A NEW COMPANION TO
THE
Gothic
EDITED BY
DAVID PUNTER
WILEY-BLACKWELL
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Edited by David Punter
I would like to dedicate this volume to the memory of two colleagues who are no longer with us: Julia Briggs, a colleague of supreme culture and grace; and Allan Lloyd Smith, a fine scholar and a true friend.
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Introduction
The Ghost of a History

David Punter

This book, *A New Companion to the Gothic*, succeeds the original *Companion to the Gothic*, which was first published in 2000. Large parts of it follow from its predecessor, but it is also different in significant ways: it contains twelve further newly commissioned essays, and many of the essays contained in the earlier volume have been altered and updated to keep pace with change and development in Gothic writing, criticism, and theory.

But as with its predecessor, the book still has two aims. The first is to introduce the reader to Gothic writing over the last 250 years, its varieties and major features, its dominant modes and different sub-genres. The second is to present some of the most significant and interesting contemporary approaches to the Gothic, and thus inevitably to bring the reader into contact with some of the ideas that have most shaped, and are continuing to shape, Gothic criticism.

Both of these aims, however, have their own complexities. To turn first to the question of Gothic writing, it needs at once to be said that the notion of what constitutes Gothic writing is a contested site. Everybody would, of course, agree that it makes sense to consider the early masters and mistresses of the genre – Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis – as Gothic writers, but even these early figures were often also writing in quite different genres. By the time we read Mary Shelley, the question of whether the “original Gothic” has already fallen apart, become transmuted into different forms, left only traces to be picked up and reutilized by later writers – for perhaps quite different purposes and often perhaps quite anxiously – is already a vexed one.

Dickens, to take an example, is a writer whom we might hesitate to call Gothic; indeed, we might feel that his work would be in some way demeaned by such a label. But the prevalence of claustrophobia in Dickens, the foreclosure of escape from institution or destitution, the grotesque exaggeration of character and location, are all
recognizably “Gothic” features, even as they play a crucial role in establishing whatever it is we mean by the category and stereotype of the “Dickensian.”

Most historians of the Gothic would agree that a cluster of texts towards the end of the nineteenth century, by such writers as Stoker, Stevenson, Wells, and Wilde, constitutes a kind of Gothic renaissance, although quite why this should have been so has been subject to various interpretations. Many, again, would agree that the ghost story, in its classic Edwardian form, has some relation to the older Gothic. But beyond this, as we move into the twentieth century, we encounter, as we might expect, further fragmentation. Where might we – to take a particularly intriguing example – locate the “Gothic moment” in modernism? Or might we prefer to see in modernism precisely that movement of the mind that seeks to exorcise the ghost, to clean out the house, ruined though it may be, and assert the possibility of a life that is not haunted as it situates itself resolutely in a present that strains towards the future?

Perhaps if we follow that line by acknowledging the way in which futurism itself came to stand as a fascinating and problematic specter on the scene of the twentieth century, we would be envisaging a response sufficient to suggest that matters are more complex, that exorcism is always fraught with difficulty and liable to produce a return of the repressed. Certainly postmodernism has seen a further set of dealings with terror and even a reinvigoration of the apparently more dated trappings of the Gothic (one might think, for example, of the extraordinary, nightmarish castles so frequently encountered in the pages of Iain Banks), but on the other hand one could say that, after all, in postmodernism everything is resurrected, or at least reexamined, if only to be consigned again to the generically confused charnel-house of history.

So here there are many uncertainties, and it is obviously possible to view this uncertainty about the field of Gothic writing as, if not exactly a virtue, at least a significant resistance to canonization: this book, for example, is not going to answer the question “What is Gothic?” any more than any other book has managed to provide an enduring answer to questions such as “What is the novel?” or “What is romanticism?” What can, however, be said – and I am now moving on to the second issue, of the relation between Gothic and contemporary ideas – is that, in recent years in particular, we have found ourselves at a peculiar confluence between the major motifs of the Gothic and a set of ways of thinking increasingly current in contemporary criticism and theory.

Gothic speaks of phantoms: the neo-psychoanalytic ideas of Abraham and Torok, following Freud, are based on a redescription of the phantom. Gothic takes place – very frequently – in crypts: Abraham and Torok, again, make the crypt the cornerstone of their psychic topography. The Gothic speaks of – indeed, we might say it attempts to invoke – specters: Derrida, in, for example, *Specters of Marx*, chooses the same post-Marxist rhetoric to talk about what we might term the “suppressed of Europe.” Gothic has to do with the uncanny: the uncanny has now come to form one of the major sites on which reinvestigations of the mind, from both the psychoanalytic and also the neuropsychological points of view, can take place. And Gothic speaks, incessantly, of bodily harm and the wound: the wound signifies trauma, and recent years have seen a veritable explosion in studies of trauma at individual, communal and global levels,
an orientation which, we can only suppose in the light of recent conflicts and their
terrible human consequences, will only become more urgent.

