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Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft by Walter Scott: the Romance of Humanity

A plethora of Gothic tales makes up Scott's substantial treatise on superstition, the supernatural and the occult. Described by the author himself as a «popular miscellany», the *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830) contain the seeds of hundreds of romances. The work contains an assorted collection of stories of the past, anecdotes, testimonies and legends, accounts that Scott gathered and painstakingly researched throughout his life, testifying to an enduring predilection for the Gothic.

The *Letters* are merely a collection of stories assembled in order to fulfil a precise and ambitious historiographical purpose, which was to narrate the history of humanity through the developments and effects of an archaic popular belief in supernatural phenomena, illustrating the way in which superstition and occultism can take hold and persist. The title is testament to the Gothic obsession with the darkest manifestations of terror, and would appear to place the peculiar interest in demonology and witchcraft within the same genre as a large body of literature and treatises produced over the centuries. This would appear to be the aim of the work, and the gathering of characters, situations and subjects that seemingly descend from the Gothic conventions is the result of accurate historical narration and an ancient collection of texts and documents[1] that piece together mankind's exhausting and painful journey from credulity to knowledge. It is not, however, a story that grows up on the sidelines of the greater story. Scott saw superstitious customs and beliefs as an involutionary historical process capable of impacting on the destinies of both nations and men. In the style of popular scientific prose, the reader is brought face to face with the devastating effects and genuine horrors provoked by imaginary terrors throughout history. As was

[1] J. G. Lockhart says that Scott «assembled about him [...] almost all materials on which his genius was destined to be employed for the gratification and instruction of the world» (John Gibson LOCKHART, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott*, Edinburgh 1837-1838, vol. I, 382).

the author's express intention, the series of ten letters maps out a history, reworking the course of historical events in a Gothic configuration of the progress of humanity, a «history of a dark chapter in human nature». This is not a general history, but a fundamental chapter in the history of man. Only painstaking and detailed research into antiquity has the power to shake deep-rooted beliefs in facts, achieving a great deal more than a general history and guaranteeing authenticity.[2] This is what Scott so admired in Walpole.

The first letter, however, does not fit with the chronology of the historical narrative. Before a historian/archivist can get to grips with reconstructing and retrieving histories of peoples and religions, there is a need to focus on what has made the supernatural credible. The universal belief in the existence of spirits means the natural inclination of the human mind towards superstition must be investigated before the individual stories of nations. The fertile field of analysis of the Romantic category of natural disposition also includes the particular propensity towards spectral illusions and visionary apparitions – or the spontaneous formation in the human mind of what Scott describes as «phantasmata», which are responsible for the firm belief that disembodied spirits are capable of appearing and being perceived by human faculties. Scott draws up a classification of perceived apparitions from his collection of supernatural horror stories. His observation of unusual cases informed the different categories of «frightful disorder» that can, in certain individuals, become exacerbated to the point of triggering insanity and death. As part of an ordinary Romantic exploration into cognitive phenomena, according to *kind* and *degree*, each story focuses on a different intensity of disturbance, with its own causes and effects, each attributable to a particular typology. There then follows an analysis of the apparitions as projections of mental or emotional disturbances, in an accepted awareness that there are parts of the psyche that are not governed by rational criteria, and then an examination of the apparitions in terms of physical and physiological phenomena, categorised as deceptions of the senses. The aim is to scientifically explain the psychological and physical processes at play that can corrupt the normal ability to tell fact from illusion. Mysterious, apparently supernatural and occult events and forces are translated into intelligible human psychological and modern medical scientific terms.

While there are those on whom the impact of spectral visitations is such that they are convinced the apparitions are real, the line of argument that tacks the short, but extremely numerous narrative gaps together presupposes the delegitimisation of the aesthetic prerequisite of much of Gothic literature. In order to make clear the deceit that

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[2] Michael GAMER, *Romanticism and the Gothic. Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation*, Cambridge 2000, 166-171.

contradicts the empirical evidence in each story, the narrative plunges the reader into incredulity towards every form of apparent suspension of the laws of nature. The epistemology, based on the law of philosophical doubt and the evidence in the first letter, requires the new protagonists of the advancement of knowledge, philosopher and doctor, to come up with tangible proof of illusions and falsehoods. They are also required to counter with their vigilant presence the conditions of both the reader seduced by the Gothic expedients and the ghost-seer, now classified in the medical lexicon as «the patient».

