David Ashford's A Book of Monsters*: Now is the Time for It*

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> the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters.

Thus reflected Antonio Gramsci almost a century ago, in 1929.[1] In what is an indirect response to Gramsci's "time of monsters," David Ashford gives us *A Book of Monsters*. It is little wonder, perhaps, that a great deal of modernist cultural production was made by modernity's discontents in the wake of the Great War and, before that, of the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation of the previous century. On the precipice of the Great Depression and World War Two, with the damp, the smog, the ashes, and the Spanish Flu choking the air, and with naught but ill omens in the news, it must have then felt as though cultural production was the only thing going for society. A century on, with climate catastrophe looming, worsening economic conditions, widening social disparities, and a seemingly renewed enthusiasm for fascism and genocide not seen for a century, one might conclude either that history is cyclical or that the new world never was born and Gramsci's time of monsters yet endures.

Speaking to this current era of monstrosity, Ashford's central project is a compelling one: he situates diverse works concerned with the adverse consequences of modernity and of the Enlightenment in a new literary and cultural tradition, which he calls "Promethean Horror." A central feature of this tradition, for Ashford, is an anxiety that modernity involves the attainment of forbidden knowledge or represents human overreach in the pursuit of power, and that this knowledge or overreach will be punished. Ashford therefore begins with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and in particular with what he believes is a

[1] More accurately, this is Slavoj Žižek's very loose translation of Gramsci. See Slavoj Žižek, "A Permanent Economic Emergency," *New Left Review* 64 (2010): 85–95 (95).

common misreading of the novel: rather than being an assemblage of corpse parts, Ashford argues, Victor Frankenstein's monster is a homunculus, not unlike the Golem of Hebrew myth. The monster is a kind of alchemical android, rather than an undead abomination.[2] Ashford's reading recontextualises Frankenstein's monster and the horror he invokes not as a work of necromancy, but as a union of ancient alchemical knowledge and modern scientific advancement. In this way, by showing that Shelley's novel is concerned with the dangers of forbidden knowledge and with the creation of artificial (mechanical, alchemical, etc.) slaves, structures, and mechanistic abominations, Ashford positions *Frankenstein* as a central and seminal text in the broader tradition of Promethean horror. Most importantly, Ashford argues that this tradition is concerned with an anxiety about the possible inversion of the master-slave dynamic and with an ongoing fear of evoking the wrath of a mad god or gods affronted by our collective hubris.

Ashford notes that versions of this anxiety about forbidden knowledge, whether arcane or scientific, appear in Paracelsus's and Agrippa's descriptions of homunculi, in the Jewish story of the Golem of Prague, and in early modern works such as William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610–1611), Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592–1593), and Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1588–1592). However, Ashford is most interested in a later form of this Gothic tradition, as a response to the Enlightenment. For Ashford, an anti-Enlightenment sentiment—or at the very least, an anxiety about the Enlightenment—occupies the intersection of Romanticism and the Gothic, and so it is fitting that he begins with Shelley, given her exploration in *Frankenstein* and other works of the idea of

[2] Even if readers go no further in the book, in this alone it represents a significant contribution to the field. Ashford's claim is incontrovertible: despite Shelley's reference to Frankenstein's research in "vaults and charnel-houses" and to his retrieval of bones from the latter, and despite Hollywood's subsequent treatment of the story, there is little reason to believe that Frankenstein's creature—eight feet tall, perfectly proportioned, yellow-skinned, and ivory-eyed—was assembled from multiple bodies. Ashford quotes Frankenstein's consultation of various alchemical sources, including the writings of Cornelius Agrippa, which, in dealing with the creation of a homunculus or mandrake, variously describe insemination via a dead man's seed and other such arcane perversions. Ironically, while this means that no resurrection of the dead or new creation from the accumulated parts of corpses occurs, the image of Frankenstein extracting innumerable dead men's seminal fluids is arguably far grimmer to imagine.

