Performing Pandemonium: The Sublime in the Works of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood,

and William Hope Hodgson

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Contents

Acknowledgments

From the grimoire known as *The Necronomicon* to the elusive play of *The King in Yellow*, weird fiction regularly features arcane texts that drive its characters to the brink of madness. With unbearable knowledge forever lying just outside their reach, the readers of these pages gibber and rave, breaking down into incoherence when trying to reproduce their contents. On more than one occasion this thesis, which was in its own way in pursuit of the unthinkable, similarly had me question my sanity, my purpose, and my ability to form a single meaningful and articulate sentence. I owe a great debt of gratitude to a number of people who pulled me back from pointless navel-gazing, self- and pandemic-imposed reclusion, and writerly paralysis.

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Introduction

It was as if one gazed at a velvet curtain, heavy, mysterious, impenetrable blackness, and then, for the twinkling of an eye, one spied through a pinhole a storied town that flamed, with fire about its walls and pinnacles. And then again the folding darkness, so that sight became illusion, almost in the seeing.

Arthur Machen, "The Ceremony"

Underneath the surface of some horror stories glimmers and pulses a presence that can be experienced only obliquely, a textually transmitted affective state, a certain experiential something that heightens sensations of wonder and awe. It insinuates itself under the skin of the world and expands its dimensions beyond the quotidian, leaving its characters teetering on the brink of madness and/or revelation. This literary effect, often easier to affectively recognize than it is to authoritatively describe, has become codified as the hallmark of weird fiction. H.P. Lovecraft, whose dubious shadow looms over the weird literary tradition, was the first to coin the term in his seminal essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature", describing the exemplary weird story as follows:

> The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim. (20)

The weird tale deals in atmosphere and suggestion, hints and whispers, resisting all too easy codification to an extent, but still powerfully evoking that outside presence that makes itself felt while continually remaining beyond the scope of human understanding. The fact that the weird can and does occur throughout a variety of *fin-de-siècle* literature (Machin 62) and any attempt to delineate it to a set of genre markers has proven unsuccessful has meant that it has generally been considered as "an inflection or tone, a *mode* rather than a *genre*" (Luckhurst, "The Weird: a dis/orientation" 1045). Treating the

weird as a mode is also in line with its early usage as a descriptor of "a certain tonality" (ibid.) particularly associated with the work of Poe (Machin 36). The above fragment indicates that the core affect that the weird tale evokes is a combination of overwhelming though elusive 'dread' and 'awe', the contrasting qualities that are characteristic of the aesthetic of the sublime. Lovecraft's essay effectively traces the history of the horror tale's employment of the various tropes of the supernatural, and judges numerous authors in terms of how effectively and consistently they manage to approach the mode that produces that sublime shudder. Lovecraft cursorily mentions early examples among classical and medieval works, but unsurprisingly maintains that the true roots of horror literature lie in the Gothic.

Arguably even more relevant to us here, however, are the modern authors he lists whom he deems to have made great contributions to weird fiction. "Supernatural Horror in Literature" is in many ways an instrument of canon formation; it defines a new form (the 'weird tale'), outlines the criteria by which it may be judged, and catalogues an impressive number of authors as exemplary writers of such weird tales. Because of the recent revival of interest in Lovecraft and his legacy, both popular and academic, a similar renewed attention has also gone out to the literary predecessors he claimed for himself, some of which[1] may likely have sunken into permanent obscurity if it had not been for Lovecraft's essay. Remarkably, however, little scholarly attention has gone to these stories of early weird fiction writers in their own right. Often these writers are, explicitly or implicitly, only considered in light of Lovecraft's work and the context in which he wrote. Furthermore, the concept of 'the weird' has in recent years outgrown its original framework, and has been mobilised by scholars to do and mean different things. Early weird writers, with their disparate works and poetics, are thus claimed for and subsumed by literary and philosophical projects that leave little room for the idiosyncrasies of their texts or for the contexts in which they were written. This thesis intends to engage with the work of Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and William Hope Hodgson, three of the writers Lovecraft singles out as having made great contributions to weird fiction, and

[1] This is notably true of Hodgson, who was brought to Lovecraft's attention by H.C. Koenig's 1934 essay "William Hope Hodgson: Master of the Weird and Fantastic", and thus only appeared in the second (revised) edition of "Supernatural Horror in Literature". Lovecraft notes Hodgson's work is "known today far less than it deserves to be" (87), and it is likely that if it were not for Koenig's and Lovecraft's appreciation, he would be entirely unknown now, nearly a century later.

grapples with what, if anything, that may mean. Through sustained close readings of key texts in their oeuvre, I will attempt to uncover how each of them weaves their narrative spells, and to what end.

A note on (dis)continuity

My very premise, then, is already compromised by the ghost of Lovecraft and the kind of retrospective categorization I take issue with: none of these authors were under the impression they were writing weird fiction, and would likely have objected to being grouped together. I am aware of the contradiction inherent in my use of the term 'weird' as a lens through which to read my corpus, but I would like to emphasise that I do not view the weird as being firmly and unequivocally separate from previous traditions, like the Gothic. I thereby deviate from a popular strand of thought that considers late nineteenth and early twentieth century weird fiction to be anticipatory of modernism. Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy, for instance, consider the weird tale to have "reached maturity in the 'pulp modernism' of H. P. Lovecraft" (117). China Miéville draws even starker lines between what he terms "the hauntology" of the Gothic and the "hallucinatory/nihilist novum" of the weird ("M.R. James" 113). Unlike the Gothic, weird fiction, in Miéville's conception, is a radical and novel form, "without mythic resonance" (105). The uncanny return of the ancestral past which typifies the Gothic story turns into the intrusion of the 'abcanny' in the weird tale: instead of the secretly familiar but repressed content of the (personal, genealogical, or cultural) unconscious being resurrected in the present, the weird stages the incursion of the unimagined-because-unimaginable other, the traumatically new. Miéville's teratological taxonomizing has as its goal to explain the relevance of these two tendencies in the twentieth century and beyond: "Hauntology and Weird are two iterations of the same problematic – that of crisis-blasted modernity showing its contradictory face, utterly new *and* traced with remnants, chaotic and nihilist *and* stained with human rebukes". The centering of modernity means that for Miéville, "[i]t is the war of 1914-1918 that is the black box, the heart of the Weird" ("Weird Fiction" 513). This emphasis on weird fiction as a literature of crisis, presciently anticipating modernism is something I would like to move away from.

Instead, I put forward a reading of my corpus that considers the 'weird' in their work as a *resurgence* of an aesthetic (the sublime) and its associated concerns which are most strongly associated with, as Lovecraft indicates, various literary works appearing a century before the appearance of the earliest text in my corpus. Lovecraft dwells extensively on the Gothic romance in his essay, considering Horace Walpole "the actual founder of the literary horror-story as a permanent form" (26). Yet he finds Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* "tedious, artificial, and melodramatic" (27), a poor execution of the weird impetus embodied by the Romantic poets (which are, admittedly, mentioned only in passing):

> The shadow-haunted landscapes of "Ossian", the chaotic visions of William Blake, the grotesque witch-dances in Burns's "Tam O'Shanter", the sinister daemonism of Coleridge's *Christabel* and *Ancient Mariner*, the ghostly charm of James Hogg's "Kilmeny", and the more restrained approaches to cosmic horror in *Lamia* and many of Keats's other poems, are typical British illustrations of the advent of the weird to formal literature. (25-26)

A comparison invites itself to Machen's comment in "A Secret Language", where he calls Walpole's style "sham Gothic", the shoddy imitation of something Walpole must have found admirable in Gothic architecture, but which he failed to emulate in his work (an attitude that, as we shall see, may reveal more about Machen than it does about Walpole): "Now one would not for a moment class the school of Coleridge in its appreciation of nature with the school of Walpole in its appreciation of the Gothic. But may it not be that Coleridge and his fellows were but the forerunners of a new doctrine which was not fully revealed to them?" (70). The doctrine Machen discerns in Coleridge, a doctrine Walpole guessed at but never managed to embody in his fiction, is the discernment that external nature continually reveals the presence of a transcendental reality, a doctrine in turn very near and dear to Machen's heart. However, Coleridge, according to Machen, drifted away from this aspiration:

> It was the misfortune, I think, of Coleridge that after his first rush and flood of inspiration he went after the strange metaphysical gods of Germany, clouding his soul with a more deadly drug than the opium which he applied to his body. (…) I would not say at all that he despised his poetry; but he thought himself embarked

> in (sic) a far higher quest of something that he called the Truth; whereas the fact is that his poetry at its finest was the truth and the vital truth. (ibid.)

Coleridge found Kant, and his faith in poetry never recovered. Stanley Cavell has described the immense impact Kant's Copernican revolution had on the Romantic poets as a continual negotiation of skepticism. With the noumenal realm severed from the phenomenal, belief in intimate and unmediated human knowledge of the world became untenable. The various bargains made for a renewed contact with, a recovery of, the world beyond the veil of the mind and the senses, is what Cavell defines as the Romantic project. Machen, as we shall see, carries on this 'doctrine' so central to Romanticism – the reconciliation of subject and object, man and nature, through the imagination – in his own work, and the same influence seeps through strongly into Blackwood's work, although it manifests under a different form than it does in Machen's. Even Hodgson, whose literary influences remain more obscure, and whose work is most incontrovertibly pulpy, inherits some of the poetical quandaries of Romanticism.

Religious feeling

The use of the word 'supernatural' (for Lovecraft titles his canonizing essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature", not opting for 'weird' or any other qualifier) also warrants some attention, especially in the context of the late-Romantic heritage I argue is so central to the early weird. Lovecraft argues that the persistence of "a literature of cosmic fear" (18), as he calls it, is intimately connected to the human religious impulse. As a staunch atheist and materialist himself, Lovecraft was as much drawn to this impulse as openly disdainful of it. In his essay he writes how

> sometimes a curious streak of fancy invades an obscure corner of the very hardest head; so that no amount of rationalization, reform, or Freudian analysis can quite annul the thrill of the chimney-corner whisper or the lonely wood. There is involved a psychological pattern or tradition as real and as deeply grounded in mental experience as any other pattern or tradition of mankind; coeval with the religious feeling and closely related to many aspects of it, and too much a part of

> our innermost biological heritage to lose keen potency over a very important, though not numerically great, minority of our species. (16)

That Lovecraft identifies this "feeling of the supernatural" (17) to lie at the basis for the production and appeal of weird fiction once more indicates its clear Romantic inheritance. In his seminal study of Romanticism by the same name, M.H. Abrams borrows the term 'natural supernaturalism' from Thomas Carlyle to denote the way in which the advent of secularism did not herald the end of religious thinking, but saw the supernatural subsumed by nature, and the religious instinct redirected towards the reformulation of the relationship between the human subject and the world (Abrams 13). I would like to situate the writings of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson as an offshoot of this Romantic literary practice of reframing and renegotiating the supernatural outside of theological tradition. Regarding the continuous appeal of the supernatural, Lovecraft observes how authors engaged in the writing of weird fiction do so "as if to discharge from their minds certain phantasmal shapes" (18). It is in the tension between this almost involuntary act of dredging up certain troublesome contents of the psyche and the self-conscious poetic salvaging of God that our interest here lies.

The fact that these writers are mostly remembered for their horror tales is certainly significant. Machen and Blackwood, at least, can be said to have written a number of works in which the supernatural is not made into an unsettling presence, works that, incidentally, both authors indicated better captured their personal vision than their horror stories ever did. And yet it is the latter that are repeatedly anthologised, and that have managed to capture the interest of readers well over a century later. Lovecraft argues that it is because pain affects us more greatly than pleasure, and "because our feelings toward the beneficent aspects of the unknown have from the first been captured and formalised by conventional religious rituals" (17), that the darker aspects of the supernatural have infused the horror tradition. I argue here that the weird continues to allure because it exposes us to the unacknowledged aspects of our own religious impulse. Weird stories do not merely tap into this enigmatic instinct, but, upon a closer reading, also richly interrogate and complicate their own premises. This connection between the horror tale and the religious experience is one already alluded to by Rudolph Otto in his *Idea of the Holy*. Otto writes that the reason of the attraction of the ghost story is "that of

itself and in an uncommon degree it entices the imagination, awakening strong interest and curiosity; it is the weird thing itself that allures the fancy" (43). The ghost, for which we may here substitute the weird phenomenon (pace Miéville), manages to stimulate our imagination to such an extent, according to Otto, "because it is a thing that 'doesn't really exist at all', the 'wholly other', something which has no place in our scheme of reality but belongs to an absolutely different one, and which at the same time arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind" (ibid.). The terror and fascination one feels upon hearing a ghost story is for Otto a much attenuated version of what he calls 'daemonic dread', a primitive but vital part of religious experience in se. As an antecedent of 'true' religious dread, 'daemonic dread', according to Otto, "first begins to stir in the feeling of 'something uncanny', 'eerie', or 'weird'" (29). This particular kind of dread experienced, the daemonic 'shudder', is fundamentally distinct from natural or ordinary fear, as it indicates a first, if undeveloped, experience of the mystery of the divine, which awakens faculties beyond the natural ones. Otto is adamant that the weird feeling that develops into daemonic dread "forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in history" (ibid.), and that any numinous emotion worthy of the name, "even at the highest level" (31), still retains a trace of primeval ghostliness. Otto writes:

> Even when the worship of 'daemons' has long since reached the higher level of worship of 'gods', these gods retain as 'numina' something of the 'ghost' in the impress they make on the feelings of the worshipper, viz. the peculiar quality of the 'uncanny' and 'awful', which survives with the quality of exaltedness and sublimity or is symbolized by means of it. And this element, softened though it is, does not disappear even on the highest level of all, where the worship of God is at its purest. Its disappearance would be indeed an essential loss. (ibid.)

The stories analysed here all partake in that 'shudder'. They stage daemonic, pseudo-paganist revivals in order to simulate a range of mystical experiences that cast into an ambivalent light the human imagination, the religious impulse, and the literary text.

The sublime

I started this chapter by outlining the kind of affective response which weird fiction aims to evoke, and by arguing that it is this sensation of awe and dread that threads through

weird texts that constitutes their very idiosyncrasy. 'The sublime' is a useful term to characterise this sensation, if only because it gives us a kind of theoretical apparatus with which to pry open the texts, but also because it connects the stories in question back to a rich literary and philosophical tradition. While I do not subscribe to his notion of weird fiction as an anticipatory literature of modernist crisis, Miéville has astutely remarked that the sublime and the numinous are important concepts to think with when considering weird fiction. Miéville writes: "The focus is on *awe*, and its undermining of the quotidian. This obsession with numinosity under the everyday is at the heart of Weird Fiction" ("Weird Fiction" 510), and "The Weird (...) punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime, and allows swillage of that awe and horror from 'beyond' back into the everyday – into angles, bushes, the touch of strange limbs, noises, etc. The Weird is a radicalized sublime backwash" (511). Miéville's insights into the central affective mechanisms of the weird are invaluable, particularly the movement he describes from the classical sublime experience to that particular veiled quality of imminent revelation we find in the weird, which he calls 'sublime backwash'. James Machin similarly notes the connection between the weird and the sublime, and considers it a constitutive aesthetic throughout the oeuvre of various early authors:

> This sense of scale—both spatial and temporal, explicit and implied—underwrites not only the cosmicism of Lovecraft and Dunsany but much of weird fiction discussed below, for example the recrudescent paganism of Machen and Buchan, and in its affect is linked to Kant's notion of the aesthetic sublime as something (an idea, an impression) overwhelming: the weird conveys this dizzying, disorienting, and alienating sense of being overwhelmed by deep time and/or deep space, even to the detriment of any other concerns. (Machin 30)

To give a single, univocal description of what the sublime is or does would be to disregard its long history, during which at various times different aspects of the concept took precedence over others, and served different purposes according to their particular historical and philosophical context. Nevertheless, for the sake of establishing a working definition, I will consider the sublime here as an aesthetic concerned with eliciting feelings of overwhelming dread and awe, bringing the human subject to the limit of what can be experienced, thought, and expressed, while promising but not necessarily granting

transcendence of these limits. Providing a comprehensive or even thorough history of the sublime falls outside of the scope of this dissertation. Instead, confronted as I am with my own human limits, I will provide a cursory overview of the theories of the sublime which interest us here, insofar as they will inform my reading of some core texts in the early weird literary tradition.

One main tension that is relevant for our discussion here, is that between the notion of the sublime as a literary aesthetic versus a conception of it as a semi-religious transcendental feeling. Like any historical aperçu of the sublime, we have to start with *Peri Hypsous* (*On the Sublime*) by Longinus, a treatise on the sublime in terms of stylistic grandeur and moral excellence. Through its rediscovery and subsequent translation by Boileau, this work had an immense philosophical impact, being the first to articulate the sublime as a distinct category, and opening up the field of aesthetics beyond discourses on the beautiful. Longinus describes a rhetorical mode superior to the merely persuasive one, one which is characterised by its elicitation of ecstasy and overwhelming awe, which both elevates and lays low the soul. Here then we have the earliest attestation of the strangely contradictory sensation of pleasure and pain which has become the hallmark of the sublime effect/affect. In fact, as Robert Doran writes, "it is precisely by being overpowered that a high-minded feeling of superiority or nobility of soul (mental expansiveness, heroic sensibility) is attained" (10). A parallel naturally presents itself with the religious experience, where we find a similarly intense and ambiguous desire for, on the one hand, self-abasement before the Godhead, and, on the other, for ecstatic union with it. Rudolph Otto expressed this mystical element of religion, which is the human encounter of the holy, as the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a mystery both awful and compelling. The encounter with the divine, which is "wholly other", something "quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny', and is contrasted with it" (Otto 40), arouses in us what he calls 'creature-consciousness' or 'creature-feeling', a sensation of submission and self-depreciation before an overwhelming force; at the same time, however, it produces the yearning for the possession *of*, or for the state of being possessed *by* the numen. Consequently, Doran considers Longinus' elaboration of the sublime rhetoric a transformation of a fundamentally religious affect into "a protoaesthetic experience of

intensity, as indicated by the use of such terms as 'awe,' 'astonishment,' 'wonder,' 'ecstasy,' 'amazement' – terms that apply equally well to both secular-aesthetic and religious contexts" (12). Longinus' transference of the sublime from the religious realm towards that of rhetoric (or that of 'protoaesthetics'), will help us think about questions of literary performance and religious feeling which I argue are central to the oeuvre of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson.

A second strand of thought that is particularly relevant to this dissertation, one I have already touched on to some extent in this introduction, is the role of terror with regard to the sublime aesthetic. The role of negative sensation in producing the sublime was elaborated by Edmund Burke in his 1757 treatise entitled *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke opens his exposition on the sublime as follows:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (39)

In order for the terrible object to be sublime, however, a certain distance from it is required, so that it does not simply activate "[t]he passions which belong to self-preservation" (51) into producing pain, but is mingled with delight. Burke here makes a distinction between actuality and virtuality, as Doran points out, so that his theory of the sublime becomes marked by "the *idealization* of pain and danger" (Doran 151), or "aesthetic distance" (ibid.). Once this distance is achieved, the terrible object evokes a kind of pleasure in the human mind at its transcendence. Doran writes: "One is elevated by terror; that is, sublimity allows us to appropriate the strength and power of that which inspires our fear" (160). Burke, then, is ultimately interested in theorizing about the sublime in terms of its great intensity, an intensity which can be co-opted by the human subject. The role of art here is ambiguous; Burke argues that the effectiveness of art to evoke sublime sensations is secondary to that of real life, insofar as it proceeds through mimesis (i.e. the close reproduction of reality), but can be as great as real life insofar as it manages to produce sympathy (i.e. the transposition of ourself onto the perspective of others). Sympathy is what allows the simultaneous proximity and distance to the object

inspiring terror, through the identification with the other experiencing it. Consequently, Burke prioritises poetry over other artforms in the conjuration of the sublime, a distinction based on the reasoning that painting or architecture are primarily mimetic, whereas poetry "cannot with strict propriety be called an art of imitation" (Burke 172). Due to the distinctive power of words, Burke declares that "eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable of making deep and lively impressions than any other arts, and even than nature itself in very many cases" (173). Three causes for this can be distinguished: firstly, poetry is able to establish greatly effective lines of sympathy between the reader and the lyrical subject(s), powerfully conveying the latter's passions on the former. Secondly, because it does not rely on mimesis, poetry is able to represent things of great affective power that rarely occur (e.g. great disasters) or are not available to the senses (e.g. God). And thirdly, words, according to Burke, are able to recombine more powerfully than images. Burke writes: "To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged; but what painting can furnish out any thing so grand as the addition of one word, 'the angel of the *Lord*?'" (174).