Letter I unequivocally sets out the theoretical premises underpinning the entire treatise. The initial exploration of perceptive phenomenology lays the ground for an analytical historical methodology, linking the development of the history of thought to a parallel evolution in the history of civilisation. In *The Literature of Terror* David Punter notes that between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Gothic was a genuine and limited substitute for the sciences of history and psychology, an attempt to get to grips with the «barbaric areas» that were still partly taboo at the time. In the early 1830s Scott, who had matured as a writer during the 1790s, just as the Gothic romance was gathering speed, pursued and redefined the cognitive tradition of delving into the shadows enveloping public and private stories. He was also able to draw on historical science and medical science in order to identify and understand the critical nexus in the evolution of civilisation that had led to man's deception and the barbarities of nations.

Thus, once education became more progressive, the philosophical argument that spirits could manifest themselves and had the power to communicate with the human world began to be put forward in the more advanced countries, albeit only by the more observant and more cultured members of society. Most people, though, got no further than speculation and believed the apparitions to be incontrovertible and undeniable, as was the case during periods dominated by ignorance, when superstitious fantasies and general credulity were rife. However, the veracity of the stories of those claiming to have seen such apparitions can be assessed with a sound mind, education and scientific research.

What triggers these falsehoods that perpetuate a belief in a relationship between earth and afterlife? Powerful emotions and strong feelings induce individuals of a passionate nature to become convinced that supernatural communication exists, the evidence of their own eyes apparently providing further proof of the reality of the apparitions. In the synopsis of the first letter, Scott expounds on the key concept of passions as prime drivers in the formation of mental images, explicated during the treatise as a driving force for human action and history: «The situations of excited Passion incident to Humanity, which teach men to wish or apprehend Supernatural

Apparitions».[3] It is the powerful passions inherent in the human race that prompt people to crave or dread supernatural apparitions. The emphasis is naturally on the faculty of imagination, which, in this particular chapter of human history, is seen as a pathological and destructive force, a morbid imagination plagued by anguished thoughts, obsessions, agitation or excitement. Under particular circumstances, the imagination is capable of conjuring up spectres in front of the organs of sight, in other words it predisposes the mind to apparent illusions, daily fantasies or nocturnal apparitions.

What makes the supernatural episodes described by Scott significant from a psychological point of view is his careful piecing together of the conditions that rob perception and cognition of their usual reliability, demonstrating how the ability to discern between appearance and illusion can fail. The case studies start by describing imaginative states in which the boundaries of reality are overstepped, in other words, visions that appear in dreams, nightmares and the intermediate states between sleep and wakening, such as sleepwalking, in which an overexcited mind plays on senses only half awake. The precept of the oneiric material, narrative fragments of which follow, relates to the process of assimilating situations, thoughts and states of mind from the real world into dreams, showing the pointlessness of discussing the veracity of the apparition with the visionary, because the apparition, despite being entirely the product of the imagination, manifests itself in what appear to be everyday circumstances and contexts. Perceived spiritual communication often takes place when we are conscious of the physical details of the scene around us and aware of being in a familiar place, in our own bed, for instance, or our own room. This then triggers a perfect set of circumstances that render the evidence of that supposed reality irrefutable. Dreams therefore, are rooted in our everyday lives: «our dreams usually refer to the accomplishment of that which haunts our minds when awake, and often presage the most probable events».[4] But this natural origin, the imagination's recourse to causes for alarm while we are awake, was misconstrued in eras when ignorance reigned and in countries where dreams were seen as portents. At this point in civilisation, they were the focus of so much attention that the number of cases in which vision and actual event corresponded so perfectly that it fostered belief in a genuine power of communication between the living and the dead.

> The number of instances in which such lively dreams have been quoted, and both asserted and received as spiritual communications, is very great at all periods; in

[3] Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft, addressed to J.G. Lockhart*, Cambridge 2010, 1.

[4] Scott, *op. cit.*, 7.

> ignorant times, where the natural cause of dreaming is misapprehended, and confused with an idea of mysticism, it is much greater. Yet perhaps, considering the many thousands of dreams, which must, night after night, pass through the imagination of individuals, the number of coincidences between the vision and the real event, are fewer and less remarkable than a fair calculation of chances would warrant us to expect. But in countries where such presaging dreams are subjects of attention, the number of those which seemed to be coupled with the corresponding issue, is large enough to spread a very general belief of a positive communication betwixt the living and the dead.[5]

Redefining by implication the concept of superstition as what is believed to be true, Scott then focuses on that movable frontier between real and false mental representation, between truth and deception, in which dreams are seen as metaphorical projections of the mechanisms of thought representation, susceptible to the variables of probability and possibility, according to culture and era.

