Introduction

We begin with a play and a party. In December 1899 *The Ghost*, a play by
Henry James, Robert Barr, George Gissing, H. Rider Haggard, Joseph
Conrad, H. B. Marriott-Watson, H. G. Wells, Edwin Pugh, A. E. W.
Mason and Stephen Crane, had its first and last performance in a village
schoolhouse in Sussex.[1] Besides the eponymous ghost, the *dramatis
personae* seem uncannily familiar, including as they do a Dr Moreau, a
Peter Quint and, with a nod to Gilbert and Sullivan, 'Three Little Maids
from Rye'. To mark the arrival of the new century, Crane had invited a
large party, including some of the authors of *The Ghost*, and other
well-known men of letters, to spend Christmas and New Year's Eve with
him and his wife at Brede Place, near Rye, a partly modernized
medieval manor house. In his *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), H. G.
Wells tries to evoke the spirit of the occasion:

I remember very vividly a marvellous Christmas Party in which Jane and I
participated. We were urged to come over and, in a postscript, to bring any
bedding and blankets we could spare . . . We were given a room over the main
gateway in which there was a portcullis and an owl's nest, but at least we got a
room. Nobody else did – because although some thirty or forty invitations had
been issued, there were not as a matter of fact more than three or four
bedrooms available . . . Later on we realized that the sanitary equipment . . .
dated from the seventeenth century . . . and such as there was indoors, was
accessible only through the Girls Dormitory [sc. the nickname given to the
large bedroom used by the women guests]. Consequently the wintry country-
side next morning was dotted with wandering melancholy, preoccupied, men
guests . . . I remember that party as an extraordinary lark – but shot, at the
close, with red intimations of a coming tragedy . . . When we were not dancing
or romping we were waxing the floor or rehearsing a play vamped up by
A. E. W. Mason, Crane, myself and others.[2]

One of the festive highlights was the performance of this 'vamped up'
play, a Gothic burlesque based on the story of an ancient giant who
haunted Brede Place in halves, having been sawn in two by the men of

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Kent and Sussex in former times. A. E. W. Mason had composed a rough outline, which Crane then circulated among his literary acquaintances, asking them to add a line or two. For instance, as Crane's biographer, R. W. Stallman, recounts, 'Joseph Conrad contributed one line to the play: ''This is a jolly cold world'', and George Gissing another: ''He died of an indignity caught in running after his hat down Piccadilly''.'[3] Wells recalled that 'it amused its authors and cast vastly [though] [w]hat the Brede people made of it is not on record'.[4] Only a few pages of this odd collaborative effort survive, Crane never intending the play to be performed again. The festivities themselves ended suddenly on a tragic note when Crane, who had tuberculosis, suffered a haemorrhage from which he was never fully to recover. Wells was called on to summon help: 'There was a bicycle in the place and my last clear memory of that fantastic Brede House party is riding out of the cold skirts of a wintry night into a drizzling dawn along a wet road to call up a doctor in Rye'.[5]

I have chosen to begin this study of late Victorian and Edwardian popular fiction and its relation to British culture with this amusing yet poignant literary episode because it shows the distinctness of this period in British cultural history in two ways. In the first place the party illustrates the emergent trends at the moment of what Andreas Huyssen has called the 'great divide' between elite and mass culture.[6] At first glance, the party at Brede Place appears to provide a tragicomic echo of a famous episode associated with the popular fiction of an earlier era: the party at the Villa Diodati near Geneva in 1816 at which Shelley, Mary Godwin, Lord Byron and John Polidori spun Gothic tales to pass the time, producing two of our most resonant literary figures – Victor Frankenstein's patchwork monster and the aristocratic vampire. While it is tempting to see Crane's party as a late Victorian Gothic counterpart to that original Gothic gathering, it is the *difference* between the popular adventure romances of the late nineteenth century, described by some recent critics as 'imperial Gothic', or 'urban Gothic', and that older Gothic fiction, that will provide one of the points of departure for this study. In its illustration of the gap between the literary culture of the Romantics and that of the late Victorians, Crane's party emblematizes that difference. The Brede Place episode does replay some of the themes of the Romantic original, but in a different key: despite the Gothic trappings and setting, it was very much 'nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance'.[7] For one thing, the performance of *The Ghost* smacks more of advertising than of spontaneous yuletide amusement. These

