker of “a glorious past” and “a glorious future.”²⁹

In accordance with such views, *The Beetle* is a novel in which the ability to command language and knowledge determines a person’s character, intelligence, and moral fortitude. The ability to speak forcefully, eloquently, and clearly, and a command of the knowledge available in the English language, define in the novel the best of British manhood, and thus of Britishness itself: as Marjorie remarks, “no satisfaction [is] to be got out of a speechless man” (167). Thus,

²⁵ Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, “‘Under the Hatches’: English Parliamentary Commissioners’ Views of the People and Language of Mid-Nineteenth-Century Wales,” in *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History*, ed. Bill Schwarz (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 178.

²⁶ Roberts, “‘Under the Hatches,’” 179.

²⁷ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 240.

²⁸ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 240-41.

²⁹ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 245-46.

Paul Lessingham, a reforming Member of Parliament, is known as a fine orator and “speaks with an Apostle’s tongue” (99). “Adept with words” (145), Lessingham “owes his success in the political arena in no slight measure to the adroitness which is born of his invulnerable presence of mind” (41-42). His “practical, statesmanlike speech[es]” (93) show evidence of “knowledge, charity, and sympathy” (155) and of “incontestable” “aptness,” “readiness,” and “grace” (93). The novel abounds with descriptions of Lessingham’s “calm, airy” (42) and “silvern tones”; (220); “short and crisp” sentences (92); and “clear and calm, not exactly musical, yet distinctly pleasant” voice (92). Moreover, Lessingham’s oratory is distinctly English; as Atherton explains,

It was very far from being an “oration” in the American sense; it had little or nothing of the fire and fury of the French Tribune; it was marked neither by the ponderosity nor the sentiment of the eloquent German; yet it was as satisfying as are the efforts of either of the three. (92)

Sydney Atherton, the “genius” inventor, “the fame of [whose] inventions is in the mouths of all men,” deals with up-to-date scientific knowledge, which he uses for the benefit of his country (162). Atherton is “a person of whom [...] many men and women join in speaking well” due to his “discoveries” and “inventions” (88), and observers are “struck by something pleasant in his voice, and some quality as of sunshine in his handsome face” (49). Augustus Champnell, the private detective, is in command of the minutest of details but also, importantly, of the ability to keep a secret. A “speechifying” (157) New Woman figure, the “sharp-tongued” (137) Marjorie Lindon speaks on public platforms and her writing is, like her personality, “unusual, bold, decided” (53). Robert Holt, whose previous employment as a clerk makes him an expert scribe, possesses the “voice [...] of an educated man” (177) and recounts his “curious story” “with a simple directness which was close akin to eloquence” (177) that proves that he has “not made an

ill-use of the opportunities which [he has] had to improve [his], originally, modest education” (45).

The chief British characters in the novel are, thus, positively defined by their associations with language, writing, oratory, and the command of facts, whether through learning, invention, or personal observation. Britishness is here associated with measured linguistic expression, which itself is associated with knowledge, culture, and order. Indeed, key scenes in the novel take place in Atherton’s laboratory and in Lessingham’s study, “a fine, spacious apartment, evidently intended rather for work than for show,” with “three separate writing-tables, [...] all covered with an orderly array of manuscripts and papers”; “a typewriter,” “piles of books, portfolios, and official-looking documents,” and walls “lined with shelves, full as they could hold with books” complete the picture of Lessingham as a man of knowledge (39). Importantly, in its respective ways, this knowledge is harnessed in the service of Britain—whether in Atherton’s military inventions, in Lessingham’s political reforms, or in Champnell’s efforts to prevent crime—and language is thus associated with the good of the nation.