These are just five examples – there are more. But we need to be very careful about
this curious collocation, as we need to be when any mode of criticism appears to get
too close to its subject matter and finds itself losing the critical distance of alienation.
On the one hand, we need to say that the forging of these tools for criticism, or more
importantly the psycho-political constellation that has permitted this resonant
“forgery,” gives us a potentially powerful grasp of new ways of understanding the
Gothic, wherever we take its parameters to be. But on the other, we also need to say
that part of the issue here is clearly that contemporary theory is increasingly itself
haunted – haunted especially by a painful understanding of the uncanny nature of
knowledge itself, haunted by an awareness of the disjunction between theory and
practice, haunted, like Gothic, by the weight of a history, just behind its shoulder,
which proves resistant not only to understanding but, more importantly, to change.

But perhaps again this is the wrong – or at least an insufficient – way to put it,
for perhaps what Gothic and much contemporary criticism and cultural commentary
share is indeed an overarching, even a sublime, awareness of mutability, an understand-
ing of the ways in which history itself, and certainly narratives of history, are not
stable, do not constitute a rock onto which we might cling – indeed, as Gothic has
always sought to demonstrate to us, there are no such rocks, there is no sure founda-
tion. There is, to paraphrase Slavoj Žižek, only distortion – slips of the tongue, tricks
of the eye, which ensure that what we see is always haunted by something else, by
that which has not quite been seen, in history or in text – just as Gothic itself, we
might say, consists of a series of texts which are always dependent on other texts, texts
which they are not, texts which are ceaselessly invoked while no less ceaselessly
misread, models of méconnaissance in the form of lost manuscripts, of misheard mes-
sages in cyberspace, in the attempt to validate that which cannot be validated, the
self-sufficiency, the autonomy of a textuality that is already ruined beyond repair.

The thirty-six chapters in this new volume – there were only twenty-four in its
predecessor – seek, in ways that I hope are extremely diverse, to address the two aims
of the book as I have tried to state them, and they are divided into six parts. The first
part seeks to supply some essential background to what we mean by “Gothic” and
naturally reminds us that “Gothic” is, in any case, a contested term, a revival of a
revival, a late addition to an etymological and historical stock that moves from the
Goths themselves, with their ambiguous place in a real “history” (normally as the
quintessential barbarians), through the grandeurs of medieval Gothic art and archi-
tecture, and on to the “Gothic revival” itself, with, I suppose, the constant reminders
around us, in Britain at least, that (politically) parliament sits in a Gothic palace of
fantastical proportions, while (culturally) the British Library has recently been
rehoused, admittedly not in a Gothic building, but beside St. Pancras station, one of
the most extreme versions of Victorian Gothic urban architecture. In this part, Fred
Botting’s scene-setting opening essay, Robin Sowerby’s work on the early Goths, and
Neil Cornwell’s contribution on European Gothic are now supplemented by an essay
on Gothic Shakespeare by Dale Townshend and one on the Gothic ballad by Doug Thomson.

The chapters in Part I (and I do not intend in this brief introduction to discuss each chapter in detail) suggest to us something of this history; they also remind us of the geographic spread of the Gothic, its presence within a significant stream of European culture, and they thus begin to suggest to us some of the concatenations of history and geography that conditioned the rise of Gothic and also provide it with a great deal of its subject matter. Part II, consisting of essays by Robert Miles on Radcliffe and Lewis, Nora Crook on Mary Shelley, Ian Duncan on Scott, Hogg and Scottish Gothic, Victor Sage on Maturin, LeFanu, and Irish Gothic, and David Worrall on Gothic drama, moves on to give some account of the major writers and generic formations of the “original” Gothic period, although even here, as I have suggested above, it is difficult to keep within strict boundaries, and the need to look, for example, at different national literatures in English reveals, as we would expect, that as social and cultural pressures differ, so too will the cycle of appearance, maturation, and vanishing of those genres that might carry their weight.

