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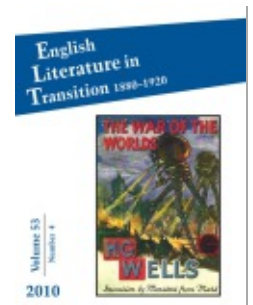
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IMPERIAL GOTHIC: ATAVISM AND THE OCCULT
IN THE BRITISH ADVENTURE NOVEL, 1880-1914

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In "The Little Brass God," a 1905 story by Mrs. B. M. Croker, a statue of "Kali, Goddess of Destruction" brings misfortune to its unwitting Anglo-Indian possessors. First their pets kill each other or are killed in accidents. Then the servants fall sick or tumble downstairs. Finally the family's lives are jeopardized before the statue is stolen and dropped down a well, thus ending the curse.¹ This featherweight tale is typical of many written between 1880 and 1914. Its central feature--the magic statue--suggests that Western rationality may be subverted by the very superstitions it rejects. The destructive magic of the Orient takes its revenge; Croker unwittingly expresses a social version of "the return of the repressed" which typifies imperialist fiction, or at least that blend of adventure-romance writing--imperial Gothic, as I will call it--which flourished from Rider Haggard's She in 1887 down at least to John Buchan's Greenmantle in 1916.

"Imperial Gothic" combines the seemingly progressive, often Darwinian ideology of imperialism with a seemingly antithetical interest in the occult. As Lewis Wurgaft declares, "The revival of 'Orientalism' in the 1870s was accompanied by a wide-ranging . . . concern with the occult . . . Anglo-Indian fiction [often deals with] inexplicable curses, demonic possession, and ghostly visitations."² Wurgaft cites Kipling's "Phantom 'Rickshaw," and there were countless such stories, not restricted to Anglo-Indian writing. One of my favorites is H. G. Wells's "The Truth about Pyecraft," in which an obese Englishman takes an Indian recipe for "loss of weight," but instead of slimming down, begins levitating. The problem caused by oriental magic is then solved by Western technology in the form of lead underwear, which allows the balloonlike Mr. Pyecraft to lead an almost normal life. On a somewhat more serious level is G. A. Henty's 1893 novel for adults, Rujub the Juggler; the title character is a Hindu magician who saves the British good guys during the Mutiny through his clairvoyant powers, though he describes his magic as a dying art, stifled by Western rationality. In Somerset Maugham's The Magician, Oliver Haddo has acquired various mystic arts, including the occult lore of Egyptian and Indian snake charmers. In Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars, Western archaeology unearths Egyptian magic in the form of the "astral body" of Queen Tera, who in the horrific finale is resurrected through or over the corpse of the heroine. In John Buchan's Prester

John, a black revolutionary gains power through something like voodoo. In Edgar Wallace's Sanders of the River, the commissioner of a West African territory out-savages the savages partly through police brutality, but partly also through knowledge of witchcraft. Says the narrator: "You can no more explain many happenings which are the merest commonplace in [Africa] than you can explain the miracle of faith or the wonder of telepathy."³

Imperial Gothic is related to several other forms of romance writing. In a recent article, Judith Wilt argues that there are subterranean links between late Victorian imperialism, the rebirth of Gothic romance in writers like Stevenson, and the conversion of Gothic into science fiction. "In or around December, 1897," she writes, "Victorian gothic changed--into Victorian science fiction. The occasion was . . . Wells's War of the Worlds, which followed by only a few months . . . Stoker's . . . Dracula."⁴ Stoker's and Wells's novels can both be read, moreover, as fanciful versions of yet another popular literary form, invasion-scare stories in which the outward thrust of imperialist adventure is reversed. The ur-text is Sir George Chesney's The Battle of Dorking in 1871, and the essence of the genre is captured in P. G. Wodehouse's 1909 parody, The Swoop . . . A Tale of the Great Invasion, in which England is overwhelmed by simultaneous onslaughts of Germans, Russians, Chinese, Young Turks, the Swiss navy, Moroccan brigands, cannibals in war canoes, the Prince of Monaco, and the Mad Mullah, until saved by a patriotic Boy Scout named Clarence Chugwater.⁵ Invasion-scare stories in turn frequently intersect with spy stories. David Stafford dates "the birth of the British spy novel" no earlier than 1893, with publication of William Le Queux's The Great War in England, and that subgenre includes many stories, like Erskine Childers' Riddle of the Sands, which contain elements of imperial Gothic.⁶

