

**SPECTRAL ECONOMIES AT THE ANGLO-AFRICAN MARGIN: BERTRAM MITFORD'S
PREDATORY POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION**

Jane Ford
(University of Liverpool)

Abstract

This article examines the work of critically neglected colonial writer, essayist and cultural critic Bertram Mitford, with particular reference to his novel *The Sign of the Spider* (1896). Taking an economic approach to *fin de siècle* imperial politics, I argue that Mitford offers an important yet sadly overlooked counter-narrative of imperial expansionism. To an extent, Mitford undermines figures like H. Rider Haggard whose narratives betray a particular insensitivity to the depredatory conditions of Empire. Exploring Derridean formulations of Hauntology, I suggest that Mitford's success lies partly in his 'spectralisation' of fiscal realities. The narrative, featuring apparitions of erstwhile economies, allows for a dialogue between past and present that problematizes Britain's position in global markets at the *fin de siècle*. I further illustrate that Mitford's depictions of anthropophagy offer a scathing cultural critique of late nineteenth-century imperial enterprise. From the indigenous tribes in an evolutionary state of economic nature to the merchant or financier at the end point of our financial evolution, 'economic man' shares a primal, archetypal desire to consume. In conclusion, I suggest Mitford attempted both to destabilise the popular myth of Britain's 'beneficent' patronage of occupied South Africa, and bravely to undertake the work of inheriting the legacy of Britain's predatory economic past.

The imperial romance, beset with notions of improbable wealth, speculative gain and the agon of financial conquest, has become a favourite amongst critics in the burgeoning discourses of Victorian literary economics. Indeed for colonial adventure writers such as H. Rider Haggard, the potentialities of hidden wealth and financial risk play an imperative role in the allure of the imperial adventure. As Francis O'Gorman points out, Haggard's fixation with the possibilities of wealth contributed to, and was part of, the 'discourses of gentlemanly capitalism' at the end of the nineteenth century.¹ Yet beyond the trials of the British gentleman-hero exists an account of imperial economics that transcends this sense of wonderment, exposing the more sinister underbelly of imperial expansion.

The author, essayist and cultural critic, Bertram Mitford (1855-1914) was a contemporary of Haggard's. Largely neglected by critics, Mitford's narratives have yet to assume their rightful place in the discourses of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. The tales, deservedly minor classics, offer a challenge to the jingoistic sentiment prevalent in the imperial romance and, unlike the counter-fictions of figures like Olive Schreiner, signify dissent at the very heart of the colonial office. Like Haggard, Mitford served in the colonial civil service and spent much time

¹ Francis O'Gorman, 'Speculative Fictions and the Fortunes of H. Rider Haggard', in *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 157-172 (p. 158).

working and travelling in Zulu territories. It is not known in exactly what capacity he was employed, but it would almost certainly seem that Mitford was occupied in a less prestigious role than Haggard, for as Gerald Monsman points out, no record of his appointments exist in the Colonial office records in London.² Whilst the stylistic parallels between the two authors are patent, no trace of Haggard's fascination with the conditions of wealth and the seemingly limitless possibilities of the new market economy can be detected in Mitford's narratives. Rather, colonial hostility and capital violence punctuate the pages of his tales, as do scenes of rapacious slaughter. At the heart of these imperial adventures is a dark and deeply politicised account of the financially motivated aggression that characterised relations between Boers, British and the indigenous populations of Africa. Mitford's narratives were undoubtedly fuelled by the chaos unfolding around him. Indeed, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw many troubling political and fiscal developments in colonised South Africa. By the time *The Sign of the Spider* (1896), Mitford's most successful novel, appeared in print, the relations between the British settlers and the Boer community had long been in crisis as the Transvaal government intended to capitalise on the influx of British merchants, entrepreneurs and 'chancers' following the discovery of goldfields in Witwatersrand. The message from the Transvaal was clear: to exploit the prosperous landscape, to feed from the profits of imperial conquest, was itself to become victim, to become part of the great economic food-chain.

For Mitford, this sense that the economic market was one characterised by predatory forces was acute. Indeed, *The Sign of the Spider*, the novel that forms the basis of this discussion, reveals within the prevailing economies of the period the enactment of a new kind of savagery: a savagery operating not in the cannibal tribes of the Cape, but in the specifically late-Victorian market economy. Cleverly juxtaposing 'new' economic man, consuming the spoils of imperial conquest, alongside the bestial savage who 'came forth to eat up other tribes', Mitford undermines the illusion of 'civilised society'.³ He writes: 'It was a primeval idyll, the wandering of these two – the man, the product of the highest *fin de siècle* civilisation; the other the daughter of a savage race. Yet in such wandering, savage and civilised were curiously near akin' (p. 216). Lexically speaking, Mitford's application of '*fin de siècle*' consciously evokes a weight of cultural meaning, not merely the end of a century but a decadent finale. As Robert Mighall points out, around the time when Wilde's immortal lines '*fin de siècle, fin du globe*' appeared in print, *fin de siècle* was

² Gerald Monsman, *H. Rider Haggard on the Imperial Frontier: The Political and Literary Contexts of his African Romances* (Greensborough: ELT Press, 2006), pp. 268-284 (p. 273).

