



“Fast lapsing back into barbarism”: Social Evolution, the Myth of Progress and the Gothic Past in Late-Victorian Invasion and Catastrophe Fiction

Ailise Bulfin

Abstract

While neo-barbarian dystopian futures are typically associated with contemporary popular culture, they were not, in fact, uncommon in late-Victorian popular fiction, especially in the politically charged, future-oriented popular fiction subgenres of invasion fiction and catastrophe fiction. Focusing on a representative tale from each subgenre – George Griffith’s *Olga Romanoff* (1894) and Richard Jefferies’ *After London* (1885) – this article shows how they made innovative use of the gothic to show the future following a large-scale war or natural disaster as a decline back into an exaggerated version of the barbaric past. Reworking the familiar gothic trope of doomed inheritance, the tales showed nemesis occurring not on an individual or familial level, but on an extensive societal scale in keeping with their sweeping narratives of mass death and its aftermath. In presenting a post-catastrophe relapse to barbarism, the tales were extrapolating from the social evolution theories of Herbert Spencer and Walter Bagehot which, though delineating the forward tendency of western social progress, allowed the fearful corollary that in periods of crisis advanced societies might also regress. While popular fiction’s engagement with theories of biological degeneration has been well researched, engagements with these theories of societal reversion have received less attention. Applying them to invasion and catastrophe fiction elucidates how the tales used their regressive futures to warn hubristic nineteenth-century modernity about its potential comeuppance if it continued to either aggressively militarise or unthinkingly exploit the non-human world, two major negative social tendencies which were the source of considerable contemporary anxiety.

Keywords

invasion fiction; catastrophe fiction; gothic; social evolution; barbarism; the past; progress; war; natural disaster; ecocriticism

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**“Fast lapsing back into barbarism”: Social Evolution,
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Invasion and Catastrophe Fiction**

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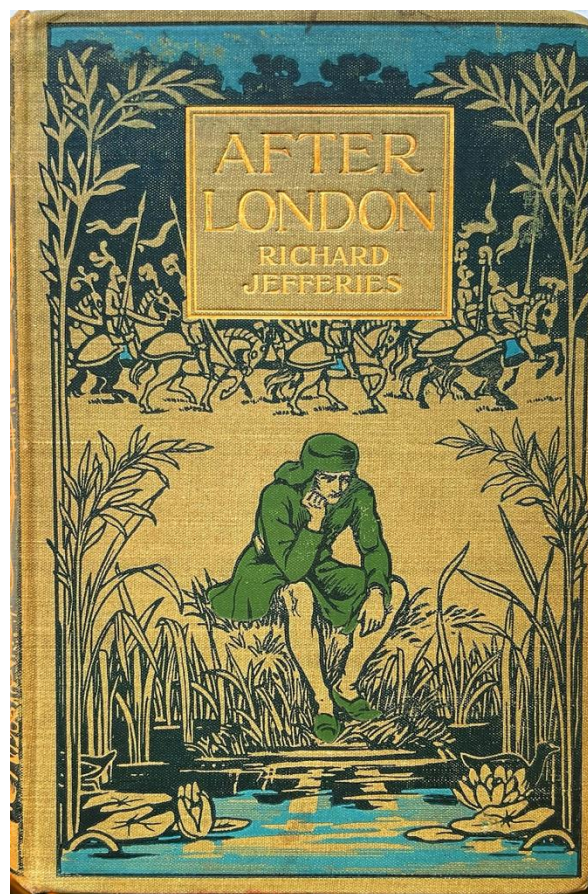


Figure 1: Cover of Jefferies, Richard. [1885] 1905.
After London; or, Wild England. London: Duckworth.
(Source: The author’s collection.)

The ornate cover of the 1905 edition of Richard Jefferies' *After London; or, Wild England* (1885) shows a young man by the waterside in what, despite the narrative's future setting, appears to be medieval garb, while serried knights in armour ride behind him (see figure 1). The explanation for this seeming paradox is the narrative's well-known premise that following a major catastrophe, English society has regressed to what is portrayed as a barbaric neo-feudal condition. While *After London* has often been approached as an isolated forerunning instance of this now common dystopian scenario, this was not an unusual plot trajectory in late-Victorian popular fiction. In fact, portrayals of mass societal reversion to purportedly primitive states of social order were reasonably common – especially in narratives which incorporated gothic elements – and they were underpinned by contemporary theories of social change emerging in the developing disciplines of sociology and political economy.

While the late-Victorian gothic is widely viewed as a genre preoccupied by the latest social and scientific developments, the extent to which popular tales with gothic elements employed contemporary theories of the past within their interrogation of the changes wrought by industrial-capitalist modernity has received less critical attention.¹ This article examines an innovative use of the gothic to create threatening versions of the past in two topical strands of late-Victorian popular fiction – the invasion tale and the catastrophe tale, the former engaging with the latest British geopolitical anxieties, while the latter articulated growing concerns about the impact of industrialisation. While invasion fiction and catastrophe fiction can be viewed as subgenres of the nascent genre of science fiction, both made substantial use of gothic conventions to intensify the sense of threat conveyed by their alarmist scenarios.² Focusing on an exemplary text from each strand – George Griffith's *Olga Romanoff; or, The Syren of the Skies* (1894) as the invasion tale (with a catastrophe finale) and Jefferies' *After London* as the catastrophe tale (with an invasion subtheme) – the article shows how these tales reworked the familiar gothic trope of doomed inheritance to deploy it not on an individual or familial level, but on a much more extensive societal scale to fit their sweeping narratives of mass death and its aftermath. Here the past, viewed through a distorting gothic lens, functions as the threat on which the plots turn as the narratives destabilised entrenched nineteenth-century assumptions of inevitable social progress to show a wholesale societal relapse back to “barbarism” as the result of large-scale war or catastrophe. In painting these dire scenarios of social reversion, the texts were extrapolating from the social evolution theories of influential thinkers such as the sociologist Herbert Spencer and political economist Walter Bagehot. Although the impetus of these theories was the elaboration of the forward progress of Western societies, they allowed as fearful corollary the possibility that in periods of crisis the polity might also regress to more primitive forms of social organisation.³

A key way in which the gothic interrogates its contemporary moment is through the central role it affords the past, which is never innocent in gothic narratives, but freights them with what Chris Baldick refers to as “a fearful sense of inheritance in time” (1993: xix). This rests on what Jonathan Dent describes as the genre's fixation with previous eras as dark and violent (2016: 2) – or, “history as nightmare,” as Robert Mighall has previously dubbed it (1999: 1). My focus is on the scaling up of these senses of the past in invasion and catastrophe fiction, when a past era – very frequently, the Middle Ages – is gothicised and presented as the awful fate awaiting an entire advanced society. In his well-known account of the early gothic, Baldick argues that the term was used to associate the medieval with the barbaric to

¹ For overviews of the late-Victorian gothic, see Margree and Randall (2012), and Luckhurst (2005).

² For more on the intersections between the two genres, see Wasson and Alder, eds. (2011).

