

*American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998, xii +265 pp., index).

“Gothic” has never been a very precise term, and after many attempts, critics have all but abandoned any commitment to the idea of gothic as *genre*. This is not to say that critics have abandoned the gothic—far from it. In fact, gothic criticism is thriving better than ever in spite of the disappearance of its traditional object. What has proliferated in its place is a palette of metaphors which attempt to describe the gothic in as vague and flexible a way possible. *American Gothic* uses almost all of them: mode, site, field, moment, impulse, etc., and contributes one or two of its own (e.g. gothic “station”). Though this imprecision might be a liability in other fields of criticism, it has served the gothic well, and this diverse collection of essays exemplifies some of the new approaches produced by the loosening up of generic boundaries. The editors have organized the book by sections to reflect the theoretical preoccupations of the field: psychoanalysis, race, gender, and postmodernism. These sections are preceded by three theoretical and/or historical essays meant to “frame” the gothic. Eric Savoy’s essay proposes that the American gothic is essentially an allegorical mode or “impulse” (not, strictly speaking, a genre) which “registers a trauma in the strategies of representation” (11). Although couched in the language of rhetoric, Savoy’s approach is basically psychoanalytic, his critical vocabulary structured by terms like repression, repetition, silence, melancholy, nostalgia, paranoia, etc. William Veeder’s essay is even more explicitly psychoanalytic, using D. W. Winnicott’s theory “potential space” to argue that the gothic serves a kind of therapeutic function by naming and playing with fears that have been repressed. In a psychological spin on a familiar historical argument, Veeder proposes that repression “damaged” the nineteenth-century Anglo-American middle class, and the gothic emerged in order to “heal” it. Maggie Kilgour’s essay on gothic doubling and the liberating effects of bringing hidden and dark truths to light also seems disappointingly familiar, though her reading of the novel and film version of *Silence of the Lambs* is insightful and fun to read (for example, she describes the end of the film as a triumph of poetic justice, as “one bad doctor eats another”).

Although the collection contributes little in the way of new theoretical or conceptual understanding of the gothic, it offers interesting new readings of gothic classics as well as identifying many new texts. For example, while there are gothic classics such as Hawthorne’s *House of the Seven Gables* and Poe’s “The Black Cat,” there is also Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*, Louisa May Alcott’s “A Marble Woman,” and Cathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*. If the collection’s weakness is its overdependence on psychoanalytic theory (and not even Winnicott or Kristeva can make repression seem fresh or insightful), its strength is in its willingness to move beyond traditional texts and concepts associated with the gothic. For example, while Poe is no new face, Lesley Ginsberg’s essay reads “The Black Cat” in terms of nineteenth-century arguments about cruelty to domestic animals, especially in the context of sentimental rhetoric about pets

and slavery. Reading this familiar story with the help of historical documents and other sources of non-fictional gothic yields important new dimensions of Poe's intertextuality and social parody. Another essay focuses on real-life serial killers, specifically the representation of evil in the media and the relationship between fictional and journalistic narratives of crime. Drama is another area of the gothic which has been rarely explored, which makes George Piggford's essay on *Dutchman* an interesting addition. One of the best essays of the collection is C. Jodey Castricano's reading of Cathy Acker's "cybergothic" as a postcolonial realization of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto." Using Foucault, Butler, and Haraway, Castricano pays particular attention to the body and its (per)mutations under systems of power. A strength of the collection is its willingness to deal with gay themes, a topic which has been broached clumsily at best in previous studies. Here, essays on Stephen King, Hawthorne, and Faulkner all acknowledge the importance of paying attention to gender and sexuality in gothic texts, but unfortunately all of these essays opt for familiar psychoanalytic readings rather than applying the concepts or techniques of what is called queer theory, which offers much more sophisticated and nuanced textual tools than psychoanalysis. This is a weakness that runs throughout the collection, and one of the essays even reiterates the old saw about masochistic female readers who feel vicarious pleasure from the abuses of fictional father-figures. Yet, overall, there is enough new material and well-researched ideas to make this collection a valuable resource to anyone interested in the gothic or simply in American Studies.