³ Bertram Mitford, *The Sign of the Spider: An Episode*, ed. by Gerald Monsman (Kansas: Valancourt, 2008), p. 138. Further page references will be given parenthetically in the text. In *The Insatiability of Human Wants* Regenia Gagnier discriminates between 'economic man' at the beginning and end of the nineteenth century. She argues that at the former, man was driven by the desire to 'produce', production being the sole end of economic behaviour. By the end of the century, this psychology was usurped by the desire to consume; economic man's 'advanced stage of development was signified by the boundlessness of his desires'. I use the term 'new economic' man in deference to Gagnier's second and productivist understanding of economic behaviour. See Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 20.

seen to herald ‘an impending collapse in standards’, the re-enactment of the fall of classical civilisations.⁴ Mitford capitalises on these notions of the fall, exposing the circular relationship between the rapacious economies at the end point of civilisation and the savage daughter at its genesis. In taking this perspective he was certainly not alone. In *Degeneration* (1892) Max Nordau notably prophesied a turbulent transition into contemporary civilisation; he argued ‘one epoch of history is unmistakably in its decline, and another is announcing its approach. There is a sound of rending in every tradition, and it is as though tomorrow would not link itself with to-day’.⁵ Yet, unable to penetrate the fog of cultural proximity, contemporary reviewers of Mitford’s novel paid little heed to his imperative insight into the economics of imperial, *fin de siècle* Britain, but rather disregarded the text as a ‘book for boys’, its author a mere ‘horror-monger’.⁶ Indeed, since the novel’s publication in 1896 it has received little attention. Gerald Monsman’s introduction to the recent Valancourt reprint of Mitford’s text (2008), alongside his appendix on Mitford in *H. Rider Haggard on the Imperial Frontier* (2006), provides a much needed, yet insufficient, counter to this critical neglect.⁷

In this essay I present Mitford as an important minority voice in *fin de siècle* imperial politics; one who, far from acting as a mere extension of Haggard, problematizes the jingoistic sentiments prevalent in the imperial narratives of the age. In a sense I argue that Mitford’s texts operate within Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s model of ‘Minor Literature’. Born of a recognition that the literary output of Franz Kafka stood as a subaltern voice in the cultural politics of his day, this theory seeks to redeem minor literatures from the reductive interpretive practice that regards these fictions as somehow lesser examples of a major form. Identifying three characteristics, Deleuze and Guattari point out that ‘Minor Literature’ is characterised by ‘the de-territorialization of language, the connection of the individual to political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation’.⁸ Minor Literature is not qualified by the employment of a minor language, but the de-territorialization of a ‘host’ language: the propensity to claim territory, forge minority space *within* a major one. Modifying this principle with reference to Mitford, I suggest his narratives do not seek to de-territorialize language, but rather the established stylistic conventions of the imperial fictions of the age. Indeed, whilst the parallels between Mitford and authors such as Rider Haggard are patent, an elemental understanding of ‘minor literature’ guides us from the impasse of regarding their literatures as ideologically akin. Mitford was not merely apprenticed to Haggard’s school of popular romance, as some critics seem to indicate. His narratives, whilst sharing stylistic similarities,

⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2000; repr. 2003), p. 171; for Mighall reference see Notes to this edition, p. 249.

⁵ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, translated from the second edition of the German 1895 text, with an introduction by George L. Mosse (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 5.

⁶ ‘Literature’, *The Leeds Mercury*, 11 December 1896, p. 13 and ‘Reviews’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 26 December 1896, p. 7 respectively.

⁷ Monsman, *H. Rider Haggard on the Imperial Frontier*, pp. 268-284.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; repr. 1993), p. 18.

ventured where Haggard's did not, to reveal the truth behind imperial expansionism and to challenge the patriotic notion of Britain as a great 'civilizing' nation.⁹ It is not merely this de-territorialization of its host-genre that qualifies Mitford's narratives as 'minor literature', but in accordance with Deleuze and Guattari's criteria, the 'political immediacy' of his works and the tendency to organise these principles in a 'collective assemblage of enunciation'. Put differently, the almost caricatured predominance of politics and the narrative investment in 'collective' values signposts the text not as a hackneyed or third rate imperial romance, but as part of a literature that makes its 'minor use' of the genre a statement against the predatory spirit of *fin de siècle* imperial economics.