Burke's theories had a profound impact on Gothic literature, and particularly on Ann Radcliffe, whose influential essay "The Supernatural in Poetry" famously develops a distinction between 'horror' and 'terror'. Particularly Burke's insight regarding the production of the sublime effect through obscurity is notable here. Burke writes: "To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (58-59). Radcliffe made this principle into the distinguishing mark of terror. She notes: "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them" (Radcliffe 149), adding: "and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?" (150). Obfuscation elevates the mere sensation of danger to a terror tinged with sublimity, awakening the faculty of the imagination. Weird fiction likewise shrouds its monstrous forces. Hints substitute full disclosure, disparate parts are revealed that suggest an awful outline rather than exposing the total entity, and

excessively detailed descriptions are given that finally break down at the inability to fully account for what is presented. Miéville portrays this as the weird's

> *hesitation*, its obsessive qualification and stalling of the noun, an aesthetic deferral according to which the world is always-already unrepresentable, and can only be approached by an asymptotic succession of subjective pronouncements. Thus the form of writing is a function of sublime backwash, these baroque stylings a philosophy of militant adjectivalism struggling against a nounism that implies, carelessly speaking of 'dog' and 'door' as if that were the end of the matter, that such unrepresentable Reals are containable in our inadequate symbolic system. (…) Weird fiction looks like radical humility in the face of Weird ontology itself. ("The Weird" 511-512)

In the same breath, Miéville astutely characterises a key formal strategy of weird fiction and denies there is much of a literary choice being made at all. This, as we shall see, is a recurrent theme in the current valorisation of weird fiction: its particular aesthetics and sublime framing are merely seen as a response to an already extant alterity, a 'weird ontology'. In the chapters that follow I hope to restore a reading of early weird texts as texts, complex, nuanced narratives that struggle with the alterity that they are in the process of generating.

A third aspect of the sublime I would like to engage with here is the idea of transcendence, and of transcendence deferred, for which we will turn to Kant. Kant's reflections on the sublime reached their fullest development in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Here, he defines the sublime as a "disposition of soul" (Kant 250) evoked by a particular object. The sublimity of the judgment does not rest in the sensible qualities of the object that evokes it, but in its ability to make the power of reason known to the human subject who beholds the object. Whereas the judgment of beauty for Kant derives from the accord between the imagination and the understanding, the sublime causes a dissonance between both: the apprehended object is too great to be comprehended. Two different types of sublimity are distinguished: the mathematical sublime, which is evoked by the mind's inability to comprehend the magnitude of nature, and the dynamical sublime, which is stirred up by nature's devastating might. The conflicting feeling both inspire in the mind, which is due to the senses and the imagination being disagreeably

overwhelmed by the object, is resolved when the faculty of reason is able to supersede the imagination and the object by being able to conceptualise 'wholeness' and 'infinity'. Kant connects these concepts back to the noumena:

> Still the mere ability even to think the given infinite without contradiction, is something that requires the presence in the human mind of a faculty that is itself supersensible. For it is only through this faculty and its idea of a noumenon, which latter, while not itself admitting of any intuition, is yet introduced as substrate underlying the intuition of the world as mere phenomenon, that the infinite of the world of sense, in the pure intellectual estimation of magnitude, is completely comprehended under a concept, although in the mathematical estimation by means of numerical concepts it can never be completely thought. (254-255)

Whereas Kant's concept of the beautiful demonstrated that nature is inherently intended for human pleasure (as the beautiful object entails a pleasing harmony between the imagination and the understanding), in evoking the sublime, nature reveals a fundamental human *telos* towards self-determination and freedom. The importance Kant places on the vocation of the human subject to divine the "supersensible substrate (underlying both nature and our faculty of thought)" (255) and on the implicit idea that nature, which is conceived as a work of art, is as it were designed for the judging faculty (Doran 207) cannot be overstated. The sublime offers to our faculty of reason a connection with that of which no intuition is possible, the Thing in Itself, facilitating a new relationship between human and world based on the former's intellectual supremacy.

Kant transferred the magnificent qualities of nature, that had in turn been displaced from God (Weiskel 14), to the faculties of the human mind, a move which profoundly reshaped sublime discourses to centre on the mind's ascendancy over nature. This displacement of the numinous from God to nature to the human mind becomes pivotal in the way Romantic poetry engages with the sublime. In order to illustrate the complex response of the Romantics to the changing mind-nature paradigm as it relates to their employment of the sublime aesthetic, I will very briefly consider the different interpretations of the Alpine sublime in Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Coleridge's *Hymn Before Sunrise*, and Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. The passage in *The Prelude* (Book Sixth, lines. 454-575) is interesting because instead of demonstrating the incommensurability of the

imagination to the vast powers of nature – a conflict which is then triumphantly overcome – it does quite the opposite: the actual experience of Mont Blanc is a disappointment. Wordsworth describes the first glance of Mont Blanc as "a soulless image on the eye/ Which had usurped upon a living thought/ That never more could be" (lines. 456-458). This disappointment is compounded when Wordsworth's company learns that they have crossed the Alps completely unawares, and that the rest of their journey is a descent. At this moment, imagination intercedes and salvages the experience post-facto, belatedly rendering the landscape sublime. Wordsworth's consequent ode to the imagination hails it as power whose glory shows the mind its "destiny" (line 541) in the "infinitude" (line 542) of "the invisible world" where "greatness make[s] abode" (line 539). Thomas Weiskel, borrowing from Keats, calls Wordsworth's sublime "the egotistical sublime", elaborating: "In Kantian terms, the sudden 'movement' of the mind is greatly slowed and the phenomenal or sensible ego is aggrandized in place of the self-recognition of the noumenal reason" (49). Wordsworth recovers the world through the Imagination (capitalised), "a totalizing consciousness whose medium is sense but whose power is transcendent. Apocalypse becomes immanent; the sublime, a daily habit" (50). Coleridge's take on the same scene is in many ways an even more paradigmatic case of sublimity. *Hymn Before Sunrise* celebrates the awakening of the soul upon the sight of the Mont Blanc, which stands as sublime proof of God's power, in which the poet rapturously shares as his soul is expanded beyond its ordinary capacity, and, taking on "her natural form, swelled vast to Heaven!" (line 23). In a headnote, Coleridge later added the exclamation "Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!". Famously, however, he never saw the Mont Blanc himself (Leask 185), and based his poem on one by Friederike Brun, which substantially complicates the idea behind the poem, making the programmatic metaphysics underpinning it feel forced. Shelley, however, would offer a rejoinder to Coleridge's question in his own poem. *Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni* reflects on the landscape and the "power" it evinces, though it finds in the alpine sublime not the evidence of the Almighty revealed to and participated in by the human soul, but a desire for symbolic significance that is renounced as soon as it is projected upon nature. As a profoundly intertextual poem, Shelley's *Mont Blanc* performatively struggles against the sublime discourse in which it is written, but by rejecting various mythical framings as inadequate, the poem ironically falls

deeper into that same register. Shelley finds the mountain's voice when he has stripped it as bare as he can manage of the mythical ballast in which it is encrusted, but, as Christopher Hitt points out, what that voice says "must be left indefinite lest it be reified, reintegrated into the imaginative and discursive structures it should exceed" (149). In its famous concluding question "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,/ If to the human mind's imaginings/ Silence and solitude were vacancy? " (line 144), the poem attempts to approach materialism by imagining the real quietening of human voices beyond "silence and solitude", which, as Hitt indicates (157), themselves constituted a sublime trope that was already worn-out at the time that Shelley was writing. What this wide range of responses to the aesthetic of the sublime demonstrates is that Romantic poetry constitutes a re-encounter with a covert religiosity – the problem of God which Kant had tried to fence off but could not expunge – as well as posing a challenge to the promise of transcendence and the triumph of the human reason/imagination over the world. It is this broader dialogue in which I would like to situate the work of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson, a dialogue which they carry on into the twentieth century.

Context

Understanding why the texts which are now classified or canonised as early examples of weird fiction were written around the *fin-de-siècle* period, and specifically why they were concerned with eliciting a sublime response from their readership, requires at least a cursory sketch of the cultural context of the time. The late nineteenth century is often and rightly regarded as a period of rapid scientific advancement, and of the formation and delineation of distinct scientific disciplines, each with their respective fields, methodologies, and discourses. This period of epistemological upheaval brought about by the new systematization of knowledge engendered debates about authority and institutional control, and consequently saw the rise of scientific naturalism, summarised by Roger Luckhurst as being "premised on the uniformity of nature and the invariability of natural laws, which meant rejection of any supernal interventions or miraculous suspensions of lawful behaviour. It was monistic, conceiving only of one order of existence – matter – rejecting the realms of metaphysics or spirit" (*The Invention of Telepathy* 15); it was a scientific attitude, moreover, which relied on empiricism, both as a

method, and "in the way it disallowed questions of ontological 'First Causes'" (15-16). Although scientific naturalism did not seek the eradication of religion, it exercised a significant secularising influence on the realm of science. The worldview resulting from materialism in the narrow sense contributed in no small part to what Max Weber would come to term the disenchantment of modernity, a conception of the world as having been drained of magic. Keith Tribe summarises this as follows:

> There is no longer anything that is in principle unknowable, nothing that, if we took the time, we could not calculate; indeed, through calculation we can potentially control and manipulate everything. And so the world is disenchanted: while science makes the world in principle comprehensible, this very comprehensibility robs the world of mystery and enchantment, while not itself lending science any meaning. (131)

The prospect of a world that gives away entirely before the rule of science while disallowing, or placing outside of the purview of rationality or empirical experience, the existence and immortality of the soul, divine intervention, or other marvellous forces at work in nature, was insupportable for many Victorians. This goes some way to explain the reason a rich variety of pseudosciences (mesmerism, telepathy, spiritualism, …) emerged and gained ground in this period, many of which claimed scientific respectability and/or exploited "uncertainty and transition in knowledges and institutions" (Luckhurst, *The Invention* 2). Often these uncertainties had everything to do with the definition of various key concepts, such as what constituted 'nature', 'matter', or 'spirit'. Alfred Russell Wallace's impassioned defense of spiritualism as an "experimental science" that would "[abolish] the terms 'supernatural' and 'miracle' by an extension of the sphere of law and the realm of nature" (Sausman and Luckhurst 192) is a case in point. The instinctive drive to project human patterns of meaning onto the world, and the need to account for this drive, led to a wide array of renegotiations of scientific insights. Despite the growing authority of scientific naturalism, Victorian culture can be said to be "full of inventive re-enchantments of the world, often creating mysterious and sublime effects out of the very science that was meant to destroy magic thinking" (Sausman and Luckhurst ix).

Alex Owen is likewise careful to note that the so-called 'mystical revival' of the time, which found expression in the efflorescence of occultism and esotericism, was

"characterized by the confluence of many of the most significant late-Victorian intellectual trends and fashionable ideas", and that the practitioners and advocates of the *fin-de-siècle* occult demonstrated an "ongoing (if qualified) enthusiasm for science" (26). Owen traces some of the central Romantic ideas regarding subjectivity into late-nineteenth and early twentieth century magical practices and mystical thought:

> (…) the self-realization of which occultism spoke was symptomatic of both the bourgeois self-consciousness and self-determination that have been so closely associated with post-Enlightenment subjectivity and the "transcendental" interiority of the nineteenth century Romantic and allied movements. This was an occult preoccupation with self that looked within for the means of transcending the phenomenal world and accessing the spiritualized manifestations of an occluded reality. The "powers of the interior man" were conceived in purely psychologized terms. In its attention to interiority occultism echoed certain aspects of 'decadent' Romanticism, but like the medical psychology of the day, it sought to elucidate a rationalized self-consciousness stripped of Romantic excess and interpreted according to the conventions of modern science. (114)

These stripped-down Romantic concepts and problems that were integrated within modern scientific frameworks and often expressed using modern scientific discourses frequently took the shape of an interest in altered mental states, an interest which connected occultism and emergent psychology and psychoanalysis (Owen 143-144). W.T. Stead, for instance, set out the object of his journal *Borderland* in its first issue as follows: "that we may understand something more of the marvellous capacities latent in ourselves, that we may secure for everyday use the almost inconceivable powers possessed by our subjective selves of which we have stray hints in the phenomena of hypnotism and dream" (4). William James in his famous series of lectures that would be published under the title *The Varieties of Religious Experience* likewise expresses great interest in altered states, although his language is a little more reticent than Stead's. James professes the conviction that "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different" (388). These different types of consciousness may lay dormant for

most of one's life, "but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation" (ibid.). The occultist attention to the irrational, and the belief in the possibility of heightened knowledge of reality, coupled with the renegotiation of such concepts as matter, spirit, and nature that accompanied the formation of new scientific disciplines, informed the literature of the *fin de siècle* to an important extent.

The writings of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson are situated precisely in this tangle of influences. Emily Alder positions weird fiction as inhabiting the "scientific borderlands" (Alder 16) of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Alder writes: "Weird fiction and science belong to the same, widespread cultural conversation taking place at this time about new knowledge and between competing versions of what valid knowledge is. Weird tales not only take part in that conversation but contribute their own versions of knowledge" (27). Although she is careful to qualify that weird tales "contribute" to the discussion, Alder's study emphasizes how weird tales "pick up on the strangeness of science, of what is already weird" (ibid.). Anthony Camara similarly calls attention to the way in which weird writers "darken matter" (1), a process of bringing out its "epistemologically vexed status" (ibid.). Camara is less attentive to what Alder terms the 'already weird' status of knowledge paradigms of the time; he is primarily interested in the stories' "speculative redeployment of scientific discourses" (11), although at times he also reads them as registering an already present "anxiety" regarding the ontological status of life and matter (8). Weird fiction, then, is in the equivocal position of producing and recording weirdness, a situation not necessarily paradoxical: the observation that literature derives ideas from and contributes ideas to the culture in which it emerges is hardly controversial. Nevertheless, I find the imprecision often surrounding the 'weird' as a literary marker unsatisfyingly imprecise, especially since it all too often oscillates from denoting epistemological uncertainty (resulting from, say, competing frameworks of knowledge) to ontological undecidability (enshrining weirdness as an essential quality of reality). Although Alder and Camara certainly register the formal qualities of the texts they read, often indeed providing rich interpretations, the representational strategies of the stories often play a tertiary role in their analyses, focussed as they are on the

speculative knowledge weird fiction putatively has to offer. While I am by no means claiming that early weird fiction is devoid of reflections on matter, life, spirit, or nature, I am somewhat sceptical that they contribute knowledge, however speculative, in a way comparable to the sciences of the time – quite to the contrary, I would argue that they actively obstruct scientific ways of knowing. Although the specific form these stories take are only made possible by their cultural context, they do not offer speculations on the world in the way in which, for instance, science fiction might[2]. Rather, the *fin-de-siècle* weird is engaged in the severing of the links of rational understanding, with the sublime aesthetic acting as a veil through which the object of knowledge, newly reconfigured by the imagination, may only be vaguely glimpsed. No crisis of knowledge is reflected or anticipated by this fiction that is not actively produced by it with the aim of imaginatively reenchanting the affective relationship between human and world. This relationship, under strain since the advent of modernity, unravelled further under the influence of the mechanical conceptions of nature and society propagated by scientific naturalism, industrialism and adolescent capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Machin writes:

> If, as Miéville argues, the First World War is a point at which weird fiction is eclipsed by reality, it is perhaps only a conclusion of a process started two decades previously. John Clute has argued that many fantasies are 'fables of recovery', the attempt to redress a diminishment or shore up the world against the losses imminent in modernity, naming this process of loss 'Thinning'. (Machin 82)

This dissertation posits that the erosion of commonplace realisms and the creation of a substrate of reality that lies beyond human understanding, Miéville's correctly identified but incorrectly attributed "radicalized sublime backwash", results directly from the attempt at recovering a sense of intimacy with the world. Carl Freedman registers this tendency within weird stories as "*inflationary*", noting that "they all, in various ways, suggest reality to be richer, stranger, more complex, more surprising—and indeed *weirder*—than common sense would suppose" (Freedman 14). These tales seek to activate affects in the reader that simulate the alteration of consciousness, enriching

[2] The science fiction genre and the weird mode are, of course, by no means irreconcilable.

reality by interrupting our familiarity with it, a move comparable to the double project of *Lyrical Ballads* described by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* as, on the one hand, the rendering believable of the supernatural, and, on the other, the enweirding of the ordinary. The works of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson under discussion here all exhibit reconfigurations of the Romantic imagination which facilitate the poetic re-enchantment of the world. They are, however, also primarily horror stories, a factor which lends them an increased affective intensity, while also complicating the kind of readings they make available. The tension between their status as horror stories and their employment of sublime aesthetic and rhetorical strategies leads to moments of provocative self-reflexivity regarding various aspects of the human religious drive, the negotiation of alterity, and the act of writing.

Weird Fiction and the Nonhuman Turn[3]

In recent years, there has been a remarkable interplay between theory and weird fiction. The weird as a concept has been mobilised by proponents of the Nonhuman Turn, and in return a variety of insights from 'nonhuman' schools of thought have been applied to the analysis and production of weird writing. Giving a comprehensive overview of the entirety of Nonhuman Turn theory, or providing a thorough analysis of the philosophical works in question falls – somewhat mercifully – outside of the scope of this dissertation. Instead, my objective in this chapter will be to trace the philosophical appropriation of the concept of the weird specifically, to identify what kind of thinking it makes available, and to delineate my own perspective within that context. In particular I question the possibility suggested by various nonhuman turn scholars that the weird as a conceptual tool can help us bridge the Kantian mind-thing gap, which becomes especially suspect upon examination of the often unacknowledged undercurrents of human interest and affect that run below the surface of these theories. Another point of interest is the rhetoric these philosophical texts employ, which tends to surreptitiously rely on the kind of aesthetics typical of weird stories themselves.

Fisher

An outlier in this regard is Mark Fisher, one of the scholars at the forefront of the effort to bring about a philosophical reappraisal of Lovecraft, and the weird as an analytical instrument more broadly. Fisher's efforts to think with the weird coalesce in *The Weird and the Eerie*, which develops both terms as lenses through which to re-examine a broad and eclectic cross section of media. Fisher positions the weird and the eerie within the "broader question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate" (11), and within the collapse of the distinctions between the human and the nonhuman, or, in Fisher's words, "the way that 'we' 'ourselves' are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces. There is no inside except as a folding of the outside; the

[3] This chapter was partially adapted from my contribution to the volume *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel*.

mirror cracks, I am an other, and I always was. The shudder here is the shudder of the eerie, not of the unheimlich" (ibid.). The boundaries of the two modes – weird and eerie – are murky, however, and in practice they often overlap, characterised as they both are as dealing with unsuspected presences and absences. The weird, for Fisher, is typically "a presence of that which does not belong", "a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it" (61), whereas the eerie denotes "a failure of absence" (62) (something where there should be nothing) or "a failure of presence" (ibid.) (nothing where there should be something). Although the conceptual demarcation he applies is at times not entirely waterproof, Fisher convincingly uses these absences and presences to chart a course through the modern landscape of materialisms and vitalisms, tracing the ambiguous absence/presence of agency and intent in matter. The central question that emerges from this eccentric ramble through media and theory is as urgent as it is classic. For Fisher, the eerie and the weird facilitate questions regarding the presence or absence of a disturbing agency and animacy in ourselves and the world. He concludes that "we ourselves become an exemplary case of the eerie: there is an agency at work in us (the unconscious, the death drive), but it is not where or what we expected it to be" (84). Fisher's mobilization of the weird and the eerie is instructive in its genuine attempt to think through the questions – and feel through the affects – that these modes raise. Absence and presence, the animate and the inanimate, the human and the nonhuman are concepts given a certain nuance and weight that is lacking in many other scholarly reflections on the weird, precisely because of its focus on human experience.

Speculative realism and object-oriented ontology

Mark Fisher's assertion that the weird is fundamentally concerned with 'the outside' is a thread that connects all approaches associated with the Nonhuman Turn, although it takes on different shades of meaning. In *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux articulates a philosophy of speculative realism based on the re-evaluation of 'the outside', specifically the outside of thought. Speculative realism attempts to break with 'correlationism', i.e. the Kantian bracketing off of 'being' from 'thinking' which results in knowable phenomena distinct from unknowable Things-In-Themselves. Dismissing this absolute distinction, Meillassoux claims, could give us back what he calls

> the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere. (7)

Meillassoux employs ideas such as ancestrality and the arch-fossil to expose the inability of the 'correlationist' to make statements about that which precedes human consciousness (correlationists, in Meillassoux's view, cannot allow 'being' to precede 'givenness', the latter term he implicitly defines as "givenness to a subject").