³ I am using the term “Western” here, rather than Global North, to refer to the industrialising nations of Europe and the US, and some of their colonies, as this more closely reflects the nineteenth-century differentiation between east and west which is pertinent to my analysis.

denigrate everything that opposed the supposedly rational, modern, progressive values of northern Europe (1993: xii). As Fred Botting elaborates, it “conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices, of superstition, ignorance... and natural wildness” (2014: 21). More recently, Tom Hillard asserts that the gothic continues to be “rooted in an often misperceived sense of the past [as barbaric] into which present concerns, desires, anxieties, and fears are projected” (2019: 27). While the implications of this loading with the portentous past have been widely analysed in gothic texts, especially early gothic, this article instead examines gothic uses of the past in speculative, future-oriented late-Victorian invasion and catastrophe fiction.⁴ Here we will see how, with a twist on the typical temporal ploys of the gothic, distorted versions of autocratic past eras are proffered as the future nemeses awaiting hubristic industrial-capitalist nineteenth-century modernity – the threatened state to which Britain would relapse should global war or catastrophe occur.

Invasion Fiction, Catastrophe Fiction and the Gothic

The gothic is a versatile aesthetic mode, and its conventions, such as that of “history as nightmare,” are drawn on by many categories of writing not perceived as explicitly gothic, including invasion and catastrophe fiction.⁵ Invasion fiction typically imagined large-scale war and invasion erupting in Europe (and beyond) in the near future, and burgeoned in response to mounting tensions between the European imperial nations and increasing anti-colonial resistance across Britain’s empire in the period between 1870 and 1914.⁶ The tales exploited these geopolitical threats in sensational scenes of mass conflict and carnage aimed not just at driving book sales, but also at advocating for increased military preparedness by illustrating the dire consequences of complacency.⁷ Notable examples include General Sir George T. Chesney’s *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) and William Le Queux’s *The Great War in England in 1897* (1894), which depicted extensive land invasions of Britain, and H. G. Wells’s *The War in the Air* (1908), which imagined large-scale aerial warfare. Within these also Griffith’s extravagant *Olga Romanoff* can be placed, with its account of all-out global air war and the destruction of Europe’s capitals by Russia (allied with a reinvigorated Caliphate), before a concluding comet strike annihilates most of humanity.

In drawing on the gothic to depict these lurid events, *Olga Romanoff* falls within the remit of Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Steffen Hantke’s “War Gothic”, a theoretical lens which identifies the wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a founding influence upon the gothic (2016: xi), with the mode coming to provide an apt literary toolbox for depicting the horrific experience of war (Soltysik Monnet 2016: 22). Invasion fiction deploys this toolbox in many ways to convey the destructiveness of war and the brutality of the invaders, but here I want to focus on how it also relies for grim effect on gothic understandings of the past. Elsewhere, I’ve discussed the deep structural connections that can be drawn

⁴ For an extensive account of the gothicisation of the Middle Ages, see Mighall (1999). While this article shares Mighall’s (and others’) view that gothic fiction paints a dark picture of the medieval period, it diverges from Mighall’s related assertion that the gothic does not engage with the desires and anxieties of its contemporary era.

⁵ On the gothic’s versatility, see Sian Silyn Roberts’ distinction between the gothic as a modal “aesthetic and theoretical category” with “a set of textual conventions, or repeated motifs, tropes and settings” and as a lower-level “collection of subgenres ... anchored to specific cultural-historical preoccupations” (2013: 21).

⁶ On the politics of invasion anxiety, see Morgan-Owen (2017).

⁷ For key approaches to invasion fiction, see Melby (2020), Matin (2011), and Clarke (1992).

between fin-de-siècle invasion anxiety and the gothic – the mode, of course, deriving its name from the infamous “barbarian” invaders who overran the Roman empire, to the fate of which nineteenth-century Britain often looked regarding its own empire (Bulfin 2018: 16).⁸ In invasion fiction, while the historical barbarians at the gates were replaced by the modern armies of Britain’s enemies, one of the key ways in which the invaders were rendered terrifying was by portraying them not just as brutal but also as atavistic. For example, both the Russian invaders in *Olga Romanoff*, and the Chinese invaders across the whole repugnant “yellow peril” strand of invasion fiction, are depicted as issuing from regimes that are socially retrograde, displaying the despotism, fanaticism and cruelty which social evolution theorists habitually associated with past eras (as discussed subsequently). The inaccurate depiction of these societies can thus be interpreted as another version of the distortion of medieval Europe on which the gothic originally depended – so that the fear being played on here is that defeat by such forces will take enlightened, progressive modern Britain backward into this dreaded past. Indeed, this is the actual outcome of some of the more pessimistic invasion novels, such as Wells’s.

Like invasion fiction, catastrophe fiction had become a well-established strand of popular fiction by the late-nineteenth century. Depicting large-scale natural or manmade environmental disaster, it arose out of the contexts of intensifying population growth, resource extraction and industrialisation. As Victorian eco-criticism elucidates, awareness of the detrimental impact of Western development on the human and non-human worlds grew across the century and prompted increasing calls for remediation.⁹ Hence catastrophe tales shared with invasion tales an admonitory impulse – many imbricating natural and manmade causes for the catastrophes, and implying that humanity needed to change its environmentally destructive ways to avoid future disaster.¹⁰ Amongst the proliferation of such tales, Griffith contributed two more comet catastrophes, “The Great Crellin Comet” (1897) and *The World Peril of 1910* (1907), while other authors depicted volcanic eruption, earthquakes, smog, flood, and even forms of climate change.¹¹ These last include Griffith’s *The Great Weather Syndicate* (1906) in which the text’s antagonists are defeated by manufactured meteorological disasters; Henry Crocker Marriott Watson’s *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire* (1890), in which an anthropogenic shift in the Gulf Stream causes Britain’s climate to cool; and, arguably, Jefferies’ *After London* – although the catastrophe is never explained in Jefferies’ text, it involves sea-level rise which may be linked to a changing climate. Jefferies also penned two unpublished accounts of extreme freezes devastating London.¹²

As well as the admonitory impulse, catastrophe tales – as might be expected – shared with invasion fiction the tactic of sensationalising contemporary fears in order to shift copies. Thus they similarly deployed the gothic’s lurid toolbox to construct their spectacular set pieces of mass death and destruction – typically centring on ruined and corpse-strewn cities – and to

⁸ For more on the nineteenth-century tendency to interpret the trajectory of the British empire through the lens of Gibbon’s seminal *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, see Brendon (2007).

⁹ Pertinent recent ecocritical works include Mazzeno and Morrison, eds. (2019), Miller, ed. (2018), and Parkins, ed. (2018). As noted in these collections, Victorian understandings of environmental degradation can differ considerably from contemporary ones. As Steve Asselin explains, the non-human world was often valued for its ‘use-value’ for humanity, with degradation, therefore, amounting to mismanagement of resources (2019: 197-8).

¹⁰ For an analysis of the links between developing Victorian ecological concerns and the causes of the catastrophes in these tales, see Bulfin (2015).

¹¹ For a recent analysis of these tales’ impetus to “imaginatively halt” late-Victorian modernity, see Frost (2019).