were scarcely *private* theatricals: notices appeared in the *Daily Chronicle*, *The Manchester Guardian* and such local papers as the *South Eastern Advertiser* and the *Sussex Express*.[8] Likewise, the appearance of the play's title page in *The Academy*, a contemporary literary magazine, more suggests a carefully orchestrated publicity stunt than a simple *jeu d'esprit*. I do not mean to imply that what separates late Victorian fiction from the Gothic or Romantic fiction of Polidori or Mary Shellley is that one is the product of a commercial literary culture while the other is not. Obviously the Romantics were also part of a commercial literary culture – the attribution of one of the Villa Diodati stories, Polidori's 'The Vampyre', to the best-selling Byron was in itself a clever piece of marketing, for instance. Nevertheless, a system of publicity of the sort that Crane was exploiting in 1899 was predicated on a literary market of a much greater scale and complexity than that of 1816. The Brede Place episode, in other words, was oriented towards a nascent literary 'mass market', though this term is not altogether satisfactory, as we shall see. This transformation of the late Victorian literary market, memorably evoked in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), entailed, among other things, the disappearance of the three-decker novel, the waning of the power of the circulating libraries, and the appearance of a new strain of light periodical literature after the fashion of George Newnes's *Titbits*. More generally, the emergence of a literary mass market was, of course, part of the development of modern consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Britain. These nascent trends represent the context for Crane's play-cum-publicity stunt, and indeed for all of the texts I will be looking at in this study.

The second reason for my selection of the Brede Place episode as a curtain-raiser is that while it indicates the emergent mass-market tendencies of this literary culture, what was most 'modern' about it, it also very clearly shows some residual features that would soon vanish. Crane's theatrical New Year's house party represents one of the last appearances on the stage of history of a decidedly Victorian ensemble. What strikes us now as curious is the collocation of 'significant' writers (James, Conrad, perhaps Wells) with writers whom we associate with a very different brand of literature (Haggard, Mason, Barr). What, we might ask, are the authors of such proto-modernist works as *The Golden Bowl* and *Heart of Darkness* doing, collaborating and socializing with the writers of *King Solomon's Mines* and that archetypal imperial melodrama, *The Four Feathers*? We don't, however, have to resort to a theory of the special cultural space of parties to explain this conjunction of disparate

talents. Rather we need to adjust our literary-historical perspective. For what we see now as a chasm between two distinct literary cultures, the great divide, was scarcely more than a crack in 1899. In many respects this was still a homogeneous literary culture. We can scarcely imagine Virginia Woolf and Edgar Wallace taking up the cudgels over the proper vocation of the novel twenty years later, but in the late nineteenth century it was possible for a champion of realism like Henry James and a defender of romance like R. L. Stevenson to do just that.[9] Authors whom we now see as 'serious' and those whose names we have all but wiped from the slate of literary history, or consigned to the nursery as writers of children's literature, debated the merits of their particular schools, but they did not see themselves as *radically* different in kind. They wrote for the same magazines, were published by the same houses, and, in the case of the men at least, sometimes belonged to the same clubs. The proto-modernist Henry James was a close friend of two of the most significant 'romancists': Robert Louis Stevenson and George Du Maurier. (In fact Du Maurier offered James the germ of the story that later became the best-selling *Trilby*, though James never used it.)[10] Joseph Conrad's work appeared in mainstream periodicals like *Blackwood's*, not in 'little magazines' of the kind that flourished when high modernism came into its own. Similarly, while one of the best-known *fin-de-siècle* periodicals, *The Yellow Book*, may look like a late Victorian anticipation of modernist literary reviews, its authors were far from constituting a 'movement' of the modernist sort, including as they did figures such as Baron Corvo and the young John Buchan as well as those more anxious to shine in the high aesthetic line. While the popular late Victorian adventure romance may look forward to the modern bestseller, then, it appeared in a literary market that was still comparatively undifferentiated. This would soon change.