Meillassoux's anti-correlationist project of thinking the absolute, the 'great outdoors' outside of thought, is connected to weird fiction by Eugene Thacker. In his *Horror of Philosophy* series, Thacker aims to think "the unthinkable world", a world which is increasingly harder to conceive of as being made for humans in the face of climate precarity. In order to make understandable the crisis of thought he aims to expose, he coins two terms in *In the Dust of This Planet*: on the one hand, there is "the world-for-us" which denotes "the world that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to, the world that we relate to or feel alienated from, the world that we are at once a part of and that is also separate from the human" (*Dust*, Preface), and, on the other there exists "the world-in-itself", which indicates those aspects of the world which resist human access. Thacker observes: "The world-in-itself is a paradoxical concept; the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us"; thus he treats it as "a horizon for thought" (ibid.). Horror, and cosmic (weird) horror particularly, is the kind of genre that makes tangible this tension of the unthinkable. To Thacker, cosmic horror is characterised by its negation of both anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism (*Tentacles Longer Than Night*, ch. 4). Cosmic horror, in other words, rejects the idea that the world exists in any easily comprehended relation to humans, or is responsive to human concerns or human mythologies. This is where the nonhuman comes into play: "The limit of anthropocentrism is the non-human, a broad domain that includes objects, assemblages, and things, as well as the hierarchy of animate and inanimate, of higher and lower orders of being, the world of plants and animals" (*Tentacles*, ch. 4). According to Thacker, cosmic horror is a confrontation with this limit,

with the nonhuman as the horizon of thought, a chastisement of any attempt at projecting human-shaped meaning onto the cosmos.

Object-oriented ontology (OOO) likewise has an interest in thinking the great outdoors, and similarly lambasts correlationism. What sets OOO apart is its emphasis on the primacy of objects over inter-object relations. Any objects, in this line of thinking, only encounter one another superficially, or 'vicariously' as "sensual caricatures" (Harman, *Circus Philosophicus* 69), retaining at all times a kind of ineffable distance from one another as part of them 'withdraws' into obscurity. Graham Harman makes the leap from Triple O's irreducible enigma of the object to the weird in *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*, judging Lovecraft to be "the poet laureate of object-oriented Ontology" (32). Lovecraft's stories, Harman maintains, derive their horror from the successfully realised tension between the object (e.g. a shoggoth) and its 'sensual' (changeable, "swirling") and 'real' (unchangeable, necessary) qualities. In Harman's view, the inexhaustibility of objects by other objects, and not just the mind-thing gap, is the machinery that drives the Lovecraftian universe. Unsurprisingly, even in his other writing, Harman borrows heavily from the weird – its purpleness, its excess, its inextinguishable wonder. Consider the following passage from *Guerrilla Metaphysics*:

> Once we note that the sensual reality of elements extends well beyond the human sphere, we thereby revive and expand phenomenology and push its theater of carnality into previously abandoned realms. The world described by philosophy is no longer the mere eruption of foundationless qualities into human view, nor a tiresome collision of solid points of matter, but rather a drunken alchemy in which dolphins, strawberries, and protons transform each other ceaselessly into gold. Objects are no longer merely unverifiable hypotheses that perhaps lie somewhere out there beyond our perception and perhaps do not. Instead, though hiding from all comers, they extend their forces into the world like the petals of a rose or the tentacles of an octopus. (170-171)

Harman posits a world teeming with magically charged objects that exist independently of human perception, reducing human existence to just one type of object among many,

and celebrating objects' "infinite inward depth" (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 110), while still asserting in the most sincere terms his conviction that it is the task of philosophy to "[unleash] the music in the heart of things" (ibid.). Here we come to an important feature of object-oriented ontology: Harman's world is humming with song; objects ensnare each other with the music they emit, transforming each other alchemically (188). Reality is full of objects that are swimming about like "inscrutable holes of withdrawn energy that somehow still emit fragrance or radio signals by way of the notes that ought to have collapsed entirely into their dark and unified cores, but have not done so" (184). Harman is careful to note that while "the universe has an aesthetic or metaphorical structure" (174), this claim is not a case of the kind of anthropocentrism espoused by the postmodernists he fulminates against, but is to be taken quite literally, and non-human objects like daisies and chairs and leopards exert the same pull or 'allure' over each other that makes them encounter each other as caricatures, while offering forbidden glimpses of the haunting unity of the object that holds their various qualities together. Weird indeed.

Another proponent of OOO is Timothy Morton, who has been dubbed "the philosopher-prophet of the Anthropocene" (Blasdel). Morton plays around with the word 'weird' in his loosely associative forays into 'dark ecology', using it to denote "a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing, a pathway that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed" (*Dark Ecology* 5). Morton uses the dual meaning of 'weird' as 'strange in appearance' as well as evoking its older connection to 'wyrd' ('fate') to make this connection between the aesthetic and causal dimension, i.e. the appearance of disparate objects bearing the imprint of their interconnected coexistence. 'Weird' then becomes a way to hint at uncanny intimacy: "realizing that we are permanently, phenomenologically glued to Earth even if we go to Mars, realizing that we are covered and brimful of skin, pollution, stomach bacteria, DNA from other life forms, vestigial organs" (118). Through a set of "attunement structures [that] are necessarily *weird*" (159), we may reach a kind of enlightenment Morton terms 'ecognosis': a joyful acceptance of the nearness of objects that are not-me, an embracing of the abjection that comes with the collapse of distinction.

Looking at Harman's and Morton's writing side-by-side reveals a fair amount of tensions and inconsistencies, but insofar as the focus of this chapter is concerned, what is

particularly striking is their use of weirdness to, on the one hand, denote object withdrawal (which Morton amplifies in his nebulous concept of the 'hyperobject') and, on the other, represent a kind of abject object proximity. The withdrawal aspect is readily apparent. Harman calls objects in their state beyond human access 'unnatural', since they "withdraw even from the brute relational system of nature" (*Guerilla Metaphysics* 19). In *Weird Realism*, this remove from (at least) human access becomes 'weird': "[r]eality itself is weird because reality itself is incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it" (51). Morton follows this line of thought for a while, claiming that the 'weird' in 'weird essentialism' "(…) means that we acknowledge that things (human bodies, quasars, spoons, slime molds and chalk) are not simply constructs made of other things—whether those other things are smaller (atoms), larger (processes), relational or correlationist (history, economic relations, the subject)" ("Weird Embodiment 19). Objects, he goes on, are furthermore weird because they ripple with 'nothingness'. 'Nothingness' means undecidability, a rejection by the human subject of its privileged position as what Morton calls a 'reality adjudicator'. Objects are irreducibly themselves, not just amalgams of relationships, but they are so in a spooky, flickering way, where we refrain from sorting them into boxes and in the process commit the crime of correlationism, and instead let them swim around in their self-sufficiency and are content to marvel at them. This is where the sublime separateness of objects is complicated, because this is where, in Morton's account, beauty comes into play. Beauty hooks the human subject; beauty "is already a trace of not-me within me, there is nothing stopping the beauty virus from going viral, as it were, and applying to interactions between all kinds of entities" (28). Objects are back to being unpleasantly, seductively close to us. "The necessarily horrible or disgusting proximity of a thing is a condition of possibility for beauty, then, but beauty is a kind of allergy medicine, a sort of vaccine that consists of this disgusting thing in a loop" (27).

The reason Triple O likes to play around with the weird, then, is because it is a concept that allows the negotiation of, on the one hand, a sense of object proximity, and, on the other hand, a sense of their sublime distance. In Triple O's metaphysics, objects innately alienate, lure, and charm each other (with humans just being one object among many). Consequently, estrangement, uncanniness, allure, beauty, all become ontic qualities of objects. Objects are simultaneously withdrawn, unknowable, and

untouchable, and yet they 'sing' – their internal music a kind of siren call to each other. Harman and Morton may inexpertly try to scrub the stink of anthropocentrism off of their respective concepts of 'allure' and 'beauty' by claiming these are universal qualities belonging to all objects, but they are unable to dissimulate that their philosophies have a real need of the notion that while objects are the perfect inscrutable 'other', they still send out rescue signals to a human subject adrift on an ocean of things that would otherwise be dead and indifferent. This is what their harnessing of the weird accomplishes.

As if caught in one of Morton's 'strange loops', Triple O, which as we have seen has drawn inspiration from the likes of Lovecraft, in turn inspires the production and the analysis of weird fiction. Jeff VanderMeer, for instance, has read *Hyperobjects* and gives talks that rehash the same concerns found in a lot of nonhumanist theory. In what is by no means a uniquely held position, Brad Tabas holds that weird fiction is a gateway to weird realism (a term he borrows from Harman). This "deeper realism (…) is not to be accomplished by focusing on what we call nature, but may paradoxically be achieved by lifting our gaze above or beyond nature to the real" (par. 3). "Realism of this type", he goes on, "keeps eco-critics focused on things-in-themselves and not upon mere representations of those things" (par. 4). Through the glasses of weird realism, we encounter the familiar spectacle of a world filled with enigmatic entities that impinge on our world despite our lack of understanding of them, but also the conviction that while they may withdraw from real knowledge, we may become more attuned to them. Near the end of his argument, Tabas recognises that "weird writing is always in the end naturalized, and that is to say retuned to the world of reason, order, and anthropomorphically ordered representations" (par. 36), but nevertheless holds out hope that weird fiction can help us become "sensitized to that which not only is visible but which is also withdrawn or wholly other" (par. 37).

New materialism

Object distance and proximity, the need to rid ourselves of human-centred paradigms ("mere representations"), the overarching concern with the other, and the recurring need for 'attunement' can all be found in the new materialism of Jane Bennett. While Bennett

and theorists associated with her so far seem less enamoured with the philosophical possibilities of the weird, and regularly butt heads with the adherents of Triple O, they share the same defining stakes, and have inspired literary analyses of weird fiction in their own right. Correspondingly, some aspects of new materialism, like the fact that they advocate for 'flat ontologies', i.e. ontologies made up out of assemblages of objects that are all equally important and have their own agency, are reminiscent of object-oriented ontology. Likewise, one could see how Bennett's notion of "thing power", the recalcitrant agency of the object "which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge" (*Vibrant Matter* 3) might appeal to Harman or Morton. New materialism distinguishes itself from Triple O, however, by its emphasis on relationality and its attempt to lay bare the "vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself" (Braidotti 2). As Benjamin Boysen shows, and as Bennett admits herself (*The Enchantment of Modern Life* 12), new materialism has its roots in a distinctly neopagan vitalism that has as its goal to "offer us a reenchanted world: a world, dictating that there is no principal ontological difference between the subjective and the objective pole, between animate and inanimate matter, the human self and the inorganic passivity of inert matters" (Boysen 231). This would explain Bennett's strange insistence that "a bit of anthropomorphism can catalyze a sensibility that discerns a world not of subjects and objects but of 'variously composed materialities that form confederations'" (*Vibrant Matter* 99). The sly injection of a modicum of anthropomorphism to ostensibly reveal the absolute other, the "intangible and imponderable recalcitrance" of things (28) does not register as much of a contradiction, as Bennett is intent on arriving at an enchanting collapse of epistemology and human meaning making into ontology. Boysen calls out the inconsistencies in Bennett's stance on anthropomorphization, stating that she "reenacts the narcissistic reflex of human language and thought, which she strives to supersede"(236).

Although new materialism does not particularly use weird fiction as a vehicle for philosophy, its discourse, like that of object-oriented ontology and speculative realism slants towards the language of sublime distance and abject presence, of enchanted, "exorbitant presence[s]" (Fisher 61). As a result, new materialism, like other Nonhuman Turn philosophies, underpins a number of studies on weird fiction. In *None of This Is Normal*, the first book-length study on Jeff VanderMeer's fiction, Benjamin J. Robertson

praises the new weird fiction tradition, for while the old weird may contain "a residual anthropocentrism" (177), he holds that the new weird has transcended human concerns and delimitations, and offers us tantalising hints of a world without ourselves, allowing us to think about 'the weird planet'. This militant anti-anthropocentrism is framed as an ethical and political response to the Anthropocene: "Given the urgency of the material situation presented by the Anthropocene, liquidating our literature of what makes us human – namely the assumptions about history and critical thought that have in part led to the Anthropocene – might be worth considering" (88). While this type of approach to literary analysis may initially appear eccentric, seen in its proper critical context it becomes clear that Robertson's study is simply an attempt to follow the philosophical concerns of the Nonhuman Turn to their logical conclusion: the complete elision of the human in the name of Anthropocene ethics. Jonathan Newell applies a similar paradigm to the 'old weird' in his book *A Century of Weird Fiction*. Newell signals that he is aware of "the risk of reducing weird and horror fiction to allegory – philosophy dressed up with tentacles and fangs" (10), and attempts to circumvent this by "bring[ing] together two ways of thinking about weird fiction: one emphasising the weird's metaphysical speculations, and another foregrounding the paradoxical aesthetics of disgust" (11). In practice, Newell's attention to affect serves only to reinforce the speculations he reads into the stories, speculations he derives directly from Thacker, Bennett and Barad. Newell skews heavily towards new materialism, and hence finds all kinds of porous entities, subject-destroying forces, non-hierarchical entanglements, and rejoinders to correlationism in weird texts. We are then not confronted "with a depiction of reality (…) stranger than we might have expected" (201), but with a by now all too familiar set of assumptions that can be replicated in the analysis of any weird text. In spite of all of Newell's protestations that weird fiction is not philosophy, what this really comes down to for him is a different communication style to convey the same basic tenets: "it is precisely its fictionality, its aesthetic nature, that enables it [weird fiction] to communicate ideas which philosophy only abstractly describes" (202). The weird's particular communication style is important because of an assumption that remains implicit in Newell's book, and many works like it: that reading weird fiction makes us better people. The philosophical insights weird texts contain can be made available to the

human on an experiential level – by experiencing the affects weird fiction impels us to feel, we are opened up to that which lies beyond the horizon of thought: the nonhuman.

While taking a definitive stance on the soundness or coherence of this or that philosophy associated with the Nonhuman Turn – or judging whether they present the correct moral attitudes in face of the crises of the Anthropocene – lies well outside the purview of this thesis, what I do argue for here is that they make for poor analytical tools to read weird fiction. The univocal meanings these readings attribute to weird texts accords poorly with the often unresolved tensions between self and world displayed by the oeuvre of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson. While these works are concerned with the "outside", it is an outside qualified by very human concerns about the consciousness and agency of self and world, otherness, and the religious impulse. To forget that the stories' sublime effects, their limit experiences, their brushes with the outside are narrative constructs instead of windows onto a metaphysical great outdoors is to do the stories themselves a disservice – they are more interesting than that – but also to potentially be blind to the ways in which 'the nonhuman' can (and does) become a problematic category, both in weird fiction and in the academic discourses intent on appropriating the weird. The anthropocentricism latent in the thirst for "the wisdom of the unhuman" (Newell 202) can obscure how the nonhuman functions as yet another Other, as susceptible to the projections of the human as ever before.

Arthur Machen

Introduction

Arthur Machen arguably made the pursuit of the sublime the basis of his literary output. In his ars poetica, *Hieroglyphics*, he famously defines literature as those texts that contain ecstasy:

> Substitute, if you like, rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown. All and each will convey what I mean; for some particular case one term may be more appropriate than another, but in every case there will be that withdrawal from the common life and the common consciousness which justifies my choice of "ecstasy" as the best symbol of my meaning. (24)

'Ecstasy' is indeed well-chosen, as it already implies the sublime is an affective state, a "withdrawal from (…) the common consciousness", a phrase which calls to mind the expansive movement of the mind as it struggles to accommodate the enormity of the sublime experience. Machen's fiction revolves around the *limen*, the threshold of what can be thought and experienced, and the widening of consciousness to reach beyond it. The second part of Machen's autobiography, *Things Near and Far*, suggests that his interest in altered states of consciousness intensified in the period after the death of his first wife, Amy Hogg, in 1899. Machen recounts how he was so overcome with grief that he resorted to what he only refers to, with characteristic vagueness, as "a process" (134), now commonly held by commentators to refer to some form of ritual magic he may have stumbled upon during his early forays into occult research. Whereas he drily notes that he acted with a certain instrumentality, such as might "urge a man with a raging toothache to get laudanum and take it with all convenient speed" (ibid.), the effect was one of "an almost intolerable ecstasy", "a peace of the spirit that was quite ineffable, a knowledge that all hurts and doles and wounds were healed, that that which was broken was reunited" (137). Machen describes how:

> the wall trembled and the pictures on the wall shook and shivered before my eyes… It is not quite just: trembled, dilated, became misty in their outlines; seemed on the point of disappearing altogether, and then shuddered and contracted back again into their proper form and solidity… . That day and for many days afterwards I was dissolved into bliss, into a sort of rapture of life which has no parallel that I can think of… (131-132)

Machen's ecstatic experience in '99 may not have been the conclusive watershed moment that would change his fiction – the trial of Oscar Wilde and the subsequent decline of public interest in Decadent literature, as well as Machen's resolution to abandon his previous writing style, which he declares in his introduction to *The Hill of Dreams* "was not my manner but Stevenson's" (70) and to start developing his own voice, arguably played a larger role in changing his literary output. Nevertheless, I would maintain that the experience was significant in consolidating the underlying principles of his writing: 1899 was the year in which Machen wrote his literary manifesto *Hieroglyphics*, as well as "The White People", widely considered to be his best weird horror story. It was also the year he joined the Order of the Golden Dawn. Although the Order ended up not living up to its initial promise, Machen writes of the period: "I began to be conscious that the world was being presented to me at a new angle" (*Things Near and Far* 125) and that there "came to be a strangeness in the proportion of things, both in things exterior and interior" (ibid.). The comparison with the distorting and unsettling effects of the weird is readily apparent, but the semi-religious and consolatory aspect of his description of the experience are remarkable. China Miéville, as we have seen, astutely places weird fiction in conversation with a religious mystical tradition. Of Machen he says: "More than the atheist Lovecraft, or spiritualistically maundering Blackwood, Machen brings out how Weird Fiction writers are in lineage with those religious visionaries and ecstatics who perceive an unmediated relationship with numinosity – Godhead itself" ("Weird Fiction" 511). I would like to expand on Miéville's phrase 'an unmediated relationship with numinosity', and simultaneously place it in a *fin-de-siècle* occultist context. The anglophone medieval tradition of mystical poetry which Miéville cites is not a bad fit for Machen, whose writings typically exude nostalgia for the Welsh

medieval past, but if we take weird fiction to be a response to modernity, it seems particularly relevant to take into account the ways in which this early ecstatic tradition is picked up and emulated by Machen's contemporaries.

Alex Owen writes that "late-Victorian magicians were undertaking what we might think of as remarkable and sustained explorations of the psyche, and extraordinary experimentation with the powers of the human mind, but they were absorbed in the magical enterprise and expressed the endeavor in these terms" (144). Machen's experimental 'process' fits quite naturally in this period during which the powers of the unconscious mind were a subject of much debate and first-hand personal exploration by the nascent discipline of psychology and occultists alike. In *Hieroglyphics*, Machen writes of these powers under the form of "the Shadowy Companion", which he defines as "the under-consciousness or other-consciousness of man", elaborating that "if you would thoroughly understand the rational man you must have sounded the irrational man, the mysterious companion that walks beside each one of us on the earthly journey" (33). The Shadowy Companion walks "foot to foot with each one of us, and yet his paces are in an unknown world" (53), and through this mysterious unconscious faculty man is made aware of this unknown world which underlies the everyday reality which is readily accessible to our "common consciousness". Christine Ferguson observes that **"**this version of the human imagination is thus lodged firmly in the Western occult tradition; it acts not as a Freudian repository for repressed desires, but rather as a channel to a numinous realm which dictates the esoteric narrative forms and symbols that will always appeal widely to the populace" (Ferguson, "Reading" 53). There is a tension in *Hieroglyphics* with regard to whether we should interpret this imaginative faculty as merely receptive, a finely tuned instrument which acts like Bergson's intuition to give us "flashes of experiential knowledge of the real" (Owen 137) or whether it is also creative, impressing onto the raw phenomenal world the noumenal symbol instead of merely finding it already in place. One moment Machen will state that the aim of true art is to provide hints and allusions to the "other things", which, he adds, with characteristic vagueness,

> (…) are sometimes in the song of a bird, sometimes in the scent of a flower, sometimes in the whirl of a London street, sometimes hidden under a great lonely

> hill. Some of us seek them with most hope and the fullest assurance in the sacring of the Mass, others receive tidings through the sound of music, in the colour of a picture, in the shining form of a statue, in the meditation of eternal truth. (99-100)

thereby suggesting that these symbols, these gates to the experience of the noumenal, are somehow 'out there', waiting to be found. The passage calls to mind Baudelaire's "Correspondances": man encounters nature as if walking through a "forest of symbols" ("La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers / Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles; / L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles" (lines 1-3)) which murmur their secret natures to the initiated observer, and art is the communication of that experience[4]. At other times, in his attempts to exclude the social realist writing mode from 'true' literature, Machen emphasises the fact that "life is not art", and "it is the business of art to give its stamp and imprint to the matter of life" (34) like one would make a gold nugget into a sovereign. This complicates the idea of art as the mere transcendental channelling (or at best collaborative translation into words) of the "other things". After all, the defining quality of art, ecstasy, is not to be found in the "other things", but in "the Idea or Conception, the thing of exquisite beauty which dwells in the author's soul" (85). This firmly establishes ecstasy as an affect which passes from subject to subject, from author to reader. Machen does not deny the subjective nature of this experience, declaring that imagination is "the power the human soul possesses of projecting itself into the unknown, and adventuring in the realm of nothingness" (147). It is the imagination which should always feed artifice. Machen clarifies, in what is undoubtedly merely intended as a metaphor, but is no less uncharacteristically

[4] Although the reference to 'correspondences' is illuminating in the consideration of Machen's work, it should be noted that any direct influence from the French Symbolists or Decadents on his work is contentious. James Machin writes: "Machen's own commensurability with Decadence is arguably based largely on the influence of Poe and even Stevenson, both of whom influenced (most notably the former) the course of French literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. Machen's 'Decadence' was a manifestation of a shared inheritance of Poe rather than a direct one imbibed from the heady cup of French Symbolism" (Machin 139). Machen himself notes in the 1922 introduction to *The House of Souls*: "Several papers, I remember, declared that 'The Great God Pan' was simply a stupid and incompetent rehash of Huysmans' 'Là-Bas' and 'A Rebours'. I had not read these books so I got them both. Thereon, I perceived that my critics had not read them either" (17). Aaron Worth traces the puzzling mention of Gilles de Raiz among the host of Sinners in "The White People" back to a few lines in *La-Bas*, which indicates that despite Machen's dismissiveness, and his eagerness to purge his work from the miasma associated with the Yellow Nineties, the influence of the French Decadents is insidiously present in his work nonetheless.

modernist: “[m]an, I mean, could never have invented the telephone, had he not first created it, had he not conceived the possibility of its existence, when as yet, it was non-existent, and so his artifice will always be progressive, and distinguished from the artifice of animals” (ibid.). Thus Machen’s imagination oscillates between being the faculty which unlocks the true forms which lie hidden under the veil of symbol, a kind of Neoplatonist remembrance of ideas, and finally, the human ability to transfer its own image onto reality. Owen already notes that “occultists’ acknowledgement that in effect occult reality is created in knowable form by the fictionalizing mind serves only to signal once again the extreme modernity of the magical enterprise. It did nothing to detract from a belief in the higher truths and a verifiable occult ‘real’ revealed in those visionary deeps” (184).