¹² These were “The Great Snow” and “Snowed Up,” both written in 1876; the former is reprinted in Jefferies ([1885] 2017).

infuse the narratives with strong negative affect. As Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland aptly put it of the eco-gothic, through which lens these tales can be read, in the twenty-first century “human-caused environmental transition” (or rather, destruction) is “increasingly being expressed in terms tied to a distinctly Gothic lexicon” (2019: 6); however, this process was already well underway in late-Victorian catastrophe fiction. In defining the eco-gothic, Andrew Smith and William Hughes assert that the gothic, with its “language of estrangement”, enables “a critique of Romantic idealism” about “nature” (2013: 2), and in these catastrophe tales the non-human world is frequently presented as the source of death and ruin – violent and agentic, exacting just revenge on modern, industrial humanity. In terms of affect, Simon Estok argues that the dread engendered by eco-gothic narratives “takes meaning in our own sense of what we stand to lose as a species – art, ... philosophy, knowledge, technology, comfort, continued existence” (2019: 48). This too informs late-Victorian catastrophe fiction (and social theory, as discussed below), which, in addition to presenting the non-human world as threatening, is haunted by the fear that modern society will revert post-catastrophe to primitive barbarism; as, indeed, occurs in some of the bleaker tales.

Progress and the Gothic Past

Underpinning the nightmare visions of the past deployed in invasion and catastrophe fiction are – perhaps, counterintuitively – entrenched nineteenth-century conceptions of progress. As Sue Zemka puts it, “a belief in progress was so deeply embedded in nineteenth-century Britain that it was one of those beliefs for which there was no outside” (2018: 812). From scientific to social to intellectual development, all facets of British existence were believed to be on an inevitable upward trajectory, despite the possibility of encountering a few obstacles on the way. In the glowing terms of the influential Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay: “the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement” (1849: 2-3). Of particular relevance here is the way in which, as Ruth McAdams (following Michel de Certeau) puts it, the belief in progress was founded on “a specific historical claim about the distinction between antiquity and modernity... in which the past was ‘marked off by an evident and intelligible line’ from the present” (2018: 811).¹³ From this binaristic perspective, all past societies were deemed the primitive inferiors of modern Britain, the natural apex of progress. The concept of progress thus afforded a key framework for understanding the past in the nineteenth century – forming the subject of a “science of history”, as political economist Walter Bagehot referred to it in 1872, which would reveal “the laws of tendencies... which... incline the will of man from age to age” ([1872] 1915: 7). In the mid-century, such theories about how societies progressed, emerging in the disciplines of sociology and political economy, were influenced by developing biological theories of evolution to form what has been referred to as “social evolutionism”.¹⁴ The key tenet, as prominently advanced in the sociological treatises of the high-profile Herbert Spencer, was that just as biological organisms evolved from simple to more complex forms, so too ran “the evolution of the social organism” towards societal

¹³ The inner quote here is from Lord Acton’s lecture, “The Study of History” (1895).

¹⁴ Though these ideas are often referred to as “social Darwinism”, they are not strictly Darwinian, “[g]iven that Spencer [one of their key exponents] both minimised the role of natural selection and developed much of his theory before 1859”, see Paul (2006: 227) and Claeys (2000). For more on political and social extrapolations from Darwin’s theory, including social Darwinism, see Pick (2011).

perfection ([1857] 1868: 16).¹⁵ Building on this, Spencer proposed, in 1882, a two-stage model of social progress, beginning in simple, rigid, autocratic “militant societies” and culminating in complex, adaptable, participative “industrial societies”, with Britain most advanced along this trajectory.¹⁶

Although the initial “militant” stage was a necessary precursor to advancement, it was nonetheless lamented as a period of “bloodthirstiness, ... cruelty, [and] selfish trampling upon inferiors” of a kind which chimed with gothic treatments of the middle ages (1882: 630). And this similarity is no coincidence because in presenting the past as necessarily inferior to the present, the concept of progress rests on many of the same historiographical binary oppositions as underpin the gothic – modernity versus the past, advanced versus primitive, civilised versus barbaric, peaceful versus militant.¹⁷ From this perspective, Jarlath Killeen, following Baldick and Mighall, argues that gothic fiction can be seen as “an instrument of liberal thinking” similarly founded on the Whig interpretation of history as progress (2014: 50). And while Dent highlights how the early gothic challenged teleological Enlightenment historiography by focusing on the violence and primitiveness omitted by the decorous histories it produced (2016: 14-16, 55-7), the gothic still fed the progress mindset by showing the past as fundamentally barbarous.

In addition to demarcating past from present, the binaristic understanding of history underpinning social evolution theories also justified the differentiation of the modern, progressive West from the rest of the contemporary world through a rhetorical sleight of hand in which the latter was designated as static and hence trapped in the past. Bagehot’s two-stage model of social progress (which was very similar to Spencer’s) included an implicit intermediary stage in which larger ancient civilisations and modern “oriental” ones were equated as “arrested civilisations” whose punitive laws impeded progress ([1872] 1915: 27-37). Even the most admired past civilisations – for example, the Greek and Roman – were considered to be afflicted by absolutism and stagnation.¹⁸ So too contemporary non-Western societies such as China and Egypt, which were derided as the degenerate husks of once advanced civilisations.¹⁹ Though neither China nor Egypt were official colonies, late nineteenth-century Britain had considerable strategic interests in both, and this framing worked to justify both British claims of superiority and encroachments into each nation. John Rieder explains how the temporal hierarchies implicit in the discourse of progress formed a cornerstone of imperialist ideology: “Progress codes the non-European world in all its diversity, not simply as the Other, but in various ways as the veritable embodiment of the past – wild, savage, tribal, barbarous, despotic, superstitious” (2005: 375). What is notable here is

¹⁵ Duncan Bell describes Spencer as one of the most widely read political philosophers of the nineteenth century (2011: 886).

¹⁶ Spencer describes these two stages in the chapters “The Militant Type of Society” and “The Industrial Type of Society” in his major sociological work *The Principles of Sociology* (1874-96), in volume 2, part 5, “Political Institutions”, first published in 1882. Other theories of incremental societal development preceded Spencer’s – for example, those of Auguste Comte – but it was not until the 1850s that they began to be inflected by evolutionary biology theories of inherited characteristics, see Claeys (2000: 236).

¹⁷ On binaries in early gothic fiction, see Mighall (1999: 9), and in political thinking, see Stedman Jones and Claeys (2011: 2-3).

¹⁸ See Lord Acton on the “hopeless and inevitable despotism” of the “ancient nations” of Greece and Rome in his essay “The History of Freedom in Antiquity” ([1877] 1907:13-14).

¹⁹ Bagehot dubs contemporary “India, Japan, China, almost every sort of Oriental civilisation” “arrested civilisations” which have failed to progress ([1872] 1915: 35). Spencer compares the “pitiless tyranny” and “unchangeable customs” of contemporary India and China to those of “Europe during the Middle Ages” ([1854] 1868: 86-7).

not just that this reductive coding denigrated non-European peoples and justified Britain's "civilising" colonial mission, but also that it presented the past as a kind of homogeneous gothic epoch robbed of historical specificity.

