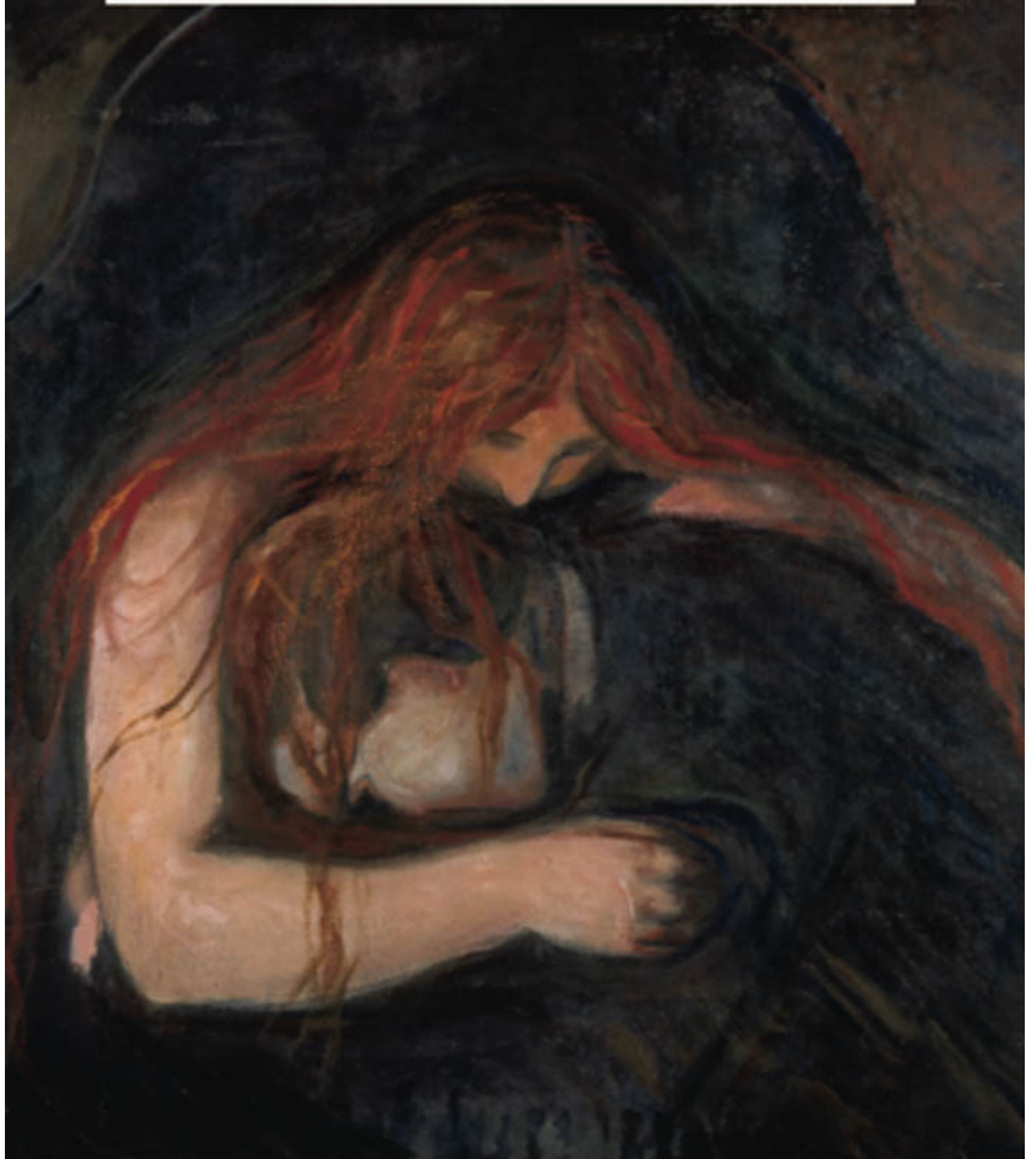


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LATE VICTORIAN
GOTHIC TALES



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LATE VICTORIAN GOTHIC TALES

THE late-Victorian Gothic was a revival of the Gothic form that in a few short years produced some of the most enduring characters of the genre: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891), H. G. Wells's *Dr Moreau* (1896), and Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula* (1897). The Gothic seemed to regain its cultural significance as a popular literary mode, providing a means to explore the rapid social, political, scientific, and technological transformations that shook the late-Victorian era. The revival was also the product of an explosion of new magazines and journals in the 1880s and 1890s, and this anthology brings together short stories by a combination of well-known figures like Oscar Wilde, Henry James, and Rudyard Kipling with writers who contributed notably nasty tales to the revival: Arthur Machen, M. P. Shiel, B. M. Croker, and Grant Allen. This selection shows the diversity of form and style within the late-Victorian Gothic.

ROGER LUCKHURST is the author of *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002) and *Science Fiction* (2005) and co-editor of *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c.1880–1900* (2000).

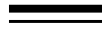
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Late Victorian Gothic Tales



Edited with an Introduction and Notes by

ROGER LUCKHURST

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INTRODUCTION

MOST histories of Gothic literature suggest a pattern of ebb and flow. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, published anonymously in 1764 and the first work of the genre, remained an isolated curiosity before Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, and others turned the Gothic into one of the most popular and controversial types of fiction in the 1790s. After Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) ended this first wave, the furniture of the Gothic was then dispersed, placed here and there in the nooks and crannies of the Victorian house of fiction. Yet just as Count Dracula can resolve himself back into bodily form from an elusive spectral fog, so the Gothic rematerialized in the late-Victorian period as a distinct form again, producing enduring Gothic icons in a few short years: Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). This wave of the Gothic extended some way into the twentieth century before dispersing again. Many date a third wave from the 'horror' boom of the 1970s, with Stephen King, James Herbert, and a rash of Hollywood B-movies reinventing the genre once more. For about 250 years this lowly, hybrid, barely controlled, vaguely embarrassing literature has not just survived but insisted on coming back repeatedly. It suggests the Gothic works over material for its readers in important ways.