Paying particular attention to questions of imperial finance, I argue that Mitford employs a kind of 'spectral economy' in which the narrative present is haunted by apparitions of erstwhile economies, from the primitive appetites of early man, to the newly redundant 'science of scarcity'. In this sense Mitford crudely anticipates Derridean formulations of spectrality. The Spectral operates not merely as a gothic device in Mitford's texts, but importantly represents an epistemology troubled by the (re)appearance of non-linear economic realities: a philosophy that is embellished in Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1994). Indeed, if we are to learn to live, argues Derrida, we must inherit from the 'borderlands'; that is to say, we must 'learn spirits', we must identify the indistinct figures and ideologies that haunt the margins of experience.¹⁰ Written in the aftermath of Soviet Communism, and shortly after Francis Fukuyama's theorisation of the 'End of History', Derrida's text occupies an analogous socio-political space to Mitford's.¹¹ To be 'haunted' necessarily requires sight of the peripheries of a cultural moment and indeed, for Derrida, the demise of Soviet communism signalled the 'passing over' of cultural ideologies associated with the movement into the margins of collective memory. For Mitford, it was not merely that in the approach to the new century the many faces of Victorian finance had made a ghost-like reappearance (which, in a sense, they did), but moreover the new hegemonic dominance of consumerist values had resurrected a predatory, more primordial economic past.¹²

⁹ With the exception of Gerald Monsman – who is perhaps the only scholar to address Mitford's *oeuvre* with true regard for its importance to our literary heritage – critics invariably refer to Mitford's work with sole reference to his resemblance to Haggard. Malvern Van Wyk Smith, for instance, argues that Mitford's work is 'a highly saleable blend of Haggard's exotically inventive romance and the Victorian public school adventure', see Malvern Van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest: A Survey of South African English Literature* (Kenwyn: Juta Press, 1990), p. 24.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 1994; repr. 2006), p. xvii.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3-18.

¹² Lawrence Birken, Gagnier, and others point out that at the end of the nineteenth century productivist ideologies had been largely abandoned; economic growth and an emerging emphasis on 'the consumer' in economic theory and practice defined the psychology of finance at the end of the nineteenth century and beyond. For a more detailed explanation see 'Introduction' in Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*; see also Chapter One 'The Dissolution of Political Economy' in Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance 1871-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 22-39.

Hardened by the abuses of ‘genteel poverty’ and a hateful marriage, Mitford’s hero, Laurence Stanninghame, heads for the Cape to make his fortune in Johannesburg’s ever pending ‘boom’ (p. 42). After initial success in the stock market, Stanninghame suffers financial ruin as the fledgling economy experiences an unexpected slump. Left with no choice he enters into a perilous slave hunting expedition into the country’s interior. Haunted by thoughts of his ‘cramped life and squalid worry of a year-in year-out, semi-detached suburban existence’, Stanninghame experiences ‘want’ as phantasmic, as ‘spectral eyes in the darkness’ (p. 7). For Mitford it is not merely atavism, or the propensity to return to primal appetites, that delineates the temporal characteristics of the period, but moreover an asynchronous organisation of economies: a fiscal *revenant*:

Grim, fell spectres haunted his waking hours no less than his dreams. Did he return from a few hours hard exercise with a fine appetite, that healthy possession served but to remind him how soon he would be without the means of gratifying it. He pictured himself destitute, and through his sleeping visions, would loom hideous spectres of want and degradation. (p. 72)

‘Fell’, that is to say, fierce and visceral, the spectres that torment Stanninghame reiterate our own essential savagery; they impress on him grim visions of a more primal appetite than is evident in ostensibly ‘civilized’ markets. Mitford’s spectres are of both past and future: certainly a primordial past, pertaining to the satiation of our most essential, primal needs, but also a past more recent. We might term this a kind of ‘suburban’, pseudo-privation, an erroneous sense of deprivation ensuing from a failure to meet the standard of luxury required of ‘polite’ society. Furthermore the apparition of future poverty, something akin to Dickens’s ghost of Christmas Future, haunts Stanninghame. The unexperienced future ‘returns’, illogically reiterating a reality that is yet to be lived.

Equally, for Mitford, as the nineteenth century draws to a close and an economy once centred on production and the provision of needs is supplanted by one favouring consumption and the satiation of ever more demanding consumer desires, ‘want’ ostensibly assumes a place in the annals of the dead past; it becomes a spectre, illusively projecting psychologies of a former time, a former economy, onto the unwitting mind of Mitford’s hero. Without becoming entrenched in the changing discourses of political economy in the nineteenth century, it is necessary to expand briefly on the principal developments that transformed the psychology of finance. In the last third of the century, the neoclassical or ‘marginalist’ school of economic thought, led by figures such as William Stanley Jevons and Carl Menger, postulated a system whereby the productivism of the classical economists – Marx, Smith and Mill for example – was supplanted by a model of production that was inherently contingent. ‘New’ economic man was driven by a desire to consume irrespective of a productive system that was largely conceptualised as the by-product of consumer

satiation.¹³ Thus the concept of ‘need’, the drive to fulfil man’s lower-order needs, was usurped by the notion of ‘abundance’. In a sense, the rise of domestic consumerism was fuelled by Britain’s liberal imperialism; the influx of commodities and imperial capital merely absorbed, perhaps even stimulated, escalating appetites at home. As Ann McClintock points out: ‘Banks and stock exchanges rose up to manage the bonanzas of imperial capital. Professions emerged to administer the goods tumbling hectically from the manufactories’.¹⁴ Yet, like Derrida, Mitford recognised the almost genealogical accession of time; *fin de siècle* or *fin d’histoire*, the transition into a new age is not unmarked by the echoes of that which precedes it.