THE ROMANCE AS POPULAR MODERNISM

To move from the curtain raiser to the main performance, in this study of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century popular fiction I will be arguing that this fiction in effect takes over from the domestic realist novel as the narrative flagship of middle-class Britain. Far from providing mere light entertainment, I will suggest that such popular fiction filled an important cultural role in turn-of-the-century Britain. This then, is an attempt at a cultural study rather than a strictly literary one, and, as will be evident, it owes more than a little to both the

American and British strains of cultural studies. I have described my focus as 'popular fiction', but the latter is a far from transparent term. The connection between the object of study and my cultural studies approach provides one way of thinking about this opacity. Indeed it would be possible to trace a pre-history of cultural studies by following the changing fortunes of the label 'popular' in twentieth-century literary and cultural theory.[11] Arguments over the term 'popular' have very much turned on the question of cultural function: if on the one hand the term 'popular' suggests some noxious pulp canned by the sinister 'culture industry' decried by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, on the other it may suggest the putative opposite of this, some residual, resistive core of working-class practice of the sort celebrated in the work of, say, E. P. Thompson. One aim of this study is to question the assumptions behind the former usage: far from being pure pulp fiction, I want to argue that the romance played an important part in British culture as a form of narrative theory of social change.[12] However, I am certainly not using the term 'popular' in the Thompsonian sense either, since what I am describing as popular fiction could perhaps be more accurately termed popular *middle-class* fiction, insofar as it was produced by, broadly speaking, middle-class writers for a middle-class reading public.

In the last fifteen years or so the Hobson's choice of Frankfurt School pessimism or 'folk' optimism has been superseded by a very different conceptual frame. As Tony Bennett points out, the impact of the work of Antonio Gramsci on British cultural studies has meant that popular culture is more often theorized as a field of struggle rather than any particular set of texts or practices.[13] More specifically, popular culture comes to be defined as the site where a dominant culture and a subordinated culture collide. For Stuart Hall, for example, 'what is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define "popular culture" in a continuing tension (relationship, influence, antagonism) to the dominant culture'.[14] We cannot identify, therefore, a set of practices or texts that is always essentially popular, or oppositional; the dominant culture can assimilate the artifacts of an oppositional culture, and indeed, aspects of the dominant culture can be given an oppositional edge.[15] It follows that from this perspective there is no possibility of 'rescuing' some authentic, fully autonomous essence of the popular; rather the popular inhabits that grey area where the less powerful confront, adopt, adapt, or even reject the ideologies of a more powerful group.

This same emphasis on popular culture as a space of negotiation between terms rather than as a fixed set of texts, or images, or practices characterizes the rather different cultural studies approach of John Fiske. For Fiske:

Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant . . . There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic force. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict. . . .[16]

For Fiske, therefore, 'there can be no popular dominant culture'.[17] While in part resembling Hall's description of popular culture as an arena of struggle for position between classes, Fiske's theorization of popular culture has more in common with Michel de Certeau's account of popular practice in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where de Certeau describes the tricks, ruses and adaptive practices by which the subordinated resist the encroachments of the state, the ' "ways of operating" [that] constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production'.[18] To this extent Fiske's popular culture sometimes seems to shade into a resistive, authentic working-class culture, though like Hall, Fiske seems reluctant to identify popular culture exclusively with the working class (or indeed any class).

While extremely suggestive, none of these formulations exactly describes the way in which I wish to theorize the adventure fiction of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. In fact what I want to argue for is something resembling that 'popular dominant culture' whose very existence Fiske denies. Writers like Stoker, Haggard or Du Maurier were not from a subordinate class, nor were they writing for such a class. To that extent they may appear to be part of that somewhat loosely defined dominant culture referred to by Hall and Fiske. But within that dominant culture they can scarcely be seen as representatives of 'high' or 'official' culture. The work that they produced would have been read by a broad section of the middle class, but it would probably have been thought of as 'light' literature rather than as anything more demanding or rewarding (the reception of R. L. Stevenson may be seen as a partial exception in this respect). John Frow has argued that in the late twentieth century the terms 'high' and 'low' no longer define different, class-linked, types of culture, but divisions within all cultural domains. That is to say both 'popular' (e.g. television) and 'highbrow' (e.g. opera) forms

may be approached from the stance of the expert or that of the casual consumer. While middle-class culture at the end of the nineteenth century was more homogeneous than it is now, we can see that at both the level of production and consumption it was marked by some degree of aesthetic stratification. To this extent the phrase 'popular middle-class culture' does not seem to me to be oxymoronic. Thus while I shall continue to use the term 'popular', *faute de mieux*, to designate the texts under discussion, my use of the term does not exactly correspond to its use in the work of Hall or Fiske. If the late Victorian and Edwardian era can be analysed in terms of a jockeying for position between a dominant and a dominated culture, the texts I will be discussing here belong on the side of the dominant; I will not be reading them for the signs of subaltern 'resistance'.