Machen’s writing, however, does show signs of awareness of the tension between, on the one hand, the primacy of a transcendental reality, this notion “that the perceptible world is only the envelope enclosing a more important reality– an envelope, if you like, imperfectly stuck down, so that now and then a glint of the beauty of its contents shines forth” (Reynolds and Charlton 116), and the artistic imagination, on the other. Never is this more clear than in the metaphor of the hieroglyphic itself, “used as a sigil signifying the high and hidden nature of everyday things, of even the most mundane lives” (Valentine, *Arthur Machen* 67) while also foregrounding the sign, and through it, the opacity of language itself. A firm believer in the importance of ritual and ceremony, Machen held that the divine could only appear veiled under a symbol. By choosing the hieroglyphic as the figure representing the essence of the literary enterprise, he remained true to his occultist leanings as well as his high Anglican faith; both rely on the “curious veils and concealments” (*Hieroglyphics* 118) he prizes so highly in art. Correspondingly, Machen elaborated and wielded an elevated sublime rhetoric, based on suggestion, omission and obfuscation in turns, in order to express reality’s deep sacred nature. Machen asserts that “you will find that books which are not literature proceed from ignorance of the Sacramental System” (197), but there is a lingering unease regarding the complicity of the artist in manifesting rather than channelling this divine trace which comes to light in Machen’s weird work more plainly than in his literary manifesto.

Machen’s oeuvre has often been split into two – into those stories in which “horror is the dominant theme” (Valentine 63), and “his later fiction [which] all aspires to convey sanctity, not sorcery” (ibid.). Since this thesis will only consider works written in or

about the weird mode, only the former interest us here, but a brief mention of Machen's later stories may still be pertinent. Notable stories such as *The Secret Glory* and "The Great Return" deal with the survival and reappearance of the Holy Grail, and it is this symbol, which would come to dominate Machen's imagination, that is the culmination of something his weird stories productively fail to accomplish. Bertha Nash notes that in Machen's 'Sacramental System', "the Eucharist, the Holy Communion, the 'breaking of bread' —call it what you will—*is* 'the body of Christ, which is given for you'" (Nash 117). In direct parallel with this, the Holy Grail is "a symbol of the Christian teaching, a symbol which possesses the special power of *becoming that which it represents*" (ibid., emphasis mine). As we shall see, it is exactly when this performative power of hallowing, of investing the material world with spiritual significance (until the sacred appears to shine through it) goes wrong that the weird appears in Machen's work. The Grail stories paper over some of the disquiet at the unforeseen faculty of enchantment the human mind has. They are, as Valentine sympathetically notes, "a dream of wish-fulfilment for Machen, long the exile from his land, long the seeker for a spirituality that satisfied his own burning certainties about the presence of wonder all around us" (95). Somewhat tragically, the Grail stories lack the affective charge of the weird 'horror' stories – Machen's self-indulgent fantasies do not evoke the intensity of feeling of his darker magics, and are rarely read. Bearing this in mind, the following chapters will focus on the fiction Machen produced in the nineties, starting with Machen's most famous publication, *The Great God Pan* (1894), followed by two works which, in the words of Reynolds and Charlton, are "two of the most brilliant things Machen ever wrote, *The White People*, a longish short story, and *The Hill of Dreams*, a shortish novel" (53), the former written in 1899 and published in 1904, and the latter written between 1895 and 1897 and published in 1907[5]. They will put to the test Machen's 'Sacramental System', and interrogate the role literature plays in the consecration of the world.

[5] Both "The White People" and *The Hill of Dreams* were conceived when "when Machen's imaginative power was at its peak" (Reynolds and Charlton 53), but the fallout of the Wilde trial made finding a market for anything remotely 'decadent' difficult, hence their belated publication.

The Great God Pan

The Great God Pan caused something of a scandal when it appeared in its full length in 1994 (Machen had earlier published the first chapter in a paper called *The Whirlwind*). Published in John Lane's controversial Keynote series, and prefaced by a frontispiece by the somewhat infamous Aubrey Beardsley, Machen's novella was immediately classed as Decadent, and received the corresponding public vitriol. After the turbulent nineties, Machen distanced himself from the Decadent movement, and looked back on the waves *The Great God Pan* caused with a kind of ironic detachment. Although he did not truly disavow the influence of his contemporaries, he was eager to emphasize that the "real origins and essences" (*Pan* 2) of his novella lay elsewhere, namely in the mystical connection he felt to the country of Caerleon, where he grew up. In his foreword to the 1916 edition of *The Great God Pan*, Machen tries to describe the significance of his boyhood impression of Bertholly house on the border of the forest of Wentwood: "It became one of the many symbols of the world of wonder that were offered to me, it became, as it were, a great word in the secret language by which the mysteries were communicated. I thought of it always with something of awe, even of dread; its appearance was significant of… I knew not what" (3). The irony of this idyllic image being the seed for a novella which reviewers would lambast as "gruesome, ghastly, and dull", and "an incoherent nightmare of sex" was not lost on Machen. In *Far Off Things*, he looks back on the process that lead up to creation of *Pan* and muses: "I translated awe, at worst awfulness, into evil; again, I say, one dreams in fire and works in clay" (107). Machen seems to have considered his experiment with *Pan* a partial failure, having wanted to convey something of the sublime feelings of "awe and solemnity and mystery of the valley of the Usk", and instead "clumsily" arriving at the diabolical.

The novella begins in the house of Dr. Raymond, a practitioner of 'transcendental medicine', as he is visited by his friend, Mr. Clarke. With Clarke as his witness, Raymond performs an experiment on Mary, a young woman in his charge; by drugging her and making a small lesion in her brain, he hopes to enable Mary to pass beyond common reality into the noumenal realm beyond, and see what he terms 'the Great God Pan'. The experiment fails, however: Mary's mind cannot withstand the heavy toll the experience

takes on her, and she is driven insane. The story then becomes a patchwork of vaguely connected events. First it turns to Mr. Clarke some years later, as he sits compiling his "Memoirs to prove the Existence of the Devil", a collection of manuscripts on macabre topics. One account of special interest to him is that of Helen V., a young orphan girl adopted by a farmer, who appears to have taken some of her playmates for long rambles deep into the forest, where they witnessed things that traumatised them horribly. Although details remain vague, one boy, shortly before succumbing to nervous shock, purports to have seen Helen with a strange naked man, later implied to be a faun. The story then abruptly turns to a chance meeting between a friend of Clarke's, a gentleman by the name of Villiers, and an old acquaintance he finds begging on the streets of London. This man, Charles Herbert, tells Villiers how he has been ruined by a woman, who exercised an intense but corruptive influence over him, telling him horrific secrets and showing him hideous sights. We are told her name is Helen Vaughan. Later Austin, an acquaintance of Villiers' and something of a professional man about town, tells him of an eminent country gentleman who died of fright on the doorstep of the Herberts' house. Through the piecing together of more chance encounters and rumours, it is revealed that Helen was involved in the death of an artist, Meyrick, who sketched a portrait of her, as well as various frightening tableaus of dancing fauns and satyrs. When a rash of suicides among distinguished gentlemen sends a shockwave through London, Villiers discovers that all of them dined or were seen to visit a Mrs. Beaumont, a recent émigré who has become a society favourite. His sleuthing reveals that Mrs. Beaumont is none other than Helen Vaughan, and together with Clarke he sets out to confront her, offering her a piece of rope with which to end her life. Upon her death, which is related in a rambling fragmentary manuscript by a Dr. Matheson, we are told how Helen's form wavers, changing sex before transforming from man to animal, then from animal to more primitive life forms, until a substance like jelly remains. At that point the change reverses, and the ladder of evolution is ascended again. For a moment Pan manifests to the men present, and Helen dies. The final letters between Clarke and Dr. Raymond reveal that Helen was the child of Mary, Raymond's unfortunate test subject, and Pan. Clarke visits the Welsh countryside where Helen grew up, and finds that it was the site of an old Roman temple to the Celtic deity Nodens, god of the Deep.

Chinese boxes

One thing that is immediately apparent upon reading the story is its curious structure. Machen employs nested narratives in the form of memoirs, letters, and manuscripts to break up the flow of the text and the immersion of the reader. The artificial fragmentation of the text is a deliberate attempt by Machen to thwart understanding: at the moment of truth, these manuscripts turn illegible (62), letters cut off before an explanation can be given (65), books are closed (23) or papers flung down (57) at the sight of a horribly suggestive word or phrase. The effect this produces is one of extreme contrivance, never does Machen allow the narrative to progress organically, instead the novella almost forcibly reminds the reader of its constructedness at every turn, deferring revelation indefinitely. This artificiality is underscored by the fact that the furtherance of the plot relies entirely on happenstance, fortuitous meetings and chance observations. Without having any reason to expect the tangle of tragedies that lies ahead, Villiers nevertheless muses with a sense of premonitory clarity: "A case like this is like a nest of Chinese boxes; you open one after another and find a quainter workmanship in every box." Machen relies on gentlemanly flaneurs like Austin and Villiers to be led through the maze-like streets of London as though supernaturally attuned to the city's rhythm and pulse, infallibly arriving at the right place and time to see a suspicious scene or find a fortuitous clue. These characters are what Paul Fox calls "aesthete-detective[s]", "hypersensitive to the impressions that life haphazardly throws [their] way" (59). Fox does perhaps misread the reason for the extreme narrative fragmentation in the tale somewhat when he states that it is an indication of "the chaos of life itself" (61) at the time. Similarly, he considers the way Villiers and Austin are pulled along by hidden forces to be a sure sign of "the wider attempt of the late-Victorians to assign meaning to a newly uncertain existence" (ibid.). While it is beyond contention that *Pan* is obsessed with exegesis, the story is not an aesthetic attempt to order and ornament "an otherwise meaningless and fragmented world" (ibid.); rather, the fragmentation is a strategy Machen employs to counteract dull and ossified ascriptions of meaning. By creating arabesque-like narrative structures that obstruct and frustrate the flow of the story, Machen suggests ineffable forces working under the surface and exerting a pull on the

characters, thereby patterning the events according to their own inscrutable design. This is Machen's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: the painstaking literary evocation and obfuscation of forces that elicit ecstasy, that much-coveted remove from everyday reality and common consciousness.

Critical consideration of the obsession with unspeakable secrets in *Pan* has traditionally focussed heavily on models positing a central cultural anxiety at the heart of the text. Kelly Hurley makes the claim that the central mystery in the novel is a sexual one, embodied by Helen Vaughan whose shifting body challenges narratives of human specificity and exceptionality and confronts the characters and the reader with what Hurley terms 'the abhuman'. In Hurley's framework, the natural response resulting from this defamiliarization of human identity is hysteria. She writes of the many times narratives are aborted, books closed with a shudder, and characters hushed that "the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic is *training* its readership somatically, underscoring that nausea is the proper response to a confrontation with abhumanness" (49). Hurley's reading of the many theatrical "paroxysms of fright" (Machen, *Pan* 21) the characters suffer as symptoms of hysteria which normatively enforce the boundaries of the human subject ignores the deliberate intricacy of the story's structure. Explaining away its "strategies of narrative occlusion" (Hurley 47) as trauma responses typical of the entirety of the gothic genre, which "seeks to draw its reader into the field of its hysteria" (49), Hurley passes over the possibility of the sublime, citing Radcliffe to make a case for nausea over transcendental transport (47). Susan Navarette finds the same anxieties regarding atavism she sees playing out thematically in the novel (cf. infra) to be at work on the level of language, reading the fragmentation and erratic structure of the story as the result of linguistic degeneration setting in. Drawing on *fin de siècle* philology, Navarette finds many instances of "the body-as-text/text-as-body" analogies, which suggest language was considered to be potentially subject to sickness and decay, much as a body might be. "As cultures and societies decay, language may also decay", Navarette writes, maintaining that in texts such as *The Great God Pan* "we see the effects when a society is exposed to and reinfected by the noxious or destructive influences bred by the poisonous texts – the 'yellow' books of the Decadents – that it has itself engendered" (194).

Reacting against this 'anxiety model', Robert Mighall argues that the only thing gothic fiction has in common with the medico-legal sciences of the time is their discursive structure. Unlike Hurley or Navarette, Mighall analyses the story's formal features in rhetorical terms, calling attention to its use of the aesthetic of the sublime. Instead of treating the text as a repository for cultural fears exhibiting a range of symptoms to be diagnosed, Mighall compares *Pan* to various writings in the nascent field of sexology and criminology with regard to how they produce certain effects. He argues that Machen borrows the figure of unspeakable sexuality from scientific sources in the same way those discourses appropriate the trappings of the gothic to produce monsters (sexual deviants) in order to legitimise their own emerging disciplines (207). The rhetoric of the sublime is the privileged utterance of those in power: it hints at superior knowledge without ever having to divulge it, thereby securing its own ascendancy. Having drawn these parallels which go some way to explain the eroticised horror in the novella, Mighall declares that Machen used these rhetorical devices mainly for effect, producing the shudder which horror fiction depends on. He concludes that "there is no sexual secret at the heart of Machen's text. It cannot be named because it doesn't exist. At the heart of the text stands *The Great God Pan*. There is no secret at all, for all (Pan) is the secret. The book is a 'Chinese puzzle' with no centre" (ibid.). Mighall's focus on the sublime as rhetoric is invaluable to reclaim *Pan* as a piece of literature instead of a medical pamphlet. Nevertheless his acute attention to style and narrative framing risks understating Machen's project in its own way. The aim of *Pan* is not so much to "'confirm the existence of the devil'" (206) so it may give its readership a thrill; rather, it is an attempt to quite literally incarnate the devil in the text.

Transmutation

The figure of Helen Vaughan, specifically her transformation at the end, has proven to be a rich vein for literary scholars to tap into. Dr. Matheson's account of it goes as follows:

> Here too was all the work by which man has been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being.

> The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed. (…) I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance like to jelly. Then the ladder was ascended again. (62)

Given its evocation of (reversible) evolution and the jelly-like principle of life, many scholars have read this passage as proof of the novella's central preoccupation with the concept of 'degeneration' which was prevalent in a myriad of discourses (scientific, moral, cultural) at the time. Kelly Hurley reads Helen as the embodiment of the looming, ever-present "possibility of formlessness" (31) articulated in gothic fiction under the influence of *fin-de-siècle* materialism. For Hurley, a fear of undifferentiation was the natural result of theories like the one expounded by T.H. Huxley in "The Physical Basis of Life". As a result, human individuation was felt to be precarious, ever given to collapsing back into disorganised matter. Hurley states the two possible responses available to fiction are "entropy" and "chaotic metamorphosis" – both fates befalling Helen. She elaborates how "[e]ach disallows the narrative of human transcendence of the material universe, for in each human identity is enmeshed within the Thing-ness of matter, entrapped within a body always in danger of becoming-Thing" (32). Adrian Eckersley likewise claims a fear of biological degeneration to be at the heart of the novella, especially the moral implications promulgated by social Darwinists (Eckersley cites Nordau, Lombroso and Krafft-Ebing). According to Eckersley, fears of bestial impulses that could break through in the less evolved criminal underclasses explain Helen Vaughan and her unspeakable sexual crimes, as a punishment for which she is dissolved into "a kind of hell that has been fully reconciled with biology" (283). Dr. Raymond's experiment, Eckersley finds, confronts us with the spectre of atavism lurking underneath human skin, with all the moral and religious implications that entails: "[w]e may see this process as an allegorical parallel with the task of science itself: it is the materialist scientist who has ripped the decent theological clothing from humanity and shown us a demon" (285). Susan Navarette reads Helen's transformation as "a reverse ontogeny" (190) ending in a complete reduction to protoplasm, another triumph for Huxley. Despite his previously mentioned reservations regarding the 'anxiety model', Robert Mighall nevertheless follows suit in claiming that Machen's 180s novels retain "an emphasis on the body as the focus for horrific returns" (153), which in *Pan* is exemplified not only by the "morphological reversions and atavistic

returns" (154-155) of Helen's metamorphosis, but also by the fact that the human brain becomes the locus of "the primeval" (154), which Raymond is able to release into the world through surgery. Borrowing from the degenerationists, Gabriel Lovatt makes *Pan*'s *femme fatale* into the embodiment of the *fin de siècle* zeitgeist, an "embodiment of contagion", of "wider principles of Decadence as a swarm that disperses – initially undetectable through the population – and regenerates through contact that absorbs individuals into the collective".

Several critics have, on the contrary, rightfully pointed out how poorly Machen's work lends itself to being analysed according to prevalent cultural and scientific trends. James Machin puts forward that "Machen's use of scientific motifs has perhaps (…) been taken too much at face value in some discourses; there is little indication of any serious knowledge of, or indeed interest in, the subject on his part, and occasional slips reveal surprising levels of ignorance" (146). Machin contends that while "it is clear Machen was willing to press contemporary scientific (and pseudoscientific) ideas to his own ends when in search of up-to-date material for his weird tales" many of the dismissive declarations he made regarding various scientific disciplines and their attitudes towards knowledge "do not sit comfortably with the reading of Machen as a deeply engaged cogitator and interpreter of contemporary scientific discourse and accompanying neuroses surrounding evolution and degeneration" (147). In regard to Helen Vaughan's transformation, Machin instead proposes Machen's interest in alchemy as an interpretative key:

> Understanding the spiritual symbolism of Helen Vaughan's protoplasmic collapse and its employment of the alchemical notion of the *prima materia* is (…) more commensurate with both Machen's interest not only in alchemy, but in quiddity and numinosity (and their evocation in his understanding of 'realism' of literature)", and his relative ignorance of and outright hostility to science. (148)

Jake Poller likewise suggests an alchemical reading of Helen's mutable body, and of the jelly that remains as *prima materia*, the pure base material of creation, which goes through various alchemical stages, of which mainly the initial ones are described in detail. First there is calcination ("the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve", Matheson writes (62)), followed by separation and conjunction, in which the male and female principle are

divided and once more united ("I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited" (ibid.)), followed by the putrefaction of *nigredo* (the stage of blackening). Poller writes how "[t]he alchemists emphasised 'the "terrible" and "sinister" experiences of "blackness", of spiritual death, of descent into hell" (Poller 24), a vision easily reconcilable with Dr. Matheson's description. After the *nigredo* stage, we are told that "the ladder was ascended again" (*Pan* 62) at which point an unspecified portion of the manuscript becomes illegible, until it resumes by describing how the transformation culminates in a glimpse of Pan. In addition to the supporting arguments Machin indicates above, an alchemical reading accounts for the way Helen's body is remade (something often left out of degenerationist accounts), and how, thus sublimated, it is, however briefly, able to manifest Pan.

