

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

Summer 2001

Review of *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, edited by Glennis Byron and David Punter

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoeveler, Diane, "Review of *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, edited by Glennis Byron and David Punter" (2001). *English Faculty Research and Publications*. 163.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_fac/163

BYRON, GLENNIS and DAVID PUNTER, ED. *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography* (New York: [St. Martin's Press](#), 1999). x + 243 pp. \$55.00.

Spectral Readings is yet another new collection of essays on the gothic, once again revealing the vitality and interest in this burgeoning field of literary study. Edited by Glennis Byron and David Punter, these essays were originally presented as conference papers at the International Gothic Association's second biannual conference held at the University of Stirling in 1995. When one sees a volume of essays drawn from a conference held five years ago one often fears the worst. Oftentimes conference papers do not translate well into published form without fairly massive revision and expansion. Happily, that is not the case with the essays in this volume. With only a few exceptions, this collection contains important, well written, and thoroughly researched essays on a wide variety of topics within the gothic canon.

First, a word about the "gothic canon." What we have traditionally discussed as "gothic" is clearly under close scrutiny and theoretical reassessment. This volume makes it clear—as David Punter states in his Introduction to the book—that gothic "exists in relation to mainstream culture in the same way as a parasite does to its host ... as a perversion of other forms" (p. 3). But Punter very astutely adds that this parasite/host relation works in a two-way fashion: "the parasite supports the host as much as vice versa, as the pragmatic daylight world survives only in its infolding of the spectral world of desire." In its rethinking of how to talk about the gothic, how to define the gothic impetus, and how to apply new methods to familiarly identified gothic texts, this volume offers several valuable essays. As there are 13 essays, all cannot be discussed in detail. I want, however, to focus on the most promising approaches taken by the most theoretically interesting ones.

The volume begins with Fred Botting's "The Gothic Production of the Unconscious." He very usefully places *Dracula* in relation to Frances Power Cobbe's theory of "unconscious cerebration," first described in her essay of the same title (1870). In addition to using Cobbe's pioneering essays on dreams and the unconscious, Botting also employs Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Cixous to spin out a variety of dazzling insights into the nature of the gothic. I cannot cite all of them here, but the following is a sample: "Gothic sites of anxiety are repeatedly, insistently artificial and textual in origin" (p. 21); "the uncanny is more than an objectified wish returning from an unconscious identified as a seat of instinct. Instead, in Lacan's terms, the uncanny marks the decomposition of the fantasy underpinning imaginary subjective integrity and the assumptions of symbolic consistency: its apprehension discloses, in horror, nothing but a void" (p. 34). David Punter follows Botting with an essay that examines the role of ceremony in a few representative works of gothic fiction, primarily Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, and Gibson's *Neuromancer*. Using Freud, Lacan, and Abraham and Torok as his theoretical scaffolding, Punter offers some interesting observations on the nature of the gothic: "as ceremonies are ritual namings, they come to protect us against namelessness, against anonymity" (p. 40). The final essay in the introductory section, William Veeder's "The Nurture of the Gothic; or, How Can a Text Be Both Popular and Subversive?" focuses on an application of D. W. Winnicott's theories of potential space, transitional objects, and play as they explain the function of gothic literature to "heal the wounds" of modernism (p. 55). In addition to using Winnicott, Veeder also briefly examines the work of four other theorists: Michael Taussig, whose *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wildman* looks at how terror heals (p. 65); Ross

Chambers, whose *Room for Maneuver* analyzes "how a change in desire can cause a desire for change" (p. 66); and Stallybrass and White, whose theories of the carnivalesque lead to an understanding of the relation of gothic to psychoanalysis: "Gothic is reborn at the moment when psychoanalysis is born and carnival is dying, thus helping to assure that healing remains available to repression's man" (p. 69).

Of the next section of essays, focusing on British texts, I found Robert Mighall's "'A Pestilence Which Walketh in Darkness': Diagnosing the Victorian Vampire" to be the most useful. He problematizes Ernest Jones's theory that "in the unconscious mind blood is commonly equivalent to semen" and instead historicizes the relation between autoeroticism and vampirism (p. 108), largely using Samuel Tissot's *Onanism* (1758). The next section of essays focuses on American gothic texts, and here the most original and provocative essay is Eric Savoy's "Spectres of Abjection: the Queer Subject of James's 'The Jolly Corner.'" For Savoy, Freud and Kristeva have developed the concept of melancholia as the "shadow of despair": "Canonical American Gothic—at least in the nineteenth century—arises from the subject's traumatised sense of historical loss, a disconnection from the field of power where the subject wishes to locate or to construct a more authentic self" (p. 163). Relying on a discussion of the device of *prosopopoeia*, the trope of haunting, Savoy explores with a good deal of sophistication the queer subject and its repression—the real gothic nightmare—in "The Jolly Corner." The final two sections of the book consist of four essays on diverse texts such as the original *Phantom of the Opera*, Heiner Müller's *Medea*, Daphne du Maurier's "Don't Look Now," and the neo-gothic works of Patrick McGrath. I found all of these essays very useful, interesting, and original, particularly Hogle's essay on racial theories of Orientalism in relation to the *Phantom*.

If I had any complaint about this collection it would be in the inclusion of a few essays that had little or nothing to say about things gothic: David Seed's "Hell Is a City: Symbolic Systems and Epistemological Scepticism in the City of Dreadful Night," and Helen F. Thompson's "Gothic Numbers in the New Republic: The Federalist No. 10 and its Spectral Factions." Although James Thomson's 1880 poem clearly contains gothic elements (which are ably explored in another essay in the volume, Alexandra Warwick's "Lost Cities: London's Apocalypse"), the poem as discussed here is "gothic" because it "draws on an association traditional to Gothic literature between visual obscurity and difficulties of understanding" (p. 88). With such an amorphous definition, virtually any work of literature would be "gothic." Helen Thompson's essay on James Madison's Federalist No. 10 as a gothic document is even more eccentric and, for me, farfetched. Her overly complicated thesis is that Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835 trans.) presents Republican tyranny as a "dramatic inversion of body and soul" (p. 140). The new majority of voters who now replace the king and the minorities who form factions within the republic are imaged by Madison's treatise as a "ghostliness of the new union" that is driven "deep into the American political unconscious" (p. 141). Even were such a paradigm plausible, it is again not particularly "gothic," nor does her discussion make for an interesting essay.

But this is to quibble with what is clearly a strong collection of essays reflecting the strength of the gothic field, as well as the promise of work to come from the conferences of the International Gothic Association.

DIANE LONG HOVELER, [Marquette University](#)

Word count: **1218**

Copyright University of North Texas, English Department Summer 2001