"overreachers," or those who try to exceed human limits.[3] Having begun with Shelley, Ashford then pursues the idea to its logical conclusion through a range of texts, genres, and disciplines, interspersed with some fairly arcane dot-connecting, while recounting facets of his own gonzo research throughout the writing process.

Although Ashford's concept of Promethean horror is not limited to literary, cinematic, and other works of horror, many of the texts referenced throughout are of this kind. These diverse works range from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and early film adaptations of Poe's story to Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990) and Steven Spielberg's 1993 adaptation of Crichton's novel. Ashford identifies a prominent anxiety about modernism, modernity, and the intersection of arcane knowledge and scientific progress through these and other texts across multiple media. His breadth of reading and the pace and fluidity with which he moves the argument along are impressive, and, as a consequence, I can only offer imperfect summaries of his seven chapters.

After an introductory first chapter, Ashford's second chapter explores the arcane geometric roots of architectural design and observes, in this context, that the Gothic tradition begins as a simulacrum. Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764), of course, was inspired by Gothic revival architecture, rather than by the Gothic proper. Ashford also describes the collision of neo-classical principles and a Gothic veneer which characterised London's psycho-geographical spaces following its reconstruction after the Great Fire of London in 1666, and he notes how, among others, Alan Moore zeroes in on this collision in the graphic novel

[3] See Jonas S. Cope, "The Mortal Immortal: Mary Shelley's 'Overreachers' Reconsidered," *Explicator* 72, no. 2 (2014): 122–26. Cope examines Shelley's treatment of characters who in various ways exceed human limits. He notes that, rather than being exclusive to *Frankenstein* or "The Mortal Immortal" (1833), this is a recurring concern in *Valperga* (1823), too. He argues likewise that, in "The Mortal Immortal," Winzy's accidental imbibement of a fraction of the elixir of life allows Shelley to deal with ideas which Cope aligns with Nietzsche's "will to power." However, Cope also argues that Winzy's unreliable narration presents the possibility of a malicious intent underlying his purported lack of intent, and that the absence of an ambiguously "morally good" character in Shelley's story calls into question the extent to which she is chastising Winzy or condemning "overreach" as a moral failure. I read the story as autobiographical, interpreting it as an expression of resentment at Percy Bysshe Shelley's premature death by accident and as aligning Winzy's (potentially) eternal youth with Bysshe Shelley's "eternally young" memory.

From Hell (1989). Ashford brings together a range of other sources, too, to discuss what this particular strain of modern architecture represents: a collision of the Masonic and the arcane with a pastiche of historical precursors, with the semiotics of sacred geometry and religious iconography, and with contemporary urban planning, resulting in a chimeric construction. He emphasises, in particular, the uncanniness of modern architecture:

> If psycho-geographical literature ultimately attacks the post-modernism of Thatcherite London, I would suggest that this is because the latter is seen to continue, to quite literally build upon, to amplify, to valorise, something that was already there in its Modernist predecessor—a gap between form and function, between signifier and signified. (41)

In Chapter 3, although Ashford continues with the theme of psycho-geographical spaces, he moves in a posthumanist direction with a discussion of Bertholt Lubetkin and the London Zoo, describing how the Cartesian conception of the human being as the "rational animal" becomes unsettled in the contemplation of our simian cousins, gorillas. Ashford examines this anxiety by considering many literary and cinematic works and works of visual art, and in particular the prototype for this mode of horror, Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and its cinematic adaptations and derivatives. He then considers these works in relation to the ideas of Charles Darwin and Peter Kropotkin, to the fallacies of evolutionary psychology, and to the limits of extrapolating human behaviour from animal counterparts. At the same time, the chapter appraises a posthumanist perspective that contradicts the philosophy of René Descartes. At the end of the chapter, Ashford frames the London Zoo's modernist glass enclosure for gorillas, known as the "House of Light," as a product of oscillating tensions and correspondences between Darwinian, Marxist, and Freudian thought.