Predictably, then, contact with the alien results in attempts at classification according to well established Orientalist taxonomies as the characters endeavor to use their knowledge to determine the exact nature of the Beetle. Holt’s initial description of the Beetle as an ancient Asiatic mummy is conditioned by his inherent subscription to British conventions of Orientalist classification: “There was not a hair upon his face or head, but, to make up for it, the skin, which was a saffron yellow, was an amazing mass of wrinkles” (19). Next, however, we are told that the monster is animalistic, though the size of its nose also directs the reader to consider racial stereotypes of Jews as well as the sharp, shriveled features of the mummy: “The cranium, and, indeed, the whole skull, was so small as to be disagreeably suggestive of something animal. The

nose, on the other hand, was abnormally large” and “resembled the beak of some bird of prey” (19). The next set of facial characteristics classifies the creature not only as Negroid, but also as deformed: “The mouth, with its blubber lips, came immediately underneath the nose, and chin, to all intents and purposes, there was none” (19). Finally, Holt returns to his earlier classification of the creature as Asiatic, although the emphasis on its powerful eyes also reminds the reader of the Jewish evil eye: “so marked a feature of the man were his eyes, that, ere long, it seemed to me that he was nothing but eyes. [...] They held me enchained, helpless, spell-bound” (19). In opposition to the British protagonists, the monster’s voice is distinctly “disagreeable” (18) and “rasping” like “a rusty saw” (51) or “a rusty steam engine” (246). What is more, the speech of this “inspired maniac” (113) is “an inarticulate torrent [...] not a little suggestive of insanity” (28) and “more resembling yelps and snarls than anything more human,—like some savage beast nursing its pent-up rage” (53). Holt repeatedly comments on the monster’s “markedly foreign” accent (28) and “guttural tones” with “a reminiscence of some foreign land” (21). Thus, the Beetle is distinguished from the British characters as much by its speech as by its appearance, and both are directly equated with foreign moral and racial degeneracy in the novel.

In the end, Holt is unable to arrive at a stable classification as he concludes that he “had no doubt it was a foreigner” (18). We have here the first sign that Holt’s language is failing him and giving way to an irrational phobic reaction to the alien. It could be argued that instead of showing repulsion towards the representative of a particular culture, Holt gives voice to a xenophobic prejudice towards the foreign *in general*. While Holt may not be familiar with different cultures, Atherton is known as something of “a specialist on questions of ancient superstitions and extinct religions” (76). However, this educated man is similarly at a loss over the Beetle’s ethnicity: “he wore a burnoose,—the yellow, grimy-looking article of the Arab of

the Soudan” (69), Atherton explains, agreeing with Holt that the “fellow was oriental to the finger-tips,—that much was certain” (106). Beyond this, however, Atherton, too, fails to classify the Beetle in a statement remarkable for its negativity:

In spite of a pretty wide personal knowledge of oriental people I could not make up my mind as to the exact part of the east from which he came. He was hardly an Arab, he was not a fellah,—he was not, unless I erred, a Mohammedan at all. There was something about him which was distinctly not Mussulmanic. So far as looks were concerned, he was not a flattering example of his race, whatever his race might be. (106)

Despite the wealth of descriptive detail in Atherton’s and Holt’s accounts, their attempts at classification prove inconclusive as well-rehearsed Orientalist discourse fails to establish the Beetle’s exact provenance and character. The Beetle is here defined by what it is *not*, by its intangible “foreignness.” Unable to determine his opponent’s ethnic makeup, Atherton, like Holt, is content to label the Beetle as a degenerate foreign monster, concluding by associating the Oriental’s “uncommonly disagreeable” (149) appearance with a moral degeneracy: “If it is true that, now and again, Providence does write a man’s character on his face, then there can’t be the slightest shred of a doubt that a curious one’s been written on his” (72). Western knowledge, articulated through scientific discourse, is challenged by the Beetle’s liminality and hybridity, associated in the novel with the monster’s foreign origins. “You know not of what you speak!” (115), the Beetle warns Atherton, who is indeed forced to concede defeat: not only is Western knowledge of the “Papyri, hieroglyphics, and so on, which remain” of ancient Eastern civilization “very far from being exhaustive” (76) but Atherton is forced to admit that “civilisation was once more proved to be a failure” in the “game of bluff” he had played with the monster (121). This failure of supposedly objective scientific knowledge leads in the novel to

xenophobic responses to the alien. Arguably, then, there is a direct connection between Orientalist discourse and expressions of xenophobia, as the narrative establishes the inadequacy of racial and scientific taxonomies in defining and containing the foreign presence.