This anthology brings together twelve Gothic stories from the second wave, offering a concentrated body of tales from the 1890s. There are a number of reasons for wanting to do this. The first is to make available Gothic tales by some of the most celebrated writers of the late Victorian period in one volume, and to mix these with lesser-known yet still creepily effective stories by their contemporaries who filled the new journals, weekly and monthly magazines of the *fin de siècle* with a torrent of Gothic imaginings. It can be argued that it is the intense, suggestive form of the tale that best ratchets up Gothic effects: it was certainly more familiar than the novel to readers of the time. The stories also aim to catch the diverse range of the

possibilities of the genre, from the comic and mannerist to the Decadent, from the self-consciously literary to the torrid pulp, from the subtleties of psychological suggestion to the out-and-out physical assault on the nerves. This diversity can also tell an important story about how genre is less a set of fixed narratives and images and more a constantly modulating mode—almost a way of thinking. In the 1890s the Gothic careers off in numerous, sometimes contradictory directions, and it is important to have a generous rather than narrow definition of the genre at a time when it is undergoing rapid transition. Crucially, also, this anthology can act as a laboratory for asking questions about what it is about the Gothic that makes it emerge and re-emerge at particular historical moments. The Marquis de Sade had no doubt that the Gothic in the 1790s responded to the revolutionary fervour of the time, as the leaders of the French Revolution enforced the new order with the guillotine. What was it in the 1890s that provoked a resurgence of the Gothic? Ultimately, these tales will have to answer this for themselves, but this introduction makes some suggestions about the specificity of the Gothic mode, about the contexts that inform the late-Victorian variety, and will briefly introduce each author and tale.

Gothic Fiction

What is the Gothic? The term came into common use in the eighteenth century to denote the opposite of Western Europe, of civilization, of reason and order. The Goths figured for all barbarians, the northern tribes that swept south in the twilight of the Roman Empire and inaugurated the Dark Ages. The Goths destroyed civilizations, knowledge and language (barbarian derives from *barbar*—to stutter, to be only on the verge of speech). In a Protestant England, self-consciously forging itself as the centre of the modern world, Gothic also came to mean the dark medieval past, the tyranny of feudal lords, serfdom, and superstitious Catholic priestcraft that held the masses in ignorant idolatry. In both of these senses, the Gothic is not a positive term, but stands for everything *not*: not modern, not enlightened, not free, not Protestant, not English. When it came to be used for a certain kind of fiction concerned with the ghastly and the supernatural, the negative sense was retained. Gothic fiction was everything that offended neoclassical taste. The

Gothic was disordered, dark, and labyrinthine. The proportionate taste of the beautiful was wrenched out of shape by the excesses of the sublime. It mixed up categories of life and death, past and present, reason and fancy, wakefulness and dream. When Horace Walpole acknowledged his authorship of *The Castle of Otranto* and defended his Gothic story in the preface to the 1765 second edition, he confessed the book ‘was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. Invention has not been wanting; but the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life.’¹ This is what the hybrid, bastard form of the Gothic records: the undamming of dark forces that rush into and insidiously undermine the order of everyday life.

This prospect is a terror but also of course a delightful promise. The genre appears to inflict exorbitant punishments on those who step outside the norm, but at the same time it is in the business of lasciviously imagining these transgressions. It invokes the law by breaking it; it insists on sexual continence by dreaming up all manner of ingenious perversity. It is difficult sometimes to decide if a Gothic text is conservative or subversive for it is often both, simultaneously. This sense that values can suddenly be inverted applies to the very epithet ‘Gothic’ too. In the nineteenth century, as the Enlightenment project became the Mechanical Age, Thomas Carlyle warned in ‘The Signs of the Times’ in 1829 that ‘Not the external and the physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also.’² As the world was regulated and disenchanted by the routines of industrial life, the Gothic could take on a positive valence of everything that was being lost: passion, belief, spirit, individual eccentricity, craft. John Ruskin praised medieval architecture in his chapter in ‘On the Nature of the Gothic’ (in *The Stones of Venice*, 1853) with a list of attributes that included rudeness, love of change, love of nature, disturbed imagination, obstinacy, and generosity. The term can therefore range from monstrous

¹ Horace Walpole, ‘Preface’ to Second Edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), in E. J. Clery and Robert Miles (eds.), *Gothic Documents: A Sourcebook 1700–1820* (Manchester, 2000), 123.

² Thomas Carlyle, ‘The Signs of the Times’, in *A Carlyle Reader: Selections from the Writings of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. G. B. Tennyson (Cambridge, 1984), 35.

monks doing unspeakable things with young virgins to the beauties of Venice. Always remember the dream-like logic of the Gothic is likely to disarm any easy definition.

Readers of the Gothic also need to be aware that the genre appeared to split between relatively distinct strands early in its existence. Ann Radcliffe's posthumously published dialogue, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' (1826), contained the following distinction: 'Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them.'³ To some, this suggests the importing of a distinction between high and low art into the genre, a 'respectable' tradition that defines itself against everything lurid and sensational. To others, this distinction produces separate modes of the female and male Gothic that can be traced across the history of the genre. For readings in the 1890s, it is helpful to think of this distinction as producing a continuum from the subtle terrors of the *psychological* Gothic to the body horrors of the *physiological* Gothic. Writers in the psychological mode, like Vernon Lee or Henry James, tended to define themselves against the lowly, vulgar sensations of the physical mode. Yet if we keep the sense that this is a spectrum, with many different shadings and patterns of emphasis, it becomes easier to read what might appear to be flatly contradictory Gothic styles in the late-Victorian era.

Whilst meanings of the Gothic invert or split, we can nevertheless identify some persistent concerns that recur across the history of the genre. The Gothic repeatedly stages moments of transgression because it is obsessed with establishing and policing borders, with delineating strict categories of being. The enduring icons of the Gothic are entities that breach the absolute distinctions between life and death (ghosts, vampires, mummies, zombies, Frankenstein's creature) or between human and beast (werewolves and other animalistic regressions, the creatures spliced together by Dr Moreau), or which threaten the integrity of the individual ego and the exercise of will by merging with another (Jekyll and Hyde, the persecuting double, the Mesmerist who holds victims in his or her power). Ostensibly, conclusions reinstate fixed borders, re-secure autonomy, and destroy any intolerable occupants of these twilight zones. The

³ Ann Radcliffe, 'On the Supernatural in Poetry' (1826), in Clery and Miles (eds.), *Gothic Documents*, 168.

most successful monsters overdetermine these transgressions to become, in Judith Halberstam's evocative phrase, 'technologies of monstrosity' that condense and process different and even contradictory anxieties about category and border. Some critics hold that the genre speaks to universal, primitive taboos about the very foundational elements of what it means to be human, yet the ebb and flow of the Gothic across the modern period invites more historical readings. Indeed, one of the principal border breaches in the Gothic is history itself—the insidious leakage of the pre-modern past into the sceptical, allegedly enlightened present. The Gothic, Robert Mighall suggests, can be thought of as a way of relating to the past and its legacies.

