David Punter, *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche*
(Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016)

The Gothic Condition consists of fourteen well-researched essays, collected from a range of articles and conference papers published and delivered by pioneering gothic scholar David Punter over the past sixteen years. Composed with Punter's characteristic erudite style, these essays provide compelling critical perspectives and readings of texts from within the gothic canon, but also of science-fiction novels such as M. John Harrison's *Light* (2002) and *Nova Swing* (2006), to name but a few. Despite the somewhat daunting abundance of endnotes, the majority of the essays in this collection focus on three central texts, while also weaving in numerous theoretical concepts and supporting primary material that ultimately form a common thematic thread. As discussing all fourteen essays in detail is beyond the scope of this review, I will focus primarily on four that have proven to be the most engaging.

In his Introduction, Punter explains that his present work is to be read as reflecting what he terms 'the Gothic condition' (p. 1) of contemporary society. He further develops this idea pointing out that

> The Gothic condition is one in which no excess, no transgression […] that can occur to the dark imagination can fail to find its equivalent in the 'real world'. Silent killing by drones; beheadings in the desert; the mass murder of children; racist attacks; endless violence towards women — all those are features of the current global landscape, and beside them, the so-called terrors of Gothic might seem pallid and even juvenile. (p. 3)

The first essay, entitled 'Spectrality: The Ghosting of Theory', provides thought-provoking perspectives on the function of the ghost and haunting within literary and cultural theory and criticism. Punter draws on Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, as well as Jean Laplanche, among others, in order to demonstrate that the act of reading is an engagement with histories written by and regarding the dead. Psychoanalysis is central here, while the analogy between the 'psychic space' and the crypt is of particular interest, and goes beyond the Freudian concept of the 'return of the repressed'. In this combination of theory and literary tropes, the locus of the crypt functions as a place where secrets and painful stories are buried alongside ancestors. Punter quotes what he calls 'an extraordinary Gothic passage' (p. 16) from Abraham and Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (1994) regarding the return of the phantom from the crypt. This return troubles and challenges the self, represented as 'the cemetery guard', urging the self to a confrontation 'on the terrain of a trauma' (p. 16).

In order to understand why Punter accords such a high importance to the concepts of the crypt and the phantom, one must return to Abraham and Torok's work — *The Shell and the Kernel* and *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* — in which the two are extensively theorised. The crypt, according to Abraham and Torok, is formed when the individual suffers a traumatic experience which leads to 'a split in the Ego'[1] and to the development of 'a secret tomb inside the subject'.[2] This 'psychic tomb'[3] functions as 'a special kind of Unconscious [in that] [e]ach fragment is conscious of itself and unconscious of the realm "outside the crypt"'.[4] The related concept of the phantom is characterised by duplicity. On the one hand, it represents the sealing in the crypt of both a memory regarding a romantic experience with a loved object, and its subsequent traumatic loss. On other, the phantom functions as the haunting influence that the secrets of departed ancestors have on the psyche of the living descendants. Abraham goes even further by arguing that ghosts are the creation of the human psyche and that 'what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secret of others'.[5] Furthermore, the violation and the uncovering of silenced and ghostly family secrets are what fill patients with horror, as Abraham observes. Punter suggests that 'the psychoanalytic encounter' between the patient and the analyst similarly evokes a 'dialogue with the dead' (p. 15) because the patient provides a narrative infused with secrets and coded words that conceal and symbolise the source of his or her crypts and phantoms. By connecting this idea of psychoanalytical analysis with an interpretative approach committed to uncovering the 'text that lies beneath the text' (p. 15), Punter argues that the self's words are to be perceived as 'the residues, the traces, of the words of others' (p. 17) and that they function as part of a conversation with an inner phantom.

The concept of the spectral, for Punter, is connected with the gothic as a place of origin as well as haunting. The core of the spectral is constituted by a series of contradictions that rely on the psyche. He writes, 'to recognize and yet not recognize the other; to recognize a foreign body at the heart of the self; to be aware and yet to be unable fully to articulate the sense that one's vocabulary […] [has] been formed by the other' (p. 24). In this sense, the haunting influence of the ghostly other extends beyond the limits of the crypt to the very acts and language of the subject. To offer a more comprehensive example of the spectral, and

[1] Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 81.
[2] Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 130.
[3] As Nicholas T. Rand calls it in the introduction to Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p. 22.
[4] Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*. p. 80.
[5] Abraham and Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, p. 171.

especially of what he calls 'a mutual impossibility of banishment' (p. 24), Punter refers to the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, in which one side cannot deny the grip of the other. Moreover, the author makes an interesting analogy between the 'foreign body' and the ghost, as both are simultaneously free to move through the world, but inexorably earthbound, compelled to return to a specific place.