“Speechless”: Phobic Inarticulacy, Linguistic Collapse, and Identity

It is not simply Western knowledge of the Orient, articulated through the English language, that fails in the novel: it is the English language itself. When brought into direct contact with the alien presence, first in the Beetle’s native Egypt and later in London, the English language suffers a breakdown which can be interpreted as a reduction to xenophobic inarticulacy and even muteness. While the presence of the foreign monster is the immediate cause of this breakdown, the narrative implies that its roots extend to pre-existing weaknesses within the British psyche. Faced with the Beetle, Holt, Lessingham, and Marjorie all lose their command of language and are reduced to varying states of chronic inarticulacy in keeping with the contemporary medical men who identified “loss of speech” as one symptom of phobia.³⁰ Holt, due to his deficient physical state, is reduced to “[s]hrieking like some lost spirit” (17) as a result of contact with the monster. Under the Beetle’s spell, Holt speaks either “in a sort of tremulous falsetto” (189) or in “a queer, hollow, croaking voice” (130) “which [he] should not have recognised as [his]” (48). Holt’s voice, containing an “almost more than human agony” (171), is indicative of his horrible experience. Lessingham, too, retreats from the vicinity of the monster in inchoate panic, “clutching at” his “bookshelves” “as if seeking for support” (43) from this vestige of knowledge and certainty in an attempt to regain his composure.³¹ Contact with the monster destroys Lessingham’s habitual “inpenetrability” (41), and his “suavity and courtesy”

³⁰ Roth, *A Few Notes*, 2.

³¹ I am indebted to Dominic Bignell for this insight.

(42). Not only does “[h]is voice falter” (215) as he “stumble[s] in the telling” (211) of his story and is reduced to “a miserable weakling” (220), he now speaks “in a harsh, broken voice which no one who had heard him speak on a public platform, or in the House of Commons, would have recognised as his” (265). So extreme is Lessingham’s linguistic collapse that he utters “a stream of inchoate abuse” in “frenzied, choking accents” (43), “mumble[s] to himself aloud” (48), “shriek[s]” (81) and “gibber[s],—like some frenzied animal” (148). Marjorie’s budding speechifying, too, is brought to an end by the Beetle. “Her voice [...] but an echo of itself” (134), she finds that she has “lost the control of [her] tongue” and “stammer[s]” (171) as “the words wouldn’t come. [...] [Her] longings wouldn’t shape themselves into words, and [her] tongue was palsied” (133-34). These failed attempts to use language and speech convey a xenophobic experience: the British protagonists are rendered unable to communicate in an effective way, and their advanced knowledge base fails repeatedly throughout the novel as contact with the unknown exposes latent weaknesses within the nation. Their previous eloquence and self-assurance give way to what philologists had termed a “language of action,” a basic form of communication consisting of inarticulate gestures, interjections and signs,³² in keeping with such accepted symptoms of phobic behavior as sensations of anxiety, loss of speech, and failure of willpower.³³

So extreme is this failure of language that, as Kelly Hurley observes, *The Beetle* can be read as a novel of silences. At several points throughout the text, language fails the characters to such an extent that their consciousness, too, fails. Hurley attributes these silences to a narrative “coyness”³⁴ which made it impossible for Marsh to depict scenes of rape and sexual violence

³² Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 21.

³³ Roth, *A Few Notes*, 2-4.

³⁴ Hurley, “‘The Inner Chambers of All Nameless Sin,’” 206.

involving men and women alike.³⁵ Thus, Holt passes out into “oblivion” (54) as the Beetle assaults him; Marjorie writes about her ordeal repeatedly but always stops at the point of her encounter with the monster as “oblivion” “come[s] to [her] aid” and she “swoon[s]” (175); and Lessingham allows “a curtain [...] to descend” as “a period of oblivion” obscures his experiences in Egypt (210). However, the ellipses and silences which punctuate the novel are also instances in which language utterly fails to explain the events. Characters attempt to describe and understand the alien presence, but words fail them and they are forced to employ such empty phrases as “unimaginable agony,” “speechless torture,” and “nameless terrors” (266) caused by “that Nameless Thing” (120); or they refer to “two unspeakable months” (213) of “nameless agonies and degradations” in “some indescribable den of horror” (269). The English language, it is implied, does not contain words to describe the experience of contact with the alien presence. The characters’ silences and gaps in the plotline define the narrative, and the muteness provoked by the Beetle is at its center. The characters’ phobic discourse within the invasion text is, then, essentially inarticulate and inconclusive.