It might seem more logical at this point to replace the term 'popular' with the less ambiguous 'middlebrow', but there are a number of other reasons for retaining the more ambiguous term. It is worth noting that Hall develops his definition of the popular as a relation rather than an essence in tandem with a discussion of British culture between the 1880s and the 1920s, which is at once the period of the romance revival and the period of the appearance of the modern 'culture industry'. Hall suggests that this is the moment when something resembling an autonomous working-class culture is reshaped by the expansion of the news media and other facets of the culture industry. The same, I would argue, is true of middle-class culture in this period. If the romance revival begins as part of a more or less identifiable popular middle-class culture, these origins do not determine its later fate; the iconic figures of the romance revival, such as Dracula, or the mummy, Dr Jekyll or indeed Dr Moreau, quickly find new roles within a popular culture less easily broken down in terms of its class address.[19]

In addition to shifts in the marketing and reception of traditional print media, there is a shift in the very modality of narrative. This was also the moment when the boundaries between middle-class and working-class culture were cut across by a powerful new medium: cinema. The narratives and figures of the popular middle-class fiction under consideration in this study gain a new currency when they become important components of that new medium as it enters its narrative fictional phase. Turn-of-the-century popular fiction, then, like the party at Brede Place, looks backwards to the nineteenth century as well as forwards to the more unstable terrain of present-day international popular culture.

Even in the 1880s just where the 'middle' might be was increasingly in doubt. The middle class expanded and changed in these years due to a number of factors. One of these was the increase in numbers engaged in white-collar, clerical occupations (attracting women as well as men). At the end of the nineteenth century, the novel continued to be a middle-class form, as it had largely been from its eighteenth-century beginnings, but its middle-class readers were not in any simple sense the direct heirs to those who earlier embraced Richardson's *Pamela*, or even Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Late Victorian and Edwardian writers themselves considered this shift and its implications for cultural production: in *Howards End* (1910), for example, E. M. Forster dramatizes the expansion and internal stratification of the middle class through Leonard Bast, the lower-middle-class bibliophilic clerk, and his relationship with the comfortably intellectual and financially independent Schlegels. Bast's aspirations to the literary culture that the Schlegels take for granted comes to a tragic end when he dies beneath an overturned bookcase (Charles Wilcox, Margaret Schlegel's stepson, is more directly responsible for Bast's death, but the symbolism is hard to ignore).

The broadening definition of the term 'professional' is a more significant factor in the redefinition of the boundaries of the middle class. We will have cause to return to look at this factor in more detail, since the rise of an ethos of professionalism and expertise relates to the revival of romance in a very direct way. This connection shows up most clearly in the character repertoire of the romance, which not infrequently pits a team of men with particular skills – sometimes actual professionals – against some outside threat (*Dracula* is the most obvious example of this narrative pattern). I will be suggesting, in fact, that the romance, insofar as it can be linked to a specific class or class fraction, embodies the fantasies of this emerging professional group, whose power is based on their access to and control of certain forms of knowledge. If, as John Frow has argued, present-day cultural studies expresses the politics of a similar 'knowledge class', then my study of late Victorian culture may also be seen as a return to the 'primal scene' of cultural studies.[20]