Ashford takes a hard left turn in his fourth chapter, exploring the figures of the orc, the goblin, and the hobgoblin as representations of anxieties about innovation and class. He argues that both J. R. R. Tolkien's orc, in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955), and H. G. Wells's Morlock, in *The Time Machine* (1895), are best understood in terms not of the proletariat-bourgeoise dichotomy, but rather in terms of a middle class in revolt, of the divorce of the arts and sciences, and of Tolkien's concerns about the encroachment of ideology into linguistics and

philology. Drawing on extensive research, Ashford locates the source of these concerns in the schism in the field of linguistics caused by the theories of Nicholas Marr, who applied a Marxist analysis to the development of language. Noting the emphasis on industrialised production in Tolkien's representation of Mordor, Ashford ultimately argues that, though neither Marxist nor anti-Marxist interpretations can be ignored, Tolkein's work is best understood in relation to the emergent opposition of the arts and the sciences, and to a growing understanding of the ways in which ideology can shape language and its study.

Ashford's fifth chapter explores the Baby Boomers' Promethean position as heirs to auxiliary, cybernetic means to become artificial gods, and it addresses the ways in which Baby Boomers fulfilled their parents' anxieties about succession and replacement. That is to say, the chapter focuses on a particular post-war concern: how to understand and to represent a hyper-evolved generation with a wealth of power. To do this, the chapter examines anxieties about a range of cultural themes and practices, from cyborgs and Daleks to brutalist and late modernist architecture, as represented in texts such as J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975). "One is tempted to conclude," Ashford writes,

> that Baby Boomers were indeed empowered, or *superpowered*, by the Late Modernist infrastructures in which they were born, raised, educated. This is in spite of the fact (or perhaps *because*) they would later attack them with such ferocity. An Oedipal assault—ungrateful recipients of Promethean gifts, promised to the generation by the architects of the post-war world. (126)

In addition, Ashford examines several related problems: the interaction between form and function, the hubris of the architectural edifice as such, architecture as an ideological weapon in the post-war global sociopolitical landscape, the dystopian consequences of "filing cabinets" for ageing Baby Boomers, and the disconnection of living spaces from essential services under neoliberal economic conditions. With relation to Ballard, he asks, "What will happen to the next generation who will grow up in this haunted house, haunted by a future that has already happened" (148–49)? Ashford frames his answer through M. R. Carey's 2014 novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* and Colm McCarthy's 2016 film of the novel, noting that the children in the film's fungal zombie dystopia have attained

a symbiosis with the parasite. Ashford likens the ruins presented in McCarthy's film to the husks of the temporary classrooms in which he was educated as a child, the ruins of decades of privatisation and other neoliberal economic policies chipping away at the bedrock of the post-war public institutions that helped the prior generation attain a godlike status. Ashford concludes, however, by arguing that this Promethean horror in fact reveals a kind of hope lingering at the bottom of the Pandora's box of modernity and of modernism.

Somewhat topically, given the prominence of contemporary debates about AI, Ashford begins Chapter 6 by discussing Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) and Walter Benjamin's theory of the Angel of History, alongside historical materialism, the ever-pressing spectre of Fukuyama's "end of history," and the pessimism implicit in viewing history through a catastrophist lens. Ashford productively conjures Benjamin's invocation of the Mechanical Turk, the eighteenth-century hoax "chess machine" that, while appearing to be able to play chess without human aid, actually involved a person inside the machine viewing the game via a network of mirrors and making the machine's moves. Ashford then quotes Edgar Allan Poe's journalistic investigation of the Mechanical Turk. While Poe does not necessarily suspect that there was a man prone in the bowels of the machine, he does note that, in responding algorithmically to each chess move, the machine was powerless to operate without human input. Poe argues, then, that a machine cannot truly, independently analyse or deduce. In this, Ashford wryly hints at arguably the foremost misconception of AI, observing that recent advances in chess-playing robots have largely been a consequence of improved hardware and parallel processing, rather than of any meaningful advance in intelligence. Ashford then aligns the customary personification of thinking machines with the kind of juvenile animism to which Freud alludes in his essay "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny") (1919). He thereby highlights the common conflation of the "complex with the profound" and argues that "IBM's Deep Blue was no less a conjuring trick than [the] Mechanical Turk" (169). Ashford also notes that Alan Turing's fundamental question was whether a machine could produce a convincing imitation of the kind of thought that Poe deemed "analysis," rather than of pure computation. Compellingly, Ashford compares the Mechanical Turk to "the invisible hand" of neoliberal economic theory and to the supercomputer in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* novel series (1951–1993). In the end, Ashford arrives at Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and Spielberg's film adaptation, arguing that their