While Machin and Poller make a convincing case – alchemy is, as we shall see, a pervasive figuration in Machen's work and was an enduring interest of his – it is not necessarily true that Machen's scientific illiteracy meant that a discourse as culturally significant as Darwinism (and its offshoots) had no impact on his work whatsoever. Some of the phrasing ("I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended") is manifestly something that would not have been written in a context in which evolutionary theory did not loom large, despite Poller's protestations that "the notion of recapitulation was anticipated by the alchemists" (27). There is no reason to assume both frameworks cannot be reconciled to an extent by considering that Machen may have borrowed from ideas circulating in the cultural consciousness without therefore espousing a materialist philosophy. This means that his work is able to use certain ideas (such as atavism) as metaphors, wrenching them out of their ideological context and utilizing them to reimagine alchemical transmutation. Machin writes: "[Machen's] business acumen was at least enough to see that to sell a story to a late nineteenth-century audience, the old folkloric prototypes incommensurate with the modern age were no longer adequate, hence his use of science and pseudoscience to create the inciting incident of a narrative" (Machin 145). Although she makes no mention of alchemy, a similar reconciliation between Machen's occultist interests and prevailing nineteenth-century scientific paradigms is suggested by Kimberley Jackson, who argues that his *fin de siècle* tales do not meaningfully engage with evolutionary theory despite using "the evolutionary

template that science provides" (127). What sets the mutable bodies in Machen's fiction apart is that they escape scientization, representing as they do "the imaginative possibilities that emerge from evolutionary theory but which the scientific mode of understanding cannot entertain" (130).

Veil

The imaginative possibilities that Helen's death scene opens up for Machen can be better understood in the broader context of the motif of the veil which is woven throughout the novella. As we have seen, veiling is omnipresent in the story on a formal level. *Pan*'s rhetoric of the unspeakable, which has been variously described as mirroring sexual hysteria, cultural dissolution, or as merely constituting the empty rhetoric of Gothic power/horror, is persistently reflected on a thematic level: the text engages very overtly with the quandary of representing the numinous. Dr. Raymond, the alchemist-turned-brain surgeon (indebted as he professes to be to Oswald Crollius (13)), is consumed by the obsession of seeing "beyond this glamour and this vision, beyond these 'chases in Arras, dreams in a career'" (10), which he expresses as 'lifting the veil' (ibid). In trying to evoke the Platonic reality beyond this veil, Raymond admits to having trouble giving his friend a transparent account. "You will think all this highflown language, Clarke, but it is hard to be literal", he says. "And yet; I do not know whether what I am hinting at cannot be set forth in plain and homely terms" (11). The reason he believes that his discoveries may yet be brought into the realm of the explainable is the leaps and bounds made in technology and science, specifically the harnessing of electricity to produce the telegraph machine:

> thought, with something less than the speed of thought, flashes from sunrise to sunset, from north to south, across the floods and the desert places. Suppose that an electrician of today were suddenly to perceive that he and his friends have merely been playing with pebbles and mistaking them for the foundations of the world; suppose that such a man saw uttermost space lie open before the current, the words of men flash forth to the sun and beyond the sun into the systems beyond, and the voices of articulate-speaking men echo in the waste void that

> bounds our thought. As analogies go, that is a pretty good analogy of what I have done (…). (ibid.)

The conception of "the voices of articulate-speaking men" echoing into space, even in "the waste void that bounds our thought" matches the kind of triumphalist techno-sublime discourse of the nineties, with its dream of rapid technological advancement and the projection of imperialist control[6]. Raymond, however, has to admit defeat at the end of the story: "I forgot that no human could look on such a vision with impunity" (66), he admits to Clarke. "I played with energies I did not understand, and you have seen the ending of it" (ibid.). In other words, the veil cannot be lifted, and Pan has to remain shrouded in the inarticulate shudder, in highflown language, in the hieroglyph, only able to be glimpsed if he is to be witnessed at all. Villiers expresses this sentiment as follows (note again the reference to electricity):

> We know what happened to those who chanced to meet the Great God Pan, and those who are wise know that all symbols are symbols of something, not of nothing. It was, indeed, an exquisite symbol beneath which men long ago veiled their knowledge of the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of all things; forces before which the souls of men must wither and die and blacken, as their bodies blacken under the electric current. Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint, poetic fancy, to some a foolish tale. But you and I, at all events, have known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking to itself a form. (57-58)

This passage arguably offers the key to interpreting not only Raymond's experiment which resulted in the birth of Helen, but also Machen's experiment which led to the publication of *Pan*. Both surgeon and author have to come to terms with the fact that instead of illumination, a bridge spanning "the unutterable, unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit" (11), the only thing they can produce is another symbol, another veil. The rape of Mary, resulting in the

[6] For an examination of how telegraphy was seen as physically and affectively linking the British empire, see Roger Luckhurst's *The Invention of Telepathy*.

shocking impregnation of matter ("human flesh") by spirit (Pan, described as "the form of all things but devoid of all form" (14)) is the nearest Raymond can come to uncovering "the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of all things". The creation of "an exquisite symbol" (or, if the reader is inclined to be less generous, "a foolish tale") is Machen's attempt to intimate the same awe-inspiring presence underneath the surface of the everyday. Helen Vaughan's body thereby becomes precisely the kind of hieroglyph that allows for the veiled presence of the numen that is Pan.

It follows, then, that the horror that she represents is not that of biological degeneration, sexual deviance, or cultural collapse, but of alchemy gone wrong. Her metaphysical dissolution (which is made palatable to a modern audience by its evocation of modern ideas regarding evolution and atavism) demonstrates Crollius' adage which is cited by Raymond: "'In every grain of wheat there lies hidden the soul of a star'" (13). This is a bastardization of a quotation from the Gospel of John, which, Poller notes, "is often cited as a parable for the great work" (23), and implies the inherent seed of perfection in base matter. Except, of course, Raymond's meddling has made it so Mary's brain, "the house of life" is "thrown open", which, as he declares, can lead to "that for which we have no name" entering into it, and as a result, to "human flesh (…) [becoming] the veil of a horror one dare not express" (66). This is an aberration of Machen's dearly held belief, that "man is a sacrament, soul manifested under the form of body" (*Hieroglyphics*). When reading the account of Helen's youth, Clarke's mind "shuddered and shrank back, appalled before the sight of such awful, unspeakable elements enthroned, as it were, and triumphant in human flesh" (*Pan* 23). Finally he adds the subscript: "ET DIABOLUS INCARNATUS EST. ET HOMO FACTUS EST" (23), "And the devil has become incarnate. And he has been made human".

The same problematization of incarnation occurs on a metalevel. As we have seen, the "Sacramental System", which Machen espouses to be the underpinning of all literature worthy of that name, presupposes plot and artifice to be a necessary evil to convey the essential idea: "To a certain extent, then, the Idea must be materialised, but still it must always shine through the fleshly vestment; the body must never be mere body but always the body of the spirit, existing to conceal and yet to manifest the spirit" (*Hieroglyphics*). To Machen, body and signifier function as imperfect contrivances through

which the soul radiates outwards. Their transparency is perhaps devoutly to be wished, but ultimately unattainable. Since they simultaneously "conceal" and "manifest" spirit, human flesh and symbol alike are the only possible bridge across the abyss "from the earth to the unknown shore" (*Pan* 12). Just like Raymond disrupts the sacrament of body and soul, so does Machen dabble in the dark arts to manifest the previously unthinkable, delivering the formless into form. I would argue, then, that Jonathan Newell accurately describes *Pan* as "an extended esoteric experiment on Machen's part designed to inculcate a kind of revelatory nausea, a powerful affective state that will, Machen hopes, lead readers to see 'the shadows that hide the real world from our eyes' and thus, perhaps, catch a fleeting glimpse of Pan themselves" (69). Where Newell errs, however, is in considering Helen's transformation evidence of her becoming "a sort of arche-fossil", allowing her to pass "beyond the borders of thought", while at the same time "allow[ing] the reader to cognise something of a world anterior to the thinking subject – a world of ancestral slime" (77). Even disregarding Meillasoux's problematic use of the concept of the 'arche-fossil'[7], Helen's body is, as I have shown, in essence a human symbol, not a non-human "artefact that precedes observation" (ibid). She is "an incarnate horror" (*Pan* 66) to Raymond as to Machen precisely because her existence suggests the futility of their undertaking: the abyss cannot be spanned, the 'real world' cannot be brought into human purview except through a kind of signification that carries the taint of illegitimacy and sacrilege. At the beginning of his experiment, Raymond asserts:

> I am perfectly instructed as to the possible functions of those nerve-centres in the scheme of things. With a touch I can bring them into play, with a touch, I say, I can set free the current, with a touch I can complete the communication between this world of sense and – we shall be able to finish the sentence later on. (12)

The similarities with Machen's literary project are self-evident: the employment of the literary strategies associated with the weird, the inculcation of that powerful affective state, to borrow Newell's words, allows for the performance of divine immanence in creation. In trying to perform God, that feeling of being "overwhelmed and possessed" by

[7] J. Leavitt Pearl takes the teeth out of this critique in "After Finitude and the Question of Phenomenological Givenness", revealing Meillassoux to be refuting a straw man argument (the denial by 'correlationism' of the presence of mind-independent reality).

the valley of Usk, “as the soul is overwhelmed and subdued by the first kiss of the Beloved” (3), Machen fumbles for the devices that will serve to awaken that sense of mingled awe and dread that is the hallmark of the religious feeling. What he finds instead, is that the effect he creates by appropriately touching the correct nerve-centres, is what Rudolf Otto terms ‘daemonic dread’, or “the horror of Pan” (Otto 29). Not only has he signified that which is not properly God, but he is acutely aware of his own artifice, condemned never to finish the sentence that eludes him. This problem of imperfect translation, or faulty transmutation, is something that will strongly resonate throughout the following chapters.

The White People

The Bad Numinous

Machen's unease regarding his own mobilisation of the 'bad numinous' as a catalyst of affective response in *The Great God Pan* trickled through into his other fiction, so much so, in fact, that Raynolds and Charlton have noted that the "obsession with evil" is "even more distinctive in Machen's horror stories than the scene-painting" (50). Machen's exasperation at *Pan* was, as we have seen, due to the problem of translating perfect visions into inadequate narrative, transmuting awe into malevolence. This faulty transliteration nevertheless continued to intrigue him, and in his reflections on the novella's creation he would develop ideas on the imagination, artifice, and consciousness that would inform his arguably most accomplished supernatural horror story, "The White People".

The story starts with a framing narrative, in which a recluse by the name of Ambrose regales his house guests with his meditations on the nature of good and evil. Ambrose divorces 'sanctity' and 'sin' from the field of ethics, maintaining that they manifest on a higher, truer plane of reality. Saints, in Ambrose's understanding of the word, do not perform good deeds that help their fellow man, but endeavour to regain Edenic ecstasy. Conversely, sin is to be understood as a metaphysical violation, a repetition of the fall of man, rather than as a societal infraction. One of Ambrose's guests, a man called Cotgrave, initially regards his host as something of a curiosity, but soon warms up to his esoteric speculations, upon which Ambrose shows him a green notebook, which he says will illustrate his theories of sin. The contents of the green notebook form an embedded narrative, and constitute the diary of an unnamed girl of sixteen, who used it to write down 'secrets'. Although she is instinctively cautious of revealing too much, it soon becomes clear these secrets are occult in nature; many allusions are made to mystical languages, games, and ceremonies, some of which were taught to her by her nurse, or by the fairy-like entities connected to the hills around the house. Her account is rambling and loosely associative, interweaving her own eerie experiences in the fairy-touched countryside with curious tales her nurse told to her. The narrator's effortless attunement to hidden layers of reality coupled with her child-like naivete complicate a

straightforward reading, but the story palpably builds towards her eventual initiation into deeper and darker mysteries. The escalating sense of elation which the girl feels when an undescribed occurrence confirms to her that her nurse's stories were true all along, and her own experiences not just imaginings, impels her to seek out the hidden forces around her. The diary is abruptly cut off at the moment of climax, when she goes into a secret wood and has an encounter with the dark nymph she knows as Alanna. The epilogue takes us back to a conversation between Cotgrave and Ambrose. The latter reveals that the girl died a year after the events recorded in the green book, and he was among those that found her in the woods, lying dead in front of a white statue of ancient Roman origin. As to the cause of death, Ambrose makes a reference to a child finding the key to a medicine cabinet, opining that "she had poisoned herself – in time" (292).

Machen here purposely revisits the problem of evil as a central concept that fuels his weird writing. As we have seen, Machen undeniably writes from an anti-materialist position – *Hieroglyphics* describes his project as a contestation of the ever more prevalent mechanistic worldview through the fundamental re-enchantment of reality. The imagination is to be employed as a faculty which will not simply restore wonder to the world, but reveal the world as a sacramental expression of divine immanence. In *Far Off Things*, Machen writes of his childhood: "Everywhere, through the darkness and the mists of the childish understanding, and yet by the light of the child's illumination, I saw *latens deitas*; the whole earth, down to the very pebbles, was but the veil of a quickening and adorable mystery" (25). If this is, as I would argue, what is at the very centre of Machen's poetics, then "The White People" takes us through the looking glass, presenting us with a child-narrator who similarly sees a latent presence underlying reality, but one which is decidedly not divine. What Ambrose describes as 'sanctity' or 'holiness', i.e. "an effort to recover the ecstasy that was before the Fall" ("The White People" 263), is roughly equivalent to Machen's spiritual and artistic pursuit of *latens deitas*: "to us, initiated, the Symbol will be offered, and we shall take the Sign and adore, beneath the outward and perhaps unlovely accidents, the very Presence and eternal indwelling of God" (*Hieroglyphics* 170). It is remarkable, then, that this concept which forms the bottom line of Machen's manifesto is unceremoniously side-lined in favour of a discussion of sin.

Sin is admittedly not altogether the polar opposite of sanctity. Ambrose, Machen's mouthpiece, reminds us that both are still "a transcendent effort to surpass the

ordinary bounds"; both are attempts to reintroduce the marvellous, to resist the desacralisation of the world and "the materialism of the age" ("The White People" 266); both, one furthermore gets the impression, receive enthusiastic authorial endorsement, since "men of genius", according to Ambrose, "partake sometimes of each character" (263). What sets apart sin from holiness, however, is that it is unnatural. Sanctity "works on lines that *were* natural once" (ibid.), for it is the understanding of the natural world as continually striving to express and point towards a higher quasi-Neoplatonic reality. Conversely, sin turns away from this noumenal ideal, appearing playfully aberrant in its conjuration of new configurations of matter. Ambrose's descriptions of sin evoke a darkly mirrored version Machen's own occult experiment after the death of his first wife (cf. supra). Machen recalls how during his altered mental state objects "trembled", "dilated", and "shuddered" before reforming into their prior image. In "The White People" the world the true sinner sees is mutable, too, but perversely so. Instead of culminating in the "knowledge that all hurts and doles and wounds were healed, that that which was broken was reunited", this transmutation would leave any observer "overwhelmed with horror" (263). Ambrose cites talking animals, singing roses, and growing, blossoming stones to illustrate sin as a seemingly whimsical but secretly horrendous marvellous force able to reshape reality at will. Similarly, the girl in the Green Book writes how her nurse taught her "something funny that would make [her] laugh", namely "how one could turn a whole house upside down, without anybody being able to find out, and the pots and pans would jump about, and the china would be broken, and the chairs would tumble over of themselves" (287-288).

Rogue Alchemy

If mutability with no purpose or direction is the province of sin, and matter striving towards the expression of the divine is the sphere of sanctity, then the former can be equated with what Ambrose calls 'sorcery', and the latter with Machen much-cherished discipline of alchemy. Through the figure of Ambrose, Machen cites alchemy as the key system to unlock the meaning of the Green Book: " I am afraid you have neglected the study of alchemy? It is a pity, for the symbolism, at all events, is very beautiful, and moreover if you were acquainted with certain books on the subject, I could recall to your

mind phrases which might explain a good deal in the manuscript that you have been reading" (291). Machen's conception of alchemy was profoundly affected by the hermetical occultism of the fin-de-siècle. His close friend, A.E. Waite, was in no small part responsible for the wider dissemination, translation, and study of alchemical treatises, but also held a very particular and narrow view of what 'true' alchemy consisted of. In an essay in which he sheds light on the scientific advancements pioneered by the alchemist Thomas Vaughan, an author Machen was very familiar with, Donald R. Dickson notes that: "While Waite acknowledged that Vaughan had experimented with metals, he believed Vaughan's true subject was the union between God and the soul; thus he regarded Vaughan as one in a long line of 'spiritual' alchemists" (Dickson 18). This overemphasis of the esoteric aspect of alchemy led to the one-sided reading of alchemical texts as encrypted references to the attainment of spiritual enlightenment, a purification of the soul instead of the transmutation of base metals. In *Far Off Things*, Machen holds back from decisively choosing one interpretation over the other:

> Nor do I hold any distinct brief for the very fascinating doctrine which maintains, or would like to maintain, that the great alchemical books are really symbolical books; that while seeming to relate to lead and gold, to mercury and silver, they hide under these figures intimations as to a profound and ineffable transmutation of the spirit; that the experiment to which they relate is the Great Experiment of the mystics, which is the experiment of God. (35)

Machen's personal reservations aside, this contemporary occultist reading of the alchemists arguably had a profound impact on his work in general, and on his conception of sanctity in "The White People" in particular. It is easy to see why Machen would gravitate towards Vaughan. Dickson writes:

> Vaughan began his public career, brief though it was, during the turbulent 1650s, and his writings ought to be seen as a part of the firestorm sparked by the fear that Descartes had depicted an atheistic, mechanistic universe. In his first two treatises, Vaughan devoted considerable efforts to refuting the notion of a lifeless universe and aimed his vitriolic barbs at the 'Whymzies of des Chartes'. As a youth

> Vaughan had been fascinated with the hidden forces of the natural world – which '(I know not how) surpris'd my first youth, long before I saw the University'. With his first works, *Anthroposophia Theomagica* and *Anima Magica Abscondita* published together in 1650 under the pseudonym of Eugenius Philalethes, he established himself as an anti-Aristotelian and a defender of divine immanence in the universe. (Dickson 18-19)

Although three centuries apart, both authors lived through a period of epistemic upheaval that threatened the belief in "hidden forces" at work in nature that could not be explained by mechanistic materialism. The Cartesian revolution and 19th century materialism both severed God from nature, and Vaughan and Machen responded to this spiritual crisis by adopting a mystical worldview. Consequently, the prominence of the alchemical paradigm in Machen's stories effectively reflects the primary concern at the heart of most of his oeuvre, namely the sacramental union of the divine and the material, the dramatic disruption of which was, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the focal point of *The Great God Pan*. The numerous references to alchemy in Machen's works have been largely ignored or underplayed by scholars, often because they complicate popular analytical lenses such as degeneration theory, and other approaches which prioritise the affect of disgust. Nevertheless, as James Machin's and Jake Poller's readings of Helen Vaughan's transformation have made clear, some attention has gone to countering this narrative. Poller goes so far as to say that in all of Machen's stories "what appear to be scientific notions and theories, such as degeneration, recapitulation and protoplasm, are revealed to derive from alchemy" (Poller 30). Regarding "The White People", Poller states that: "The alchemical symbolism of 'The White People' is too complex for a full treatment here. In brief, the chief process referred to in the Green Book is the formation of the philosopher's stone, and the colours associated with this, namely red, white and black, are encountered throughout" (Poller 22). While Poller's reading of transformations in Machen's work is one-sided – there is definitely a case to be made for the fact that although Machen knew astoundingly little about science, many of the concepts Poller dismisses as irrelevant to the study of Machen's oeuvre would still have entered the public imagination in some shape or form – it is his assertion that alchemy offers a vitally important prism for reading Machen which is of interest here. Although I

similarly argue in favour of reading Machen as an aspiring alchemist, I would like to complicate the notion that Machen unproblematically succeeds in expressing the divine under the veil of matter. The vexing presence of the diabolical that Machen despaired over in relation to *Pan* haunts all of his weird works, and it is this vexation which this chapter aims to follow through on.