If what the imagination can see seems more significant than what the eye can attest to, even in the cold light of day, if passions and nerves can convey more potent and more accurate information than reasoning, more or less infallible guides are required to lay bare the deceit. This is what informs the innumerable stories featuring daydreams, an almost inexhaustible expedient in the *Letters*, in which Scott blends folklore, popular belief and historical archive with antiquarian zeal. They are mostly accounts presented along the lines of confessions of traumatic experiences or revelations of secrets so terrible that they can scarcely be told; an expedient common to much of Gothic Romantic literature. The accounts of spectral persecutions are seldom told in the voices of their protagonists, tending to be recounted by witnesses to their confessions. Eyewitness accounts presented in the prevalently Gothic medium of the first person would be overly subject to uncontrolled fluctuations of the imagination, passions and fears, as demonstrated by the analysis of the nature of confessions contained in the letters on the historical causes of the Inquisition.

The *incipit* of the first story shows that establishing documentary authenticity for each 'visual' story about apparitions is crucial, according to well-established tradition, in order to ascertain the veracity of eyewitness accounts and the reliability of original sources.

> A most respectable person, whose active life had been spent as master and part owner of a large merchant vessel in the Lisbon trade, gave the writer an account

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[5] Ibidem.

> of such an instance which came under his observation. He was lying in the Tagus, when he was put to great anxiety and alarm, by the following incident and its consequences. One of his crew was murdered by a Portuguese assassin, and a report arose that the ghost of the slain man haunted the vessel.[6]

The contagious nature of superstition means that stories about apparitions are easily shaped and quickly disseminated. The metadiscursive framework of the *Letters* thus serves to log, disentangle and make sense of the documentary compilation and the verbal transmission. In this particular case, we have to rely on trustworthy eyes. The observer of the scene is a respectable person in possession of public authority – a ship's captain. However, he is later succeeded by a great many real and fictitious doctors, and then replaced in the letters on witch-hunting by judges. It is not the virtuous observer of *sensibility* whose compassion is more important than the action he or she may take to alleviate other people's suffering. It is the spectator, who while not impassive in the face of stories of spectral persecution, does not allow himself to be emotionally swayed by demonstrations of anguish and fear; it is because of his level of authority and rational faculties of judgement and discernment that he is able to withstand the psychological power of the passions. This dovetails with the Lockean theory that observation can lead to an understanding of the mechanisms of thought formation. In this particular case we can observe the first sensorial formation of the idea, when the mind is immersed in perception and passion and becomes a victim of its own imagination. Thus, the captain decides to get to the bottom of what is upsetting his crew, and after hearing out the sailor, an honest and creditable person, yet obsessed by the ghost of a fellow crew member murdered by a Portuguese man, comes to the conclusion that the man's palpably terrified state of mind warrants his intervention. He therefore decides to see these nocturnal visitations for himself and, after keeping the sailor under observation, informs him the next morning of what actually happened during the night, managing to convince the sailor that his senses have deceived him. His action therefore serves to liberate the sailor from that particular dream.

This shows the need to discuss the spasms of one's own consciousness in order to prevent them becoming intolerable and to prevent the tribulations of daily life becoming psychological terrors. It is crucial to speak out, to accept remedial intervention that cannot be achieved internally. The guides also have a social role to play. Everything possible is done to avoid leaving the «sufferer» on his own, on the sidelines of his own community, and it is they who have the prerogative of «detection of the fallacy». They try to discover where the deception generated by the superstitious imagination has become

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[6] Ibidem, 8.

rooted. The happy ending of the captain's story shows that empirical investigation by a rational person can rely on observable evidence to correct a temporary obfuscation of the senses produced by dreams.

It is much more difficult, however, to pinpoint the deceptions that beset the public domain, even with the benefit of the inference methods used in legal investigations and their strict rules on cross examination and contradiction. From time immemorial, on the battlefields, in the tumult and violence of the moment, people who have felt themselves to be on the edge of the spiritual world have been convinced of seeing apparitions of beings that their national mythology associates with such situations. Shared emotion and collective excitement can infect the most controlled and wary of people, to the point of being convinced of the veracity of the portent, relying on what others have perceived rather than they themselves, especially when the story of the apparition is not told by a respectable sailor but by a fanatic or seasoned liar.