representation of the decline of neoliberal economics demonstrates the fallacy of, first, overreliance on mathematical modelling and, second, the confusion of mathematical modelling with extricable and applicable truth. Ashford's thesis here takes a sharper shape, too, in likening the quasi-religious reliance on economics and the catastrophic consequences of economics on the contemporary world to a series of simulacrum-dinosaurs engineered from fossils and chicken DNA running amok. The argument is apt, witty, and intellectually persuasive.

Ashford's final chapter moves in a different direction altogether, while simultaneously tying the book together as a cohesive work. Here Ashford begins with Amiri Bakara's *The Black Mass* (1966), a dramatic adaptation of the Nation of Islam's foundational myth of Yakub. While this choice may at first be surprising, in fact the myth of Yakub returns us to a Promethean (or Frankensteinian) problem and, likewise, to the question of the Mechanical Turk, of AI, and of what it means to speak to something without a soul. This then leads to a compelling analysis of Reza Negarestani's 2008 work of theory-fiction, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Ashford proposes that the terror invoked by *Cyclonopedia* is only palpable when you indulge it, although it is unclear whether this pertains to fears of Promethean horrors or to the ideas that engender those fears. Next, Ashford connects *Cyclonopedia* to Stephen King's recent novel, *Revival* (2014), through the two books' shared concern with a kind of half-Gnostic, half-Lovecraftian conception of reality uncovered through Promethean means. Ashford then turns to Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), which conceptualises the encroachment upon Nigeria by imperialistic technologies that alter everything they touch. These three novels lead finally to the somewhat ambivalent and philosophical conclusion of Ashford's work. Although *A Book of Monsters* is a work of nonfiction and of scholarship, Ashford's final chapter *feels* like the fundamental revelation of Negarestani's work: a devastating expression of metaphysical horror, delivered in the wryest manner imaginable. There is a narrative quality to this final chapter, and it hits hard, enacting something of the uneasiness the book has up to this point studied. Looking upon the kingdom of ruin we have inherited in this century, there genuinely is a question as to whether fossil fuels, widespread industrialisation, information technology, and even commercial agriculture serve us or if instead we serve them. In pursuing this question, Ashford examines the reactionary revulsion induced in many upon contemplating the ashes left after modernism's excess, which Ashford describes

in incendiary terms as a brilliant, blinding light. There is, however, an implicit terror in the light's current absence, a suggestion that with the waning of modernism we are on the cusp of, if not already in, a kind of Dark Age.

Further to the above, Ashford can really *write*, in terms both of the craft of writing in the finer sense and of its cruder tools of communication. It is no mean feat to make such a polyphonous and multi-disciplinary expression of varied and complex ideas so concise and musical to read. If I had to nominate one fault in Ashford's approach—which is hard to do, because I enjoyed it so thoroughly and found so much value in it—it would be what to me seems a fault characteristic of a large bloc of modernist studies. Like many modernism enthusiasts, Ashford tends to oscillate between situating things which are generally deemed postmodernist, but which they like, as part of the broader modernist movement, and aligning those things which they don't like, not with modernism, but with the many ills of the postwar period. This is a matter of semantics, but at least as far as literary and cultural analysis goes, these semantics matter.[4] If there is one thing that conservative public intellectuals and defenders of the neoliberal order have made abundantly clear in the past few years, it is that they absolutely detest all things postmodern (even if they are, perhaps, even worse at defining postmodernism than its advocates). In the sections on both Keynesian economics and brutalist architecture in Chapters 5 and 6, Ashford's disappointment with what came after modernism is palpable, and there is a sense that Ashford identifies various world issues with the passing of modernism and with changes to modernity, rather than understanding these issues to be the logical consequences of such developments. At times, even, Ashford seems to look down on those possessed of the very anxieties he has taken such time and care to analyse. For the most part, Ashford is echoing Fredric Jameson's sentiments on the matter, but it