Upon further examination, Poller's claim that the Green Book describes the formation of the philosopher's stone rings rather hollow. If the Green Book is supposed to be Machen's Emerald Tablet, it is certainly a strangely distorted rendition of it. Although the use of colours in the story is indeed striking, there is no straight-forward transition from black (*nigredo*) to white (*albedo*) to red (*rubedo*) – the relative importance of the colour green ("green ceremonies", "the green place") likewise does not do much to strengthen this argument. The only reference to the creation of a magical stone is the passage which recounts the tale of Lady Avelin, a noblewoman and witch, who according to the tale was able to produce a 'glame stone' with which "one could do all sorts of wonderful things" ("The White People" 283). Far from being the philosopher's stone, it gives every appearance of being an adder stone (or, in Welsh, a *Glain Neidr*). First described by Pliny the Elder, the 'ovum anguinum' "known in the Gallic provinces, but totally omitted by the Greek writers" is produced when snakes congregate and twine together in summer by the "viscous slime which exudes from their mouths" (389). This stone Pliny describes as an egg, "the shell of it was formed of a cartilaginous substance, and it was surrounded with numerous cupules, as it were, resembling those upon the arms of the polypus" (ibid.). Similarly, the girl narrator in the Green Book tells us the glame stone is "shaped something like an egg, and coloured dark blue and yellow, and red, and green, marked like a serpent's scales" (283). Lady Avelin forms the stone by calling snakes to her: "from every part of the wood great serpents would come, hissing and gliding in and out among the trees, and shooting out their forked tongues as they crawled up to the lady. (..) And she whispered to them, and she sang to them, and they writhed round and round, faster and faster, till she told them to go" (ibid). The glame stone does not purify matter or spirit; Avelin's sorcery is much more practical: she wishes to use the stone in order to murder her suitors. Avelin kills these men by making wax dolls in their likeness, and through sympathetic magic each doll's fate becomes that of the man it is an image of. The girl's nurse makes similar dolls out of clay, and teaches her

how to use them: “And she said that if one loved very much, the clay man was very good, if one did certain things with it, and if one hated very much, it was just as good, only one had to do different things, and we played with it a long time, and pretended all sorts of things” (282). Play and make believe are the very essence of the sorcery done in the Green Book. Another example of this can be found in the passage in which the narrator descends into a well, remembering a story her nurse told her of another girl who went into a dark pit, “and came back laughing, and said there was nothing there at all, except green grass and red stones, and white stones and yellow flowers” (274). When some time later in the story, the girl is seen wearing beautiful emerald earrings, a red ruby the size of an egg, a diamond necklace, and a crown of pure gold, she is asked how she is able to afford all this finery, seeing as she is quite poor. In response, she laughs, and says that they are only the plants and stones she found at the bottom of the pit. When at the end of the story the girl is taken away by a diabolical man with a terrible face, “two knots of faded grass and a red stone, and some white stones, and some faded yellow flowers” (275) are found on her bed. Instead of an alchemical transmutation in which they are truly turned into gold and precious gems, the flowers and stones are part of a game of make believe which only the girl seems to be in on. Like a child playing at being “some great princess from a long way off”, the girl wears a crown of yellow flowers, except her game of pretend is believed by others, and she is married to the king’s son, effectively becoming what she pretended to be. Sympathetic magic is also at work in the framing narrative. In the prologue Ambrose, seemingly unprompted, mentions an “odd article in one of the reviews some months ago” in which a mother watches as her child injures itself playing, whereupon the same wounds manifest on the mother’s hands as the child’s, and in the epilogue he reminds Cotgrave of the same anecdote. The article in question was written by a Dr. Herbert Coryn, and appeared in *The National Review* in 1898 titled “Mind as Disease-Producer”[8]. The article holds that the cause of many diseases lies in allowing the mind to dwell on morbid, immoral, or simply useless topics

[8] I am grateful to Tom Toremans for his discovery of this article in the archives. In his introduction to “The House of Souls”, Machen goes so far as to call Dr. Coryn’s anecdote “the mainspring of the story” (6), stating: “With this instance, of course, are to be considered all cases of stigmata, both ancient and modern: and then the question is obvious enough: what limits can we place to the powers of the imagination? Has not the imagination the potentiality of performing any miracle, however marvelous, however incredible, according to our ordinary standards?” (6-7)

and chains of associations, urging the reader to combat noxious mental habits by prayer and meditation, “meditation, or the raising of the field of feeling till it touches its like and its source in the spaces of the universe” (921). In other words, the creative powers of the mind can, according to the article, quickly turn unnatural and materialise in malignant ways on the physical plane when not properly directed toward higher things (such as God). These examples show that while sin is an ecstasy, it is wrongly oriented: whereas the Great Work of alchemy (at least according to its 19th century commentators) is concerned with achieving spiritual truth and enlightenment by retracing the physical to its divine origins, the work of the sinner is the manifestation of an alternate reality through the weaving of new pathways of associations that guide drifting thoughts along different routes away from the mind’s “source in the spaces of the universe” whereby they are eventually able to wreak further havoc on an already fallen world.

Sorcery and the Subconscious

Taking this line of thinking further, we find additional evidence of Machen’s interest in ‘sin’ as a product of the fictionalizing mind. When asked about passages in the Bible which name as sins the kind of acts he trivializes, Ambrose has the following to say:

> Yes; but in one place the word 'sorcerers' comes in the same sentence, doesn't it? That seems to me to give the key-note. Consider: can you imagine for a moment that a false statement which saves an innocent man's life is a sin? No; very good, then, it is not the mere liar who is excluded by those words; it is, above all, the 'sorcerers' who use the material life, who use the failings incidental to material life as instruments to obtain their infinitely wicked ends. (264)

The juxtaposition of “liar” and “sorcerer”, is an interesting one. Ambrose seems to suggest that the trivial “false statement” is the mundane equivalent of the metaphysical sin, much like the commonplace criminal is the pale shadow of the sorcerer, the ‘true’ sinner. The “failings incidental to material life” which the sorcerer utilises to further his nefarious goals are then perhaps not just the imperfections of the phenomenal world, but

of language itself. Kimberley Jackson notes that the "insidious nature of figurality" is the real transformative force behind the story: "Animating the inanimate, endowing it with body parts which do not naturally belong to it, language allows for an understanding of sin through its tropic relation to the world. Through figurative language, the flowers can sing and the rock can break out in stony blossoms" (Jackson 134). It is no wonder, Jackson continues, that Ambrose illustrates to Cotgrave what sin is by showing him a manuscript: "What this suggests is that such literature is itself a form of sorcery; it conjures up figures of the unknown, of the formless and shapeless deep out of which all things emerge" (ibid.). A casual remark by Ambrose gives another indication that ecstasies often are linguistic or literary performances. Noting that "we may recognize evil by its hatred of the good" (264), Ambrose observes that "one doesn't need much penetration to guess at the influence which dictated, quite unconsciously, the 'Blackwood' review of Keats" (ibid). Keats' untimely death spoke to the imagination of his contemporaries, some, like Hunt and Shelley, averring that the scathing reviews had killed the poet. Emily Lorraine de Motluzin notes of the bitter war waged against Keats and his fellow 'Cockney' poets, that it is "justly notorious for its ferocity, its venom, and its journalistic overkill" (107) and that "*Blackwood's*' Cockney-killers had indisputably mastered the fine art of ridicule in its varied and multifaceted forms, and, thus armed, they were able to unleash upon the Cockney poets one of the most destructive campaigns in literary history" (ibid.). Although *Blackwood's* has to share the dubious honour of killing John Keats with *The Quarterly Review*, Machen presumably singles them out for urging the poet to return to his medical career: "It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop Mr John, back to 'plasters, pills, and ointment boxes,' &c" (Z., 524)[9]. The rhetorical murder of Keats (de Motluzin lists various instances of the reviewers priding themselves on "killing Cockneys") followed by the poet's actual death is entirely in line with the kind of sympathetic magic by which Avelin killed her suitors. But more damning even than the murder of the flesh-and-blood Keats, at least in Machen's eyes, is the

[9] In *The Hill of Dreams* Keats' reviewers are far from being painted as "Hierarchs of Tophet" ("The White People" 264), and are instead likened to "barbarians" and "black savages", although their main offense is still that "they dismissed Keats to his gallipots" (Machen, *Hill* 192). In "The White People", Machen seems similarly loath to attribute the grandeur of true sin to them, instead choosing to imply that an "influence" "dictated" their withering words.

denial of his poetry and the renunciation of its ecstatic potential, as it reduces him from an alchemist (a 'saint') to a mere chemist.

Here we find then how the sorcery and sanctity paradigm of "The White People" logically ensued from Machen's disenchantment with his earlier work. Keats, according to Machen, was able to tap into the divine trace with ease[10], *Pan*, on the other hand, invoked the demonic where Machen only intended to evoke the mysteries suggested to him by the hills and valleys of Caerleon. In his inexperience, the aspiring alchemist turned sorcerer. In *Far Off Things*, Machen muses: "it is one thing to dream dreams; and quite another to interpret them, and in this active faculty of interpretation, or translation of the heavenly tongues into earthly speech, there are infinite degrees of excellence" (109). Having botched the translation of Caerleon into *Pan* gave Machen a better appreciation of the recalcitrance of language: as an imperfect medium it could easily distort latent divinity into dormant evil. Unsurprisingly, that central theme in Machen's work which is the figuration of spirit under the defective vessel of matter, finds a metaliterary equivalent in the anxiety felt by himself and his characters regarding the impossibility of representing the sublime experience: "(…) once words are granted, we fall into the region of the logical understanding, we are forced to devise incidents and circumstances and plots, to 'make up a story'; we translate a hill into a tale, conceive lovers to explain a brook, turn the perfect into the imperfect" (4), Machen writes in his introduction to *Pan*. Worse by far than performing Pan is falling within this region of the logical understanding, which is the death of ecstasy.

> The logical understanding is the prison-house of Wordsworth's supreme and magistral ode; it is the house of prudent artifice, of the calculations of means to the end; it is the region where things can be done by recipe, where effects are all foreseen and intended. It is the house of matter and the house of mechanism. And when youth does anything well or pretty well, it is because youth has not wholly been overcast by the shadows of the prison-walls; it is because it does not understand. Nay; it is so even with age. (1-2)

[10] Besides the already mentioned reference to Keats, "The White People" contains certain echoes of Keats' works in the stories told by the girl's nurse. Avelin mirrors La Belle Dame sans Merci; Sir Simon, the suitor who bests her hides in her bedroom to observe her rituals like Porphyro in "The Eve of St. Agnes".

Even sin, which has less to do with the retrieval of the numinous trace than with purely imaginative play, can fall short of inducing the desired 'weird' effect if the sorcerer is too conscious of the artifice required to produce it. Despite its essential performativity, sin, too, must remain an unconscious endeavour: the girl narrator, the mother fearing for her child, and Keats' detractors all performed their unnatural sympathetic magic instinctively. Ambrose clarifies:

> It is like holiness and genius in this as in other points; it is a certain rapture or ecstasy of the soul; a transcendent effort to surpass the ordinary bounds. So, surpassing these, it surpasses also the understanding, the faculty that takes note of that which comes before it. No, a man may be infinitely and horribly wicked and never suspect it. (264-265)

Because Machen's ecstasy, as is clear by now, is the sublime under another form, it by necessity exceeds all cognitive bounds, which raises an important problem for the writer of such ecstasies: ecstasy resists being knowingly put into a work. Machen accordingly dramatizes the literary-alchemical act of sublimation as an invariably long, arduous, and ultimately mostly futile process of refinement, during which he "toiled and despaired over the impossible alchemy of letters, finding nothing but ashes in his crucible" (8). The sublime flounders when it is revealed as artifice, it only exists in the unsayable. This contradiction is reminiscent of one of Blanchot's aporias, the idea that poetry has as its duty to name the sacred, but since the sacred is that which is by necessity prior to poetry, immediate, and uncommunicated, this means poetry is impossible. This "irresolvable double bind that imposes on poetry the obligation of writing while confronting it perpetually with the impossibility of writing" (Hill 87) is what Machen touches on when he laments that "one dreams in fire and works in clay". The task of the writer is to convey an ecstasy which lies beyond "the region of the logical understanding" – in the abstract Machen is able to believe in the kind of literary alchemy which resurrects the sacred as the wholeness of being which came before language, but in practice he finds that in order to awaken the affects he desires to convey, a different kind of sorcery is at play. Meaning, as Blanchot writes, requires the annihilation of the world by language: "Death alone

allows me to grasp what I want to attain; it exists in words as the only way they can have meaning" (Blanchot 324). Sin, under the form of weird writing, denies the world and remakes it, now enchanted and topsy-turvy, but in order for this enchantment to work, the sinner has to remain unconscious of the labour that made it possible, unconscious of the poor materiality of the clay with which he works, which is to say language. "The White People" stages Machen's budding awareness of the stylistic devices he claimed to be unconscious of in writing *Pan*. In *Hieroglyphics* these devices are alluded to: a "'strangeness' of incident, or plot, or style" (200) is needed to arrive at the "unreal" (ibid.), examples of this are the found manuscript method (199), as well as the child narrator (183) and certain properties of the fairy tale (200), all of which, of course, are deployed in "The White People". One device stands out from the others, however, in managing to not only achieve this remove from the ordinary which is the hallmark of the weird, but also to some extent absolve Machen of the consciousness of his artifice, or at least allowing him to bypass it. By emphasising the gap between 'fire' and 'clay', and thereby highlighting his own incompetence, Machen paradoxically manages to safeguard the sacred[11]. The same principle is at work in the typifying proliferation of things unnameable, secret, occult (for the initiated only) in Machen's weird stories; something sublime looms in the text by remaining outside of it, despite being created *by* it. In Blanchot's words: "Speaking is what is required, that, that alone will do. And yet speaking is impossible" (Hill 89). Machen's weird writing uneasily straddles this threshold of the unsayable.

[11] Burke notes: "Another source of greatness is Difficulty. When any work seems to have required immense force and labour to effect it, the idea is grand" (77).

The Hill of Dreams

The Hill of Dreams is widely considered to be Machen's finest work. Intended to be "a 'Robin Crusoe' of the soul" ("Introduction" *Hill* 69), it contains close parallels to Machen's own life, its protagonist, Lucian Taylor, being an at times ironic stand-in for the author. Although it is not a weird narrative in the same sense as "The White People", it is a deeply personal meditation on the production of the weird sublime affect, and shows Machen at his most self-consciously Decadent. The novel also amplifies the Romantic echoes that are found in "The White People". The enchantment effect which the employment of the weird sublime aesthetic makes possible raises questions concerning the faculty of the imagination and regarding literary performativity that recall Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode" as well as Coleridge's "Dejection" and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In doing so, *The Hill of Dreams* takes the idea of the imagination as an alchemizing force further, thereby critically interrogating some of the main premises of *Hieroglyphics*.

Structurally, the novel is conceived as a Bildungsroman following Lucian from childhood until his untimely death in a London boarding house. Lucian grows up near Caermaen, a thinly veiled fictional version of Machen's Caerleon, exploring its hills and valleys and investing them with profound transformative potential, every childhood ramble becoming its own little ecstatic experience. This culminates when on one hot summer day he climbs the hill on which an old Roman fort stands, and, exhausted, falls asleep among its ruins. Although the novel is unclear about what transpires exactly, Lucian undergoes a kind of dreamlike initiation, the aftereffects of which resonate long after he wakes up. Lucian's penchant for the mystical drives him to isolate himself from his peers and society at large, and he gives himself entirely to the reading of rare and obscure literature and the writing of more of the same. Spurned by commercially-minded publishers, Lucian sinks into deep despair, until he meets a farmer's daughter called Annie, who for him takes on immense significance as a figure of sublimated femininity. He redoubles his efforts to capture and reproduce the nebulous ecstatic experience for which she has become the symbol, inventing strange rituals and writing more oversophisticated prose. His masterpiece is the creation of 'the garden of Avallaunius', a colourful and decadent replica of the old Roman city of Isca Augusta, and before long the

purely imaginary reality of the ancient Roman settlement and the banality of modern life melt together seamlessly as Lucian travels between them in his meditations. Rather suddenly Lucian comes into some money, and travels to London to make something of his literary career. Through extreme isolation and single-minded obsession London turns from a refuge into a place of extreme desolation, and Lucian's mind slowly unravels as he loses the last sense of connection with his surroundings. His madness comes to a crescendo when he meets a prostitute, who in his phantasmagorical inner universe becomes both a mystical lover and a witch summoning him to his doom. In a final fever dream, he celebrates the wedding of the Sabbath with her[12], before ultimately expiring at its climax. After his death, the real prostitute enters the room, and it is revealed that Lucian died of a drug overdose, sat at his desk in front of a manuscript of illegible scribblings, having left her everything.

As may be inferred from the summary above, the events in the novel are punctuated by three major ecstatic episodes: Lucian's vision at the fort, his moonlight encounter with Annie, and the hallucinogenic marriage of the Sabbath moments before his death. These are moments of special significance which are either long prefigured or resonate for many pages after their occurrence. It is no coincidence that the three ecstasies and their fallout lead Machen to employ some of his weirdest imagery; aside from *Hieroglyphics*, *The Hill of Dreams* contains some of his most interesting ruminations on how writing in the weird 'manner' may perform "that high theurgic magic" (*Hill* 171) that produces the sublime ecstatic affect in the reader. Viewed consecutively, these three ecstatic moments constitute a gradual initiation. In his spiritual robinsonade, I argue that Lucian passes through the stages that together form the alchemical great work, thereby metafictionally structuring *The Hill of Dreams* itself as a magnum opus.

Nigredo

The first major ecstasy of the novel is heralded by a vision Lucian receives as a young boy while he wanders "resolved to lose himself" (75) near his childhood home. The novel's

[12] The topoi of the witch and the witches' sabbath figures strongly in Machen's work, as do allusions to sexual magic (the soirées of Helen Vaughan in *The Great God Pan*, the rituals of the nurse-witch in "The White People", among others).

opening line, “There was a glow in the sky as if great furnace doors were opened” (ibid.), describes the spell the sunset casts over the scene, the already alchemically inspired simile hinting at an ineffable influence beyond the façade of the sky which burns away impurity, just as a metallurgic furnace extracts undesirable material from metal. “Leaden clouds” (ibid.) are brought into motion until “the air was all glimmering and indistinct, transmuting trees and hedges into ghostly shapes” (77). Finally, the sky turns scarlet, making it appear as if “[t]he old Roman fort was invested with fire” (78). Lucian, like the unnamed girl protagonist from “The White People”, engages with the world around him as if it is innately revelatory, but the weird magic or “glamour” (75) which lies over the “fairyland” of the hills of Caerleon is much less ambiguously implied to stem from the young boy’s imagination. Unlike the ambivalent position “The White People” takes with regard to the reality of the girl protagonist’s experiences[13], in *The Hill of Dreams*, unconscious fiction-making is exposed as one of the novel’s central concerns early on. Lucian is described as being “like the hero of a fairy-book”, and his experiences leave him “amazed, *as though he were reading a wonderful story*, the meaning of which was a little greater than his understanding” (76, emphasis mine). The subjective nature of the weird mystical experience is highlighted when he tells his father of it, feeling “somewhat mortified when his father seemed perfectly acquainted with the whole course of the lane, and knew the names of the wild woods through which he had passed in awe” (78).