However it is not solely the anachronistic organisation of time that characterises Mitford’s approach to economics; the spectres that haunt the text are not merely benign incarnations of asynchronous realities, but rather *predatory* apparitions, recalling and prefiguring a more sinister economic proclivity, a kind of vampiric desire to consume:

The ghastly remnants of that fearful feast lie around in the moonbeams – human bones, picked clean yet expressive in their shape; spectral, as though they would fain reunite, and, vampire-like return to devour their own kind (p. 102).

These human remains mark the aftermath of a cannibal feast witnessed by Stanninghame and his companions in the midst of their slave hunting expedition. The bones, situated in a post-consumptive temporality, operate as signifiers, shapes that denote both a compulsion to return and, furthermore, a primordial, vampire-like appetite. In the ethereal moonlight, the last vestiges of human life stand testament to the assisted passing into historicity; only hours before, living, breathing and tenaciously clinging to life, these creatures are now unanimated relics of a spectral past. Yet, the relationship between the living and the dead figures as a more reciprocal transmission; it is not merely the past that visits the present but the present that *revisits* a former state. By juxtaposing Stanninghame’s carnal indulgence of economic appetites with this savage lust for human flesh, Mitford consciously draws analogies between the predatory psychology of finance and a more primal desire to consume. Richard King points out that cultural critiques of anthropophagy in contemporary media find in the practice an ‘essential metaphor for late capitalism’. In other words,

¹³ In *The Theory of Political Economy*, first published in 1871, Jevons argued that ‘we labour to produce with the sole object of consuming’; furthermore our desires ‘are absolutely insatiable, and seem to increase with every improvement of civilization.’ An important marginalist voice in *fin de siècle* economics, Jevons here highlights the fundamental change in economic thought in the nineteenth century. For the classical economists (such as Marx) the end of economic activity was production and surplus. Towards the end of the century, post-classical economists, including Jevons, argued that production was incidental to the escalating appetites of new economic man. See W. S. Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy*, 5th edn (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1965), p. 102. For a more detailed explanation see Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, and Birken, *Consuming Desire*.

¹⁴ Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 208.

the mechanisms of capitalism promote a philosophy of exploitation and consumption, whilst cannibalism is similarly an abuse of the human body with an ultimate goal of consumption and individual profit. King argues: 'Given the similarities between classical cannibalism as embodied by the Aztec and quintessential capitalism as engendered by the modern West, it is not surprising that recent realignments of capitalism correspond to the emergence of a reconfigured cannibalism'.¹⁵

However it must not be assumed that the parallels witnessed in contemporary culture represented a unique and defining characteristic of modernity; Mitford was certainly aware that, in troping the human body as currency, the discourse of cannibalism assumed in his text a symbolic value. Keen to draw analogies between the savage consumption of human flesh and Stanninghame's acquisition of bodies for consumption in the slave-market, Mitford creates a situation whereby the rise to civilization, and subsequently to a post-classical economics, has served not to eliminate savage appetites but merely to sanitize them:

He looks upon the tragedy with a cold commercial eye. Prisoners represent so many saleable wares. If it is essential that his hell-hounds shall taste a modicum of blood, or their appetite for this species of quarry would be gone, it is his business to see that they destroy no more property than can be avoided (p. 104).

The cold, unmoved commercial gaze of Hazon, Stanninghame's comrade, is the antithesis of the 'blood-fury gleaming from distended eyeballs' in the face of the savage men (p. 103). Yet the 'material for the [savages'] feast', five human bodies 'trussed, bound' and 'helpless', is the self-same material of the hunter's 'wares': human bodies 'yoked together like oxen'. The evolutionary distance between the anthropophagic and capitalist mindset is paradoxically annulled by the singularity of their purpose. Hazon, cognisant of these analogues, reasons that common to all commercial enterprise is a kind of vampire-like subsistence: 'your British pattern merchant, your millionaire financier, what is he but a slave-dealer, a slave-driver, a blood-sucker?' (p. 134).

