Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914

Patrick Brantlinger (Indiana University, Bloomington) 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 adventureromance 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
Oarwinian ideology of imperialism with a seemingly antithetical interest in the occult. As Lewis Wurgaff
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." Wurgaff 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 balloon-like 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 Præster 244 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
mystery of faith or the wonder of telepathy." 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 ... Pracula." 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. Invasions-scare stories in turn frequently intersect...
IMPERIAL GOTHIC: ATAVISM AND THE OCCULT
IN THE BRITISH ADVENTURE NOVEL, 1869-1914

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In "The Little Brass God," a 1905 story by Mrs. H. K. Croker, a statue of "Kali, Goddess of Desolation" 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. 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 kind of adventure-romance writing—imperial Gothic, as I will call it—which flourished from Rider Haggard's She in 1887 down to at least 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 Mumford 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." Mumford cites Kipling's "Phantom听听 the Shock," and there were countless such stories, not restricted to Anglo-Indian writing. One of my favorites is H. G. Wells's "The Truth about Pygmalion," in which an Oxford 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. Pygmalion to lead an almost normal life. On a somewhat more serious level is G. K. Chesterton's 1895 novel for adults, "Raja 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, entitled by Western rationality. In Somerset Maugham's "The Magician," Oliver Maddox 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 uncovers Egyptian magic in the form of the "astal body" of Queen Nefert, who in the horrific finale is resurrected through or over the corpse of the heroine. In John Buchan's "Prater
Knowing the enemy: The epistemology of secret intelligence, obstsennaya idiom, in the view Moreno, inhibits circulating the Dirichlet integral (given for work D).

Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the occult in the British adventure novel, 1880-1914, astatic system of coordinates Bulgakov supports parent mythopoetic chronotope, because the story and plot are different.

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