The contagious powers of superstition in cases of fanaticism or imposture can radicalise the prospect of fatal deceptions to which the human mind and behaviour are prey. The fatal morbidity of the mind, plunged into the depths of nightmares and madness, raises serious questions about the need for empirical intervention in order to fully comprehend the activity of the mind and piece its triggers together. Studies of triggers for mental processes necessarily rely on medical evidence in order to work out possible forms of treatment through a deductive analysis of symptoms. As Scott warns, terrible diseases exist that can trigger hallucinations, some of them common to madness: «Unfortunately, however, as is now universally known and admitted, there certainly exists more than one disorder known to professional men, of which one important symptom is a disposition to see apparitions».[7] As well as perceived psychological illusions, these include physical disorders and diseases of the sensory organs, when rather than processing information, they interfere with correct perception by contradicting the empirical evidence. It is not the imagination that takes over and stifles what the senses perceive, it is the organs of sight that betray their own mandate by transmitting false ideas to a healthy mind. The detailed anecdotes about the deception of the senses, which includes optical, auditory and tactile illusions, suggest that the human tendency towards cognitive fallibility has a biological and neurological basis, the demonology is ingrained in humanity («mortals [...] see, hear, and perceive, only by means of the imperfect organs of humanity»[8]). However, as Scott notes, false representations of the mind produced by disturbed imaginations or imbalances in the

[7] Ibidem, 16.
[8] Ibidem, 4.

external organs were attributed to demons and spirits in primitive society. It is the hoodwinking of the senses that informs the most tenacious categories of superstitious credence that consolidate belief in a life beyond bodily limits.

The accounts of infirmity and organic disorders require the scientific precision of medical consultation or testimony. The various types of infirmity and progress of the diseases are recorded by doctors who have gathered the confessions of the sufferers and witnessed with their own eyes the deterioration of bodily senses. Scenes of physical and mental suffering, largely confined to private and solitary spaces, form the backdrop to a painstaking investigation into the inexhaustible and constant foment of the imagination, which, as we have seen, does not even let up during sleep. *Letter I*, which sets out to illustrate the activity of the mind, and includes neurological terms, is testament to a constant, critical dialogue between the Romantics and neuro-scientists of the time, which, even during the early decades of the nineteenth century heralded a revolution in the perceived relationship between body and mind.[9] In Scott's case, in particular, the disquisition on perception and optical phenomena is influenced by his conversations with the scientist David Brewster, who made interesting discoveries in the new field of optical research.[10]

The letter mentions other doctors who were considerate enough to inform the scientific community and the wider public about their studies into the causes of mental disorders or, as Scott would have it, chose demonology as their study subject: Dr Gregory of Edinburgh, Dr John Ferriar of Manchester, who published many writings on the subject, including *Of Popular Illusions and more particularly of Modern Demonology*, the philosopher and scientist Ware Samuel Hibbert, whose treatises were another acknowledged source for *Letter I*, specifically *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions* (1825) and *Philosophy of Apparitions* (1828).

The argumentation framework offers cases of real, physical disorders that can trigger a weakening of the intellect, depression of the mind or the agitation of a diseased imagination, leading to the perceived wonders of the material world. They stress the harmful effects of drug and alcohol abuse on the eyes, which can transmute initially pleasing images into terrifying impressions and scenarios, and discuss degenerative diseases of the blood and nervous system, and permanent and transitory organic disorders.

The accounts of the testimonies and confessions, on the other hand, are largely structured around the *topos* of the visits. Visits from doctors and other charitable

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[9] Alan RICHARDSON, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Cambridge 2004, 6-8.

[10] Frederick BURWICK, «Science and Supernaturalism: Sir David Brewster and Sir Walter Scott», in: E. S. SHAFFER (ed.), *Literature and Science*, Cambridge 1991, 83-89.

members of society, to whom those who are unwell turn for help or advice, serve to try and counter the unpleasant and repellent visitations of supernatural enemies. The anecdotes relating to attempted treatments are not simply didactic expedients intended to indicate a reliable means of dissipating the more enduring beliefs, however. As the beginning of the letter makes clear, the apparitions are considered real by people of a particular temperament, or members of primitive societies, when the human mind defers to the fallibility of personal faculties in relation to individual or historical/cultural circumstances. In the latter, the variable consists of the level of civilisation of a society, depending on whether it is in a state of ignorance or progression. The medical cases, on the other hand, concern visionaries, who are aware of the fact that the daily persecutions exist only in their own imaginations. These include people of strong character, extraordinary common sense and integrity, such as the famous bookseller from Berlin, Mr Nicolai, whose love of science gave him the moral courage to give the Philosophical Society an account of his sufferings.