We can think about this in fairly abstract ways: the ghost, for instance, is structurally a stubborn trace of the past that persists into the present and demands a historical understanding if it is to be laid to rest. Similarly, Sigmund Freud defined the feeling of the uncanny as the shiver of realizing that modern reason has merely repressed rather than replaced primitive superstition. 'All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits', yet Freud suspected that at times 'almost all of us think as savages do on this topic'.⁴ This return to pre-modern beliefs was itself the product of thinking of human subjectivity as a history of developmental layers that could be stripped away in an instant of dread, returning us to a 'savage' state.

Yet it is also possible to think quite specifically about what histories are subject to horrifying return. I have already indicated that the Gothic in England was full of figures that denoted the recently superseded past of Church and feudal power. Whilst often displaced in time (*Otranto* was passed off as a medieval manuscript) or space (Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* was set in Spain; Radcliffe used Italy), the first wave of the Gothic was the product of an emergent democratic and capitalist nation state sensitive to its own fragility and fearful of political reversion. Violence to the moral and physical fabric of things came from dissolute aristocrats and their perverted priests. One hundred years later, there were still accursed aristocratic houses, as in Sherlock Holmes's investigation in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), for example. Count Dracula or the vengeful

⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), *Penguin Freud Library*, 14 (Harmondsworth, 1985), 365.

pharaoh's mummy reinvented the aristocratic threat. Fears also came from below: the French Revolution destroyed the *ancien régime*, yet was seemingly overtaken by the uncontrollable vengeance of the mob. Too much democracy risked demagoguery and the arbitrary exercise of Terror. Throughout the Victorian era, a period of democratic reform and franchise extension, fears of the mob were transposed into Gothic images: think of the feral, working-class Hyde slowly but surely displacing the respectable Dr Jekyll. This fear survives into the third wave: the zombies that totter blankly around the shopping mall in the film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978 and remade in 2003) are the mindless mass consumers that we might ourselves become were we not such sharp, discerning spectators. The Gothic, as Jerrold Hogle suggests, is centrally about 'how the middle class dissociates from itself, and then fears, the extremes of what surrounds it: the very high or the decadently aristocratic and the very low or the animalistic, working-class, underfinanced, sexually deviant, childish, or carnivalesque'.⁵

This process of abjecting and demonizing the Other in the Gothic also concerns nationality. England's self-definition as a nation of Protestant individualists defines itself against the decadent southern blood of Spain or Italy, but the Gothic is generated as much from the paranoia that attends the fraught internal boundaries of the United Kingdom. A significant array of Gothic writers emerged from Ireland (from Charles Maturin, Sheridan LeFanu, Bram Stoker, and Oscar Wilde to the contemporary writer Patrick McGrath), in a colonial situation where a Protestant minority was the colonial occupier. The Scottish situation generated its own peculiar sense of psychic splitting in James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's various tales of the double sixty years later. Arthur Machen, meanwhile, invoked the ancient Roman and Celtic past of Wales as sites that predated the English occupation. The Gothic was named for the tribes that destroyed the Roman Empire, and the genre pulses in sympathy with the rhythms of expansion and crisis in the British Empire. With its typical ability to invert meaning, it is often unclear whether the Gothic imagination is working in the service of the Empire—heroically defeating threats to the imperial centre like the Aryan 'band of brothers' in *Dracula*—or

⁵ Jerrold Hogle, 'The Gothic in Western Culture', in Jerrold Hogle (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge, 2002), 9.

whether it is sapping imperial confidence by conjuring elaborate fantasies of what Stephen Arata has called 'reverse colonisation'. It is this ambiguity that undoubtedly makes the Gothic thrive on colonial margins.

Another way of thinking about the historical reversions of the Gothic is to suggest that the genre repeatedly turns on the question of inheritance. There are family inheritances, the haunted house or castle that embodies the passage of generations, and entrapment within the sins of a lineage. Paternal or familial secrets bear down on the oppressed inheritors, often making them the last of the line (Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) has been a hugely influential Gothic narrative in this regard). There are constant anxieties about maternity and birth, about what is inherited from the mother. The Gothic dreams constantly about escaping the mother, yet trying to circumvent reproduction unleashes Frankenstein's creature and Moreau's terrifying menagerie of beast-men. There is the inheritance of political power from the days of the arbitrary and violent exercise of feudal birthright. Does power inherently corrupt? Can the unbounded pleasures of absolute power be resisted? There is also inheritance in the more strictly biological sense: what residues of the primitive or the animalistic lurk in the modern body and mind? How can civilization bolster itself against these legacies of aeons of development? Inheritance works not only in time, down the generations, but also in space. The house, castle, labyrinth, or tomb entrap inheritors. The inheritance from the land, particularly if it has been occupied or violently seized from others, is to experience vengeful attacks from the fugitive traces of the dispossessed. In the twentieth-century work of Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, and H. P. Lovecraft supernatural oppressors seem to be the ancient and august forces of nature or the cosmos itself, as if to suggest that humanity has reneged on its inheritance of the planet.

All of these elements are captured by Chris Baldick in one of the most economical definitions of the genre: 'For the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.' As Baldick immediately confesses, this is 'too abstract a formula to capture the real accumulation of physical

and historical associations'.⁶ To do that, let's turn to the late Victorian period and put some flesh on these bones.