What Part II reveals, I hope, is therefore also something of the political contexts of early Gothic. There was a time when it was the fashion to suppose that Gothic, because of its fantastical settings and melodramatic presentation, constituted in some sense an escape from social concerns. It would, I think, be difficult these days to understand what an “escape” of such a kind might look like, to imagine a literature removed from its psychological or sociological contexts. But more specifically, what is revealed in this part is not only that, for example, the early writers were – as of course they must have been – responsive in important ways to the gender culture of their times, or that the author of Frankenstein was concerned with the political implications of the scientific and technological developments that she saw – or at least sensed – around her, but also that Gothic was, from its very inception, a form that related very closely to issues of national assertion and social organization, and which even, on occasion, could “take the stage” in foregrounding social issues and in forming social consciousness.

It is perhaps important to say at this point that in the list I have given above of the political involvements and responses of the Gothic, I have deliberately elided issues that might seem to us to be, as it were, “conscious” – Scott’s devotion to the evolution of a Scottish nationhood, for example – with those that might seem “unconscious” – say, Radcliffe’s sensitivity to the plight of persecuted women in the late eighteenth century. This, I think, is a continuing crux of critical involvement with the Gothic. Just as our understanding of the relations between the conscious and the unconscious have ripened since Freud’s early topographies and the surprisingly regressive schematizations of Lacan, so our understanding of the complexities of dealing with the psychology of Gothic textuality has also deepened.

In moving on to Part III, this issue is very much to the foreground. The confessed aims of ghost-story writers, for example, which used to be seen as “explanatory” of their fiction, need now to be seen as texts themselves, to be placed alongside the
“original” texts themselves but possessed of no more heuristic power than any other text. The trajectory here through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I ought to say, is obviously exemplary rather than “complete,” whatever that might mean. There are many, many other texts that might have been mentioned, but the chapters in this part provide a series of insights into moments, as it were, in the continuing history – or should it be the post-history? – of the Gothic. In this part, Allan Lloyd Smith addresses nineteenth-century Gothic; Julia Briggs the ghost story; Glennis Byron the phenomenon of Gothic in the 1890s; and William Hughes the continuing journey of the vampire. Clive Bloom speaks of horror fiction; Gina Wisker returns us to the vampire from a specifically female point of view; Heidi Kaye introduces us to Gothic film; and I say something of poetry and the uncanny.

There might seem, in Part III, to be something of an excessive attention – even, perhaps, an addiction – to vampires. This is partly because of continuing critical attention, and the apparently endless creative reinterpretation that the vampire motif continues to receive. It seems as though each new social crux – from class anxieties through later nineteenth-century sexual liberation and on to later struggles around race and sexual orientation – traces its own representation on the curious body of the vampire. I here have to confess that, had I been called upon to predict the fate of the vampire when writing the original (whatever that may have been!) of this Introduction in 2000, I could never have guessed at the veritable explosion of vampire tales and vampire-related cultural phenomena which have soaked the first decade of the twenty-first century in fake (I hope and presume) blood. And, as we would expect, to follow the history of representations of the vampire (although even to use the term is, of course, in some sense to participate in what might strictly seem a “hysterical” debate about their “reality”) is also to trace another debate that is particularly evident in this part, which is about explicitness.

Obviously, a crucial feature of the developments of the texts that we think of as Gothic, from the late eighteenth century into the twenty-first, is the increase in, even the exorbitation of, the available terrain of description: physical events and violations, pathologized psychic representations, and the possibilities for representing these, first on the printed page but now in many other media besides, have altered radically over these 250 years. Yet one interesting feature of the Gothic, if we consider the difference between the classic ghost story and the more brutal forms of horror fiction, is not so much how Gothic has “kept up to date,” whatever that might mean, but rather how it seeks to enact for us a continuing psychic balancing act whereby the explicit and the contemporary can in some way be put into relation with the most archaic – of forms, but also of psychic materials. Some would say that this is the force of the Gothic; if so, it is also the force of the two most powerful sources of contemporary cultural ideas: psychoanalysis, through its insistence on the power of primeval instincts (one might look, for example, at Anne Rice’s “explanations” of her characters) and deconstruction, in its insistence on the impossibility of the fading away of what we might paradoxically call the “originary trace” (The Blair Witch Project may be a suitable example). Perhaps one might be able to put it even more simply, in a world of
replicas, forgeries, replays, simulacra, media piracy: what is old, the Gothic seems to continue to ask, and what is new?

