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Alien Nation: Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality by Cannon Schmitt (Review)

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eighteenth-century epistemology. This is Blake at his anti-Newtonian (and, one might add, antitrinitarian) best.

Donald Ault
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Alien Nation: Nineteenth-Century Gothic Fictions and English Nationality. *Cannon Schmitt.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. Pp. xii+219.

This persuasively argued and lucidly written book is a substantial, entertaining contribution to a familiar but still vital brand of historical-cultural studies, the exploration of conflicted English responses to "foreignness" during the empire-building century from the 1790s to the 1890s. Reading a sometimes surprising but ultimately convincing selection of texts—Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), a handful of Thomas De Quincey's essays, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), two lectures by Matthew Arnold, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) (with nods along the way to several startlingly apt cartoons and paintings)—*Alien Nation* argues that the progressive assimilation and transformation of familiar Gothic conventions in these works "parallels and so points up the historico-cultural shift toward hybrid or incorporative nationality as the century unfolds" (pp. 19–20). Contrasting his interpretations to the tradition of reading Gothic narratives as subversive, a tradition he sees as compromised by its dependence on what Foucault derides as the "repressive hypothesis," Schmitt takes a Foucauldian tack by demonstrating instead how Gothic narratives "represent and enact" (p. 10) the dynamics of power that construct English identity in contrast to a fantasized other.[1] Thus *Alien Nation* also challenges Benedict Anderson's view that national identity emerges from internal connections rather than external contrast (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [London, 1983]). Although the argument sometimes silently unifies

1. See, e.g., Mary Jacobus, "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in *Villette*," in *Women Writing about Women*, ed. Mary Jacobus (New York, 1979), pp. 42–60; Mary Poovey, "Ideology and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*," *Criticism* 21 (1979): 307–30; David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London, 1980); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975).

the double bind it acknowledges at its core—that is, without some functional generic taxonomy of the Gothic one must read each text in isolation, but an overly rigid generic template risks dehistoricizing texts—it more often maintains an admirably balanced self-consciousness. Indeed, when such contradictions occur they seem inevitable instances of what Schmitt forthrightly acknowledges at the outset as "historicism's dependence upon essentialism": "without an initial essentializing gesture to provide the ground against which difference can be measured," he says in the introduction, "part of the historicity of a text remains inaccessible" (p. 8).

Thus Schmitt with due qualification adopts and adapts Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's catalog of Gothic conventions as his chief point of reference (*The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* [New York, 1986]), but the subset central to his argument is the pure young woman menaced by a predatory foreign man, a motif he pursues through the first three chapters. Chapter 1 relates the trope to Nancy Armstrong's influential model in which the bourgeois subject is female and the novel, like the conduct manual, creates and maintains middle-class subjectivity by demanding relentless self-surveillance (*Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* [Oxford, 1987]). By juxtaposing Radcliffe's high Gothic *The Italian* against Hannah More's influential conduct manual *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), Schmitt demonstrates that both books not only construct proper female subjectivity as incessantly self-monitoring, but also equate proper female subjectivity with proper English subjectivity. Schmitt acknowledges the chief weakness in this otherwise strong argument: Radcliffe's supposed paradigm of Englishness is embodied in an Italian heroine. If his explicit answer to that objection—namely, that the novel's logic insists that "all good women behave as if they were Englishwomen" (p. 39)—seems uncomfortably circular, he convincingly demonstrates elsewhere that the heroine's Italianness is downplayed by the more explicitly national characteristics of her persecutor, the eponymous Italian Schedoni. This reading is rendered more persuasive by its juxtaposition with More.

A similar but different confluence of national identity and the damsel in distress lies at the heart of chapter 2, which explores De Quincey's use of the pairing to undergird his aggressively paranoid politics. De Quincey's "The English Mail-Coach" (1849), "Suspiria De Profundis," and *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821–22, 1856), as well as several less familiar essays responding to the Opium Wars and the Indian Mutiny, repeatedly cast England as simultaneously the threatened young woman and her male defender. Schmitt thus sees De Quincey in harmony with the rhetoric that dominated English responses to the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857, which consistently

demanded retribution for ostensible atrocities against English women and children. (Schmitt also treats a compelling snapshot of this trend in John Tenniel's *Punch* illustration of "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger.") It is here that Schmitt unveils a worthwhile revision of Armstrong's model, showing that as the Gothic construction of national identity evolves, "women are not so much properly representative in themselves as place-holders for men" (p. 161). Such gender slippages, important but backgrounded in De Quinceyan Gothic, are foregrounded in the focus of chapter 3, Brontë's *Villette*, which again uses the Gothic's ever-imperiled heroine to contrast English and foreign identities. But Brontë's implicit reasoning is interestingly less insistent than De Quincey's, as her quest for a viable feminine subjectivity makes her reluctant to endorse his brand of female martyrdom.

