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Review of "Teaching the Gothic," edited by Anna Powell and Andrew Smith

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Teaching the Gothic. Ed. Anna Powell and Andrew Smith. Houndsmill, Basingstoke, Hampshire/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 214 pp. + xxi.

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As the coeditor of another volume of essays with an almost identical title, *Approaches to teaching gothic fiction* (MLA, 2003), I was more than a little intrigued to read and review the current volume, the latest offering in Palgrave's series "Teaching the New English," published in conjunction with the English Subject Centre. While reading this book, however, I often felt that I was looking into a mirror darkly, while that refrain from "Let's call the whole thing off" kept running through my head: "you say tomāto and I say tomāto." Although I know that the contributors to this volume teach the same texts that I do for the most part, and although we conduct research in the same areas, I was struck often by the very different worlds we inhabit. Each of us has produced a volume of teaching essays that speaks to the realities of the classroom situations that we know, but clearly we know very different pedagogical contexts. While this volume is situated in the UK (only three of the thirteen contributors are American), the MLA volume is very decidedly an American production, produced by and intended for American teachers of the gothic. Because the differences are so striking in how we structure our instruction, I will focus on those distinctions and then suggest some commonalities that I think we both could or should share.

In their Introduction to the volume, Powell and Smith state that their intention is to "take a different approach" from the MLA volume to assembling a collection of essays on gothic pedagogies: "some of the contributors examine how changes in intellectual

history have impacted on curriculum design and so influenced what (and how) we teach. The early chapters address how developments in criticism and theory have shaped our approach to teaching the Gothic” (5). One of those “changes” in canon formation seems to be the foreboding status of F. R. Leavis, who is mentioned twice as a sort of dark presence who demonized the gothic with his “great tradition” approach to literary texts (2; 10). His presence in the USA was and is not strong, although the New Critical tradition of Brooks and Warren was and continues to linger in the classrooms of professors trained in America in the 1960s and 1970s. Another difference that is peculiar to the UK is the very heavy reliance on Fred Botting’s book *Gothic*, which seems to have assumed an iconic status that it simply does not have in the teaching of the gothic in the USA. The other curricular development that is peculiar to the UK is the establishment of “Gothic MAs” (5), an idea that is totally infeasible given the economic and professional realities of American higher education and society.

In the first essay, William Hughes presents an excellent survey of gothic criticism, 1764-2004, concluding somewhat alarmingly: “as academic teaching in the Gothic becomes more widespread, so the pressure to direct formal publishing to areas of mass appeal becomes more acute” (24). The logical outcome of such a situation is that “the success of Gothic teaching may well lead to the atrophy of Gothic criticism,” and to the release of more editions of *Frankenstein* rather than *The Children of the Abbey* (24). Happily, in fact, just the opposite has occurred in the USA with the founding of Valancourt Books and Zittaw, which have published a series of little-known and rare gothic classics over the last few years, expanding the range of teaching texts beyond what Oxford and Norton have been routinely producing. Literary criticism has also branched

into more arcane and specialized areas as these texts have become more available to scholars and graduate students of the gothic. Rather than seeing the expanded teaching of the gothic as leading to a market specialization of the field, the opposite appears to be the case, at least in the USA.

Jerry Hogle's essay on "Theorizing the Gothic" focuses on *Dracula* (as do a number of essays in this volume), but it very usefully shows how the major theoretical approaches can be employed to teach this text. His discussion of a variety of psychoanalytical approaches (Freudian, Lacanian, Kristevan, and Zizekian) is a valuable summary, while his explication of feminist approaches is also welcome. In addition, he presents a thumbnail sketch of Marxian approaches, as well as Bakhtinian, and Saidian positions.

Lauren Fitzgerald's essay "Romantic Gothic" focuses on *Frankenstein*, the most taught text in the American curriculum (now being taught as one of the required books in the Western Civilization History sequence at Marquette). But rather than produce yet another essay on this oft taught work (with its own *MLA Approaches* volume), I think a more useful approach would have been to explore the most recent attempts to find the gothic subtexts in works traditionally considered to be romantic (cf. the recent critical work of Gamer and Hogle). My own teaching in this area focuses on the Germanic ghost tales and the ballads of Gottfried Burger and their influence on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Keats, the Shelleys, Baillie, Bannerman, Scott, and Lewis.

"Victorian Gothic" is the focus of Julian Wolfreys' essay, which draws heavily on his recent book *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2002). This essay looks very briefly at Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, Dickens's *The*

Haunted House and *Dombey and Son*, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, but presents very few (if any) specific ideas for *teaching* any of these texts.

Similarly, Lucie Armit's "Postmodern Gothic" reads at times more as a critical essay than one intended for a pedagogical collection. In fact, Armit confesses to some ambivalence (if not hostility) to the "Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)-speak of Learning Outcomes and Benchmarking criteria" (79). Although there is no such agency in the USA, there are regional accrediting agencies that periodically assess how effectively instruction is delivered in every university and college in the country. To be unable to speak to such agencies about what the gothic allows students to learn (to "do" things with textuality) is to further doom our enterprise, further marginalize ourselves in the curriculum. When she finally stops soul-searching, however, Armit does present some useful and specific ideas for teaching the postmodern gothic, including a game called "Gothicopoly" (83) and "Gothic Spotting" (84), another game that requires students to construct gothic narratives out of the people, places, and situations that encounter on the North Wales coastal railway line (an American adaptation might be to write about a fictional cross-country tour on a Greyhound bus, a gothic experience if there ever was). Finally, Armit focuses on the postmodern novel *The Crow Road* by Iain Banks, a book I do not believe is taught in America (at least I never saw it mentioned in the over two hundred surveys we received on teaching the gothic in the USA). This is not a fault, but it does make clear that as far as contemporary works are concerned, there is no established canon of "postmodern gothic."