Nicolai recovers from the disease triggered by a blood test to which he periodically submits, while his drug regime increasingly blurs the edges of the crowd of ghosts that move and gesticulate in front of him. In the other cases, however, faith in science is dulled by its inability to alleviate the pain and assuage the despair. The visionaries become victims of their own imaginary illnesses, and no amount of reasoning or common sense can combat their effects. However, imaginary terrors can kill the body even when the intellect is vigilant and the sufferer does not remotely believe in ghosts and is well aware, furthermore, of the exact nature of the trick being played on him by his imagination. An extreme example of this is given in the story about an upright man, a high-ranking lawyer. The unfortunate patient decides on his deathbed to confess the reasons for the torment that is weighing him down and draining his energies, and describes how the steady progression of the illness has turned the visitations into persecutions, spectral phenomena in spectral deliria. In the face of the desperate anguish caused by the implacable presences, the doctor's efforts to distract the patient and treat the illness are to no avail.

> "Well," said the Doctor, "we will try the experiment otherwise." Accordingly, he rose from his chair by the bedside, and placing himself between the two half-drawn curtains at the foot of the bed, indicated as the place occupied by the apparition, asked if the spectre was still visible. "Not entirely so," replied the patient, "because your person is betwixt him and me; but I observe his skull peering above your shoulder."
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> It is alleged the man of science started on the instant, despite philosophy, on receiving an answer ascertaining, with such minuteness, that the ideal spectre

> was close to his person. He resorted to other means of investigation and cure, but with equally indifferent success. The patient sunk into deeper and deeper dejection, and died in the same distress of mind in which he had spent the latter months of his life [...].[11]

The eighteenth-century notion of the unstoppable progress of humanity is revealed to be illusory and Utopian. Faith in men of science and the willingness of individuals to use their skills for the common good persists, although there are still those who, persecuted by obscure and hopeless feelings of anguish, can only succumb to death or be condemned to desperate wandering. Hope in the progress of humanity is not extinguished by sentiment or reasoning, nor indeed by illusions of purely scientific investigation. The gloomy outlook is expressed in the words of the patient himself: «Science, philosophy, even religion, has no cure for such a disorder; and I feel too surely that I shall die the victim to so melancholy a disease, although I have no belief whatever in the reality of the phantom which it places before me».[12] False ideas can also prove resistant to the combined forces of religious sentiment, rationality and science, while humanity continues to deal with the ongoing perils of subjection to the laws of death and destruction.

Unlike the Romantic tendency to exalt the imagination, the *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* demonstrate the brain's inclination to reach conclusions based on insufficient evidence and to be hoodwinked by supernatural manifestations, because of the age-old belief in a spiritual world.

False impressions, first impressions, mistakes, inaccuracies, mental illusions, physical tricks and implausible confessions feed the already abundant mass of superstitious fantasies that have their origins, according to Scott, in the adulteration of facts and principles in both sacred and secular history, rooted within «the infancy of every society». Superstitious deceptions all too readily accepted as indubitable have warped the authentic reading of historical events. The difficult and delicate task of examining and resolving the plausibility and likelihood of the accounts therefore rests on a rigorous hermeneutical analysis of the sources in order to avoid telling the story exactly as it has been passed on, filtered down through time and tailored by the superstitious inclinations of those narrating it. In order to bring to light the mystifying and biased versions, the painstaking retrieval of documents and testimonies also has to focus on the memories and cracks of unofficial history. Accurate historical revision alone can replace false and corrupt interpretations produced by trickery or imposture, and

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[11] Scott, *op. cit.*, 33.

[12] Ibidem, 32.

produce a real view of events. Scott also takes a historical approach, countering the innocuous historicism of much of Gothic literature and its superficial and inaccurate historical reconstruction which, as in the Radcliffe case[13], has helped to sow the «seed of superstition», favouring supernatural and improbable events to the detriment of authenticity.

It is necessary, therefore, to return to our origins and consider the early history of humanity in order to make sense of the general tendency towards fallibility and corruptibility ingrained in the human species, because the laws that govern the history of the world are the laws of human nature and of man's cognitive faculties. Crime, fall and punishment are archetypal events in the universal story as told by Scott, forming the framework for the *Letters*, intended to illustrate the interaction between the specific and the universal[14], between the infinite variety of historical circumstances and the general dynamics that regulate the evolution of human history. *Letter II*, therefore, employs a universal interpretative approach to sift through the individual episodes that make up the story. The stories of individuals and nations are evaluated for their diversity and individuality according to time and place, but are understood and told as part of the history of humankind.