Hazon paints a grim view of man's ascent; each stage of development, from blood-sucking savage to corporate financier, becomes more spurious, the illusion of civilization more pronounced. The dangerous, exploitative manufacturing practices of industrial Britain, the protracted working day and workforce maimed, scalped and killed in office is not, according to Hazon, so different to this 'wild scene of carnage and massacre' (p. 103). Hazon's marauding enterprise is governed only by the desire to optimise capital, an attitude of entrepreneurial depredation that was widely believed to be the privilege of the patriotic Englishman throughout the nineteenth century. Indeed, *The Economist* of 25 April 1896, reporting on the situation in South Africa, stated that the blacks' effort to 'throw off the yoke of the detested white men' could worryingly result in 'pecuniary losses which would be felt even in London for

¹⁵ Richard King, 'The (Mis)uses of Cannibalism in Contemporary Cultural Critique', *Diacritics*, 30 (2000), 106-123 (p. 113).

many years to come'.¹⁶ By extension, the analogues between anthropophagy and late capitalism fulfil not merely, as King argues, a metaphoric function, but also a *mimetic* one: The behaviour that drove primitive man to consume the flesh of his own finds agency and is replicated in the marketplace.

Whilst Mitford's protagonists exercise 'savage' values in their commercial ventures, there equally exists for their author the notion of the 'enterprising savage'. In *Through the Zulu Country* (1883), a non-fictional account of the battlefields and people of Zululand, Mitford notes that in the aftermath of war, ammunition of English serviceman still litters the ground: 'you may see where the unexploded cap and the marks of teeth where the enterprising savage has torn open the case to extract the powder and ball'.¹⁷ The image of savage man, deftly extracting the prized substance from an unused bullet, caricatures the curious kinship between savage and civilized; this simple, unconscious entrepreneurial act of savage man, satirises the imbruted account of the African peoples. Imperial enterprise, or rather capital-violence, justifiable on the grounds of the 'civilizing influence' delivered to South Africa's countrymen, is to Mitford nothing short of farce. Thus Stanninghame's assertion that their captives 'would be much better off when the journey was ended and they were disposed of [...] in civilized and Christian lands' (p. 133) exposes the thinly-veiled irony directed towards what *The Times* identified as Britain's 'coercion policy tempered with beneficent measures'.¹⁸

More importantly, for my purposes, the abandoned battlefield documented in *Through the Zulu Country* is haunted by spectral relics of the bloody Anglo-Zulu conflict. Mitford, in describing the scene, states that 'every now and then you come across a heap of these [used cartridges], and begin to speculate on how some poor fellow made a long stand for it on this particular spot until his ammunition failed'.¹⁹ The living present is disturbed again by the reanimating influence of this debris; the 'heap' alone stands in commemoration of the ill-fated soldier. As Derrida points out: 'There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as a re-apparition of the departed.'²⁰ Derrida's logic initially appears to fall in on itself, since what is an apparition if not a 're-apparition' of the departed? This, however, is essentially Derrida's point. Time is not linear and structural, but prone to wane, collapse, and be revived. Certainly for Mitford, the living, the departed, and the *revenant* exist in disorientating intimacy. Here the discarded artillery effects a kind of metonymic conjuring act: it summons the spectral presence of a British soldier, determined to sell his life dearly.

Interestingly, the tribe operates in a closed economic system, a fact Mitford points out when he comments 'those who are active in at any rate preparing them [the victims] for slaughter, are their own children – *their own sons*' [emphasis in original text] (p. 101). Bodily capital is reinvested into the very system that produced it. In a

¹⁶ 'The Situation in South Africa', *The Economist*, 25 April 1896, p. 514.

¹⁷ Bertram Mitford, *Through the Zulu Country: Its Battlefields and its People* (London: Kegan Paul, 1883), p. 106.

¹⁸ 'The House of Commons', *The Times*, May 24 1892, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁰ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 5

sense the tribal elders are ‘superannuated’, preserving the autarkic integrity of the community. At the beginning of the twentieth century, anthropologists considered tribal cannibalism an attempted act of spiritual ‘appropriation’. Indeed, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud writes: ‘By incorporating part of a person’s body through eating, one at the same time acquires the qualities possessed by him’.²¹ Here, consumption is of the family stock; capital gain through the ingestion of human flesh serves to perpetuate genetic assets. In economic terms the tribal community operate in a form of primitive protectionism, preserving equilibrium through the restricted movement of capital. However, the civilisation of man serves not to remove us from such base considerations, but propels humanity into what is essentially a financial Darwinian struggle. Economies move away from the self-consuming nature of this primitive consumption, expanding these predatory appetites into free markets, international competition, and imperial expansion. As Stanninghame argues: ‘Preyer or preyed upon – such was the iron immutable law of life, from man in his highest development to the minutest of insects’ (p. 133).