As the characterisation of Egypt and China suggests, social evolution theorists did not view societal development as unilinear, but additionally postulated that societies could devolve from complex to more primitive or "barbaric" forms of social organisation. Here they were working on similar lines to the prominent pseudo-scientific theories about the biological degeneration of individuals, races or species back to more primitive physiological forms (which, as a wealth of scholarship has shown, fuelled so many gothic scenarios).²⁰ For example, Bagehot, discussing social convulsions such as the French Revolution, observed, in terms redolent of the late-Victorian gothic: "We see frequently in [political] states what physiologists call 'Atavism' — the return, in part, to the unstable nature of their barbarous ancestors" ([1872] 1915: 100).²¹ Spencer went even further to propose that social "retrogression has been as frequent as progression" ([1874-6] 1877: 106) and that even now a "retrograde movement towards [first-stage] militancy" was underway in Britain due to imperial rivalry (1882: 634). While these concerns were only briefly touched upon and scenarios of social regression afforded no detailed elaboration in Spencer's and Bagehot's work, they were certainly given full gothic expression in the invasion and catastrophe fiction this article explores. Complementing the rich vein of investigation into literary representations of biological degeneration, the focus here is instead on popular fiction engagements with the related fears of the retrogression of the polity.

Atavistic Tsarism in *Olga Romanoff*

Due to its convoluted plot and relative obscurity, *Olga Romanoff* requires a brief introduction. It is the sequel to Griffith's 1893 bestseller *The Angel of the Revolution*, which enlivens a predictable near-future Russo-French invasion-of-Britain plot by adding in an independent (anti-Tsarist, Russian-led) anarchist group which uses new aviation technology to overpower *both* warring sides and inaugurate a progressive Anglo-Saxon world federation. *Olga Romanoff* is set more than a century later (c. 2030), after the anarchists have established their own geographically isolated Anglo-Saxon "utopian" society, Aeria, and enforced global peace via their superior air-power. The novel opens as the beautiful but deadly last descendent of the Tsars, Olga Romanoff, steals the airship technology and attempts to reinstate an expanded Tsarist empire. In doing so, she sparks a second all-out global war which reduces the West's cities to rubble, before the aforementioned comet strike makes the war's outcome moot. The small body of scholarship on Griffith's two neglected novels tends to focus on their preoccupation with the ultra-modern – with high-tech weaponry and the latest geopolitical developments in *Angel* (Carver 2021; Bulfin 2018; Mollmann 2015; Wood 2015); and, similarly, with *Olga Romanoff*'s antagonist as a pioneering "woman of science" (Hroncek 2016: 6). Harry Wood's apt evaluation of *Angel* as "an eclectic mixture of anti-state rhetoric, Russian despotism, anarchist-nihilist revolution, and racial exceptionalism", applies equally to *Olga Romanoff*'s overblown plot and identifies Russian autocracy as a key concern (2015: 10). However, the striking use of the gothicised past, and particularly of perceived Russian atavism,

²⁰ Seminal scholarly works include Brantlinger (1988), Hurley (1996) and Pick (1989).

²¹ Paul identifies similar societal-level concerns in Darwin's *Descent of Man*, citing one of his more famous pessimistic conclusions: "Darwin warns, thinking of Bagehot and Henry Maine, 'the nation will retrograde, as has occurred too often in the history of the world. We must remember that progress is no invariable rule'" (2006: 220).

within these future-oriented tales has not yet been considered in any detail. The following section discusses how Griffith, particularly in *Olga Romanoff*, makes multifaceted use of the scaled-up trope of the nightmare past to paint autocratic Tsarist Russia as a retrograde relic of the barbaric past and a suitably sensational source of threat for his narratives.

In creating an exaggerated portrayal of Tsarism, Griffith was exploiting ingrained British popular prejudices about Russia.²² As Michael Hughes puts it, “For much of the nineteenth century, Russia was widely perceived as Britain’s ‘natural’ enemy, a backward and uncivilised country with designs on India” (2020: 121). Duncan Bell describes the discursive positioning of Russia as a “liminal societ[y]”, which, like China and Japan, “fell awkwardly between the categories of ‘civilised’ and ‘barbarian’” (2011: 870). In other words, despite its status as European imperial nation, Russia was subject to the same gothic temporal othering as contemporary “oriental” nations like Egypt and China, and was thus considered to be trapped in an autocratic past. Spencer cites it as his main example of a modern society that has not advanced beyond rigid militancy, its absolute ruler and punitive regime standing in marked contrast to the “progressing industrialism” of other European nations (1882: 584-6, 639). In the late century, burgeoning Russophobia sparked sympathy for a prominent group of exiled London-based Russian revolutionaries who were campaigning to highlight the iniquities of Tsarist rule (Hughes 2020: 124) – and this sympathy is reflected in Griffith’s positive portrayal of the anarchists in both novels. Anti-Russian sentiment was further exacerbated by 1890s geopolitics, as the series of agreements leading to the 1894 Franco-Russian alliance intensified perceptions of Russia as Britain’s foremost foe – which translated into a prominent role for Russia as invader in the decade’s invasion fiction.²³ Griffith drew on these Russophobic currents to vilify Tsarism in *Angel*, positioning the real-world Russian ruler Tsar Alexander III as the novel’s brutal antagonist, who wielded arbitrary “power of life and death, of freedom and slavery” over his subjects “to maintain as vile a despotism as ever insulted the justice of man” ([1893] 1894: 364). His dreaded victory would usher in a global “era of tyranny and *retrogression* [my emphasis]” (284) – with Tsarism being coded here, as in Spencer’s account, as the antithesis of progress. This also resonates with the indictments of Tsarism promulgated by the revolutionary exiles: the Tsar, to quote one high-profile campaigner, was “an eternal foe of human progress” (Peaker 2006: 12).

Griffith intensifies the threat posed by Tsarism in *Angel*’s twenty-first century-set sequel through the eponymous Olga Romanoff character, descendant of the tyrant Alexander III, who embodies all the regime’s ills. Cast as an arch-gothic villainess who hypnotises, poisons and enslaves the text’s Anglo-Saxon heroes, her iniquity is reinforced by a series of comparisons with agentic historic women typically reviled in Victorian culture: Cleopatra, Lucrezia Borgia, Messalina, Semiramis and, repeatedly, the expansionist Russian empress Catherine the Great ([1894] 1895: 15, 108, 28, 31, 147).²⁴ While her power ostensibly resides in the futuristic weaponry that is fetishized throughout the text (see figure 2) and her hypnotic skills are science-based rather than supernatural, in Olga’s own view her scheming makes her more like “a witch or a poisoner of the fifteenth century than ... a girl of the twenty-first” (54).²⁵

²² For an overview of late-nineteenth century British Russophobia, see Peaker (2006).

²³ Russia’s prominence as antagonist receded as Germany’s power grew in the early-twentieth century and following the 1907 Anglo-Russian rapprochement. See Linney (2017) on the nationalities of the invaders across the decades.

²⁴ For more on Victorian views of famous agentic women, see Hroncek (2016).

²⁵ On the fetishization of technology and especially weapons in Griffith’s two novels, see Carver (2021), Mollman (2015) and Wood (2015).