Three years later, Lucian gives in to the spell the Roman fort has cast on him, and climbs the hill on which it stands. The climb is difficult, and once on the summit, he sees the hill is covered in stunted trees, poisonous-smelling herbs, and uncommon stinging nettles. The worst of these “shameful growth[s]” (83) is a fungus, which is evocatively described: “The earth was black and unctuous, and bubbling under the feet, left no track behind. From it, in the darkest places where the shadow was thickest, swelled the growth of an abominable fungus, making the still air sick with its corrupt odour, and he shuddered as he felt the horrible thing pulped beneath his feet” (ibid.). Anthony Camara picks up on the fungal motif that runs through *The Hill of Dreams*, and claims Machen uses it “to stage the confrontation between opposed nineteenth-century theories of

[13] Ambrose reflects that: “[a] child's imagination always makes the heights higher and the depths deeper than they really are; and she had, unfortunately for herself, something more than imagination” (292), while at the same time maintaining that “there could have been no possibility of ‘suggestion’ or sub-conscious action of any kind” (291-292).

vitalism and materialism" (Camara, 93). While Camara's insights into nineteenth century mycology are sound – the fraught taxonomical position of fungus informs its value and appeal as a metaphor – I would argue that Machen is a great deal less interested in biological life than in the "undead animation" (101), that "vital force behind the scenes" (95) which Camara astutely problematizes but in the end somewhat reductively considers part of Machen's reflection on life's inaccessibility and inherent logical contradictoriness (cf. Eugene Thacker's concept of 'blasphemous life'). While I hope my reservations regarding this reading will become clear in time, I do agree that the alive-in-deadness of fungus is a valuable image to think with when considering Machen's weird. As mentioned above, that "vital force behind the scenes" is present in the novel from the first line, under the symbol of the furnace, which transmutes the landscape and sets it in motion. When Lucian, after his long climb, falls asleep on top of the hill, a similar magic is performed when the twisting, rotting trees that surround him are anthropomorphized: "(…) there were forms that imitated the human shape, and faces and twining limbs that amazed him. (…) His eyes were fixed and fascinated by the simulacra of the wood" (85). Finally, the sunlight appears to turn green, and "the contrast between the bright glow poured on the lawn and the black shadow of the brake made an odd flickering light, in which all the grotesque postures of stem and root began to stir; the wood was alive" (ibid.). In his analysis, Camara maintains that the anthropomorphism implies that the wood (both in the meaning of 'trees' and 'dead wood') is "imbued with the same vital force as human beings" (Camara 97). Although the surrealist undercurrent of the scene does not escape him, Camara attributes it to life's essential "sinful" or "disturbing" animating qualities, citing other examples further on in the novel which inversely emphasise human life as perversely and grossly material. While I recognise that contemporary scientific theories are insidiously present in the novel, considering the use of fungal imagery, I would like to contend that Machen 'darkens' matter not in order to grapple with its changing epistemological status, but to examine how it comes alive in the human mind. The faces Lucian sees in the trees are not a reminder of the terrifying fundamental life force that connects humans and trees; the dead bark does not possess some kind of "indwelling creative power" (ibid.), nor does the fungus represent the "nadir of life" (92), thereby fruitfully combining materialist and vitalist paradigms. Rather, Lucian's first ecstatic moment on top of the 'hill of dreams' is an initiation into the powers

of his own imagination which turn degraded, dying matter into life. As such, this scene corresponds with the *nigredo* stage of the alchemical magnum opus. The putrescent, bubbling, black earth with all its lowly growths stands for the putrefaction and mortification of matter, the first steps in its transmutation[14]. The human faces that appear in the wood of the trees are apophenic visions, occasioned by the human tendency to perceive patterns gone rogue: "Green mosses were hair, and tresses were stark in grey lichen; a twisted root swelled into a limb; in the hollows of the rotted bark he saw the masks of men" (Machen 85). "Imitated", "simulacra", "masks" all highlight the questionable reality of the scene. The "undead animation", that strange force operating behind the scenes, is the faculty of the imagination, which, in Coleridge's words: "is essentially *vital,* even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead" (*Biographia Literaria* 121). Lucian's spontaneous attribution of life and personhood to matter at its most base is the culmination of the *nigredo* stage. A vague eroticism already tinges this scene, as Lucian lies naked in the sunlight "the gleaming bodily vision of a strayed faun" (86), and he remembers, as he awakes, the impression of a woman: "he entreated the dark eyes that had shone over him, and the scarlet lips that had kissed him" (ibid.). This erotic charge will become increasingly pronounced in the other key scenes I wish to discuss.

Albedo

The *albedo* or purification stage comes after Lucian's first commercial failure – upon learning his work has been rejected and partially stolen by the publishers, Lucian wanders home furious and hopeless, thinking about the careless cruelties people inflict on him, and on one another. The motif of sordid base matter that characterised the *nigredo* stage makes another appearance here:

> He and his father seemed to pass down an avenue of jeers and contempt, and contempt from such animals as these! This putrid filth, moulded into human

[14] Colour changes reflected the proper progression of the great work. The colour sequence is usually black (*nigredo*) – white (*albedo*) – red (*rubedo*), although some sources distinguish additional stages, like the peacock's tail (various colours) which appears between blackening and whitening (cf. Paracelsus).

> shape, made only to fawn on the rich and beslaver them, thinking no foulness too foul if it were done in honour of those in power and authority, and no refined cruelty of contempt too cruel if it were contempt of the poor and humble and oppressed; it was to this obscene and ghastly throng that he was something to be pointed at. (106)

The description of human beings as filth (repeated shortly thereafter: "And he was to call this loathesome [sic] beast, all sting and filth, brother!" (ibid.)) is remarkable: here human life is reduced to de-souled "shapes". This contrasts sharply with the spontaneous animation that occurs shortly after. Lucian loses himself in the landscape and in his panic mistakes the rippling and gurgling of the brook for a conversation between two entities: "[he] almost fancied he heard two voices speaking in its murmur; there seemed a ceaseless utterance of words, an endless argument" (110). Even though the text clearly flags its fictionality ("almost fancied", "seemed"), the impression of the landscape's life and agency and personhood does not leave Lucian:

> With a mood of horror pressing on him, he listened to the noise of waters, and the wild fancy seized him that he was not deceived, that two unknown beings stood together there in the darkness and tried the balances of his life, and spoke his doom. The hour in the matted thicket[15] rushed over the great bridge of years to his thought; he had sinned against the earth, and the earth trembled and shook for vengeance. (ibid.)

This passage calls to mind the voices the ancient mariner hears and "in [his] soul discerned" (line 397), weighing his sin and his penance for having killed the albatross. In Coleridge's poem, the ascription of life, consciousness, and agency to the albatross, which is hailed by the other sailors "as if it had been a Christian soul" (line 65) leads the mariner to shoot it in defiance of this fiction, killing the world with it[16]. Correspondingly, in *The Hill*

[15] "The hour in the matted thicket" refers to Lucian's vision on the hill.
[16] For readings of the *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* through the lens of animism and skepticism, cf. *In Quest of the Ordinary* by Stanley Cavell and "'I know he knows I know he knows I am': Suspension of Disbelief in A. L. Kennedy" by Ortwin de Graef.

of Dreams, Lucian's 'sin against the earth' is the attribution of life and voice to trees and rivers, and his simultaneous inability to extend that same spark of life to his fellow man. Lucian, "'degenerate,' *decadent*" (112) as he is, has an excess of the artistic imagination Machen mentions in passing in "The White People". Just as Ambrose says of the latter story's girl protagonist: "A child's imagination always makes the heights higher and the depths deeper than they really are (…)" (292), so for Lucian "the rough rains and blustering winds of life, which a stronger man would have laughed at and enjoyed, were (…) 'hailstorms and fire-showers'" (*Hill* 112). In *The Hill of Dreams*, the artist's ability to imbue the everyday with the marvellous (cf. Miéville's "radicalised quotidian sublime") becomes defective and suspect.

Lucian's salvation from his own pathological imagination comes in the form of Annie Morgan:

> To his right there surged up in the darkness the darker summit of the Roman fort, and the streaming fire of the great full moon glowed through the bars of the wizard oaks, and made a halo shine about the hill. He was now quite close to the white appearance, and saw that it was only a woman walking swiftly down the lane; the floating movement was an effect due to the somber air and the moon's glamour. (111)

So closely identified with the moon, Annie is the embodiment of the lunar queen who materializes in the *albedo* stage. Their brief but dramatic encounter is a turning point for Lucian. No longer concerned with the slights levelled against him by the publishers and society in general, he withdraws into his own reality. Annie becomes an idol to be worshipped; the actual girl soon relegated to the wings, while her idealised image becomes his muse and the object of his desire before which he prostrates himself, "abased and yet rejoicing as a Templar before the image of Baphomet" (128). In his "strange worship" (133) of her, Lucian creates purposely cryptic and esoteric manuscripts and rituals, chasing an aesthete's vision of complete devotion to art coupled with an emphatic disregard for its moral or practical use value. Increasingly, Machen's principal preoccupation with literature's ability to show the great sacrament of body and soul, the eternal beneath the accidental, turns into an interrogation of the plain performativity of

writing. In the *albedo* stage, the unconscious imaginative ability of the child becomes a conscious sublimating effort. Correspondingly, Lucian's engagement with his environment is shown to be less and less spontaneously enchanting: "He would walk a few quick steps, and pause as if enraptured, gazing in the air as if he looked through the shadows of the world into some sphere of glory, feigned by his thought" (127). Here the double 'as if', and the phrase 'feigned by his thought' already signal how the instinctive and effortless fictionalizing of the child has given way to a growing consciousness of artifice. Soon enough, his agonies over matters of style take on overtones of performative sorcery: "No common words, no such phrases as he might use in a tale would suffice; the sentences of worship must stir and be quickened, they must glow and burn, and be decked out as with rare work of jewelry" (128). Machen's belief in the importance of style as "the last perfection of the very best in literature, (…) the outward sign of the burning grace within" (*Hieroglyphics*, 49) is reminiscent of this excerpt of Arthur Symons' *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*:

> It [i.e. symbolist literature] is all an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings. Mystery is no longer feared, as the great mystery in whose midst we are islanded was feared by those to whom that unknown sea was only a great void. We are coming closer to nature, as we seem to shrink from it with something of horror, disdaining to catalogue the trees of the forest. And as we brush aside the accidents of daily life, in which men and women imagine that they are alone touching reality, we come closer to humanity, to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it. (8)

Lucian's aestheticist leanings should be understood within this context of a larger mystical revival as a desire to articulate a reality beyond realism. An era in which scientific materialism has brought man "closer to nature" to the point he would "shrink from it with something of horror" drives an aesthetic reimagination of nature as essentially encrypted and occult. It is only this impenetrability which vouchsafes the possibility of

intimacy with the world that is safe from 'cataloguing'. We are circling back here to the very rhetoricity of the sublime as can be found in Longinus, in which lie its origins as an aesthetic category. The sublime, as we have seen, "lies at the ambiguous frontier of the literal-religious and figurative-aesthetic" (Doran 13). This tension between, on the one hand, the idea of a genuine ecstatic experience with its full religious or quasi-religious resonance and, on the other, an understanding of how this experience can be simulated by the employment of aesthetic and rhetorical effects, productively perturbs the reflections on literary transmutation in *The Hill of Dreams*. As mentioned before, Robert Mighall already identified rhetoricity as a key problem in *The Great God Pan*, but by consequently dismissing its empty "secret" as "a 'Chinese puzzle' with no centre" (207) arguably misunderstood its full significance for Machen's oeuvre. On the contrary, both Lucian and Machen through him grapple with the difficulty of sublimation, in the alchemical and literary sense. Inspired by his love for Annie, Lucian learns this conscious spiritual transmutation:

> A certain process suggested itself to his mind, a work partly mental and partly physical, and after two or three experiments he found to his astonishment and delight that it was successful. Here, he thought, he had discovered one of the secrets of true magic, this was the key to the symbolic transmutations of the eastern tales. The adept could, in truth, change those who were obnoxious to him into harmless and unimportant shapes, not as in the letter of the old stories, by transforming the enemy, but by transforming himself. (143)

The vagueness with which Machen uses the word 'process' here is reminiscent of the way it is used in "The White People" as well as in his recollection of the transcendent experience he underwent after the death of his wife. Lucian later refers to this 'process' as alchemy: "he held in his hand the powder of projection, the philosopher's stone transmuting all it touched to fine gold; the gold of exquisite impressions" (153). The purpose of alchemy, to be "lord of [one's] own sensations" (ibid.) echoes the aesthetic principles set out by Walter Pater[17]. Following a semi-Baudelairean, semi-hermetic logic

[17]Pater's words in *Renaissance* resonate strongly throughout much of Machen's oeuvre: "To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. Failure is to form habits; for habit is

of correspondences, Lucian thinks of exquisite impressions as "varied symbols of one mystery" (148) which can be transmuted into each other.

The means by which to effect this transmutation, the vessel for that "powder of projection" (153), is, of course, literature. The heritage of Wilde and the Decadents is readily apparent in Lucian's conception of literature as fundamentally amoral and anti-utilitarian. Initially, language, according to the young poet, is deemed "chiefly important for the beauty of its sounds, […] by its capacity, when exquisitely arranged, of suggesting wonderful and indefinable impressions" and literature, accordingly, is "the secret of suggestion, the art of causing delicious sensation by the use of words" (155). The (al)chemical metaphor does not remain implicit:

> As the chemist in his experiments is sometimes astonished to find unknown, unexpected elements in the crucible or the receiver, as the world of material things is considered by some a thin veil of the immaterial universe, so he who reads wonderful prose or verse is conscious of suggestions that cannot be put into words, which do not rise from the logical sense, which are rather parallel to than connected with the sensuous delight. The world so disclosed is rather the world of dreams, rather the world in which children sometimes live, instantly appearing, and instantly vanishing away, a world beyond all expression or analysis, neither of the intellect nor of the senses. (156)

This, I believe, is where Machen's gets closest to describing what Lovecraft would later call the weird, not as genre or style, but as that indefinite experiential quality which comes closest to 'affect'. The pursuit of fine literature, which is to say of the creation of such symbols which suggest the ineffable, is then a constant performance of that 'something more'. Much later, in 1934, Machen would write an article in *The Bookman* entitled "The Wonder from Wales", again using (al)chemical imagery in likening this sublimating element in literature to a leaven, its provenance being the Grail legend in the *Mabinogion*:

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relative to a stereotyped world; meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike" (210-211).

> From Celtdom at large, and from the Welsh in particular, there did enter into English literature in the making a certain strange leaven. And its work and office were this: that there is an element in our literature wholly peculiar to it, not shared so far as I know by the literature of any other people, whether ancient or modern. It is difficult to define it exactly; as we have seen, its origins in Welsh hover on the verge of intelligible things. It refuses to be brought to the question of the logical understanding; if you ask: 'Now what exactly does this mean?' you will get no answer. But before you turn away in disgust, remember that the same question, if asked of pure or absolute music, will meet with the same silence. This strange element has been given all sorts of names; it has been called the sense of wonder, the sense of ecstasy; its product has been defined as the 'the fairy way' of writing; but I think it avoids all description and every attempt at definition. (90)

The sublime is and is not the empty Chinese puzzle trick Mighall makes it out to be. It is not empty rhetoric in the sense that the stakes of creating the effect/affect are higher and its consequences more profound than he seems to allow for, but it is fundamentally without content in the same way that the Lacanian objet petit a is uncapturable and yet structures desire. The sublime exists precisely in the movement towards the unobtainable object – as soon as it can be captured or comprehended, it no longer elicits the feelings by which we recognise the sublime; the sublime is by definition elicited only by the unbounded. Lucian's early musings on the creation of his manuscript illustrate this: "'But it's so hard to get at the core of an idea—the heart, as I call it,' he went on after a pause. 'It's like having a box you can't open, though you know there's something wonderful inside. But I do believe I've a fine thing in my hands, and I mean to try my best to work it'" (115). The dramatization of the ineffable is the only way the world escapes the commodification Machen dreads.

The process of sublimation, the refinement of base perception into superior sensation which is the main characteristic of the novel's *albedo* stage, is prefigured by Lucian's attitude towards Annie, and most potently realised in his creation of the garden of Avallaunius. Looking back on his strange private courtship of Annie, Lucian later reflects: "he did not think of the young farmer's wife as the real Annie; he did not think of the frost-bitten leaves in winter as the real rose" (167). Unlike the woman herself, the

sublimated idea of her which Lucian creates can weather eternity: “he possessed Annie, as a man possesses gold which he has dug from the rock and purged of its baseness” (ibid.). In honour of his beloved, Lucian makes “a singular study of corruption”, dreaming up fantastic scenarios, characters, and impressions belonging to the ancient city of Isca, which come to overlay those of the modern city of Caerleon. Many of these should ring familiar to readers of Machen, as Lucian meets women who had fauns for playmates, dallied with nymphs, and gazed into pools until they met what was reflected therein (157). If Lucian is a complex proxy for Machen (Machen took the name ‘Frater Avaullaunius’ (‘brother of Avalon’) upon initiation into the Order of the Golden Dawn (Graf 74)), Isca and her strange rituals and inhabitants stand in for Machen’s stories, and all are implied to function as “varied symbols” hinting at a precious mystery. Like Machen’s literary output, the imaginary realm Lucian has alchemised out of the everyday is a conscious re-enweirding, an act of devotion to the idolised feminine, and yet this construction is, in true Decadent fashion, presented as more authentic than reality itself:

> To Lucian, entranced in the garden of Avallaunius, it seemed very strange that he had once been so ignorant of all the exquisite meanings of life. Now, beneath the violet sky, looking through the brilliant trellis of the vines, he saw the picture; before, he had gazed in sad astonishment at the squalid rag which was wrapped about it. (161)

The question of whether a certain awareness of literature as being a conscious artifice replacing the unconscious “activity of boyish imagination” (164) does not dissolve its magic will be picked up in the third part of the novel, which leads up to the third ecstasy and Lucian’s death.

Rubedo

The relative sense of triumph that followed the creation of the garden and the ‘possession’ of Annie quickly fades when Lucian moves to London. Here Lucian is safe from the glamour of the landscape he has come to dread, from the suggestion “that his very soul was being moulded into the hills, and passing into the black mirror of still

waterpools"(170). Seemingly having started to fear his own temperament, Lucian turns all his attention to "the work" (181), a phrase he has come to use "to denote the adventure of literature" (ibid.). These efforts "had grown in his mind to all the austere and grave significance of 'the great work' on the lips of the alchemists; it included every trifling and laborious page and the vague magnificent fancies that sometimes hovered below him" (ibid.). This is where the true drama of the novel unfolds. Always trying to "summon even the faint shadow of the great effect" (179) in his own writing, Lucian reads Poe, Hawthorne, and Coleridge, hoping to revivify "the clattering pieces of mechanism which would not even simulate life" (ibid.). Lucian's despair mounts as the crucible of his imagination remains cold, no matter how he tries to "light up the dead fires, and kindle again that pure flame of enthusiasm" (184). Although Coleridge's "Dejection" is not formally mirrored or explicitly alluded to[18], it remains an important intertextual reference, as Machen reprises the anguish felt at the loss of the poet's ability to feel touched by the beauty of the world, and consequently to write poetry. In Coleridgean terms, the creation of poetry, after all, depends on the ability of the primary imagination to perceive and participate in the living world, and on the power of the secondary imagination to receive these impressions and artistically rework them. When the imagination fails, the artist is left with mere 'fancy', which only imitates and simulates, but cannot transmute the world which otherwise remains fixed and dead (*Biographia Literaria* 304-305). Just as for Coleridge, the question of the performativity of style remains a nagging concern for Machen. Nicholas Freeman writes how:

> As literary fashion changed and Machen's work seemed a fly in decadent amber, his spiritual revelations were seen as arising from his choice of words, not through the experiences that may have suggested that choice in the first place. His ecstasy became regarded as linguistic and aesthetic rather than spiritual, though Machen himself believed until his dying day that 'omnia exeunt in mysterium': mystery ends all things. (Freeman 12)

[18] Lucian reads *Kubla Khan*, one of Machen's favourites. Certain pages by Poe and Coleridge "had the power of holding [Lucian] in a trance of delight, subject to emotions and impressions which he knew to transcend altogether the realm of the formal understanding" (172). Machen also repeatedly refers to Coleridge in *Hieroglyphics*.

Perhaps because of his desire to treat Machen's spiritual beliefs seriously, something he quite correctly criticises notable Machen critics of neglecting to do, Freeman does not examine in detail the repercussions of Machen's fixation on style. Although he notes that Machen derived from medieval theology and the gothic the literary devices that allowed him to evoke awe, he never critically considers how *The Hill of Dreams* self-consciously stages weird writing as labour, and the everlasting mystery of the indwelling of God as an elaborate stylistic effect.