This failure of language is equated in the text with a challenge to Western knowledge, the loss of national and cultural identity, and, ultimately, the destruction of Western civilization itself: the English characters’ linguistic regression implies a degeneration of the entire nation, resulting from internal weaknesses, defined through its command of the vernacular. In the late eighteenth century, influential philologists such as Horne Tooke had argued that the study of language was in fact “the natural history of understanding, of thought, of mind” because language was central to thought, thought was embedded in language, and, indeed, that language

³⁵ It is, of course, also a common gothic device to invite the readers to fill in such gaps with the worst violation their minds can conjure.

was thought.³⁶ Faced with the monster, some of the British characters lose their ability to use the English language, their instrument of making sense of the world; in the process, their ability to think independently and thus their British identity are placed under threat. Like immigrants in contemporary xenophobic discourse, the Beetle in Marsh's invasion text is represented as a parasite exploiting both real and perceived weaknesses within British culture. Nineteenth-century anxieties about class, gender, and morality are most clearly embodied in the Beetle's victims—an unemployed, emasculate clerk, a "New Woman" regarded as "a thing of horror" (157), and a radical politician with a past. However, the body politic itself is presented as inherently flawed in the novel due to the linguistic failure of a host of inarticulate politicians. One of Marjorie Lindon's three suitors, the parliamentarian Percy Woodville, is notorious for his lack of oratorical powers and has "to have [his] speeches written for [him]" (90). Woodville does not "know what to speak about" and "can't speak anyhow" (96), and his notes take the form of "hieroglyphics, but what they meant, or what they did there anyhow, it was [impossible to] tell" (61-62). The elderly Mr Lindon, a senior Member of Parliament, is unable to form a coherent sentence without beginning to "stutter and stammer" (95), "puffing and stewing [...] at the top of his voice" (124). What is more, the "language which he habitually employs" is described as "unbecoming to a gentleman," especially one of "high breeding" (168).

Given such weaknesses within British society, the underlying fear in the novel is that contact with the alien may strip the English characters, already somehow lacking in quintessentially British characteristics and physical and mental stamina, of their national and cultural identity. This collapse is represented in the novel as a total loss of linguistic independence and, thus, of self-expression. For Holt, speech is associated "with the power to

³⁶ Aarsleff, *The Study of Language*, 14, 19.

show that there still was in [him] something of a man” (32). As the unfortunate tramp falls into the Beetle’s clutches, he admits that “something was going from [him],—the capacity, as it were, to be [him]self” (22). The monster’s “sentences, in some strange, indescribable way, seemed, as they came from his lips, to warp [Holt’s] limbs; to enwrap themselves about [him]; to confine [him], tighter and tighter, within, as it were, swaddling clothes; to make [him] more and more helpless” (32). Holt explains,

There was this odd thing about the words I uttered, that they came from me, not in response to my will power, but in response to his. It was not I who willed that I should speak; it was he. What he willed that I should say, I said. Just that, and nothing more. For the time I was no longer a man; my manhood was merged in his. I was, in the extremest sense, an example of passive obedience. (20)

Holt is unmanned by the monster’s invasion: “something entered into me,” Holt explains, “and forced itself from between my lips, so that I said, in a low, hissing voice, which I vow was never mine, ‘THE BEETLE!’” (42).

If, as philologists argued, the character of a people was represented in the vernacular, then the loss of language erases the British characters’ cultural identity and replaces it with a markedly foreign register. Under the Beetle’s spell, both Marjorie and Holt are taken to be “of weak intellect”: “They said nothing, except at the seeming instigation of the Arab, but when spoken to stared and gaped like lunatics” (264). Holt, “speechless” (19), acts in “a silence which was supernatural [...]—not a word issued from those rigid lips” (65). Indeed, Lessingham is forced to wonder what Holt’s nationality may be, since he is speechless and dressed in an Eastern cape: “You look English,” he says, “is it possible that you are not English? What are you then [...]? Your face is English” (45). Lessingham is himself thrown “into a state approximating

to a paralysis both of mind and body” (218) and loses his memory, language, and identity following his “agony of fear” (218). He describes his collapse into “a state of semi-imbecility” and “a species of aphasia”: “For days together I was speechless, and could remember nothing,—not even my own name” (216). The monster appropriates its victims’ British identity, arguably most clearly articulated through their command of the English language. The Beetle’s invasion is, thus, associated with the removal of the victims’ original linguistic and cultural identity and the substitution of something alien and essentially loathsome.