[4] To elaborate: it is true that *postmodernism* was always a contested term outside of the field of architecture, but if we are to take its generally accepted definition as referring to a loose, retroactively labelled collection of aesthetic trends (e.g., parody, pastiche, irony, metafiction) either in reaction to or continuing the modernist tradition and arising in the postwar period, and if we then divorce the term from that historical context, it is all too easy to argue that, for instance, Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) is the first postmodern novel. By the same token, it is easy to argue, as many modernist scholars do, that postmodernism is simply post-war modernism, though this is, amongst other things, to ignore the particularly cynical countercultural threads of the 1960s and their influence on the tone of postmodernist work.

is a slippery slope from agreeing with Jameson to inadvertently agreeing with Stephen Hicks, who uses "postmodernism" as the strawman for every recent sociopolitical development he doesn't like. While it would be unfair to align Ashford with Hicks, at times he does run the risk of conflating the texts under consideration with the latter-day sociopolitical ills with which they historically coincide. Nevertheless, Ashford devotes a good deal of time to Moore, Nagarestani, Ballard, and others, all of whom are usually situated squarely in the realms of postmodern fiction. Ashford also acknowledges that modernism, as a project, ultimately failed to live up to its utopian aspirations, but it is less clear whom or what he blames for this. Nor is it clear whether Ashford sees the Promethean horrors of our present as cosmic punishment for the overreaching of modernity and of modernism. Indeed, it is at times difficult to know just how rational or justified Ashford considers the anxieties which underpin Promethean horror to be.

For instance, at one point Ashford writes wryly that "We believe that the period designated 'anthropocene' […] will necessarily entail an era of cosmic horror; we expect to suffer. Like the criminal titan, centuries exposed to hostile skies" (200). This could be read as a dismissal of anxieties about the Anthropocene, but sometimes it seems instead that Ashford means covertly to acknowledge that, as a consequence of Enlightenment hubris, the world really is on the cusp of apocalypse, thereby demonstrating the truth of the logic of Promethean horror. Sometimes, instead, it seems that Ashford is covertly laughing at me for being a luddite rube afraid of fire. Ashford expresses hope that the planet will find some way to renew itself, though ideally not at the cost of an extinction event taking mankind with it, but at the same time he notes "the appalling arrogance of those who are both for and against the 'Modern Prometheus'" (216). From this, might the reader infer that, for Ashford, all positions are arrogant, except for ambivalence?

One might argue that, at least in its early pages, *A Book of Monsters* has little ideological bent to it. From this perspective, the book's foremost argument is that certain texts can be located in a tradition that has not yet been broadly established and discussed. Though the invocation of the myth of Prometheus presupposes punishment for hubris, in general Ashford weighs in only subtly on the legitimacy of anxieties about Enlightenment overreach and the lingering ghosts of the

modernist project. In any case, Ashford's central argument is that in the popular and collective consciousness, whether well-founded or not, these Promethean fears are pervasive.

I do not know if I necessarily agree with everything Ashford says, but outside of the question of modernism's culpability, Ashford is a writer after my own heart. Even where I disagree, I value his arguments and the artistry with which he's penned them. The depth and breadth of research here is impressive, as is the scope and logic of the argumentation. Ashford takes great pains to atomise a myriad of theoretical concerns and synthesise them so that that they become accessible. The integration of linguistics and other fields puts Ashford's approach in line with philology, rather than with more contemporary schools of criticism and analysis. While the book does establish a literary and cultural tradition seldom discussed, what this particular tradition says about history and society at large pushes *A Book of Monsters* beyond the field of literary criticism and theory towards historical analysis, albeit an historical analysis that articulates itself through the literary imagination. Ashford is a writer of unusual genius and scope, and whether or not this book will appeal to everyone, I think it would benefit anyone to read it, particularly now.