All of these popular romance formulas--imperial Gothic, Wellsian science fiction, invasion fantasies, spy stories--betray anxieties characteristic of imperialism both as an ideology and as a phase of political development. To Wilt's and Stafford's mainly literary perspectives a socioeconomic one may be added, related to Fredric Jameson's "political unconscious" and also to the theories of Joseph Schumpeter and J. A. Hobson that define imperialism as an "atavistic" historical development. Jameson writes: "In the context of the gradual reification of realism in late capitalism . . . romance once again comes to be felt as the place of narrative . . . freedom . . . [offering] the possibility . . . of demonic or Utopian transformations. . . . [Northrop] Frye is surely not wrong to assimilate the salvational perspective of romance to a reexpression of Utopian longings . . . of some feeling for a salvational future."⁷

Although Schumpeter argued against the theory of "economic imperialism" espoused by Hobson and reflected in Jameson's thesis, his argument that "imperialism is . . . atavistic in character" fits both imperial Gothic and the flourishing of occultism, as well as some other late Victorian phenomena such as the Decadent Movement and the influence of crude versions of social Darwinism.⁸ Schumpeter identified capitalism with progress through rational self-interest and therefore could not see it as a source of regressive irrationality. But it was precisely the power of capitalism to protect its interests by deflecting discontent onto alien or overseas targets which Hobson pointed out and which Lenin and later Marxist critics of imperialism emphasized. Nationalist fervor and race-thinking came to overshadow class consciousness and the struggle for domestic reform.

More alert than Schumpeter to the contradictions inherent in capitalism, Hobson also interpreted the cultural effects of imperialism in terms of "atavism" or a "reversion to savagery." In The Psychology of Jingoism, Hobson writes: "the superstructure which centuries of civilisation have imposed upon . . . the individual, gives way before some sudden wave of ancient savage nature roused from its subconscious depths."⁹ But the idea of "atavism" can be found everywhere in late Victorian culture, just as the idea of progress seems characteristic of an earlier, more optimistic era. At times literature itself was declared an atavistic activity, as in Arthur Machen's definition of it as "the endeavour of every age to return to the first age, to an age, if you like, of savages."¹⁰ And as the great anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor recognized, occultism or spiritualism also belonged to "the philosophy of savages": it was "a direct revival from the regions of savage philosophy and peasant folk-lore," a throwback to "primitive culture."¹¹ What is more, "atavism"--psychological and social regression like Kurtz's "going native" in Heart of Darkness--is one of the three central themes of imperial Gothic. The other two are, first, the theme of invasion, often in the form of demonic powers from the past as in Machen's and Stoker's tales of terror, and, second, the theme of the degradation of adventure as in much of Conrad.

Imperialism and occultism developed simultaneously but without any apparent causal connection. It seems merely coincidental, for example, that the Society for Psychical Research was founded in 1882, the same year as the British take-over of Egypt. Similarly, Yeats's interest in the occult seems tangential to his politics, until it is remembered that magic for him involved a subversion of the rational, the modern, the democratic. In A Vision and elsewhere, he expresses a desire for the downfall of Western materialism

which out-Spenglers Spengler.¹² For Yeats, the gyre is turning; the Second Coming in the form of an invasion from the spirit world is commencing.

Yeats takes us beyond 1914, but his interest in magic came well before. The usual explanation for late Victorian occultism concerns the breakdown of religious orthodoxy under the impact of science. The search for new sources of faith led many to telepathy, Theosophy, seances, and it also led to the far reaches of the Empire, where "strange gods" and "unspeakable rites" still had devotees. Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia in 1879 can perhaps mark the beginning of the trend. Noting that late Victorians often fell "under the spell of the occult wisdom of the East," Elie Halevy mentions Madame Blavatsky as symptomatic.¹³ With her Indian baggage of occult powers and invisible gurus, she influenced Yeats and converted Annie Besant, who "breaking with [Charles] Bradlaugh and [atheism], attempted . . . to infuse new life into Brahmanism in the hope that this . . . might . . . regenerate the world."