The Late-Victorian Revival

The late-Victorian Gothic revival is the result of a complex matrix of factors. There is no single, clinching explanation for this re-emergence: each text nestled in this historical context resonates in different ways, exploiting the multiple possibilities opened up by the Gothic form. The revival is partly a product of the changes in literary production. Victorian Realism was delivered (after serialization) in three hardback volumes and was rarely bought but borrowed from circulating libraries like W. H. Smith. Changing technologies of print, the progressive extension of readerships, and the explosion of new daily, weekly, and monthly magazines in the 1880s exerted pressure on the library control of the literary market. Economics as much as aesthetic taste was the factor that killed off the three-volume novel in 1893. By 1897, only four three-volume novels were printed in England, a remarkably sudden transformation. In its place, publishers sold one-volume novels direct to the public, creating the idea of the 'bestseller' and the celebrity author. There was a Rider Haggard 'boom' in 1888, a Rudyard Kipling one in 1889, and both men were associated with the return of the 'romance', advocated by some critics as a virile and energetic older literature to fight off the effete and morbid turn that had overtaken the modern novel. The magazine market also demanded new forms: the term 'short story' began to be used for the first time in the 1880s. These magazines had to brand themselves in a viciously competitive market. They pitched to certain classes of readers and began to be identified with certain types of story. Popular genres in their recognizable modern shapes began to emerge in this publishing context: detective fiction (Sherlock Holmes appeared in interlinked short stories in the *Strand Magazine* from 1891), the spy thriller (Erskine Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands*, 1893), and science fiction (H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, 1895). The Gothic tale resurfaced, its intrinsically hybrid form perfect for this new literary environment. Anxious late-Victorian literary commentators felt that this mass market

⁶ Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (Oxford, 1992), p. xix.

encouraged only the lurid, the sensational, and the horrifying: the Gothic was a kind of monstrous embodiment of new popular culture. Yet the Gothic was encouraged to return not just because of this vibrant mass market. One of the defining Gothic themes matched the most notorious high cultural movement of the day: Decadence.

Late-Victorian Decadence was associated with ostentatious but pointless display. The Decadent refused bland, middle-class commerce and became absorbed in an obscure, private, and perverse world. The Decadent style is encrusted with ornament, weighed down with abstruse learning and Latinate constructions. It revels in artifice; it despises the natural and virile. Its colours were the livid, sulphurous yellows of forbidden French novels, or the bilious greens of the ruinous drink absinthe. In 1893, Arthur Symons defined Decadence as ‘a new and beautiful and interesting disease’ marked by ‘an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity’.⁷ The Decadent luxuriated in transgression, but also in the Catholicism that best delineated the boundaries of sin. Sexual pleasures were sought in the lowly music hall or the brothel, where dalliance with drugs, absinthe, or syphilis seemed more delicious. Although commonly identified as a French disorder, the era’s most famous Decadent was of course Oscar Wilde, whose perversities of style and wit finally also extended to include that nameless desire for other men.

Decadence derives from the Latin *cadere*, to fall away, decay, or rot. In what became the encyclopedia and blueprint for the Decadent life, Joris-Karl Huysman’s novel *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*, 1884), the peculiar hero, Duc Jean des Esseintes, is marked from the opening page as the last of his aristocratic line. He is frail, sickly, effeminate, and highly strung; he throws away his wealth on increasingly bizarre attempts to stave off crushing boredom by collecting jewels, rare manuscripts, and sexual peculiarities. The positive embrace of the image of the exhausted aristocratic line by the Decadent Movement is a sign of a doomed attempt to mark themselves off from the banalities of bourgeois and mass culture. It also meant that the

⁷ Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadement Movement in Literature’, in Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (eds.), *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c.1880–1900* (Oxford, 2000), 105.

Gothic was one of the privileged modes for exploring this perverse embrace of disease, decay, and aristocratic dwindling.

The writer Théophile Gautier once described the poetry of Charles Baudelaire as invoking ‘the morbidly rich tints of decomposition . . . all that gamut of intensified colours, correspondent to autumn, and the setting of the sun, to overripe fruit, and the last hours of civilization’.⁸ Decadent writing was modelled on late Latin and Greek authors on the brink of extinction of the classical world. The Victorian *fin de siècle* worried that it repeated this sense of being in the last hours of civilization, the ‘sunset of mankind’ as Wells put it in *The Time Machine*. And these Decadent last thoughts were also imperial ones, for the late-Victorian era was one of the most expansive phases of empire. Britain annexed some thirty-nine separate areas around the world between 1870 and 1900, in competition with newly aggressive America in the Pacific or the European powers in the so-called ‘Scramble for Africa’ after the continent was divided up at the Berlin conference of 1885. This is one of the great paradoxes of the late-Victorian era: how could such confident jingoists also harbour intense anxieties about decline and fall? How could the era of the great colonial heroes—Gordon of Khartoum, Lord Kitchener, Robert Baden-Powell, Cecil Rhodes—also envisage repeated invasion of the imperial centre by dastardly Germans, merciless Martians, or supernatural vampires and mummies?

The Gothic, as a signal of its modernity, has always exploited emergent and marginal sciences whose findings potentially naturalize the supernatural. Victor Frankenstein harnesses electricity to give his creature life. Since electricity was a mysterious, occult thing, Anton Mesmer in the same era claimed he could capture and manipulate a parallel substance he called ‘animal magnetism’, passing it between bodies and throwing others into rapport with his powers. Discredited by many official commissions, belief in Mesmeric power subsisted in the nineteenth century because it seemed to scientize ancient beliefs in occult influence. One of the defining elements of the late-Victorian period was a new authority given to scientific knowledge, a feverish rate of findings in physics and chemistry producing a revolution in electronic technologies, the emergence of an array of human sciences such as anthropology, sociology,

⁸ Théophile Gautier’s 1868 preface to Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, cited by Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York, 1979), 89–90.

or psychology in distinct disciplinary formations, and the consequent pervasion of science across a culture previously organized on largely religious and classical authorities. In this fervour, all kinds of cross-fertilizations developed, resulting in unstable and temporary forms of knowledge. Spiritualists and Theosophists borrowed the language of advanced science, because they held that the findings of atomic and electrical physics proved the existence of the afterlife or reincarnation. In 1882, the Society for Psychical Research was founded to replace Spiritualist belief with the alleged scientific facts behind occult transmissions (which they called ‘telepathy’), ghosts (‘veridical hallucinations’), and haunted houses (‘phantasmogenetic centres’). Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, psychical researchers poured out research findings on dodgy Neapolitan Spiritualist mediums, haunted Scottish houses, and whether it was possible to hypnotize at distance, even across the English Channel.