Part IV provides a different set of coordinates for these connections between Gothic and the contemporary, in particular inspecting, on the one hand, modes of collaboration between Gothic writing and its criticism and, on the other, ways in which Gothic opens onto its own other, especially in the sense that the sometimes ponderous over-seriousness of Gothic paves the way for its own deflation. Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall’s essay concentrates on these issues as does, from a different perspective, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s. One thing we might conclude from the critiques in this part is that Gothic (although this may well be true of all other genres) is, as a generic institution, always engaged in conjuring its own others: a critical other, which will not let either its achievements or its deficiencies rest (and this “critical other” is conjured in the essay by Michelle Massé); and/or a “mood other,” which will forever harass and snap at the heels of any attempt at self-elevation, will continually remind us that attempts to secure grandeur for the human plight will be met in return by the necessity of the human body to discredit and undignify itself at the very moment when spirit is trying to vindicate its divine connections, showing off the most impressive cards on its mantelpiece. What, we might ask, is therefore “abjected” by Gothic’s credentials? In an attempt to address this question, this part therefore contains three new essays which address the ways in which Gothic abuts onto “other scenarios”: Vijay Mishra’s on the Gothic sublime; Julia Round’s on Gothic and the graphic novel; and Catherine Spooner’s on contemporary Goth culture.

Part V is wholly new, and seeks to address an issue which has become of increasing importance to definitions or descriptions of the Gothic over the first decade of the twenty-first century. This issue is essentially about the relationship between Gothic and globalization, and it is a vexed and complicated one. Another way of putting it would be: Does each cultural source have its own “home-grown” version of the “Gothic,” or is the Gothic a Western European/US export/import which contemporary writers, TV producers, and film companies across the world have chosen to adopt/ adapt in the name of their endless (yet entirely reasonable, given the inequities currently concealed beneath the bland brand-name “global”) search for markets for non-Western products (which might also be “Goth culture” under a different name)? Not less important is the way in which these essays broach the question of the relation between “Gothic” and “local” folklore, whatever “local” might mean. Has Gothic become, in the contemporary marketplace, a means of expression for local ghosts, or a means of imposition of Western conceptions which have no idea of, to take but one example of ignorance, the enduring cultural and communal power of the ancestors? You will find essays in this part which address all of these issues. There is a synoptic essay by Glennis Byron, director of the only project so far on global Gothic; followed by essays by Ken Gelder on Australian Gothic, Ian Conrich on New Zealand Gothic, Cynthia Sugars on Canadian Gothic, Katarzyna Ancuta on Asian Gothic, and Charles Inouye on Japanese Gothic. Of course, this last disjunction is bizarre, because Japan is part of Asia, but perhaps this signals the differences between geographic and cul-
tural orders, at least where Gothic is concerned. I should add that there are many other territories – I think it is important to prefer the word to “nations” – whose relation to the Gothic could have been mentioned; but perhaps this could be the start of something larger.

Part VI brings together a series of chapters that encounter the moment of contemporary criticism through some of its most crucial practitioners and motifs: feminist criticism, deconstruction, queer theory; psychopathology, abjection, magical realism. Five of these essays appeared in the first Companion: Kate Ferguson Ellis on the Gothic heroine; Stephen Bruhm on Stephen King and the “queer”; Scott Brewster on Gothic and madness; Jerrold E. Hogle on the ghost of the counterfeit; and Lucie Armitt on magical realism. To this I have added an essay by Joanne Watkiss on hospitality and the Gothic. Gothic, the writers in this part each variously assert, continues; it continues to engage with both new materials and new mechanisms of interpretation. Perhaps, then, it might not be absurd to say that part of the force of the Gothic is precisely that it continues: it continues, as it were, against the odds, with its apparatus in shreds, its diagnostics discredited, its authors – and critics – pilloried by the cultural police and made to look foolish by their own controversies; but it also continues unshakeably to provide us with images that, no matter how we shake our heads in vexation, woe, or intellectual pity, will not stop pester ing us.

Pest, pester, pestilence: Is the Gothic, to engage in a little etymological arabesque, pestifugous, or is it a pestiduct? Does is spread contamination, or might it provide a channel for the expulsion of contaminating materials? What Gothic perhaps suggests is that such a differentiation is impossible, that we cannot tell whether the materials of Gothic, however their currency is handled by writers or in other media, will serve to draw the plague of images (which is, put in another language, the terror of repetition) away from us, or whether the very repetition, the insoluble dilemma of how to rid ourselves of vampires and monsters of our own making, will embed these images of unease, of dis-ease, more uncontrollably in the heart.