Imperialism thus maintained an esoteric import trade in ancient religions, everything from Buddhism to Rosicrucianism, as a "spiritual" accompaniment to materialistic trade. But as an ideology or political faith imperialism itself functioned as a substitute for declining or fallen Christianity, and also for declining faith in England's future. In his study of William Ernest Henley, Jerome Buckley remarks that "by the last decade of the century, the concept of a national or racial absolute inspired a fervor comparable to that engendered by the older evangelical religion."¹⁴

Imperialism and occultism, then, can both be seen as emergent pseudo-religions. But their fusion in imperial Gothic represents something other than a search for new faiths. The "atavisms" described by imperialist romancers do not offer "salvational" answers for seekers after religious certainty; they offer instead insistent images of decline and fall, or of "civilization" turning into its opposite, just as the Englishman who desecrates a Hindu temple in Kipling's "Mark of the Beast" turns into a werewolf. The narrator of Riddle of the Sands starts his tale this way: "I have read of men who, when forced by their calling to live for long periods in utter solitude--save for a few black faces--have made it a rule to dress regularly for dinner in order to . . . prevent a relapse into barbarism."¹⁵ Much imperialist writing treats the Empire as a barricade against a new barbarian invasion, but it just as often treats it as a sort of "dressing for dinner," a way of preventing England itself from "relapsing into barbarism."

Fictional atavisms can be matched by innumerable expres-

sions of anxiety about backsliding by politicians and colonists doing the actual work of empire. Missionary writings from about the 1870s on are full of concern about being converted to heathenism instead of converting the heathen. Actual cases of backsliding or "going native" were not unusual, and must have increased as the numbers of Europeans in the far reaches of the Empire increased. Ian Watt lists nearly a dozen possible models for Kurtz, ranging from Stanley to Charles Stokes, who deserted the Church Missionary Society for an African wife and life as a slave trader and gun runner.¹⁶ Sir Harry H. Johnston, first governor of Nyasaland, wrote in 1897: "I have been increasingly struck with the rapidity with which such members of the white race as are not of the best class, can throw over the restraints of civilisation and develop into savages of unbridled lust and cruelty."¹⁷ Besides examples of individual regression, sometime in the 1870s expressions of concern about national regression start to multiply. The British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as automatically progressive, and began worrying instead about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial stock.¹⁸

Perhaps imperial Gothic combines a "bad faith" optimism in British domination with a more honest worry about the justice of the claims of the imperialized world. More likely, the atavistic descents into the primordial experienced by its characters are unconscious allegorizations of the larger regressive movement of imperialism as a whole. In The Lion's Share, Bernard Porter writes that "imperialism" was "a symptom and an effect of [Britain's] decline in the world, and not of strength."¹⁹ What followed the mid-Victorian "age of equipoise" was shaped by the slow stagnation of the economy--the so-called "Great Depression" from 1873 down to the 90s; by new demands for power from workers, women, and the Irish; and by the rise of powerful rivals for empire, especially Germany. The fears of regression and invasion expressed in imperial Gothic reflect the disintegration of the mid-Victorian liberal compromise and the slow sapping of Britain's industrial and international strength.

Besides the themes of regression and invasion, imperial Gothic frequently expresses anxiety about the waning of adventure. This is ironic in part because Hollywood loves to regress to Haggard and Kipling for its romance formulas--witness Raiders of the Lost Ark. To early Victorian adventure writers--Captain Marryat, Mayne Reid, R. M. Ballantyne--it seemed self-evident that England was the vanguard nation, leading the world toward the future. Says one of the marooned boys in Ballantyne's Coral Island, "We'll take possession of [this island] in the name of the King; we'll . . . enter the service of its black inhabitants. Of

course we'll rise, naturally, to the top of affairs. White men always do in savage countries."²⁰ Such upbeat chauvinism continued to characterize boys' adventure fiction well into the twentieth century, but in imperial Gothic white men don't always "rise to the top"--they just as often sink into savagedom, cowardice, or exotic torpor, like Tennyson's "Lotos Eaters." Lord Jim's failure to live up to his heroic self-image has its analogues in many writers who were ostensibly not critical of imperialism. Conrad's stories, moreover, frequently read like botched romances in which adventure turns sour or squalid, undermined by moral frailty.