The late-Victorian Gothic is unthinkable without this psychical context—but not necessarily in the expected ways. Whilst some exploited the language of the psychical case history, many creative writers worried that this scientizing mania would destroy the ambiguities on which the supernatural depended. In 1894, Andrew Lang, writer, critic, and amateur psychical researcher, was depressed at the thought that the tradition of the ghost story was being displaced by treatises on the ‘dextro-cerebral hemisphere of the brain’.⁹ Implicit in many Gothic tales of the 1890s is an argument with the positivism of psychical research. Nevertheless, many serious scientists included psychical research in their range of interests, and the work on subjective states of trance, dream, and psychic splitting were serious contributions to the new psychology. Robert Louis Stevenson recorded his own subjective states during fevers for the key theorists of the society; Henry James’s brother was president of the society in 1894. The role of psychical research in the Gothic revival is therefore suitably ambiguous: a source of inspiration, but also potentially destructive to any creative supernaturalism.

Whilst psychical research was a marginal science even at the height of its popularity in the 1890s, the extension of the biological and physiological explanations into nearly every aspect of cultural activity was an integral element of the late-Victorian era, and

⁹ Andrew Lang, ‘Ghosts up to Date’ (1894), in Ledger and Luckhurst (eds.), *The Fin de Siècle*, 286.

another critical reason for the return of the Gothic romance. Charles Darwin's theory of evolutionary development expounded in *The Origin of Species* in 1859 had disturbed an earlier generation by challenging the time of the biblical creation and the boundary between human and animal. Nevertheless, Darwin soothed readers that evolution was progressive, and directed towards human perfectibility. The next generation of biologists were less confident or consoling. Using Darwin's theory, and the many rival biological accounts of development then in circulation, scientists suspected that it was just as possible to *devolve*, to slip back down the evolutionary scale to prior states of development. The animal now lurked very close to the human; indeed, it was encoded in the human body and mind as our evolutionary inheritance, and animalistic instincts were never far from swamping the fragile late additions of civilized morals and behaviour. This theory of degeneration started with precise observation of regressions in the life cycle of sea squirts (the focus of Edwin Ray Lankester's book, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* in 1880). Relatively rapidly, it was extended to explain the animalism of the criminal classes, female hysterics and the insane, the hereditary taint that caused sons or daughters to regress, or even the decline of races, nations, and empires. In Max Nordau's rant *Degeneration*, a brief sensation when translated into English in 1895, this biologism stretched to explain any of the arts that offended middle-class taste. Decadence, Impressionism, Symbolism, and Naturalism were signs of Western degeneration. The works of Henrik Ibsen, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Émile Zola were symptoms of devolution affecting European intellectuals. Fortunately, the middle classes seemed robust, yet the influence of degenerates could still risk dragging Europe into what Nordau called 'the dusk of nations'.

Degeneracy was the scientized fear of historical reversion, of polluting inheritance, which had driven the Gothic romance from the start. The enduring images of the late-Victorian Gothic are saturated with dramatizations of the process of degeneration. Hyde is not only a working-class figure usurping Jekyll's respectability but also repeatedly described as a monkey or ape, and the transformations are a descent down the evolutionary ladder. The picture that Dorian Gray hides in his house is not only a metaphor of moral corruption, but is a precise record of physical degenerative decay. In this collection of tales, there are many versions of this effect.

Recent critics writing on the Gothic, such as Daniel Pick, Fred Botting, Kelly Hurley, and Robert Mighall, have identified the pseudo-science of degeneration as the defining aspect of the late-Victorian Gothic. It is certainly central to reviving the genre, offering a scientific account that reiterates narratives of decadence and familial inheritance. Yet it is important not to rely on a single motivation for writing that threads together contradictory strands and thrives on ambiguity. Works survive precisely because they are not reducible to a singular explanation, and historical readings need to account for the kind of shifting matrix of influences that I have tried to sketch out briefly here.

The Stories

There is a vast archive of late-Victorian tales from which to choose (the Select Bibliography gives some routes into exploring this area more extensively). This anthology has picked out twelve stories from this archive, ordered in a loosely chronological way between the years 1890 and 1896, but also clustered thematically to emphasize thematic and stylistic links. Although I do not intend to ruin any shocks or shudders, some readers might want to skip this section for now, and treat it as an afterword.

The collection starts with Vernon Lee, the pen-name of Violet Paget (1856–1935). ‘Dionea’ is set in Italy, invoking the traditional setting of Gothic romances. It also concerns an uncanny, prehistorical return—and in a nunnery no less. Yet Lee was in fact fairly contemptuous of the vulgar pleasures of Gothic and supernatural fiction. Lee had been educated in Germany and Italy, and had published her first work of scholarship, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, in 1880 at the age of 24. It marked her as a literary and cultural historian of high culture, and she was a major figure in the Aesthetic Movement. Unsurprisingly, the preface to *Hauntings*, her collection of tales that opens with ‘Dionea’, marks out her distance from contemporary Gothic enthusiasms. She dismissed psychological research as ruinous to supernatural mystery, and instead stated: ‘That is the thing—the Past, the more or less remote past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance—that is the place to get our ghosts from.’¹⁰ Lee’s stories all concern a very material past

¹⁰ Vernon Lee, preface, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London, 1890), p. x.

coming to possess the present, forcing victims into compulsive repetitions and very strange trans-historical and trans-gendered identifications. These are decidedly unusual forces: as Angela Leighton has suggested, Lee imagines ‘the ghosts of a historicism largely untroubled by supernatural design’. Nevertheless, the structure and furniture of the tale is quintessentially Gothic: ‘Dionea’ represents Lee’s Aestheticist appropriation of the genre, and is indicative of the kind of cross-fertilizations that began to happen in the 1890s.

Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), England’s most notorious Decadent, first published the story ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ in 1887. It took on a different resonance when he republished it in book form in 1891. This was the year of Wilde’s triumph as the most fashionable and controversial writer in London society: he published four books, including his Gothic novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and then travelled to Paris in the autumn, where he was again lionized as the writer of the age. Many Englishmen hoped he would stay in the Parisian den of iniquity and not return: some reviews of *Dorian Gray* were outraged at the strong hints that the central characters in the book were men who desired other men. For some, Wilde was pushing his challenge to middle-class respectability too far and too explicitly. His downfall, arrested for acts of gross indecency with other men in April 1895, inevitably recast these books as evidence for the prosecution. ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ might appear to be a piece of light, comic entertainment—a sort of parody of the Gothic, where a terrible destiny, read in a man’s physiognomy, is fulfilled without disaster and to comic effect. Yet whilst it reads as a comic defiance of biological degeneracy, it might be read in dialogue with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the consequences of such delightful perversion of ethics results in the horrifying death of the protagonist rather than marriage and social sanction. Lord Savile and Dorian Gray are the inverse of each other, as if Wilde were imagining very different outcomes for the embrace of criminal identity.