This study follows the particular strand of *fin-de-siècle* popular fiction that contemporary critics styled the 'revival of romance'. This was the literary current that began to overwhelm the domestic novel in the 1880s, and it was initially most closely associated with R. L. Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard, whose *Treasure Island* (1883) and *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) did much to create the popular perception of a new direction in fiction. 'Romance', though, was also the genre in which

readers would have placed the work of Anthony Hope, Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, George Du Maurier and their many rivals for the attention of the popular reading public.[21] While the phrase '*revival* of romance' seems to suggest a return to earlier narrative forms, and a hankering after some lost literary world, I will be arguing that the 'revived' romance was in fact a distinctively *modern* phenomenon, and that it was shaped in the same historical mould as literary modernism. It makes more sense, I will maintain, to shelf a narrative like *She* or *Dracula* with the work of modernists like Joyce and Woolf than that of eight-eenth- and early nineteenth-century practitioners of romance like Ann Radcliffe, or Sir Walter Scott: the novels of Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker no more represent a simple revival of older forms than does Stephen Crane's Gothic play, in which the Ghost shares the stage with Dr Moreau.

In arguing for the modernity of the romance revival, and for the existence of a 'popular modernism', I am reworking the broader argu-ment of Fredric Jameson's 1979 essay, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', that 'both modernism and mass culture entertain relations of repression with the fundamental social anxieties and concerns, hopes and blind spots, ideological antinomies and fantasies of disaster, which are their raw material'.[22] In effect I am extrapolating this argument back to the moment when modernism and mass culture could begin to be glimpsed as distinct phenomena, when the niche market in which both take their place was emergent, not dominant. Indeed Jameson himself moves in this direction in the final chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, where he brings the formidable historicizing apparatus he develops in that work to bear on the fiction of Joseph Conrad, who, as he points out, seems to float 'somewhere in between Proust and Robert Louis Steven-son'.[23] The case of Conrad, Jameson suggests, should remind us that the 'breakdown of older realisms' leads not simply to modernism, but to 'two literary and cultural structures [viz. modernism and popular cul-ture], dialectically interrelated and necessarily presupposing each other for any adequate analysis'.[24]

In arguing for the kinship of modernism and mass culture Jameson is at pains not to collapse the two. Crucial to his argument is the idea that they handle their 'raw materials' in quite different ways, modernism providing certain stylistic compensations for the loss of the ability to map the historical totality, while mass culture operates in an essentially narrative register, harmonizing perceived contradictions. The tendency of the former, then, is towards the fetishism of style; that of the latter

towards allegories of resolution. If this division of cultural labour seems at times a little too neat – for my purposes, at least, Jameson's analysis of fiction in relation to modernity and reification seems itself to risk reifying the fluid relationship between the romance and early modernism – it is a salutary reminder that all modernisms, high or popular, are not the same, with consequences for their reception.

For Jameson, that high modernism's inevitable tendency is toward pure style is itself to be understood in terms of the rationalization of life under industrial capitalism, and in particular the over-development of certain human capacities (e.g. analysis, abstraction, quantification) and the concomitant under-development of others (e.g. sight, taste). Freed from a more integrated role in work, or research, the visual sense finds a new autonomous role for itself in the arts, where Impressionism, for example, 'offers the exercise of perception and the perceptual recombination of sense data as an end in itself'.[25] But in turn such new aesthetic pleasures can be seen to have a role in 'mak[ing] us increasingly at home in what would otherwise . . . be a distressingly alien reality. Viewed in this way . . . modernism can be seen . . . as a final and extremely specialized phase of that immense process . . . whereby the inhabitants of older social formations are culturally and psychologically *retrained* for life in the market system' (my emphasis).[26] As Jameson himself acknowledges in the Conclusion to *The Political Unconscious*, such historicizations may appear excessively functionalist. Nonetheless, for my purposes, there is something extremely attractive in this attempt to grasp modernism as a species of 'retraining', though I do not altogether agree as to the variety of training that is involved. I would add two further riders: firstly, to the effect that this retraining is achieved as much by what I am calling 'popular modernism' as by its high cultural analogues; and secondly that retraining may be something that subjects embrace.

In defining the romance revival as a sibling of modernism rather than as its unusually decrepit great uncle, I am also indebted to a number of other critics who have begun to lay the groundwork for a broader definition of modernism and modernity. Marshall Berman, for example, usefully defines modernism as 'any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it'.[27] His list of modernists thus effortlessly accommodates Dickens, Marx and Baudelaire as well as more obvious candidates like the Italian Futurists, Joyce and Woolf. As part of this broadening of the scope of