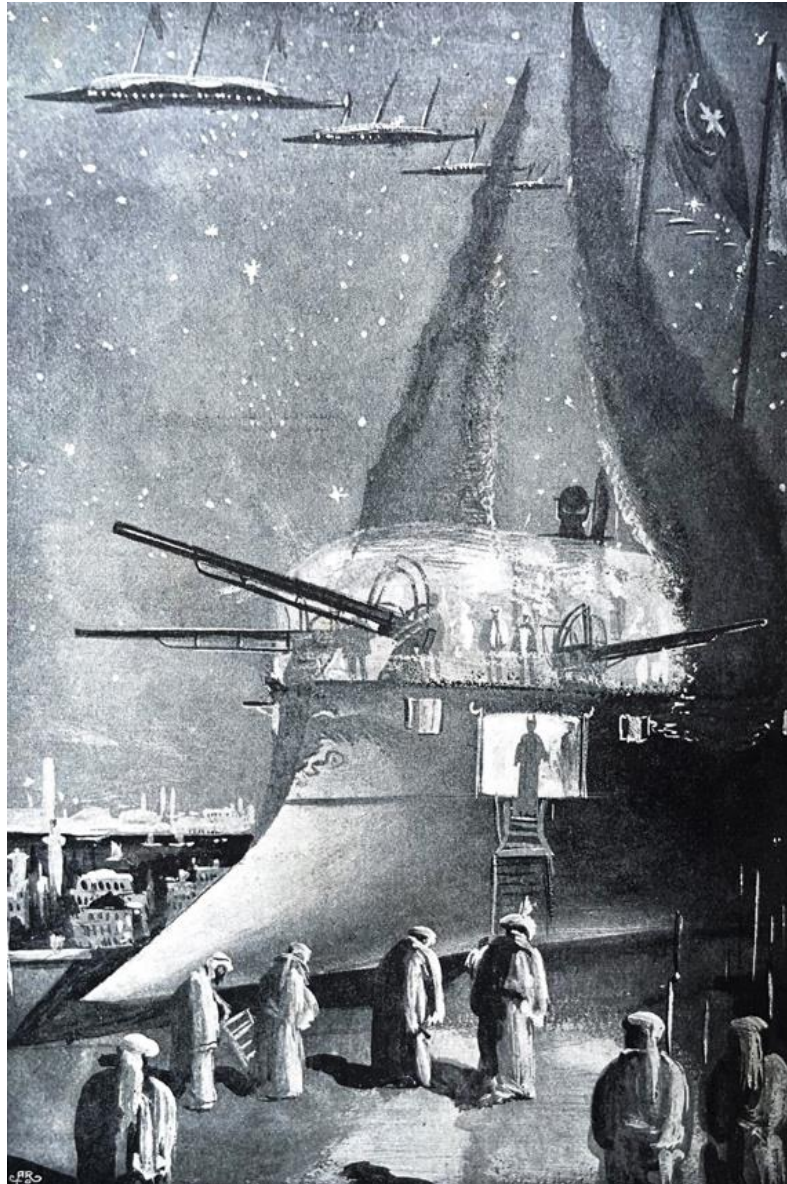


Figure 2: “Evil in Such a Shape Might Be Something More Than Good.”
 Frontispiece to George Griffith. [1894] 1895. *Olga Romanoff; or, the Syren of the Skies*.
 Illustrated by Fred T. Jane. 2nd edition. London: Tower.
 (The figure in the airship’s doorway is Olga Romanoff.)
 (Source: The author’s collection.)

On the world stage, her megalomaniac bid to “restor[e] ... the Romanoff dynasty” and re-inaugurate “an era of personal despotism and popular slavery” (129), entirely derails the course of global progress by destroying the Aerial-enforced peace. Should she win the war:

The old order of things, as it existed before the days of [Tsar] Alexander II. [1855–1881], [would] be completely reinstated. The lower orders of the people [would] be reduced once more to serfdom, and the trading classes to a condition very little better.

(130)

In other words, Olga would roll back even the limited progress Russia was deemed to have made in the nineteenth century by re-instating the barbarous institution of serfdom, which, as Spencer notes, had been abolished by Tsar Alexander II in 1861 ([1885-96] 1898: 491). Thus Olga's regime bears all the hallmarks of the despotism and militancy which characterise Spencer's developing societies, but which he also identifies as forces of social retrogression in established but chronically militant societies (1882: 572). As Marco de Waard puts it of liberal historian Leslie Stephen's account of progress, the "process of advancement can only be stopped by 'tyranny' or 'atrophied by some process of social decay'" (2011: 464), forces which Griffith painstakingly shows to be inherent in Tsarist rule. The demonisation of Russia frequently identified in Griffith's narratives (Hughes 2020: 121; Mollman 2015: 33) arises not just from generalised Russophobia, then, but out of this precise understanding of Tsarism as atavistic, a spectre of the nightmare past. Comparable with or perhaps worse even than gothic medieval Europe, Tsarist Russia threatens both as barbaric invader and as the retrograde political system that will be imposed on Britain if defeated.

Olga Romanoff's far-future setting adds complexity to the operation of the past as nightmare trope – more so than in *Angel* (and other near-future set invasion fiction) – because it renders contemporary Tsarist Russia not just atavistic, but as already the barbaric past of the text's early twenty-first century era. This accords with what Fredric Jameson argues is a key function of science fiction texts: that their imagined "futures serve the ... function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come", throwing the workings and flaws of the present (rather than the future) into clearer relief (1982: 152-3) – as Griffith clearly attempts with Tsarism. Nor does Griffith confine himself to castigating only contemporary Russia in this way. Rather, through a series of asides, paradoxically directed at the implied 1890s reader by the future narrator, nineteenth-century Western civilisation is cast as the primitive origins of Aerial society, which is "far advanced ... beyond the standards of the present day [i.e., the 1890s]" – beyond Britain's "hideous ... slums and sweating-dens", and beyond the "leagued despotisms" of Europe ([1894] 1895: 108, 35, 192).²⁶ What this narrative temporal paradox produces is a kind of palimpsest of barbaric pasts overwriting each other in the text, as nineteenth-century modernity is shown to be the nightmare past to which the advanced Aerials do not want to return.

A far deeper regression, however, occurs towards the end of the novel, following the ruinous Russian-instigated global war. Though Olga's Tsarist resurgence has been averted, in the text's temporally-conscious language, the "clock" has been "put back" (31) to a nightmare version of the past far worse than the 1890s:

The world, which ten years before [Olga's war] had been a paradise of peace, prosperity, and enlightened progress, was now a wilderness of misery and an inferno of strife, fast lapsing back into barbarism.

(335)

The art and science and culture of five hundred years had been forgotten in [a] few weeks of madness, and mankind had sunk back wholesale into the grossest superstitions of the Dark Ages.

(345)

²⁶ A nostalgic counter-current in the text occasionally valorises Britain's deeper Anglo-Saxon past.

Here Griffith could be dramatizing Spencer's and Bagehot's contentions that militarism and the resultant violent social upheaval can cause major social regression, and drawing on the inflated rhetoric of the war gothic to do so. (The preceding battles are recounted in similarly inflated terms.) On a deep level, these passages, like the text itself, are structured by the scaled-up past as nightmare trope which underpins one of the key admonitory gestures of invasion fiction – the warning that reversion to a purportedly barbarian past is the likely outcome of a world war which must be avoided at all costs. This lesson is illustrated in very similar terms in the cataclysmic conclusion of Wells's *The War in the Air*, in which “Europeanised civilisation”, ill-advisedly considered “a secure and permanent progressive system”, is obliterated by the global air-war (1908: 335, 346). The few survivors are forced back into a rudimentary neo-feudal existence, as “a universal social collapse followed, as it were a logical consequence, upon world-wide war” and “[t]he world passed at a stride... to a social fragmentation as complete as the robber-baron period of the Middle Ages” (353, 355). In *Olga Romanoff*, Tsarist Russia is not only placed on the wrong side of the historic line that divides absolutist antiquity from progressive modernity, but also becomes the agent of the latter's reversion to an immiserated pre-modern state. However, this is not the text's last word on the subject of progress, as the post-comet survival of a few select Aerians holds out the possibility of a rebooted Aerial utopia, to which we will return in conclusion.