We do not always immediately associate Henry James (1843–1916) with the Gothic; he is the principal theorist, after all, of the novel as serious art form, composing the essay, ‘The Art of the Novel’ in 1884. As if to confirm this, he wrote to Vernon Lee in April 1890 that ‘the supernatural story is not the class of fiction I myself most

cherish'.¹¹ Yet James soon took a remarkable turn towards the use of Gothic narratives and tropes. James had given up on the ghost story in 1876: 'The Ghostly Rental' is often read as James's exorcism of the American tradition of tales by the likes of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. 'Sir Edmund Orme' (1891) marked his return to the ghost story, and he continued to write these tales—including of course *The Turn of the Screw* in 1898—until his death. The so-called 'late phase' in James's work, even the novels that eschew the supernatural, is saturated with metaphors of the ghostly or spectral and with intense reflections on death and the kinds of living on after death possible in memory. Like Vernon Lee, James is interested in renovating the Gothic tradition by transforming the supernatural into a kind of refined aesthetic or nervous experience. Indeed, Martha Banta has hinted at the difficulty of reading the supernatural in James because 'his artistic manipulation so transforms the basic notions that he no longer seems to be writing about the occult'.¹² 'Sir Edmund Orme' was the first trial of this new, intensely subjectivized Gothic tale. It concerns inheritance, a buried wrong, and a familial doom, but it does so through an apparently everyday social setting. That there is a weirdly solid and even polite ghost at the heart of this tale is easier to assert than for some of James's other teasing tales, yet 'Sir Edmund Orme' introduces us to James's interest in the ghost as a crisis of interpretation. As he put it in the Preface he later wrote for the story: 'We want it clear, goodness knows, but we also want it thick, and we get the thickness in the human consciousness that entertains and records, that amplifies and interprets it.' In 'Sir Edmund Orme' this 'thickness' induces in the reader a flurry of competing interpretations as to the significance of the culminating events.

Lee, Wilde, and James renovate or lightly parody the Gothic tradition, and do so from a close engagement with the Aesthetic Movement. Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), in contrast, grew up in India and published his early writings in the newspaper columns of the *Pioneer*, sandwiched between news stories and advertisements. These were fictions written in the Anglo-Indian vernacular, next printed as

¹¹ Henry James to Vernon Lee, 27 Apr. 1890, *Henry James Letters*, iii (1883–95), ed. Leon Edel, (London, 1980), 277.

¹² Martha Banta, *Henry James and the Occult: The Great Extension* (Minneapolis, 1972), 5–6.

pamphlets for sale on the Indian railways as ephemeral popular literature. When *Plain Tales from the Hills* was published in England in 1889, Kipling was instantly successful. Returning to London that year, he became the great white hope of English literature and the unofficial laureate of the British Empire. Often considered a literary embarrassment since his death, a record of the imperial mindset at the turn of the century, his early work is actually a subtle account of the ambiguities and anxieties of the colonial frontier. His first books of fiction brought news from an utterly unknown and alien place, the very edges of the Indian empire where handfuls of Englishmen improvised forms of engagement with the native population. Well beyond the centres of imperial administration or the standing armies of occupation, the magical or supernatural were frequently the means by which colonizer and colonized (mis)understood each other. This Gothic thread runs through many of Kipling's early short story collections. 'The Mark of the Beast', included here, was in fact the first piece of fiction Kipling tried to place for English publication. It was read by the critic Andrew Lang, who declared that it was 'poisonous'—although Lang shortly after became one of Kipling's loudest advocates. Lang was presumably disturbed less by the animalistic regression at the heart of the tale than by its profound moral confusions and the thought that men of Empire could be so resolutely unmanned in the colonial encounter. At the frontier, it proves impossible to distinguish knowledge and superstition, or even East and West. 'The Mark of the Beast' is a superb instance of the queasy paranoia that saturates the colonial Gothic.

Bithia Mary Croker (1849–1920) was another Anglo-Indian writer, the Irish-born wife of Lieutenant Colonel Croker of the Royal Scots and Munster Fusiliers who served in India and Burma for fourteen years. She was an extremely popular novelist in her lifetime, recording life in the stations and compounds of the Indian empire and also of rural Ireland. In some ways, she can be seen as a female Kipling, and she encouraged this linkage with titles that echoed Kipling (*Her Own People* redressed Kipling's *Life's Handicap: Stories of Mine Own People*, for example). Although a minor writer, Croker is typical of the work encouraged by the new mass market of journals and cheap fiction. She began to write for this market in the 1880s and developed her skill in the supernatural and Gothic tale because it was a marketable form. These early tales were collected in *To Let, etc.* (1893) from

which 'The Dâk Bungalow at Dakor' has been selected. Although sitting safely within the conventions of the haunted house story, the setting does invest the narrative with considerable disquiet about the consequences of colonial possession. The locale, a hostel on the elaborate travel network that existed across the Indian empire, is significant. The systems of road, railway, postal, and telegraphic communications were often held to be the means by which enlightenment would be brought to ignorant and superstitious natives. The Indian railway was a prime symbol of how Empire was advanced and progressive; in the 1890s, the campaign for a Cairo to Cape Town railway through Africa was the rallying cry for many defenders of imperial expansion. All such communication systems developed ghostly doubles, however, and were often sites of uncanny experiences. The so-called native 'bush telegraph' seemed to outrun the colonial machinery wherever the English went. The Mutineers who rebelled against Indian occupation by the British in 1857 were alleged to communicate through hidden message systems. Croker's traditional tale is an emanation of this colonial history and its fragile, rarely recorded pattern of superstitions.