Also a sort of botched romance, Stevenson's Beach of Falesá expresses the decline of adventure. In Treasure Island and Kidnapped, Stevenson sought to recapture the aura of swashbuckling adventure that had seemed both natural and contemporary to Marryat and Ballantyne. But the narrator of Falesá is no hero, only a semi-educated trader who finds competitors at his new South Seas station. These are two Englishmen, Captain Randall and Case, and their negro sidekick Black Jack. "Trade and station belonged both to Randall," says Wiltshire; "Case and the negro were parasites."²¹ Randall is a degenerate, boozy representative of that usually noble species, the English sea captain, and Case and Black Jack "crawled and fed upon him like the flies, he none the wiser." The imagery of parasitism is pervasive; trade itself--the very white presence on the island--seems diseased, close to what Hobson would say about "economic parasitism" in Imperialism. The description of Randall squatting in his hut in an alcoholic stupor, swarmed over by flies and mosquitoes, offers as powerful an image of the corruption of the imperial adventure as anything in Conrad. "Any clean-minded man would have had the creature out at once and buried him," says Wiltshire; "and to . . . remember he had once commanded a ship, and come ashore in his smart togs, and talked big in bars and consulates . . . turned me sick and sober." Nothing could be farther from Marryat's heroic sailors like old Masterman Ready, who never lies, "is a great reader of the Bible," and is never "at a loss . . . in . . . difficulty and danger."²²

In Falesá, adventure has given way to trade, although it sneaks in through the back door when trade gives way to crime. The same sort of degradation is evident in Stevenson's treatment of the supernatural, which he at first intended to be genuine, but reshaped into a cheap hoax.²³ Wiltshire discovers that Case has rigged up a puppet theatre of phosphorescent devils in the forest in order to play upon the superstitions of the natives, and this he dynamites in a spectacular finale. Case tries to shoot Wiltshire, but in self-defense Wiltshire kills Case instead as the jungle flares up around them. This violent demystification of the

island, and the apparent elimination of European villainy from it, leads to an ironically tame ending in which Wiltshire settles down to a life of domestic bliss--or boredom--with his Kanaka wife and racially mixed children. The conversion of adventure into crime, the fake devils, and the miscegenetic, homebody ending compose a realist, parodic inversion of imperial Gothic.

The decline of adventure is also registered in Conan Doyle's 1911 novel, The Lost World, in which a journalist says to the hero, "The big blank spaces in the map are all being filled in, and there's no room for romance anywhere."²⁴ But there is room--or Doyle at least will invent it--in the Amazon basin, where the English adventurers regress through a Darwinian nightmare to the days of the dinosaurs. Doyle felt keenly the decline of British power, the closing down of frontiers, the waning of romance, mystery, adventure, and the consequent need to reinvent these in fantasy. Doyle could also insist on the truth of the fantasy, much as Yeats insisted on the truth of magic. The creator of that great incarnation of scientific deduction, Sherlock Holmes, immersed himself in the Spiritualist movement, becoming one of its leaders, while it became for him a substitute for all other causes--for imperialism itself.

The characters in The Lost World, including the atavistically apelike Professor Challenger, reappear next in The Poison Belt of 1913, where adventure shrinks to watching the end of the world from the windows of an airtight room in Challenger's house. But the world does not end: the poisonous cloud lifts, people revive, and Doyle's band of fantasy adventurers live on to appear in a third novel, The Land of Mist, published in 1925, the same year as Yeats's A Vision. Challenger and the rest are now participants in what Doyle believed to be the greatest adventure of all, beyond the borders of the material world. Exploration and invasion metaphors abound. Lord John Roxton's newspaper ad sets the tone. Roxton is "seeking fresh worlds to conquer. Having exhausted the sporting adventures of this terrestrial globe, he is now turning to those of the dim, dark and dubious regions of psychic research. He is in the market . . . for any genuine specimen of a haunted house."²⁵ While the crumbling of the Empire quickened after World War I, Doyle himself turned obsessively to haunted houses, seances, lands of mysticism or mist. The skeptical Challenger exclaims that the "soul-talk" of the Spiritualists is "the Animism of savages," but Doyle himself was not skeptical (p. 19). He believed Spiritualism with a capital S to be the successor to Christianity, the new advent of the City of God after the fall of the City of Man. Material adventure in the material Empire might be on the wane, but over the ruins the light of the great Spiritualist adventure was dawning.

In his History of Spiritualism, Doyle writes: "I do not say to [the] great and world-commanding . . . powers . . . open your eyes and see that your efforts are fruitless, and acknowledge your defeat, for probably they never will open their eyes . . . but I say to the Spiritualists . . . dark as the day may seem to you, never was it more cheering . . . never . . . more anticipatory of ultimate victory. It has upon it the stamp of all the conquering influences of the age."²⁶ But the "ultimate victory" of Spiritualism was pre-figured for Doyle in the demise of the empires of this world. That was the precondition of the invasion and reconquest of reality by the realm of Spirit, or perhaps of our transubstantiation--a kind of psychic emigration and colonization--into the world beyond reality, an invisible empire rising ghost-like out of the corpse of the old.