***After London* and the ‘Relapse into Barbarism’**

Richard Jefferies was a nature writer as well as a novelist,²⁷ and *After London* can be read as an admonitory novel born out of his concerns about the ill effects of human activity on the “natural” or non-human world.²⁸ In the text, in a forerunning instance of the eco-gothic, Jefferies punishes nineteenth-century industrial-capitalist modernity for its destructiveness by reducing it to a primitive state of neo-feudalism via the agency of the non-human world in conjunction with anthropogenic pollution.²⁹ London's transformation into an uninhabitable swamp – following the unspecified catastrophe which depopulates England – is narrated with characteristically gothic excess through the imagery of ruin and rot:

For this marvellous city... was after all only of brick, and when the ivy grew over... [and] the waters underneath burst in, the huge metropolis was soon overthrown... all the rottenness of a thousand years and of many hundred millions of human beings is there festering under the stagnant water...

([1885] 1905: 48, 50)

Outside the toxic city, the (once again) wild countryside too becomes what Kate Neilsen describes as “a gothic environment in which boundaries [between human and non-human] are no longer intact” (2020: 208) – an apt setting for the social regression which follows London's fall. This is detailed in part I of the novel, entitled “The Relapse into Barbarism” – a phrase

²⁷ On Jefferies' nature writing, see Granata (2022), who identifies in it a complex ambivalence about the relationship between progress and the non-human world akin to that often observed in *After London*.

²⁸ For recent ecocritical readings of *After London* on these lines, see Tait (2021), Neilsen (2020), Frost (2019), Taylor (2018). For a counter perspective, see Manning (2020).

²⁹ On emerging Victorian understandings of pollution and the need to mitigate its effects, see Thorsheim (2017).

akin to that describing *Olga Romanoff's* post-war world and freighted with gothic connotations. It is key also to Jefferies' summary of the novel in an 1884 letter:

The first part describes the relapse of England into barbarism; how the roads are covered with grass... woods occupy the country... filled with wild animals... [t]he rivers are choked, and a great lake forms in the centre of the island.

Such inhabitants as remain... use the bow and arrow, and wear armour, but retain some traces ... of civilization. At the same time, slavery exists, and moral tyranny. There are numerous petty kingdoms and republics at war with each other. Knights and barons possess fortified dwellings, and exercise unbounded power within their stockaded estates...

(cited in Besant 1888: 208-9)

As implied by the summary, it is medieval feudal England that is gothicised to provide the threat in *After London*, in contrast to the atavistic Tsarism of *Olga Romanoff*. As John Brannigan observes, Jefferies' novel imagines the United Kingdom's disintegration and devolution back to "a rather familiar anarchic and violent past" which "return[s] to haunt a [greatly diminished] English people" (2015: 6, 2). While Griffith's sketch of post-war barbarism is brief, Jefferies renders the horrors of *After London's* devolved post-catastrophe society in much more detail than typically provided in these tales. To do so, he relies on two key narrative techniques: in part I, a future historian narrator explicitly documents the society's failings; and in part II, the text positions its protagonist within the society and conveys its brutality through his lived experience.³⁰

The social order painstakingly delineated by *After London's* future historian narrator shares many characteristics with the autocratic first-stage societies of Spencer's and Bagehot's theories.³¹ But, more specifically, it chimes with their pejorative accounts of the historical medieval period as a retrograde interlude which (though a necessary precursor to nineteenth-century modernity) reverted to the authoritarianism of "pre-Athenian times" due to its feudal social order (Bagehot [1872] 1915: 113).³² In Spencer's account of "Europe during the Middle Ages," "its governments were autocratic... feudalism held sway... the criminal code was full of horrors and the hell of the popular creed full of terrors" ([1854] 1868: 87). Serfdom and other forms of social bondage underpinned this system, "the feudal lord possessing his serfs and himself possessed by his suzerain" (Spencer [1885-96] 1898: 606). Here, the social theorists were drawing on a widely-endorsed nineteenth-century historical interpretation of English feudalism as a corrupt system characterised by "aristocratic disorder", "abuse of power", violence and social fragmentation (Pollard 2000, cited in Abels 2009: 1015). As Caroline Sumpter shows, Jefferies, from his note-books, appears to have held similarly negative views of England's medieval period (2011: 320-1); and in *After London*, English society is reduced to something akin to what the historian Macaulay referred to as the "state of ignominious vassalage" which predated England's industrial progress (1849: 1). As Jefferies' fictional historian laments, future England's rigid hierarchical society is dominated

³⁰ *After London* is structured around a similar narrative temporal paradox to that observed in *Olga Romanoff* (and other future-set fiction). While the narrator is a historian who is contemporaneous with the future society he is documenting (and in which the protagonist resides), he frequently appears to be addressing an audience unfamiliar with this society – which is, by implication, Jefferies' contemporary 1880s readership.

³¹ It also shares many of the characteristics of twenty-first century eco-dystopias, as set out in Hughes and Wheeler, eds. (2013).

³² While historians now emphasise the medieval period's diversity of social arrangements, in the nineteenth century its social order was classed as feudal, see Abels (2009).

by a tyrannical noble class, to which all other classes are beholden, and founded on bond-slavery and the arbitrary exercise of power. Divided into “numerous provinces, kingdoms, and republics” and riven by constant “wars and social convulsions” (Jefferies [1885] 1905: 32-3), it exists in what Spencer would class as a primitive state of “chronic militancy” (1882: 569). Menaced by internal and external threats, its embattled inhabitants shelter in fortified “enclosures” and “walled cities” from Welsh, Irish and Scottish invaders; rival statelets; escaped slaves; and “savage” groups of so-called “Bushmen” and “gypsies” (Jefferies [1885] 1905: 28, 30). Furthermore, as per the tropes of the eco-gothic, this beleaguered society continues to be assailed by the non-human world; by reinvigorated, agentic fauna and flora – “the trees of the vale [which] seemed as it were to invade and march up the hills” (6) – which entrap its living space and check its progress. This again resonates strongly with Spencer’s description of the effect of the “[c]hronic wars in early European days [which] repeatedly broke up the industrial organization [so that] the greater number of trades ceased to flourish [and] ‘the highways were so overrun with briars and thorns that it was difficult to discover the tracks’” ([1885-96] 1898: 366).³³