Lawrence Birken’s analysis of narcissism and post-classical economics provides a useful insight into the mechanisms involved in the transition from the self-consuming appetency of tribal cannibalism to the centripetal ambition of Empire. Birken points out that Freud, in his writings on narcissism, established a new ‘pleasure principle’, whereby economic models of expenditure ran parallel with psychoanalytic theories of desire. According to Freud, the tendency towards auto-eroticism is the most primal and easy to satisfy. However, in the conditions where this is not possible one must look to others to gratify one’s own original desires. Birken argues: ‘The idiosyncratic consumer is thus propelled by self-interest into the social world. The human being is forced to invest in others as a round-about means of satisfying itself’.²² The tribal community, in its economic ‘state of nature’, is gratified to see genetic stock re-capitulated in the act of consumption. Conversely, the global scale enterprise of imperial Britain reads, in Birken’s terms, as an oblique means of satiating escalated expectations of desire. This transition between savage and civilised is exemplified in the mace constructed by Stanninghame to defend himself against the ferocious spider-god:

These bones might further be utilised. They might be splintered and sharpened into daggers. No sooner thought of than carried out. And now the skeletons underwent the most ruthless desecration. Several were wrenched asunder ere he had selected half a dozen serviceable bones – and these he hammered to the required size with his newly constructed mace – sharpening them on the rough face of the rock [...] Did ever mortal man go into close conflict armed in such a fashion – he wondered – with club and dagger manufactured out of the bones of men? (p. 205)

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. by James Strachey, (London: Routledge, 1950; repr. 1961), p. 82.

²² Birken, *Consuming Desire*, p. 45.

In the context of close battle, the weapon rates as a commodity of exceptional utility value. For Stanninghame the luxury of sentiment is over-ruled by the notion of 'serviceability' or functional economic behaviour. The language of productivism predominates here; the commodity is not crafted but 'manufactured', 'constructed'. The sounds of industrial Britain resonate with every 'wrench' of the human remains. However, outside the 'survival' context, Stanninghame's mace assumes a rather more sinister value. Returning to England and in possession of a considerable fortune, the notion of utility is usurped by the ornamental value or 'marginal utility' of the product. Amidst the 'other trophies and curios', the gruesome weapon becomes nothing more than a bauble, a souvenir, a gruesome testament to the Victorian capacity to collect (p. 235).²³

Approximately fifty years later, at the Nuremburg trial, the wife of a Buchenwald commander was found guilty of crimes against humanity for the collection of human 'souvenirs'. The defendant, Ilse Koch, was found to be in possession of flayed skin and the shrunken heads of two Buchenwald victims. Whilst occurring some considerable time after the publication of Mitford's novel, the event and the surrounding discourse are highly pertinent to the current discussion. Transcending the merely theoretical considerations of this macabre collector behaviour, the event also highlights the conceptual distinction between utility and marginal utility value and its bearing on ideas of ethical consumption. Lawrence Douglas writes of the events of the trial that:

the reaction of the tribunal to these extraordinary artefacts expressed an understanding that shaped the rhetorical and jurisprudential complexion of the Nuremberg case: Nazi practices had not, according to this view, eroded the distinction between 'primitive' and 'civilized'; rather, they represented a rebirth of the primitive, an explosion of the savagery normally kept in check by institutions of modernity.²⁴

Significantly, the tribunal interpreted the atrocities committed at Buchenwald not as an indication of the kinship between modern man and our more primitive forefathers, but rather as evidence of the reiterative quality of our savage origins. For the Nuremberg arbiters, the spectre of our predatory past had not passed seamlessly into the margins of experience, but was destined to haunt our every progress, to be 'reborn' if we could not successfully legislate against it. Classifying these offences against humanity as 'crimes of atavism', Lawrence Douglas locates the production of human 'curios' firmly in the past, but, as he later concedes, articles of utility produced by similar methods (soap, for instance) displayed a 'grotesque triumph of the very logic of efficient production upon which the economy of civilization is

²³ For an in-depth analysis of the role of 'The Collection' in Victorian culture, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

²⁴ Lawrence Douglas, 'The Shrunken Head of Buchenwald: Icons of Atrocity at Nuremberg', *Representations* 63 (1998), 39-64 (p. 45).

based'.²⁵ Post-dating Mitford's text by several decades, it is of course possible to over-state the importance of the parallels between these fictional and disturbingly real cultural events. However, what this example certainly serves to do is to validate Mitford in his assertion that the trajectory of human economic experience is not characterised by linear progress, but, in the words of Derrida, a sense of '*non-contemporaneity*' with oneself.²⁶

A brief glance at Mitford's prose reveals the very macro level at which ideas of temporal atavism find expression, and this is helpful to understand how, for Mitford, matters of predatory enterprise were not in a sense premeditated but instinctive and immediate. Irony is felt not in the great narrative flights of expression, but at the very elemental level of Mitford's language. As Michael Lieven points out, Mitford's discourse, often criticised for its inelegant style, vibrates with disgust at the reality of Britain's interference at the Cape. It contrasts greatly with Haggard's thinly veiled liberal imperialism, his colonial ambition and not least, his awe at the power of the post-classical economy.²⁷ Furthermore, where Haggard's body economies have an identifiable nomenclature, a terminology to navigate what Foucault later dubbed the 'anatomy-politics of the human body', Mitford's feature inconspicuously in the narrative's dialogues.²⁸ 'Stony-broke' and 'stony hearted', Laurence Stanninghame's professed deficit is expressed both as financial hardship and anatomical, emotional deprivation. It is at the level of Mitford's vernacular phraseology that the economies of the flesh become evident, filtering through to the very base units of language, to the common slang and colloquialism:

I'm broke, stony broke, and it's more than ever a case of stealing away to hang oneself in a well. I tell you squarely, I'd walk into the jaws of the devil himself to effect the capture of the oof-bird (p. 7).