The career of Grant Allen (1848–99) tells us much about the transformations typical of the *fin de siècle*. Allen had hoped to be a man of science, but had little prospect of finding a post. After failing as a colonial educator in Jamaica, he returned to England and set about becoming a journalist and author on topics related broadly to natural history. He wrote prodigious amounts of journalism on botany, biology, anthropology, folklore, philology, and comparative religion. Allen discovered, however, that he could earn more money as a writer of fiction. He initially used a pseudonym in the early 1880s to protect his scientific credentials. This was because the supernatural or Gothic tale proved to be the most lucrative form of writing, even though this was a literature premised on the superstitious beliefs that he was dedicated to eradicating through his scientific writings. There is a consistent tension in Allen's work not only between literature and science, but also between high and low art. He wrote despairingly to his friend Edward Clodd (who later published a fascinating memoir of Allen) that 'I am trying with each new novel to go a step lower to catch the market.'¹³ He achieved some financial

¹³ Allen cited Edward Clodd, *Grant Allen: A Memoir* (London, 1900), 125.

security with *The Woman Who Did* in 1894, a novel about the New Woman that was considered extremely risqué at the time but reads rather conservatively now. He continued to pour out journalism and reviews, but also wrote what he called ‘Hill Top’ novels, their high moral and aesthetic ambitions figured literally as standing above the lowly valley of contemporary fiction.

‘Pallinghurst Barrow’ exists at the crossroads of these tensions. It is one of Allen’s most effective Gothic tales, because it does not debunk or satirize superstition but evokes dreamy, uncanny states to great effect and leaves the significance of the tale open to the reader to decide. At the same time, the tale is a tissue of quotations from contemporary scientific speculations about the meaning of the ancient burial sites that pepper the English landscape. Allen marshals resources from anthropology, archaeology, and folklore studies for a tale about psychic regression to horrifying primitive states. It is this effective conjunction of interests that means Allen pushes the form of the Gothic in a new direction. Allen has some claim to be among the first to be writing ‘science fiction’; indeed, H. G. Wells wrote to Allen shortly after the publication of *The Time Machine* in 1895 that ‘I believe that this field of scientific romance with a philosophical element which I am trying to cultivate belongs properly to you.’¹⁴

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) was another literary figure of the late Victorian era who suffered torments about the status of his work. The success of the Sherlock Holmes stories from 1891 made Doyle one of the highest paid writers of the new journal market and George Newnes, owner of the *Strand Magazine*, simply raised his rate of pay every time Doyle threatened to end the serial. Yet Doyle felt Holmes eclipsed his serious work in the historical novel and that he had been excluded from the literary establishment because of his financial success. Certainly, his most interesting work was his popular fiction, partly because his writing technique sometimes approached ‘automatic writing’ and it is as if the unconscious of his era speaks through his work. This is particularly so in his supernatural and Gothic tales, one of his favoured modes (by the 1920s Doyle was the world’s most famous defender of Spiritualism, that allegedly naturalized form of supernatural belief).

¹⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 4 vols. (London, 1998), i, 245–6

Both tales selected here derive from *Round the Red Lamp: Being Facts and Fancies of the Medical Life* (1894), recalling Doyle's first unsuccessful career as a general practitioner in the 1880s. 'The Case of Lady Sannox' is a hallucinatory tale of sexual mutilation that still has the power to shock for its exorbitant punishment of Lady Sannox. 'Lot No. 249' is one of many mummy tales that began to emerge in the late-Victorian era. England's relation to Egypt had been transformed in 1882, when decades of politicking and intrigue for influence over the government of Egypt were ended by the British military occupation of the country. It was the very beginning of an ideological commitment to imperial expansion, with Egypt a strategic seizure because it ensured control of the Suez Canal and thus routes to India. Just before this occupation came one of the most sensational archaeological discoveries in the nascent science of Egyptology: a cache of thirteen mummies of pharaohs, hidden long before by priests to protect the bodies from grave-robbers. The find included the body of Rameses II, widely held to be the pharaoh at the time of the Exodus led by Moses. This potent mix produced a fascination with the Egyptian undead—Rider Haggard popularized the form in 1889 with his novel *Cleopatra* and it was continued by Bram Stoker in *Jewel of the Seven Stars* in 1903. The mummy in Doyle's 'Lot No. 249' is undifferentiated—nameless and reduced to an ignominious lot number sold in an auction. Perhaps little more than a Gothic icon of transgression in this tale, the mummy nevertheless suggests another area where the Gothic tropes of revenge, inheritance, and the consequences of possession were reanimated by the particular imperial context of the late Victorian era.

Any anthology of this era needs to include some tales from France. For all the Decadent sins hinted at in English fiction, censorship made the English scene positively demur compared to France. The conservative commentator William Barry, writing in the Tory *Quarterly Review* in 1892 about Guy de Maupassant, Gustave Flaubert, and Théophile Gautier pronounced that such writers revealed 'a process of death, moral, intellectual and even physical, has set in among the French'. Someone, Barry hoped, would 'sweep these abominations from the earth'—or at least stop them before they reached England.¹⁵ The publisher of the English translations of

¹⁵ [W. F. Barry], 'The French Decadence', *Quarterly Review* (Apr. 1892), 504.

Émile Zola's Naturalist novels had already been prosecuted and his books withdrawn. In 1892, Wilde's play *Salomé* was refused a licence for performance, so he staged it in Paris. There, Decadence flowered in its most elaborate form, in the wake of the dissolute genius of Baudelaire and Gautier. At the heart of the *fin-de-siècle* scene in Paris was Jean Lorrain (1855–1906). Lorrain was a dandy, an exhibitionist, a self-advertisement for a scandalous life of absinthe, ether, and perverse sexuality. He wrote opinionated newspaper columns between 1890 and 1905 that mixed fiction, aesthetic discussion, gossip, and reviews. The reviews were often so vitriolic that his victims demanded recompense: he fought duels with the poet Paul Verlaine and a young first-time novelist called Marcel Proust. He was also introduced to Oscar Wilde in 1891, in the weeks that Wilde experienced the Decadent and homosexual worlds of Paris. On Wilde's arrest in 1895, Lorrain forced a French newspaper to retract a statement that Wilde and Lorrain were 'intimates'. Lorrain's later book, *Monsieur de Phocas* (1902), a confession of a dissolute Decadent and probably his best work, is clearly based on Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also contains a detailed portrait of a corrupting English aesthete whose 'voice gives birth to abominable suggestions within me'.¹⁶ Some suggest this is the story of Wilde's influence on Lorrain.