The contingent nature of life in this chronically violent society is conveyed through the experience of the protagonist, Felix Aquila, a young nobleman whose family home is a “fortified residence” which “might at any moment become a besieged garrison” ([1885] 1905: 69, 70). When Aquila loses the advantages of his class position, he experiences first-hand the iniquities of arbitrary power and enforced military service, toiling behind the battle lines amidst the “drawn and distorted” corpses of fellow serfs “hanged ... perhaps for a mere whim, since every baron had power of the gallows” (211). The narration of traumatic experiences like this, which “haunted [Aquila] for long after” (211), is coloured by his emotional responses of shock and dread in a way that the future historian’s detached account is not. Despite John Plotz’s convincing contention that *After London* is a naturalistic text which operates above and “below the level of experiential subjectivity” (2015: 33), there is no doubt that Jefferies’ novel invites readers to encounter this brutal society through its struggling protagonist’s senses, and in turn through those of its most exploited social class when Aquila’s social fall allows him “to see society from *their* point of view” ([1885] 1905: 219, original emphasis). The society that takes shape from this perspective is in a sense inherently gothic in that the gothic is rooted in exactly the kind of distorted version of medieval society that Jefferies presents. Just as Catherine Spooner argues that, “in Gothic texts ... the past ... chokes the present, [and] prevents progress and the march towards personal or social enlightenment” (2006: 18-9), so Jefferies’ narrator describes how the retrograde “division of [Aquila’s] society into castes, and the iron tyranny of arms, prevent[s] the individual from making any progress” ([1885] 1905: 147). This forces Aquila, after his narrow escape from servitude, to try to find a new way of living, taking the text in an unexpected direction, as we will see.

The disparaging view of the Middle Ages held by Jefferies, and the social evolution theorists, was not the only one current in nineteenth-century culture. Another strand of Victorian medievalism romanticised the period and produced works such as William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) – which, unlike *After London* (though inspired by it), turned future England into a kind of neo-medieval utopia.³⁴ Another work imagining a neo-medieval future and highly comparable with *After London*, is Watson’s *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*. In this novel, nineteenth-century social inequality and the cooling of

³³ The overrun tracks documented here are highly reminiscent of the greening of human thoroughfares at the start of *After London*. It is not clear, however, whether Jefferies read Spencer (or Bagehot) directly. His biographer W. J. Keith notes that he read widely in history and science in the 1870s, including Darwin and Lyell, but does not mention Spencer (1993).

³⁴ For more on this relationship, see Sumpter (2011).

England's climate (following the diversion of the Gulf Stream into the putative Panama Canal) combine to cause England's population to diminish drastically, leaving much of London submerged (again) under a large swamp. Watson's future English society is not a war-torn dystopia like Jefferies', but after a violent transition, "England [has] slowly decayed, and ceased to be a nation among the nations of the earth" (1890: 76). Underpinning Watson's critical portrait of the resulting primitive hierarchical agrarian-subsistence society is the same premise as that of *After London* – that catastrophes cause deserved social regression.

After London is, however – as several critics have noted – a complex, ambivalent text, and its damning account of nineteenth-century modernity's merited relapse into barbarism is not its last word on the subject of social evolution.³⁵ While Griffith in *Olga Romanoff* draws an unfavourable comparison between the nineteenth century and the purportedly utopian future society, Aeria, in *After London* something quite opposite occurs. Despite the narrative glee at its demise, industrial-capitalist nineteenth-century society proves, by implication, to be far superior to Jefferies' neo-feudal nightmare. It is, in marked contrast, orderly and secure – no Bushmen, Celts nor rival warlords menace its citizens; nor do the horrors of bond-slavery and arbitrary punishment. Furthermore, the "esteem" for "learning ... above all things" ([1885] 1905: 62) of "that age of highest civilization" (28) is favourably contrasted to the wilful ignorance of Aquila's society, in which learning was "most despised" (62) – a contempt characteristic of militant societies according to Spencer (1882: 600).

Amplifying *After London*'s ambivalence is the abrupt, optimistic conclusion in which Aquila's plans to effect his own progress by "enclos[ing] an estate" (97) are approvingly narrated:

During one of these excursions into the forest he discovered ... open woodland ... dotted with fine old oaks... A little clearing only was wanted to make the place fit for a castle and enclosure... A more beautiful spot he had never seen, nor one more suited for every purpose in life.

(294)

From an ecocritical perspective, two aspects of this passage are noteworthy – firstly, the extractivist view of the non-human world in terms of its use-value for human purposes; and, secondly, the presence of the key term "enclosure". At face value, enclosure here refers to the clearing, shutting in and converting to agricultural usage of a small area of wild land. However, it also connotes the more formal system of amalgamating and closing off existing common land from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, which is viewed as one of the major social developments that instigated the transition from feudalism to early capitalism (McNally 1988: 11).³⁶ Jason Moore, in setting out his theory of the "Capitalocene" – as the epoch in which the all-encompassing socio-economic-ecological system of capitalism began to radically transform the earth's surface – argues that capitalism's negative impact on the non-human world begins not with the Industrial Revolution but with the crisis at the end of the European medieval feudal period, out of which he sees the structures of early capitalism rising (2017, 2003). According to Moore, one of the ways "western Europe's landlords responded to the

³⁵ Many critics identify a marked ambivalence in *After London* about progress, human nature, human-nature relations and modernity – see, for example, Tait (2021), Manning (2020), Frost (2019), Plotz (2015), Sumpter (2011) and Rieder (2008).

³⁶ Marx, of course, famously formulated a socialist version of this account of social evolution in *Capital* ([1867] 1887). For a reading of Jefferies' work as critiquing socialist theories of progress, see Davies (2022).

[feudal] agrarian crisis [was] by enclosing common lands and shifting from arable to animal husbandry, especially sheep-raising” (2003: 123) and also by increasing forest enclosures (2017: 22, 2003: 135). (These unsustainable agricultural practices required ever more land, fuelling the European geographical expansion which underpinned capitalism’s emergence.) Jefferies, who was not just a “wild” nature writer, but an expert, farm-born commentator on agricultural methods and trends (Granata 2022: 103-4, 106), was unlikely to have been unaware of the full implications of the practice of enclosure. Given that Felix’s valorised schemes entail both forest enclosure and intensified sheep farming (which latter Moore closely associates with England’s shift to capitalism (2003: 124)), he can be read as a figure embodying the transition to early capitalism, imbued with the potential to catalyse just such a social revolution in his own neo-feudal society. Read in this light, *After London* expresses narrative approval for the very underpinnings of early capitalism that brought about the late-nineteenth century version, which so deeply troubled Jefferies,³⁷ but which *After London* implicitly validates.³⁸

The critical consensus on *After London*’s ambivalence seems to be that the text ultimately presents human nature as flawed and unchanging, confining social development to abortive cycles of decline and fall³⁹ – a recursive, gothic historical perspective antithetical to teleologies of progress. Mark Frost, for example, usefully summarises such interpretations, and himself concludes that “even beginning again imaginatively in *After London* proves pointless for Jefferies, who sees human nature as irredeemable” and offers “the bleakest diagnosis of human civilization” (2019: 255, 259). However, a counterpoint to this static view of humanity can be found in the transforming and transformative figure of Aquila, who rises above his society’s ignorance through self-education and immersion in the non-human world, developing an abolitionist perspective during “solitary intercommunings in the forest” (287). In Aquila’s hard-won *bildung*, and in his attempts to create a more egalitarian way of living with the shepherd tribe who eventually adopt him, is the suggestion that a new version of enclosure instigated by such a promising founder may be an improvement on the nineteenth century’s antecedents, facilitating true social evolution. In this possibility, Jefferies’ text resonates with theories of social evolution that blended the cyclical and linear models of history to allow for progress within the cyclical, with each new cycle improving on previous ones by advancing humanity a little further. Bagehot describes this as:

“the connective tissue” of civilisation... the continuous force which binds age to age, which enables each to begin with some improvement on the last, if the last did itself improve; which makes each civilisation not a set of detached dots, but a line of colour, surely enhancing shade by shade.