As cultural formations, both imperialism and Spiritualism aroused--and I am quoting Schumpeter--"the dark powers of the subconscious, [and called] into play instincts that carry over from the life habits of the dim past. Driven out everywhere else, the irrational" sought refuge in imperialism, Schumpeter contends, and I would add also in Spiritualism. Imperial Gothic expresses the atavistic character of both movements, shadowing forth their source in the larger, gradual disintegration of British hegemony. Doyle's phantom empire--and the imperial Gothic themes of regression, invasion, and the waning of adventure--express the narrowing vistas of the British Empire at the time of its greatest extent, in the moment before its fall.

NOTES

¹Mrs. Bithia M. Croker, The Old Cantonment; with Other Stories of India and Elsewhere (London: Methuen, 1905), pp. 48-63.

²Lewis S. Wurgaft, The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1983), p. 57.

³Edgar Wallace, Sanders of the River (1909; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1930), p. 277.

⁴Judith Wilt, "The Imperial Mouth: Imperialism, the Gothic and Science Fiction," Journal of Popular Culture, 1981, p. 618.

⁵P. G. Wodehouse, The Swoop! and Other Stories, ed. David A. Jasen (New York: Seabury, 1979). On invasion scare stories in general see Samuel Hynes, The Edwardian Turn of Mind (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 34-53, and

also I. F. Clarke, Voices Prophesying War, 1763-1984 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966).

⁶David A. T. Stafford, "Spies and Gentlemen: The Birth of the British Spy Novel, 1893-1914," Victorian Studies, Summer 1981, pp. 489-509.

⁷Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 104-5.

⁸Joseph Schumpeter, Imperialism and Social Classes (1919; New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1951).

⁹J. A. Hobson, The Psychology of Jingoism (London: Grant Richards, 1901), p. 19. See also Hobson, Imperialism: A Study (1902; Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1965).

¹⁰Quoted by Wesley D. Sweetser, Arthur Machen (New York: Twayne, 1964), p. 116.

¹¹Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, Primitive Culture, 2 vols. (1871; New York: Harper and Row, 1970), I:155, 142.

¹²Yeats declared that "when in 1926 the English translation of Spengler's book [Decline of the West] came out, some weeks after A Vision, I found that not only were dates that I had been given the same as his but whole metaphors and symbols that had seemed my work alone." A Vision (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 18.

¹³Elie Halevy, Imperialism and the Rise of Labour (London: Ernest Benn, 1951), pp. 182-83. See also Ruth Brandon, The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (New York: Prometheus Books, 1985). There was, of course, interest in the occult throughout the nineteenth century, but in Britain the founding of psychic organizations and spiritualist churches began only in the 1870s and 80s.

¹⁴Jerome Hamilton Buckley, William Ernest Henley: A Study in the "Counter-Decadence" of the 'Nineties (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1945), p. 134.

¹⁵Erskine Childers, The Riddle of the Sands: A Record of Secret Service (1903; New York: Dover, 1976), p. 15.

¹⁶Ian Watt, Conrad in the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 141-46.

¹⁷Sir Harry H. Johnston, British Central Africa (London: Methuen, 1897), p. 68.

¹⁸At the peak of Britain's domination of nonwestern peoples, there even arose the fear of "the lower races increasing upon the higher." See Charles H. Pearson, National Character (London: Macmillan, 1894), p. 14.

¹⁹Bernard Porter, The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism 1850-1983, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1984), p. xi. Porter expresses what is now the standard position among historians. See, for example, Richard Shannon, The Crisis of Imperialism 1865-1915 (London: Granada, 1974), and the essays in C. C. Eldridge, ed., British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984).

²⁰Robert M. Ballantyne, The Coral Island (London: Nelson, n.d.), p. 22.

²¹Robert Louis Stevenson, The Beach of Falesá, in Island Nights' Entertainments (1892; New York: Scribner's, 1925), pp. 3-89.

²²Captain Frederick Marryat, Masterman Ready (London: Nelson, n.d.), pp. 13-14.

²³Edwin M. Eigner, Robert Louis Stevenson and Romantic Tradition (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 35.

²⁴Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Lost World (New York: Review of Reviews, 1912), p. 13.

²⁵Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Land of Mist (New York: Doran, 1926), p. 132.

²⁶Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The History of Spiritualism, 2 vols. (New York: Doran, 1926), I: 173.