For Mitford's hero, to be 'stony', to be bereft of money, is at once to be dispossessed of life, of the means of living. This necessary co-dependence between the conditions of life and wealth is not by any means an exclusively *fin de siècle* concern; indeed as Regenia Gagnier points out 'although economics was still called the "science of scarcity", scarcity was no longer a material obstacle'.²⁹ Yet, curiously, the imperative relationship between the bodily and the fiscal is invested in Mitford's text; real material, quantifiable life had never sat in such close proximity to cold hard cash. Lawrence Stanninghame does not experience abject privation but 'genteel poverty', and yet he feels pressed to inhabit antitheses; with life and death, wealth and poverty operating on the parallel plane, Stanninghame chooses to operate in extremes;

²⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁶ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. xviii.

²⁷ Michael Lieven, 'Contested Empire: Bertram Mitford and the Imperial Adventure Story', *Paradigm*, 25 (1998), <<http://faculty.ed.uiuc.edu/westbury/Paradigm/lieven2.html>> [accessed 17 April 2009], (para. 5 of 24)

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990; repr. 1998), p. 141.

²⁹ Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, p. 1.

mediocrity in wealth and life is simply not an option. As Mitford narrates, he had ‘got into the habit of thinking there are but two states, death and Johannesburg’ (p. 17).

Johannesburg of course, built in the midst of the gold rush, is the metonymic representative of wealth and prosperity, yet it also represents ‘the other’. The African city with its fatal lure, its mysterious capacity to catapult one to dizzying heights of wealth and prosperity, or to consume, break and dispose of life, embodies the essential otherness of the ‘dark continent’. In effect ‘stony’ signifies a *fin de siècle* condition, a strange psychological phenomena that at the beginnings of the culture of abundance, and in the context of economic enterprise, one should feel bound to invest ‘life’ into this kind of financial speculation. Indeed ‘stony’ is a *fin de siècle* permutation, the first recorded use of the term appearing in R. C. Lehmann’s *Harry Fludyer at Cambridge* (1890).³⁰ Originally published in *Punch*, Lehmann’s comic university sketch was widely disseminated; his pervasive slang and colloquial dialogue caught the popular imagination.³¹ ‘Stony’ evidently needed little explanation, despite this being ostensibly its first foray into print. The term accentuates the ‘thingness’, the essential materialism of this condition of financial and bodily deficit. Moreover, the primeval resonance of ‘stony’, evocative of ‘stone-age’, atavism and the unevolved nature of things, recalls us to savage roots, to the primal want that precedes us.

In contrast, a glance at Haggard’s popular romance *Mr Meeson’s Will* (1888) reveals the more explicit demarcation of key terms deployed in the exploration of bodily economies. Bridging the gap between the speaker’s lexical shortcoming, and the speculative content of his thoughts, Haggard conjectures in Latin, the language of the higher disciplines:

Bill was more careful of the artistic effect and the permanence of the work than of the feelings of the subject. *Fiat experimentum in corpore vili*, he would have said had he been conversant with the Classics, without much consideration for the *corpus vile*.³²

Augusta is here tattooed with the last will and testament of Meeson, a miserly publisher who, repentant of his spiteful bequest and in the wake of a shipwreck that leaves him stranded, attempts to restore wealth to his only living relative. Providing

³⁰ ‘Pat said he was stoney or broke or something but he gave me a sov’, R.C Lehmann, *Harry Fludyer at Cambridge*, quoted in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk/cgi/entry/50238374?query_type=word&queryword=stony&first=1&max_t_o_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=rY34-HHweGk-409&hilite=50238374> [accessed 12 December 2008]

³¹ In the *London Illustrated News* and other papers the sketch was declared a hilarious success. James Payn in particular remarked that it was ‘a more accurate and graphic account of the university life of to-day is to be gathered from this little volume [...] *Harry Fludyer at Cambridge* is really very funny’, quoted in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, January 14 1891, p. 3. The text was later included in the 1902 publication *Slang and its Analogues* for its characteristic use of slang expression, see John Farmer and William Henley *Slang and its Analogues Past and Present* (London: Poulter, 1902) p. 273.