(1872: 6)

The possibility that such a counter-current lurks within *After London* is supported by key moments which Silvia Granata identifies in Jefferies’ nature writing, in which he laments the brutalities of the past, commends the peaceful nature of the present day, and, in Granata’s interpretation, puts his trust in a future in which progress does not take place at the expense of the non-human world (2022: 110-11). Thus, it is possible that the predominantly pessimistic

³⁷ For Jefferies’ views on the ills of nineteenth-century modernity and, particularly, of London, see Frost (2017: 26-9).

³⁸ This is echoed on a smaller scale in the comparable narrative approval for Aquila’s father’s crop-yield improvements on his baronial estate (145-6).

³⁹ This view is espoused, to differing extents, by all the critics listed in note 35 above.

After London countenances the inescapable theory of progress – ideological cornerstone of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism – more than it seems to on the surface.⁴⁰

Ambivalence about progress is also detectable in the more upbeat *Olga Romanoff*, as the utopian Aerial society – acme of progress – is destroyed at the end by the comet strike, which causes a further global regression from post-war “barbarism” back to some kind of nightmarish primeval time:

The once verdure-clad mountains rose up bare and gaunt and blackened... unrelieved by a blade of grass... It seemed as though the clock of Time had been put back through countless ages and the world was once more as it had been before the first forms of life appeared upon it.

(372)

Griffith’s novel too, in brief moments – notably, when relating the Anglo-Saxon states’ pre-war failure to maintain the Aerial peace (103) – appears to endorse the gothic view of an unchanging humanity mired in cycles of decline that overhangs *After London*. However, in a final *volte-face*, *Olga Romanoff* pulls back from primeval sterility to suggest that the few surviving Aerials may regenerate the human race and thus recreate their utopian society on a species-level scale, as “the world was waiting to begin its life anew” (373). This conforms to a key trope of the catastrophe genre which I refer to as “mass extinction as progress”; in other words, in many of these texts, the catastrophe functions to clear away the purportedly flawed mass of current humanity allowing a more highly evolved future race to develop from the small group of superior survivors.⁴¹ While this is a highly dubious form of eugenicist optimism that the more nuanced and pessimistic *After London* avoids, it is one that Griffith is willing to embrace in *Olga Romanoff*, in which, despite many sensational setbacks, progress seems poised to win out over the nightmare past in the end.

Conclusion: Modernity and the “Progress Unconscious”

In keeping with the admonitory impulses underpinning both strands of fiction, the invasion and catastrophe tales discussed here created threatening versions of past eras to warn hubristic nineteenth-century modernity about the impending checks to its progress if it continued either to aggressively militarise or unthinkingly exploit the non-human world, two major negative social tendencies which were the source of considerable contemporary concern. Examining how the tales made extensive use of gothic conventions to hammer home the warning that societal reversion would follow as the logical consequence of large-scale war or catastrophe, among other things, sheds new light on the ways in which the gothic was being developed at the fin de siècle. The prevailing critical understanding of the late-Victorian gothic as updating the early gothic to turn on threats from its contemporary moment (for example, those posed by the “new woman,” the urban poor or colonial subjects) needs to be expanded to take into account the recurrent deployment of the distorted past in

⁴⁰ While Tait (2021) and Taylor (2018: 128-9) see some grounds for optimism in *After London*’s open-ended conclusion – which is, Tait argues, “utopian by virtue of [its] refusal to close off the possibility of what is yet to come” (79) – this very optimism is what yokes the plot’s trajectory to the logic of the progress myth.

⁴¹ For an overview of texts which follow this logic, see Bulfin (2015). On the strongly raced dimension of these survivor groups, see Steve Asselin, ‘The Providential Genocides: Racial Survival and Acts of God in Fin-de-Siècle Apocalyptic Fiction’ (working title), forthcoming in *VPFJ*.

the gothic adjacent texts examined here. While pressing concerns about invasion and exploitation created the obvious narrative tension, what is innovative is their pairing with the shadowy double of the nightmare pasts they will precipitate. Also novel is the societal-level scale of the threats, evident in the tales' recurrent scenarios of mass movement, violence and death, which arose out of what Nicholas Daly terms "the demographic imagination" – referring to the nineteenth century's sustained population growth and consequent tendency to think in mass terms (2015). Arguably, the gothic needed to be updated in this way – through the scaling up of the past as nightmare trope – in order to be suitable for dealing with the concerns of a mass society.

Through their use of the gothic to construct fantasies of future catastrophe and mass social reversion, Griffith and Jefferies were able to express profound misgivings about modernity and its exceptionalist narratives of inevitable progress. In doing so, they invited readers to question assumptions about the upward trajectory of their own societies by showing how precariously established they were, how quickly they could disappear in the face of catastrophe. On the other hand, in aggressively presenting the past as the underlying source of threat – the nightmare to which we do not want to return – these ambivalent tales implicitly shored up the liberal assumption that society, or, at least white Western society, is always inevitably progressing to a more perfect state. This is a highly problematic assumption, which as Zemka points out (2018: 814), had strong links with nineteenth-century racial pseudo-science and helped legitimate the industrial-capitalist system's exploitation of colonised nations and the non-human world.

Progress, of course, remains an entrenched idea today,⁴² and we do not have to look far into our own culture to find similar uses of the gothic past as nightmare trope which may (unintentionally) work to bolster it. For example, it is key to what may be termed neo-Victorian "misery pornography" – texts, such as *Ripper Street* (2012-16) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-16), which wallow in various aspects of nineteenth-century hardship. As per *After London*, these series by implication show the present as far superior to the gothic past, lending support to the myth of progress.⁴³ Now, as in the nineteenth century, this culturally pervasive "progress unconscious" acts as an impediment to the kinds of radical systems change needed to address modernity's challenges.

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⁴² For an overview and critique of Steven Pinker's popular twenty-first century iteration of the progress narrative, see Dwyer and Micale (2021).

⁴³ Other examples include *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015-17) and *The Alienist* (2018-20), both of which deploy the disturbing "child brothel" trope as a simplistic shorthand for conveying how nightmarish life in the nineteenth century was. The implicit logic here is that the Victorian past was a dreadful time when such exploitation was rampant, by comparison with an orderly present in which it has largely been stamped out – an assumption which is sadly incorrect as child sexual exploitation is currently on the rise across Europe (*EU strategy* 2020).

List of Figures

Figure 1: Cover of Richard Jefferies. [1885] 1905. *After London; or, Wild England*. London: Duckworth. (Source: The author's collection.)

Figure 2: "Evil in Such a Shape Might Be Something More Than Good." Frontispiece to George Griffith. [1894] 1895. *Olga Romanoff; or, the Syren of the Skies*. Illustrated by Fred T. Jane. 2nd edition. London: Tower. (Source: The author's collection.)

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