These, at any rate, are some the issues we come across, so many of the writers here remind us, when looking both at the contemporary writing of the Gothic and at current critical attempts to engage with it. Yet in looking at matters in these ways, there is always the hovering danger that despite attempts to examine crucial contexts, we are still privileging the textual “moment” above all others. For “Gothic” has other contemporary manifestations, as you will see in this book, but before mentioning them it seems worth suggesting that there is a relation between Gothic writing – with its intense privileging of the material word and thus, inextricably, of the lost word, the “destroyed” manuscript – and that privileging of language that has now become the Leitmotif of critical theory. We might think of Lacan’s assertion that the unconscious is structured like a language, or of Derrida’s that there is nothing outside the text; susceptible to multiple interpretations though both of these formulations are, one “reading” of them would be in terms of a desperate rearguard attempt to privilege both speech and the written text at a time when, among those audiences for whom Western critics and theorists write, there is a problematic decrease in the articulacy
and literacy necessary to understand their words (this is no different in 2011 from 2000). It is possible to think here of a refusal to see the troubling possibility that the unconscious, whatever it might be, is not structured like a language, might indeed not be structured at all, or of the equally troubling insistence that, despite Derrida’s late ethical turn, there is indeed something outside the text. Two things, in fact: we might refer to them as the outer world and the inner world; but we might also argue – and here is where Gothic gets caught up again – that they are linked quite specifically by the pain of the wound.

If we want to take up this heretical approach, we might say that in terms of the outer world the Gothic confronts us with several contemporary problems, and we cannot be too delicate in our handling of them. For example, how do we interpret contemporary manifestations of “Goth culture,” and how do we connect it with older versions of the “Gothic”? I notice that when I wrote the first version of this Introduction, I was writing in the immediate aftermath of the Denver school massacre (predicted, in some sense, in many a Gothic text), aware that the two youths who committed the slaughter of several students were referred to by some of their schoolmates as “Goths.” Those schoolmates also made a very clear connection between this “affiliation of style” and a sense of “inner exile” on the part of the killers. This process of the demonization of the Gothic has, of course, an ancient history; but one which is continually being given new inflections according to the dictates of new sociocultural orders.

Perhaps, however, this might then lead us to suppose that to interpret the Gothic correctly we need to pay attention not only to an already conventional dialectic of civilization and barbarism, important though that is, but also to a phenomenon of inner exile, in which whatever melodramatic scenario the spurned ego enacts for itself on the cave walls can be seen, under certain cultural circumstances, as a potential for acting out. Under these circumstances – and I have argued this elsewhere – the question of available cultural materials can be readily used as a legal panacea, a societal alibi. The real question would be: What is the nature and genesis of the darkened imagination that will find in the available cultural materials sustenance for a program as devastating, as extreme, as pathological as the behaviors described in The Monk; ambiguously hailed in such contemporary writers as Bret Easton Ellis; acted out in a series of (usually teenage) incidents across the West? But also, and following from that, rather than treating Gothic as a form of incitement, can we still find in it an oblique but necessary source of understanding?

It is important then to think about certain kinds of boundary (and some of the chapters in this book suggest that Gothic is all about boundaries). It is important, for example, to think about boundaries – of some kind – around the writer, the artist, and to remember that representations do not “hold” in the cultural psyche unless they find an answering resonance. I think, as I have indicated above, that we might be looking astray if we now seek this response at the level purely of articulacy, literacy, the word; to imagine that possibility is, paradoxically, to risk sinking back into an unexamined archaism.
Yet perhaps, in this discussion, archaism in some form, and especially in its pre-verbal shape, is everything; perhaps we might be driven to think that Gothic, even in its most bourgeois forms—and there have been plenty of those—remains popular, remains current, even develops in currency, because it gives permission. Quite what it gives permission for is, inevitably, never known, cannot be predicted in advance, and cannot be owned in words; perhaps there is no preset program that Gothic will “turn on,” in any of the senses of that phrase, and the extraordinary versatility of contemporary vampire imagery may be evidence for that. But if Gothic has come to serve as a kind of cultural threshold, or as a repertoire of images that fatally undercut the “verbal compact” on which, among other things, the modern state rests, then more than ever it deserves and needs to be investigated. And I hope that these more political and, indeed, dangerous questions, questions that cannot be endstopped, as unconscious processes which may threaten grievous harm to the body of culture cannot be endstopped, at the boundary of the word, will be in readers’ minds as they survey the material, old and new, discussed in this book and the critical questions—themselves also old and new—raised in the course of what continues to be an energetic, ongoing (even if exemplarily ruinous) debate.