The Beetle, by contrast, is able to communicate its wishes very clearly indeed in its appropriation of the English vernacular and, by implication, of British culture. A native speaker of what is in the novel condescendingly termed “the *patois* of the Rue de Rabagas,” an imaginary Cairene street, and equated with “gibberish” (45), the Beetle also speaks English; indeed, Lessingham comments on his encounter with the Egyptian priestess that “[a]ll languages seemed to be the same to her. She sang in French and Italian, German and English,—in tongues with which I was unfamiliar” (209), perhaps as a result of frequent engagement with European imperialism. It is true that several of the characters comment on the monster’s “queer foreign twang” (105) and “queer lingo” (255), dismissing its speech as “a sort of a kind of English” (246) and its writing as “straggling, characterless caligraphy” not unlike “the composition of a servant girl” (244). Yet, in spite of the Beetle’s foreign accent and appearance, the monster is able to navigate contemporary London with ease, hailing cabs, purchasing railway tickets, renting houses and taking rooms both in writing and in speech. Indeed, the monster’s “yells and screeches, squawks and screams” (248) are in marked contrast to the British characters’ increasingly halting tones and muteness. The Beetle’s language is associated with physical and mental violence, violation, and command, leading those who come into contact with it to stand

“in expectation of a physical assault” (29). In the novel, this form of communication proves stronger than the British characters’ supposedly superior tones. The polite, polished expression associated with Britishness is, thus, shown to be feeble when confronted with the Beetle, and in the novel this fragility is equated with degeneration and disease within the British nation.

Like Stoker’s *Dracula*, the Beetle is able to appropriate English culture through a command of the English language.³⁷ In the mouth of the Beetle and its victims, words become spells, the most powerful of which is “the spell of two words,” “THE BEETLE!” (34). This curse is repeated throughout the novel and always followed by a descent into chaos and destruction of certainty. The Beetle also communicates very effectively without words through telepathy and gestures.³⁸ Holt comments on the monster’s apparent access to his thoughts, which it “seemed to experience not the slightest difficulty in deciphering” (52), while Atherton struggles to understand the Beetle’s sign language: “raising his hands he lowered them, palms downward, with a gesture which was peculiarly oriental” (107). While able to write in English, the monster also uses a form of communication reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing when it sends Lessingham a “dexterously done” “photogravure” (80) or pictorial “representation” (218) of a beetle, not unlike “a cartouch” (114), which provokes his phobic attack. These alternative modes of communication represent a challenge to the established conventions of speaking and of recording speech in the West and suggest, again, the monster’s ability to appropriate the English language and all that it symbolizes in the novel, and to offer a markedly foreign substitute.

The novel concludes with the narrative of the aristocratic detective, Augustus Champnell. Unlike a typical detective narrative, this final fragment is inconclusive. Instead of

³⁷ For a reading of *Count Dracula* as an invader, see Stephen Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization”, *Victorian Studies* 33.4 (Summer 1990).

³⁸ For a discussion of telepathy in the novel, see Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 208-10.

providing the certainty and ready answers one expects from detective fiction, Champnell can only offer the reader a startling lack of conclusions and certainties. His narrative is punctuated by negatives, just as the novel itself has been punctuated by silences and ellipses. The very nature of the fragmented split narrative, Champnell's final statement of the case, is brought into question as the detective reveals that Holt's narrative was in fact not his but "compiled from the statements which Holt made to Atherton, and to Miss Lindon." Marjorie, by contrast, "told, and re-told, and re-told again, the story" of her ordeal in writing but "she would never speak of what she had written" (295). While the resulting text presents a gathering together of fragments, it is, finally, inherently flawed. Champnell is here forced to agree with the Beetle's accusation that the British characters "know not of what [they] speak" (115). The fragmented, inconclusive nature of the invasion text confirms the essential inarticulacy of the characters' phobic discourses, at the center of which there is a linguistic vacuum. The phobic experience of contact with the foreign has permanently compromised the British characters' ability to synthesize information in coherent language, shaking their belief in the omnipotence of Western science and knowledge and challenging their assumptions of the stability of national and cultural identity.

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