The primary focus shifts away from the female victim in chapter 4, which argues that Arnold's lectures, "England and the Italian Question" (1859) and *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), and Collins's prototype sensation novel, *The Woman in White*, alter the course of the Gothic's contribution to national identity by using its elements to contrast modern English identity against past forms of Englishness rather than foreignness. The infrequently discussed lectures by Arnold pose models of national character as either fixed in a static and formulaic past, like "pure" Gothic narratives, or ever unfolding into an open-ended future, as though they were realist novels. Arnold of course does not invoke these genres explicitly, but Schmitt nevertheless makes a compelling case for their relevance, demonstrating that the logic of national identity pervading both lectures is tied explicitly to literary structures in the second and that the conflict between the two genres was part of the contemporary intellectual climate. The same roles for Gothic and realistic elements are exploited by *The Woman in White*. Although the sensation novel's mixture of domestic realism and the Gothic has been seen as subversive of the domesticity supposedly at the heart of middle-class Englishness, Schmitt's close reading supports his claim that Collins's hybridized genre instead erodes bourgeois identity, only to reconstitute and expand it by shifting the markers of an idealized medieval aristocracy onto contemporary middle-class English manhood.

Alien Nation's parallel argumentative strands are woven together in chapter 5, which tracks the roles of both imperiled women and a neo-feudal middle class through Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In recent years, Stoker's greatest hit has roused a flurry of critical attention, placing it in the context of late-century xenophobia. Schmitt builds on this discussion by considering the novel's titanic oppositions of East and West in relation to the contemporary climate of terror (in both the Gothic

and political senses) surrounding the Irish question as well as Stoker's ambivalence toward his own Anglo-Irish heritage. At first glance, Stoker's adapted Gothic scenario of a predatory medieval aristocrat subsuming young middle-class Englishwomen seems directly counter to Collins's implicit bid for the regenerative power of a new quasi-feudal middle class. But Schmitt argues instead that it is precisely Dracula's infusion of ancient Eastern aristocratic blood (through his blood-blending "nursing" of Mina Harker) that enables the cartel of bourgeois Western men allied against him to fuse into a new super nobility taking root in England at the novel's close. Schmitt impressively outlines this fusion's similarity to the assimilation anticipated with fear and loathing by the Anglo-Irish at the end of the century, a trend he tangentially illustrates with another spot-on *Punch* cartoon, "The Irish Vampire." He shows that by experimentally representing "the creole's ability to survive miscegenation" (p. 153), *Dracula* replaces the fear of national identity's death in absorption by a ravenous other with the grimly hopeful scenario of an anemic national identity's regeneration through the absorption of that powerful other.

The introduction and afterword together briefly consider Arthur Conan Doyle's late Sherlock Holmes tale "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire" (1924), which provides a satisfyingly apt synthesis and extension of Gothic's participation in the evolution of national identity so convincingly developed throughout this incisive, provocative, and enjoyable book.

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Melville's Anatomies. *Samuel Otter.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Pp. xiii+369.

This wry, offbeat, endlessly beguiling book concentrates on body parts in Herman Melville. Heads, hearts, faces, skin, and eyes make up the chief exhibits here—a catalog not in itself remarkable, but rendered so by the scope and the tenacity of the author's claims. "Anatomies," for Samuel Otter, is the most capacious of heuristic paradigms. Highly charged and referentially encyclopedic, its regime of meaning extends from the physiological to the sociological, from the body to the body politic. Those parts of us that seem most intimate, most concrete, and most organically given turn out to be signifying vehicles for social phenomena that are diffused, systemic, and laden with contradictory