The story of our origins goes back to the Bible. The loss of the gift of immortality, and with it communication with the spiritual world, are the consequences of disobeying God's orders and eating the fruit of the forbidden tree. The prehistory of the human race, however, began with the merciless and vindictive Flood that gave life to the human race by relegating it to the lower echelons of creation and scattering it around the world. It is at this point, Scott reminds us, that God continued to manifest himself to those destined to become the fathers of his chosen people, supporting the historiographical interpretation that lays the emphasis on a strict division between sacred history and secular history, between the Jews and the pagans without Revelation. This bred the antagonism of ungodly men, who claimed a role equal to that of the prophets of the God of Israel, openly practising and flaunting witchcraft for aberrant reasons. He cites the example of the Pharaoh of Egypt's magicians who tried to rival Moses by using deceit and witchcraft to predict calamities during his reign.

There then follows the period in which the Omnipotent decides to take on the honour of legislating directly for his chosen people. The first historic document, the Law of Moses, dictated by God, generated the first corrupt interpretation which, informing the penal codes of all Christian nations, triggered cruelty and bloodshed,

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[13] GAMER, *op. cit.*, 166.

[14] Tim MILNES, «The Incommensurable Value of Historicism», in: D. W. DAVIES (ed.), *Romanticism, History, Historicism. Essays on an Orthodoxy*, New York/ London 2009, 14-31.

despite the fact that much of Mosaic Law was later replaced by the more benign and clement laws of the Gospel. There is a reference to the twenty-second chapter of *Exodus*, which urges men to put witches to death. Firstly Scott notes the different semantic meanings within the Scriptures. The witches of the Jewish world are, in fact, likened to sorceresses or poisoners, given to administering noxious potions and playing mischievous tricks. This implies lack of subservience or submission to a diabolic power, contrary to popular mediaeval and modern belief. The Old Testament law against witchcraft would not condone the severity of the sanctions inflicted by the codes of the European nations. Witchcraft also qualified for capital punishment in the Jewish world. It was classed as betrayal of or rebellion against the divinity, given that the chosen people enjoyed special and direct manifestations of divine presence and power, which involved the suspension of the laws of nature. This is why the Jewish religion was founded by the same God on the forbiddance of divination, which was a common practice in pagan countries, where superstitious practices were employed to obtain responses. Magic and witchcraft were in fact an integral part of religion for the ancient pagans, and soothsayers accorded themselves the competences of genuine prophets, through whom the will of God was expressed. What is more, according to the Holy Scriptures, all divinities and idols worshipped by pagans were considered to be devils or malign spirits.

The period of miracles followed, confirming the faith of the Jews and destroying the pride of the pagans. Impostors with pretensions of supernatural power competed with those charged with spreading the Gospel by producing authentic miracles. In order not to allow the demonic influence of the enemy the privilege of hoodwinking men with prophecies, imaginary miracles and deceitful portents, perpetrated through the persecution of mortals, abuse of people, violation of minds and bodily organs, the Omnipotent reduced the lying oracles to silence with the Coming. The Saviour's appearance on earth put an end to pagan divinities.

While the world of the ancient nations could be divided into Jews and pagans on the basis of the ban on or practice of divination, Scott identifies the universal principle on which the historic evolution of humanity is founded as the division of the spiritual world into angels and demons. Thus every man was able to carry out his own mandate and exercise his own power moved by a strictly moral natural inclination. Demons were therefore enemies, usurpers or apostates of the divine Dictate, tarred by the crime of hostility towards the human race, contaminated during every era by a residual paganism. They elected pagan divinities as their own idols, personifications of the fallacious desires and perverse passions of the human race.

The Omnipotent, Scott also reminds us, gave his Church demonstrations of his power through supernatural signs and signals, bearing witness to his mission and preventing

the faith being corrupted by demonic influences. The mediaeval Christians formulated charges of witchcraft and demonology propagated by ecclesiastics against any abuse of the faith, to help instil belief and bolster their authority in the minds of the faithful. The gradual contamination of religious sentiment and the steady corruption of members of the Christian Church served to expose the modern system of witchcraft as an unnatural insult to common sense and a crime against the person:

> [...] the more modern system of witchcraft was a part, and by no means the least gross, of that mass of errors which appeared among the members of the Christian Church, when their religion, becoming gradually corrupted by the devices of men, and the barbarism of those nations among whom it was spread, showed a light, indeed, but one deeply tinged with the remains of that very pagan ignorance which its divine founder came to dispel.[15]

Demonological doctrine, based on a balance of power between demons, witches and magicians, inflicting harm on innocent human beings, spread in all its variations throughout Europe, taking root in the remains of ancient pagan popular beliefs and the tendency of men throughout history to believe in supernatural events because of a deep-rooted belief in the hereafter.