Steven Bruhm's "Gothic Sexualities" focuses on Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, and very usefully distinguishes between queer theory and the earlier "good for

gays” approach employed by George Haggerty (106). A very smart, theoretically informed essay, Bruhm surveys the approaches taken by Eve Kosofsky Sedwick and Judith Butler, and concludes with a provocative comparison between the classroom experience in “North America” and Canada: “it is currently the vogue in North America that students’ classroom experiences must be rendered ‘safe’ and ‘nurturing’...their subjectivity (provided it is not one of historical privilege) affirmed at every turn” (104). Such an assessment is indeed all too true. Very few American professors would dare to teach *Interview* (I would not), and fewer I think would raise the issues that Bruhm does in class. His essay, however, provides a clear example of how far apart the UK and USA are in the works and issues they are willing to talk about in class.

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s essay “Female Gothic” is another useful survey that positions its analysis around the controversies (of essentialism) that have bedeviled the definition of this contested field. Also very useful is the comparison of the field in the UK to the USA. Here, in fact, the field is codified by very similar texts and the approaches are extremely similar. Apart from the issue of Poppy Z. Brite, who apparently is taught in the UK and not in the USA (114; 148), the canonical status of the authors and texts has been very consistent.

“Adapting Gothic from Print to Screen” by Anna Powell is another engaging essay that focuses on three filmic versions of *Dracula*, but one that could have profited from a more recent theoretical approach on adaptation (cf. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo). Using Propp and Todorov (123), Powell wants to “challenge student readings based on character psychology” (123). A laudable goal, but more recent work on the methods for detecting the ideological content in film would allow students to see the

adaptations more critically while also appreciating film as a genre that is distinctly different from literary textuality. Also interesting in this essay is the brief mention of “censorship in the USA” (124), and certainly there is an implicit warning in American classrooms that offending student sensibilities is dangerous business. I know I have been extremely careful about using films in my classes and would not, for instance, show the film adaptation of *Interview with the Vampire* or anything by Dario Argento.

Alan Lloyd-Smith’s “American Gothic” was a treasure trove of information about teaching the American gothic. Very practical, wide-ranging, and clearly situated in the classroom, this essay was a model of usefulness. Recommendations about what texts to use (Brown’s “Somnambulism” rather than one of the novels; specific short stories by Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville) was most appreciated, as were his suggestions about peer assessment for ungraded oral presentations (139-40).

Another extremely strong essay was “Imperial Gothic” by Patrick Brantlinger. Nicely organized by a focus on dominant themes (imperial expansion, race, geographical exploration, gender and sexuality, science and religion, and realism vs. romance, 154), the essay presents brief discussions of the key texts that evidence the “imperial gothic” as a genre. In contrast, “Postcolonial Gothic” by Gina Wisker focuses on Morrison’s *Beloved* as a postcolonial text, but it is simply not as wide-ranging or as useful as, say, Brantlinger’s essay.

The final essay in the collection is Andrew Smith’s survey of “Postgraduate Developments” in the UK. As I mentioned at the outset, the US model does not offer specialized MAs because the degree is viewed as either a feeder into a Ph.D. program or a stand-alone degree designed to allow students to teach in secondary schools or move

into the work force (publishing, public relations, human resources, etc.). In either case, the thinking in the USA is that the degree's value lies in its wide-ranging overview of the entire fields of both British and American literatures. This essay more than others makes it clear that higher education postgraduate programs in the UK and USA are not simply inhabiting different continents, but different planets. There is little if any individual tutorial work done on the MA level in America, and an MA program with less than ten students would not be economically tenable given faculty salaries and lines.

There are, as I said at the beginning, many differences between teaching the gothic in the UK and the USA, and this volume certainly speaks to the specific realities of teaching in the UK. I would conclude that where the field is demarcated by gender, race, class, or sexuality, there is consensus on what texts we teach, although not perhaps on how we approach those texts. But perhaps it is a sign of the health and energy of the field that there is no monolithic approach to the field, and for that I am encouraged.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that, unfortunately, there are a number of errata in the Chronology, perhaps the worst place to have errors. Without I hope being pedantic, I will note that "Sarah" Reeve did not publish *The Champion of virtue*, "Clara" Reeve did. Radcliffe's *Sicilian Romance* was published in 1790, not 1791. Coleridge did not publish a drama titled *Osario* in 1797, but something called *Osorio* in 1790. Holcroft did not publish *Tale of Mystery* in 1820 but in 1802, and Poe's middle name is not "Allen." There are a number of other errors in names throughout ("Welleck," pp. 49-50; "Cottam," p. 201), forcing one to conclude that another proofing of copy should have been done.

Apart from these errors, this is an extremely valuable collection of essays, particularly for teachers in the UK. I think it also useful for American instructors as it introduces us to texts and approaches that are not commonplace here and that is always a valuable lesson.