³² H. Rider Haggard, *Mr Meeson’s Will* (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008), p. 76.

the canvas for Meeson's penitential decree, Augusta ironically becomes the *corpus vile*, the 'worthless body' of Meeson's transaction. This is an ironic gesture, of course, because with the inscription of the tattoo Augusta's body assumes an exchange value equal to the wealth of this affluent castaway. Perhaps drawing inversely upon the Tichborne case – in which a claimant's absence of tattoos negatively identified him as the heir to the fortune – Haggard's text explicitly sets up the terms by which the body becomes commodity.³³

More than an interesting aside to ideas of economic spectrality and predatism, this comparison serves to illustrate the unorthodox status of Mitford's perspective in the imperial narratives of the age. Haggard cannot fully realise the sinister mechanisms by which the body is subjugated in the act of exchange. Employing Latin, language of the classics and of the socially elevated, the message embedded in this exchange is not one of caution but rather of triumphalism. The talismanic significance of Augusta's tattoo, the mysterious almost unrealisable wealth that it promises, represents a triumph of the body and of white flesh. In contrast, Mitford's text, with its stark and colloquial expression, vibrates with the anxiety of this brutal economic inheritance; a stony, violent, atavistic discourse, revealing the dark secrets of our predatory past.

'If our narrative deals with history', wrote Mitford in the Preface to his 1893 novel *The Gun-Runner*, 'it is with a vanishing page of the same'.³⁴ By the 1890s the scramble for Africa was nearing resolution, and with it the horror that can only be felt in the immediacy of the events. Yet Mitford's ethic was not informed by the desire to chronicle a fleeting past but rather, addressing themes later to concern Derrida, do the work of 'inheriting' the awful legacy left in the wake of imperial expansion:

As such we look to it to interest the reader, if only as a sidelight upon the remarkable military power and ultimate downfall of the finest and most intelligent race of savages in all the world – now thanks to the 'beneficent' policy of England, crushed and 'civilized' out of all recognition.³⁵

³³ The Tichborne case, beginning in 1867, was arguably one of the most sensational trials of the Victorian age. The Claimant, supposedly the lost son of wealthy dowager Lady Tichborne, returned after a period of fourteen years when it was believed he had been lost at sea. Despite Lady Tichborne's positive identification of the man who claimed to be her son, many, including friends and relatives, doubted his identity. In the trial, the prosecution brought overwhelming evidence against the man who we now know to have been an Australian butcher, Arthur Orton. The most damning of this was the evidence that the plaintiff did not possess the tattoos of the real heir, Roger Tichborne. The attorney-general's address, transcribed by *The Times* newspaper, reads as follows: 'The plaintiff swore distinctly, and was obliged to swear distinctly that he is not, and never at any period of his life has been tattooed, Roger Charles Tichborne was beyond all question tattooed in his left arm in the way I will describe...', 'The Tichborne Case', *The Times*, 02 February 1872, p. 10. For a more detailed account of the trial see also Lord Frederic Herbert Maugham, *The Tichborne Case* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).

³⁴ Bertram Mitford, Preface, *The Gunrunner* (1893), quoted in Gerald Monsman's introduction to Mitford's *Renshaw Fanning's Quest* (Chicago: Valancourt, 2007) p. xv.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The reality of Britain's interference in South Africa vanishes ghost-like into the annals of the past. A 'sidelight', Mitford's fiction illuminates the oblique perspective of *fin de siècle* imperial politics; it conjures the apparitional presence of the predatory foreign policies that saw African nations forced into bondage. This recalcitrant spirit, the desire to disrupt the illusion of Britain's 'beneficent' patronage of occupied South Africa is, according to Derrida, integral to the act of inheriting, for 'if the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, unequivocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation we would never have anything to inherit from it'.³⁶ The legacy of Britain's imperial enterprise, the predatory psychology of finance and fever of consumption that took hold in the last third of the nineteenth century, made for a ghastly bequest. It seems that the atavistic and predatory spirit that infected humankind was exacerbated, or perhaps more accurately 'metastasised', in the inequitable conditions of Empire. Yet in taking up the mantle, Mitford offered not merely a rival voice but also bravely 'owned' to the awful heritage that he shared. Indeed, whilst figures like Olive Schreiner struck out against the aggressive and self-serving policies of the British, few others were prepared to acknowledge themselves 'heir' to the marauding appetites that shaped the modern world.³⁷ Mitford was certainly no great *litterateur*; yet what he was, and what he continues to be, is a major voice in the 'Minor Literature' of Empire: a necessary third dimension to our understanding of imperial politics at the end of the nineteenth century.

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³⁶ Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 1

³⁷ Olive Schreiner, unlike many imperial writers of the day, was critical of Britain's involvement at the cape. Her later tale *Trooper Peter Halket* (1897) notably castigated the exploitative practices of European settlers in South Africa. Schreiner also spoke out against colonial racism and the controversial 1891 Strop Bill, which gave Europeans the right to flog black labourers.

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