Christianity with the aid of literature, and even history, sparked incredibly vicious fantasies about peoples and religions outside the Church. As for the Crusaders, Mahmound, Termagaunt and Apollo were just different names for the Arch-devil. Furthermore, based on the supposed superiority of the nature and object of their faith, they believed that Muslims were aided by malign spirits in their battle against the Christians, while they themselves enjoyed the direct protection of saints and angels. The tale of the battle between Richard the Lionheart and Saladin, which was nothing more than a clumsy tale of magic, in which a devil is defeated by a simple trick, is just one example of how even crude legends can be passed on and accepted as truthful narrations of facts, in other words, how the fictitiousness of a *romance* can appear as true as a chronicle. Legends therefore become evidence of what an era is disposed to believe or consider credible.

Charges of devil worship were formulated both inside Europe and in every corner of the globe. They were levelled not just at the pagans in Northern Europe and the Mahommedans in the East, but also at the civilisations steadily being discovered by the Europeans in the New World. In fact, the South and North American natives were

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[15] Scott, *op. cit.*, 75.

considered guilty of alleged diabolic practices in all stories about countries discovered and conquered, to justify the cruelty perpetrated by the colonisers.

Scott's history of demonology therefore comes under the heading of a history of human nature. The origins of a history of humankind can be deduced from the general tendency of human nature towards superstitious ideas that move the darker reaches of the souls of individuals and groups of people. There is also confirmation of the communality of stories about the origins of the European nations: «The Celtic tribes, by whom, under various denominations, Europe seems to have been originally peopled, possessed, in common with other savages, a natural tendency to the worship of the evil principle».[16] From the acquisition of a common belief in the cult of evil, which informs the same ideas in different religions, the historical analysis continues with an examination of the variety of details pertaining to the many different latitudes. A Romantic historiographical approach, a comparative historical analysis of different cultures in its widest sense, using material gathered from different countries and periods, is taken to the various letters. A distinctive national character, which varies according to the powers of imagination of each individual nation, leads to the discernment of a national supernatural. The enduring pagan cults and the mixture of ancient classical customs and superstitious beliefs that all peoples derive from their own countries can be traced, along with the similarities and differences between different places and particular coincidences between the creeds of different nations caused by contamination, migration or as further proof of the natural inclination of human nature towards superstition. All this forms the material for the demonological doctrine. The conquerors of the Roman Empire brought with them from the Nordic countries the idea of the existence of witches with the same characteristics as those for which they were celebrated in the sagas and chronicles; there are legends common to many different nations, about satyrs and gods of the forest, and blends of Nordic and Celtic superstitions. It is clear that the *Duergar*, the grey dwarves, were darker of temperament and more malign than the elves, despite being said to be more akin in character to the Germanic spirits, the *Kobold*, from which the English name *Goblin* and the Scottish *Boyle* derive; while the Celtic fairies were altogether gayer, having been invented by a people of superior taste and imagination; even their woodland pygmies had more sociable habits that those of the harsher *Duergar*. We note that prior to the Saxon conquest, popular Celtic traditions were darker than Nordic ones and that superstitions in the southern countries were altogether milder than the corresponding category in Scotland, whose stories tended in the main to be terrifying and often repugnant.

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[16] Ibidem, 88.

A synchronic look at the different cultures also reveals the metamorphic progression of the history of mankind in the run-up to the enlightened modern ages of ethical and moral renewal. This diachronic development does, however, include arid patches in history caused by destructive and obscurantist forces. Temporal change explicates an inexorable law of degeneration, dissolution and death, innervating the narrative of this historical process with paradigmatic and ruinous happenings: decline, fall, corruption, hegemony, misrule, violence and terror.

The affirmation and spread of Christianity and the ensuing 'conversion' of pagan countries are seen as the main forces for change in the history of Europe largely told as a history of the religions, the Church and religious sentiment. It leads on from the assumptions about the beneficent apostles and saints, who converted the early Christians with their stories and miraculous powers, their healing abilities and persuasive language, which attested to the authenticity of their mission to the debased form of papal power that held sway over minds obfuscated by superstition. From the 'visits', therefore, of the Christian missionaries whose arrival induced even the coldest of Northern peoples to forsake pagan mythology to the 'visits' of members of the Inquisition – who also acted on behalf of the monarchies – to the various places where tales of witchcraft were rife in order to eradicate any potential sedition by God's rebels. While every era in national histories contains the advent of angels or demons, Scott's reiterated metaphor of the 'visits' signalled the incarnation of a previously transmuted beneficent principle into a maleficent one or a maleficent one into a beneficent one. The most odious and cruel character is portrayed in *Letter VIII*, the letter that describes laws and trials against witchcraft in English history. The arrival of demonic figures such as the monster inquisitor Hopkins takes place in times of violence and misgovernment, which generate individuals whose 'character' is shaped by such events – in this particular case during a period of civil discord, schisms from the Roman Catholic Church and instinctive alarm over witchcraft. The fact that a king was passing laws to give voice to his own passions and fears, moreover, as happened during the reign of James I, the Scottish King of England, made the Witchcraft Act, based on the fantasies expressed in his treatise on demonology, even harsher and more severe.