Another thought-provoking essay is 'Pseudo-Science and the Creation of Monsters'. Here, Punter analyses two nineteenth-century texts — Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) — along with a twenty-first-century one — M. John Harrison's *Light* (2002). Each of the three texts is used here to highlight a different aspect of science's role in creating (fictional) hybrid beings. Punter proposes reading science as a form of supernatural power, and Victor Frankenstein's troubling of the limits between life and death is key to this reading. Furthermore, Victor is positioned as 'a debased, debauched form of Prometheus appropriate to a debased age' (p. 75). In the case of Wells's text, on the other hand, 'the limits of the human' are tested in multiple attempts to breach the animal/human dichotomy. Dr Moreau populates the island with failed experiments that remain defined by the animal rather than the human, and are unable to transcend their 'beast-flesh'. Here, science deals not only with the secrets of transformation via vivisection but also with pain, which Dr Moreau perceives as a necessary evil to ensure 'scientific progress'. In his related discussion of Harrison's text, Punter highlights the condition of Seria Mau Genlicher, the captain of a spaceship, who undergoes a process of mutilation as she fuses with the ship, becoming a cyborg and therefore ceasing to be a human. Ultimately, the question that this chapter poses is whether science — in its constant mutating and virtually enhancing the human body — is monstrous; or if its creators, driven by a hubristic determination to challenge the categories of the natural, can be considered 'Gothically mad' (p. 86).

The creation of monsters and their status as epitomes of the boundaries between the human and the animal is further examined in the tenth essay, 'Of Monsters and Animals'. Punter has adopted an ontological reading, by developing Heidegger's idea of the abyss that exists between the human and the animal. Punter suggests that monsters spring from the abyss, or what he refers to as the gulf within the human. This realm of darkness within the self, he argues, is responsible for hybridity and thus the instability of the human. Punter refers back to the texts in the earlier essay on 'Pseudo-science' but also to Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000), which he reads as revolving around the metaphor of 'factory farming', and to

Stephen King's *Rose Madder* (1995), where the male protagonist is characterised by an animalistic monstrous aggression, and is associated with a minotaur. In connection to the idea of hybridity, an intruiging question is raised: 'what does it take for the human body to be perceived as deformed?' (p. 154). The proposed answer is rooted in teratology and in the assessment of 'birth defects', especially those that trouble the limits of the human. In this sense, he asserts, the medical also acts as the metaphorical 'police at the edge of the human species' (p. 154). Interestingly, Punter argues that the new-age monster is no longer a hybrid between the human and the animal (as in the case of the vampire or the werewolf), but rather between human and machine — that is, the cyborg. In this regard, he again invokes the figure of Seria Mau, who 'undergoes a process of monstrosisation' (p. 155), in that she is technologically modified in order to be incorporated in the spaceship. In fact, the image of the mutilated and dehumanised Seria Mau appears in four of Punter's essays. At a first glance, we could perhaps dismiss this as mere repetition; however, a more attentive reading reveals that Seria Mau is herself the specter that haunts Punter's text, representing the future of a highly technological world that is both monstrous and limitless.

Another interesting discussion that revolves around the body is presented in the essay 'Abhuman Remains of the Gothic'. This is probably the shortest and yet one of the densest essays in terms of references to both literary and cinematic works. Focusing on examples of bodily fragments, it also touches upon the idea of bodily integrity, especially in connection to prostheses and surgeries that are meant to keep the human body alive. Punter defines the abhuman as 'the place where the body fails to hold itself together […] what has been seen as inside (the skeleton, the organs, the guts) become visible, when what has been seen as outside (the skin, facial expression, limbs) fall back inside and are lost' (p. 97). Ann Radcliffe's representation of the skeleton in *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794); the human remains that have been disturbed by the vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897); and the significance of the fragmented body, especially the eyes and the heart, in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart'(1843) and E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816), are central to this chapter's discussion of the body as vulnerable. Within the context of a highly technological world that can fashion artificial body parts in order to ensure the functionality of the human body, the question raised here is 'what exactly is it of the human that remains?' (p. 103).

Overall, Punter's *The Gothic Condition*, despite its numerous and at times overwhelming references to novels and films, succeeds in providing an engaging critical analysis that challenges the reader to move further away from monsters such as vampires and

monsters that have become the mainstay of gothic texts and criticism, and to examine instead the anxieties that the cyborg embodies. With its captivating accounts on spectrality, and its incursion into aspects of the fragmented or technologised body, this book will surely be appreciated by many scholars of gothic fiction.

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