The two short tales included here reflect the conjunction of Decadence and the Gothic once more, but also show a different national development. The French tradition had incorporated the influence of the English Gothic, the stories of the German Romantic E. T. A. Hoffmann, and particularly (after Baudelaire's translations) the American Edgar Allan Poe. This heady brew produced the *conte frénétique*, which were macabre tales tinged with slightly hysterical humour. A new form, the *contes cruels*, emerged late in the century after Villiers de L'Isle Adam published his *Cruel Tales* in 1883. Lorrain's 'Magic Lantern' and 'The Spectral Hand' sit knowingly—almost wearily—at the end of these literary traditions. The first is a short reflection on the place of the fantastic in the modern world; the second a brief access into the occultism made fashionable by Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel of the Black Magic world in *La Bas* (1891).

Possibly the closest English fiction got to the explicitness of Parisian

¹⁶ Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, trans. Francis Amery (Sawtry, 1994), 85.

Decadence was *The Great God Pan* by Arthur Machen (1863–1947). It was famously denounced by the overexcited *Westminster Review* as ‘a nightmare incoherence of sex and the supposed horrible mysteries behind it, such as might conceivably possess a man who was given to a morbid brooding over these matters, but which would soon lead to insanity if unrestrained’.¹⁷ In fact, the fragmentary manuscripts that make up this text only hint: they are full of occlusions and silences because the various male narrators continually break down, unable to say what they have seen or experienced. Some survive by hoarding salacious secret documents. Many appear to die of unbearable terror, or possibly pleasure, or possibly both. Machen’s Gothic tales of the 1890s are full of doors shut firmly in our face, with only the barest suggestion of the unimaginable horrors that take place behind them. As a serious scholar of the occult, a close friend of the mystic and occultist A. E. Waite, Machen knew how to suggest, but never show.

Arthur Machen seemed to embrace obscurity. Although published in the Keynotes series by The Bodley Head, the defining Decadent series, he largely avoided the literary scene and he very soon strongly disassociated himself from the literature of the 1890s. He brilliantly evoked the strangeness of London, yet his work was saturated with longing for the Welsh landscape of his childhood, best conjured up in the tortured, Decadent prose of his novel, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). He had a brief moment of fame again in 1916, when his newspaper fiction appeared to generate the famous modern myths about spectral appearances seen by soldiers in the trenches, before sliding into obscurity once more. Yet Machen’s writing has since been rescued, and *The Great God Pan* has become the quintessential text of the late Victorian Gothic for many contemporary critics. The intensity of the tale comes from the way in which central Gothic themes converge on the figure of one elusive yet monstrous woman. The pagan gods are not dead, but can return to topple science with superstition and modern man with bestial pleasures that predate civilization. Many kinds of reversion permeate the story. The tale also neatly plays out the geographical drift of the Gothic from its first inception. Starting on the wild fringes or margins—in this case the ancient woodland of Gwent—the horror moves steadily towards the imperial metropolis and the centre of fashionable society. Like

¹⁷ Review cited by Machen in 1916 Introduction to *The Great God Pan*, reprinted by Creation Classics (London, 1993), 26.

Count Dracula's move from the Carpathian mountains via Whitby and Purfleet to Piccadilly, the Gothic relentlessly advances on the centres of urban civilization. London becomes a psychic topography, the grid of streets the map of disordered fantasy and forbidden desire.

The anthology ends with the genuinely unhinged tale, 'Vaila', by Matthew Phipps Shiel (1865–1947). Like Machen's *The Great God Pan*, Shiel's *Shapes in the Fire* was published in the Keynotes series by The Bodley Head, but the extremity of the writing derives from the clash of high and low styles. In many ways, Shiel exemplifies the Decadent style: his work is ornate, with elaborate constructions and a delight in obscure terminology, borrowings from other languages, and obsolete words. It is, as Arthur Symons defined Decadence, a 'learned corruption' of language. Shiel once claimed that 'The English language is like a vast collection of various coloured stones for mosaicking, and can express pretty well any idea or mental sensation.'¹⁸ Shiel's Gothic fiction, in that case, is something akin to crazy paving. This is because Shiel's Decadent ambitions clash with a lowly enthusiasm for the apparatus of the Gothic. It produced a style Shiel memorably described as 'beserk Poe with all genius spent'.¹⁹ Indeed, this early work predicts Shiel's trajectory towards pulp writing—he is perhaps now remembered for *Yellow Danger* in 1898, a virulently racist fantasy about the Asian threat to the European races that he retold in *The Yellow Wave* and again in *The Yellow Peril*. Some speculate that these texts derive from a mixed-race secret in Shiel's family (he was born in the British colony of Montserrat to an Irish preacher, and possibly mixed-race mother). Biography need not explain the insistently racial focus of the Gothic in the 1890s, however, as this Introduction has shown. 'Vaila', with its Northern settings, its dramatization of the last days of a noble, Northern aristocratic family, and its doomed castle and mouldering corpses, is full of the obsession with the destiny of the white race and the fears of degeneration and decline typical of the era.

The Gothic in the 1890s was marked by this fusion of styles, at a time when the distinctions of high and low literature, in their

¹⁸ Shiel, cited A. Reynolds Morse, *The Works of M. P. Shiel: A Study in Bibliography* (Los Angeles, 1948), p. xvi.

¹⁹ Shiel, cited Sam Moskowitz, *Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction* (Cleveland, Oh., 1963), 144.

modern conception, were just in the process of being formed. In this moment of transition there were some amazing cross-fertilizations, and the Gothic responded so well to this because it has always been a product of hybridity. Soon, the Gothic would become a pulp genre: M. P. Shiel, for instance, became the presiding influence on the American pulp magazine *Weird Tales* which began in 1923 and which fostered the talents of H. P. Lovecraft. Shiel's bibliographer confessed in 1948 that he could not trace a single copy of some editions of his books—books that Shiel had himself now forgotten he had written. This anthology attempts to recover from these losses, to expand the readership, and deepen the understanding of this fascinating phase of the history of the Gothic genre.

NOTE ON SOURCES

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- Oscar Wilde, 'Lord Arthur Savile's Crime: A Study of Duty', from *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* (London: James R. Osgood and McIlvaine, 1891), 1–74.
- Henry James, 'Sir Edmund Orme', from *The Lesson of the Master* (London: Macmillan, 1892), 262–302.
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