> James succeeded to Elizabeth amidst the highest expectations on the part of his new people, who, besides their general satisfaction at coming once more under the rule of a king, were also proud of his supposed abilities and real knowledge of books and languages, and were naturally, though imprudently, disposed to gratify him by deferring to his judgment in matters wherein his studies were supposed to have rendered him a special proficient. Unfortunately, besides the more harmless freak of becoming a Prentice in the art of Poetry, by which words and numbers were the only sufferers, the monarch had composed a deep work

> upon Demonology, embracing, in the fullest extent, the most absurd and gross of the popular errors on this subject. He considered his crown and life as habitually aimed at by the sworn slaves of Satan. Several had been executed for an attempt to poison him by magical arts; and the turbulent Francis Stewart, Earl of Bothwell, whose repeated attempts on his person had long been James's terror, had begun his course of rebellion by a consultation with the weird sisters and soothsayers. Thus the king, who had proved with his pen the supposed sorcerers to be the direct enemies of the Diety, and who conceived he knew them from experience to be his own, who, moreover, had, upon much lighter occasions (as in the case of Vorstius,) showed no hesitation at throwing his royal authority into the scale to aid his arguments, very naturally used his influence when it was at the highest, to extend and enforce the laws against a crime which he both hated and feared.[17]

This is just one of the many examples of joyless reigns of terror sparked by ecclesiastical and political oppression during which, as Scott mentions, a rise is seen in morbid diseases of the mind. It is on the catastrophic giddiness of troubled times that the imaginative manifestations of people and nations become ingrained and survive, contaminated by the metamorphic power of mortification and extinction. We note that magical powers were seen in Nordic sagas and myths as special, which is why the prophetesses in the Germanic tribes were held in such high esteem. Elevated to the highest echelons because of their supernatural knowledge and ability to read the future, they became abhorrent and were likened to tricksters and sorceresses as soon as these tribes converted to Christianity. We also note that modern European nations have airbrushed out the popular image of devilry from the woodland gods and adopted only their degrading outward symbols. A sense that the end was nigh, moreover, served to banish the great national myths, even the legendary icon of an independent Britain, King Arthur, and Merlin his magician. A messenger tells of his miraculous disappearance, but the legend is the most recent version in which he renounces the famous sword out of an inability to hold off impending ruin.

> [...] the monarch sends his attendant, sole survivor of the field, to throw his sword, Excalibur, into the lake hard by. Twice eluding the request, the esquire at last complied, and threw the far-famed weapon into the lonely mere. A hand and arm arose from the water and caught Excalibar by the hilt, flourished it thrice, and then sank into the lake. The astonished messenger returned to his

[17] Ibidem, 245-246.

> master to tell him the marvels he had seen, but he only saw a boat at a distance push from the land, and heard shrieks of females in agony [...].[18]

The merry, kind English fairies that thronged the world at the time of King Arthur were also banished, and the widespread enjoyment of the marvellous elements of fantasy gave way to a much nastier and more enduring belief in witches. Similarly, the Nordic deities changed into demons after the conversion.

However, the coexistence of a beneficent principle and a maleficent one at various different stages in the historical evolution of man put the brakes on reason left to its own devices. Just as Europe was becoming a chamber of horrors with its unrelenting witch-hunts, brave philosophers emerged to counter the prejudices of superstition and ignorance with science and experience. Investigations, questions and opinions demolished the unreliability of supernatural devices and triggered the discovery that it was fixed laws that regulated the extraordinary phenomena occurring in the natural world. Furthermore, there was the courage of some monarchs, such as Louis XIV, who introduced the abolition of trials for witchcraft, putting their faith in judges, philosophers and sages instead. They used their enlightened powers of judgement to interpret what the inquisitors had seen as the main evidence, the confessions. These proved, in fact, to be unreliable tales full of nonsense that the incriminated witches, choked with terror, came up with after being imprisoned and tortured until they confessed to whatever they had been charged with.[19] The common sense of the judges, made suspicious by the incoherence of the testimonies, saved the nations from the final ruin of imposture and credulity.

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[18] Ibidem, 131.

[19] Christine L. KRUEGER, *Reading for Law: British Literary History and Gender Advocacy*, Charlottesville 2010, 79-82.