This manifest, almost obsessive awareness of the ability of literature as the conscious equivalent of the imagination's ability to enchant has far-reaching consequences that touch some basic assumptions underpinning Machen's worldviews. The more Lucian pursues the alchemy of letters, the further it removes him from sharing in any communal experience with others. He observes with mounting despair how "he had become in a measure inhuman" (169) until he finally has to conclude that "he had lost the art of humanity forever" (184). In order to better understand what is at stake, I would like to return to a passage earlier in the novel, when Lucian sees a group of boys torture and kill a puppy. Whereas in an earlier passage, when seeing a boy abuse a cat, Lucian had acted empathically by saving the cat and beaten its assailant for it, this time around, already under the influence of the kind of philosophy which will soon lead him to undertake the previously mentioned magico-alchemical 'process' that will allow him to reduce others to "harmless and unimportant shapes" (143), he remains detached, merely regretting how the reminder of humanity's unpleasantness has disturbed his walk. This is also when the fungal motif of the *nigredo* stage makes another appearance:

> Lucian went on his way hastily, and shuddering with disgust. The young of the human creature were really too horrible; they defiled the earth, and made existence unpleasant, as the pulpy growth of a noxious and obscene fungus spoils an agreeable walk. The sight of those malignant little animals with mouths that uttered cruelty and filth, with hands dexterous in torture, and feet swift to run all evil errands, had given him a shock and broken up the world of strange thoughts in which he had been dwelling. (139)

As well as the first ecstasy on 'the hill of dreams', this fragment brings to mind Lucian's 'sin against the earth', when he cursed mankind as filth, deeming them less pure than corpse-eating worms. The dog, "a little creature with bright pitiful eyes, almost human in their fond friendly gaze" with "a foolish long tail which it wagged beseechingly, at once deprecating severity and asking kindness" (137), is heavily anthropomorphised by the narrator, making pathetic appeals to the humanity of the urchins as well as Lucian. Lucian does not only fail to save it, he also reacts rather coldly to the owner of the puppy, a little girl who rushes up to him to ask if he has seen it, curtly telling her that it has been killed and she should go home. Like the puppy's suffering, the little girl crying "distressed him, and he wished to think of other things" (139). The chapter ends on a strange note: Lucian walks by a plot of grass where a wooden cross used to stand, and he remembers the old sermon that would be preached there: "shewing them that as our lord Jhu dyed upon the Tree of his deare mercy for us, so we too owe mercy to the beasts his Creatures, for that they are all his poor lieges and silly[19] servants" (140). Lucian reflects on the beauty of the medieval service, but not on its morality, allowing his thoughts to wander to the "secret golden palace he was building" (141). Here is, I believe, the central tension of the novel; Lucian's 'sin' lies in his ability to 'ensoul' others, or withhold that animation, that spark of life, effectively turning others into shambling shapes. To (mis)appropriate Camara's phrase again, the poet-alchemist's imagination has become "a vital force behind the scenes, busy animating dead bodies and wreaking metaphysical mayhem" (Camara, 95). His ability to "annihilate the world around him and pass into another sphere" (*Hill* 143) leaves that annihilated world dead and writhing, such as when he watches villagers fawning over a nobleman, "all that he saw was a swarm of flies clustering and buzzing about a lump of tainted meat that lay on the grass" (146). The failure to respond to the appeal to sympathy of an animal (the dog), and then another human being (its owner) recalls the ancient mariner's callous killing of the albatross before passing into a world inhabited only by dead and slimy things. The insertion of a lengthy quotation from a moralising sermon in its original archaic form only serves to underline the artificiality and the conscious effort required to once more bless the world. As Lucian's obsession with

[19] The Oxford English Dictionary distinguishes between several shades of meaning of 'silly'; here it should be read in the old sense of "plain, simple, uncomplicated; rustic, homely", which is coincidentally also the way it was used in *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, cf. "The silly buckets on the deck" (line 298).

literature's weird transmutational potential increases, and his continued isolation in London starts eating away at his sanity, so his ability to invest humans with life and spirit declines. When he startles a woman in the London fog, "she seemed for the instant like a horrible puppet. Her scream was a thing from the nocturnal Sabbath" (188). Other people are thus absorbed into Lucian's idiosyncratic inner world, and become characters, puppets in the phantasmagorical fictions he dreams up, their individuality annihilated. One example which stands out occurs near the very end of the novel, where descriptions of people milling about a butcher's shop merge seamlessly into images of flies:

> There were women fluttering uneasily about the greengrocers, and shabby things in rusty black touched and retouched the red lumps that an unshaven butcher offered, and already in the corner public there was a confused noise, with a tossing of voices that rose and fell like a Jewish chant, with the senseless stir of marionettes jerked into an imitation of gaiety. (230)

The narration then fittingly enough takes up the fungal motif when describing the decay of a house:

> Dark ivies swarmed over an elm-tree, and a brown clustering fungus sprang in gross masses on the lawn, showing where the roots of dead trees mouldered. The blue verandah, the blue balcony over the door, had faded to grey, and the stucco was blotched with ugly marks of weather, and a dank smell of decay, that vapor of black rotten earth in old town gardens, hung heavy about the gates. (ibid.)

Before seamlessly merging again with the previous scene: "And then a row of musty villas had pushed out in shops to the pavement, and the things in faded black buzzed and stirred about the limp cabbages, and the red lumps of meat" (ibid.). The mingling of images makes it impossible to tell just *what* the things in faded black are, and juxtaposed with the derelict buildings and overgrown gardens, women, meat, and flies become an almost undifferentiated mass. This perception of Londoners evidently touches on a larger sense of interpersonal alienation of modern urban life with its frantic rhythm of commercial activity and industry. In Lucian's eyes, the metropolis is horribly sublimated and desublimated in turns, its buildings and neighbourhoods "fungus-like sproutings, an efflorescence of horrible decay" (ibid) but also a darkly numinous fairy landscape

reminiscent of some scenes in *The White People*[20]. The evil mythical glamour overlaying the city turns its inhabitants into ghostly fictions which were "scarcely real, the bodies of the living, but rather the uncertain and misty shapes that come and go across the desert in an Eastern tale […] here every one was a phantom for the other, though the lines of their paths crossed and recrossed, and their eyes stared like the eyes of live men" (229). The solipsism-inducing living conditions of the city and the reverse alchemy at work in the suburbs ("there must be a leaven working which transformed all to base vulgarity" (220), Lucian ponders) are plainly a commentary on modernity. I would nevertheless like to come back to the idea that the 'deadening' of the world and those in it is suggested to be the natural culmination of a life lived for art's sake. Lucian is convinced that "the love of art dissociated the man from the race. One touch of art made the whole world alien […]" (193), and the central tragedy of his existence is that "he could not gain the art of letters and he had lost the art of humanity" (194). The artist's sublimation of the world driven to its decadent conclusion ends his participation in God's creation. Whereas "[t]he time had come when all the wonder of the earth seemed to prefigure this alone, when he found the symbol of the Beloved in hill and wood and stream, and every flower and every dark pool discoursed a pure ecstasy" (210), now he realises that "from the first he had allowed his imagination to bewilder him, to create a fantastic world in which he suffered, moulding innocent forms into terror and dismay" (ibid). The first quotation closely parallels the first stanza of Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode", bemoaning the loss of the child's spontaneous poetic vision. The unconscious act of enchantment of the child's imagination which integrates the subject into the world is warped when that sense of connectedness is disturbed, either by societal factors (hence the alienation of modernity) or through the decadent artist's insistence on art's pre-eminence over life. The 'good' kind of estrangement which breaks the world out of the mould of habit and convention then gives way to a different and less benign form which hampers the subject's impulse to imagine themself as holistically entwined with other animated entities. In Machen's Anglo-Catholic perspective, this takes the shape of a sinful inability to love the world, and a renunciation of responsibility over creation (cf. the passage of the puppy and 'the holy roode'). More generally, it is a continuation of the Romantic theme in which the

[20] For a more thorough examination of how *The Hill of Dreams* depicts London and the psychogeographical parallels to the caerdroia of *The White People*, see Boyiopoulos.

imagination should but sometimes critically fails to act as "the reconciling and unifying [agency] in a disintegrating mental and social world of alien and warring fragments" (Abrams, 212).

Rubedo is the reddening stage of the alchemical process, and it signals the completion of the great work. In *The Hill of Dreams*, the colour red is explicitly connected to the workings of Lucian's imagination. When he is a child, a halo of flame burns around the fort to portend the vision he will receive, making the sky look like a furnace. When he 'sins against the earth', "[b]lood was in his eyes, and as he looked up the sky seemed of blood, and the earth burned with fire" (107). When he thinks back on that day he remembers how "[a] red cloud had seemed to swell over the hill, and grow great, and come near to him; he was but an ace removed from raging madness. It had almost come to that; the drift and the breath of the scarlet cloud had well-nigh touched him" (215). Similarly, the weird writing he tries to emulate burns with "blood-red fires" (179). Finally, it is a colour consistently connected with the lips and cheeks of the women who entice Lucian: with the spectral appearance of the woman on the hill, with Annie, and ultimately with a prostitute he meets in a working class neighbourhood in London. As the prostitute approaches him, he sees that her face is "not flushed with drink as he had supposed, but it was radiant with the most exquisite colour, a red flame glowed and died on her cheek, and seemed to palpitate as she spoke" (199). When she suggests going with him, he shrinks back from her and flees home. He immediately proceeds to languish over her, fantasizing of being led "to her mystic world, to the rosebush where every flower was a flame". This passage evokes the poetry of Mahmoud Shabestari, specifically *The Secret Rose Garden*, a Sufi text exploring the way to God through the figure of the 'beloved'. As in Shabestari's poem, the beloved only stands in for a greater love, and likewise the figure of the prostitute acts as a symbol for sublimated femininity, since Lucian's infatuation is "no love of a woman but the desire of womanhood, the Eros of the unknown" (*Hill* 210). The image of the prostitute haunts him, however, until he sees her reflected in a character in one of his own stories, and the last vestiges of his sanity give way. As Kostas Boyiopoulos writes:

> In his Decadent solipsism Lucian paradoxically enacts the possibilities of an imaginary encounter in his mind based on the actuality of a non-encounter. He

> thus resembles Des Esseintes's eccentricity in J.-K. Huysmans's influential novel *À Rebours* (1884) where the ultimate artifice is in the natural (such as the imitation of fake plants by exotic real ones, or an imaginary trip to England experienced as actual reality in the Paris train station). (56)

This imaginary encounter takes the shape of a witches' Sabbath, and "amongst them was the form of the beloved" (233). The female phantom of the Roman fort, Annie, the character from his latest story, and the prostitute blend together, and he embraces her as both of them catch fire and immolate in a perverse chymical wedding.

The conclusion of the magnum opus, both in alchemical and literary terms, leaves the question of whether the experiment was successful somewhat unresolved. Before dying, Lucian thinks how "[a]ll his life […] had been an evil dream, and for the common world he had fashioned an unreal red garment, that burned in his eyes" (233), a marked contrast with his earlier assertion that the creation of the garden of Avallaunius had made him 'see the picture' whereas before "he had gazed in sad astonishment at the squalid rag which was wrapped about it" (161). This undecidability is magnified in the last line of the novel, which echoes the opening line. When Lucian's body is found by the prostitute and her companion, the "flaring light" of their paraffin lamp "shone through the dead eyes into the dying brain, and there was a glow within, as if great furnace doors were opened" (236). I would like to resist the reading of this line and the end of the novel in general as an admission of failure, or as suggesting that, as Camara says, "the higher realities […] are jeopardized, threatened to be exposed as no more than the most hollow and desperate of human dreams" (Camara, 105). The notion of failure is a complicated one. As Christine Ferguson says of the conventional suicide at the end of the Decadent novel:

> While failing on one register, the decadent subject achieves a dark success on another – the futility of self-destruction is countered by the context of triumphant experimentalism in which the act occurs. When we recognize the decadent script as positivistic bildungsroman in which the subject develops by mastering approved forms of knowledge and then challenging the order of meaning in which subjectivity is articulated, it is no longer possible to view the suicides that

> frequently mark its conclusion as clumsy failures. Rather, such conclusions logically culminate an attempt to master, dissect, and transcend conventional modes of epistemology. (Ferguson, "Decadence" 471)

The novel's explicit equation of the alchemical furnace with the human mind arguably problematizes Machen's Hermeticist belief system, but it also emphasises its protagonist's poetic ability. It succeeds, then, in being a thorough inquiry into the ecstatic abilities of the imagination, that "glow within". However, in spite of Ferguson's rather more favourable reading of failure-as-success, the fact remains that the apex of Lucian's mystical experiences is a witches' sabbath, not the creation of the philosopher's stone. Of the "nuptiae Sabbati", Machen writes in *The Three Impostors*:

> By the power of that Sabbath wine […] the house of life was riven asunder, and the human trinity dissolved, and the worm which never dies, that which lies sleeping within us all, was made tangible and an external thing, and clothed with a garment of flesh. And then in the hour of midnight, the primal fall was repeated and represented, and the awful thing veiled in the mythos of the Tree in the Garden was done anew. (175)

When reading Lucian's final ecstasy in the light of Machen's other work, not in the least "The White People", it becomes clear that, according to Machen's philosophy, he dies a sinner's death. Its failure to manifest the mystery of the indwelling of God in creation means that Lucian's writing sets bloodred fires to the "tremendous sacrament" (*Three Impostors* 174) of the universe. His is the sin of improper creation, the act of signifying things that are not God or of God. In its exploration of the poetic ability to wantonly attribute souls and voices to human and non-human alike (or withhold them), the novel sacrilegiously implies that to exist in the world at all requires continuous acts of enweirding it.

Algernon Blackwood

Introduction

Algernon Blackwood's work is often compared to Machen's, a fact which is not only due to Lovecraft's listing of them as joint precursors. Vincent Starrett, an American publisher and bibliophile who greatly admired Machen and was in large part responsible for the resurgence of interest in Machen in the twenties, recalls a conversation he had with Machen on the subject:

> We spoke of Algernon Blackwood, of whom one thinks immediately after one thinks of Machen. (…) 'Do you like his work?' I asked. His answer was a little parable: 'I have met him a number of times in certain esoteric circles. He is a most interesting and amiable man. There is some difference perhaps in our approach to our subject matter, although I realize that we are lumped together by the reviewers. Tennyson, you remember, says 'the cedars sigh for Lebanon,' and that is exquisite poetry; but Blackwood believes the cedars really *do* sigh for Lebanon and that, Starrett, Is damned nonsense!' (Starrett 248-249)

Although his work was "lumped together" with Blackwood's, Machen, at least, evidently believed there to be an important distinctness in their respective styles. This chapter aims to define what it is that sets Blackwood's approach to his fiction apart from Machen's, while also trying to determine how both used sublime poetic strategies to different effects. Tennyson's sighing cedars will make their appearance along the way.

As Machen's comment already suggests, Blackwood's work is deeply informed by his nature mysticism and panpsychist beliefs. Despite this constant, however, Blackwood did not adhere to any coherent philosophical worldview. China Miéville disparagingly calls Blackwood "spiritualistically maundering" ("Weird Fiction" 511), S.T. Joshi despairs somewhat over the lack of a clearly delineated set of ideas present in Blackwood's fiction, and admits his inability to get a grip on Blackwood's penchant for mysticism (*The Weird Tale* 90). The reason for this inconstancy lies in Blackwood's absorption of a multitude of

different philosophical, literary, and esoteric influences, as well as a dislike of religious dogma. His early interest in Eastern religious teachings was an initial escape route out of the strict Evangelicalism that oppressed his childhood home. His father's warnings of the occultist movements that were flourishing at the time and the ghost stories meant to instil moral lessons in his son had something of the opposite effect. Blackwood notes in "Episodes Before Thirty" how he would painstakingly seek out all of the reading material cited in Evangelical treatises as works of the Nephilim (31). Among these were works on spiritualism, animal magnetism, theosophy, and magic, which he supplemented with Symbolist and Romantic poetry – "Goethe, Schiller and above all Novalis" (Ashley 23), although Shelley would become his favourite. Some of these topics he would only take a fleeting interest in (such as spiritualism), others would remain a lasting influence. One such writer who would leave an indelible mark on him was Gustav Fechner. Mike Ashley, Blackwood's biographer, describes how:

> His most profound discovery was the work of Gustav Fechner, who believed that everything, including the Earth, had a soul. Fechner and his spiritual successor, the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who would soon be postulating the idea of racial memory, were like bread and milk to Blackwood. Their views began to build a structure which Blackwood could clothe with his own thinking (Ashley 24).

Fechner's philosophy[21] would become the cornerstone of his novel *The Centaur*, and have an impact on most of his stories, inextricably entwining itself with Blackwood's occult interests and the all-pervasive pull of nature which he experienced – and often described – as being under a spell. In his own words, this period was characterised by "[t]he early feeling that everything was alive, a dim sense that some kind of consciousness struggled through every form, even that a sort of inarticulate communication with this 'other life' was possible, could I but discover the way" (*Episodes* 33). Travel provided ample opportunity to experience and deepen this sense of mystical communion, and his secret

[21] Blackwood mentions *Zend-Avesta*, in which Fechner claims the planets and the cosmos possess psychic (i.e. conscious) life, in *Episodes Before Thirty*. In this book, as in *Nanna, oder, Über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen*, Fechner speculated on the variegated nature of consciousness in other life forms. This imaginative extension of the scale on which consciousness manifests, as well as of its different potential structures, fed directly into such works as "The Willows".

night-time excursions into the gardens of his boyhood home in Kent, where he would play and "practise [his] incantations" (ibid.), would turn into long treks through Switzerland, the Caucasus, Egypt, and Canada. Filtered through the lens of his mystical temperament, these experiences inspired his writing profoundly, and in the resulting stories the sublime is never far off. S.T. Joshi notes that each one of Blackwood's tales "seeks to uncover those layers of mystery that lurk behind the façade of the known – the mystery of forests, of deserts, of snow-capped peaks, and, most significantly of all, of the human psyche" ("Introduction", xvii).

The human psyche is indeed perhaps the region that was of the most interest to Blackwood. Despite his association with the Society for Psychic Research and his investigations of haunted houses, Blackwood remained more interested in the intersection of the world and the human faculties than in the purely metaphysical beyond:

> My interest in psychic matters has always been the interest in questions of extended or expanded consciousness. If a ghost is seen, what is it interests me less than what sees it? Do we possess faculties which, under exceptional stimulus, register beyond the normal gamut of seeing, hearing, feeling? That such faculties may exist in the human being and occasionally manifest is where my interest has always lain. (*Selected Tales*, xiv)

This all-pervasive attraction Blackwood felt towards the idea of altered states of consciousness betrays just how thoroughly he was entrenched into various cultural movements of the time. Mike Ashley observes the influence of the numerous occultist and theosophical writings to which Blackwood had access. He quotes from Hartmann's *Magic, White and Black* to illustrate the central magical belief, vital to Blackwood's own worldview, that there is something like a source of life which every organism unconsciously taps into, over which the magician can gain conscious control (Ashley, 52). But Blackwood's interest in the unconscious was not only purely occult; he was also taught hypnosis by a doctor he was acquainted with, which would find its way into some of his weird stories, notably "The Man Who Found Out". I argue that hypnosis was an attractive practice to Blackwood because it was based on the assumption that the mind is

porous, open to suggestion and outside stimuli. Ellenberger notes how mesmerism (out of which the technique of hypnotism would emerge) was of particular interest to German Romantic philosophers, as it relied on the existence of 'vital fluid', which would provide a scientific basis for the Romantic conception of "the universe as a living organism endowed with a soul pervading the whole and connecting its parts" (Ellenberger 78), and would finally "enable the human mind to establish communications with the World Soul" (ibid.). Although I am not suggesting Blackwood believed in the by then long disproven connective fluid, it is easy to understand how he could see in hypnosis those unknown psychological forces and abilities at work that, he believed, allowed one to have experiential access to the world beyond the prison house of the senses. Like the magician, the hypnotist could bring unconscious processes into the light of the conscious, opening the psyche up to influences beyond it.

It is this conception of the mind as possessing hidden faculties that open it up to outside forces that also influenced Blackwood's interest in writing. At the age of twenty-one, Blackwood wrote a very earnest piece for *Lucifer*, a Theosophic magazine, titled "Thoughts on Nature". In it, he describes the expansion of dormant parts of the psyche that grow aware of and able to access other life: "the beholding spirit seems to leave its own plane of consciousness and to enter that of the surrounding nature-life, to commune, indeed, with the potencies which, above and behind all natural phenomena, render them beautiful, mysterious or weird" ("Thoughts" 315). He then cites Shelley, without naming him, only referring to him as "another poet gifted with far deeper insight into the real essence and nature of things" (316), although amusingly enough he seems to fault him for not being a Theosophist. Shelley, Blackwood says, "never fully realised, though, the full meaning of the word he was so fond of using and which represented what he justly worshipped without ever comprehending that he was worshipping in reality, not the highest, but only the shadow of the highest – NATURE" (315-316). Nature, Blackwood implies here, has its own consciousness, which Shelley may have unwittingly dipped into. Although this article represents the views of a very young Blackwood, he would never fully abandon them; instead they would over time mature into a deeper and more nuanced worldview. As he writes in his autobiography, *Episodes Before Thirty*: "if Tibet and its shining Mahatmas faded, the theories of Karma and reincarnation were older than any modern movement, and the belief in extension of consciousness to some

nth degree, with its correlative of greater powers and new faculties, have not only remained with me, but have justified themselves" (32). His appreciation of Shelley, likewise, mellowed out somewhat. In *Episodes*, Blackwood recalls how in those early days "[t]he spirit of Shelley, of course, haunted me day and night" (76), and how *Prometheus Unbound* "lit earth and sky, peopled the forests, turned stream and lake alive, and made every glade and sandy bay a floor for dancing silvery feet" (ibid.). No longer is Shelley described as a vatic poet, worshipping something he does not understand but which nevertheless speaks through him; rather it is his poetry which lights and enlivens, haunting young Blackwood and leaving him as under a spell. Thus inspired by his experiments in occult alterations of consciousness and proto-psychological mind-bending, and enchanted by Shelley's poetry, Blackwood would go on to develop his own literary powers of suggestion.

S.T. Joshi divides Blackwood's œuvre up into three distinct types of stories: "stories of awe, stories of horror, and stories of childhood" (*The Weird Tale* 90). The works under discussion here can be seen as commingling the first two categories. "The Willows" (1907) and "The Wendigo" (1910) are widely regarded as Blackwood's best stories, and considered paradigmatic of the weird tale. "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" (1912) partakes more of awe than of horror, but nevertheless features the same uncanny psychic attunement and eerie animations of landscape of the two more well-known works.

The Willows[22]

By far Blackwood's most celebrated and anthologized story, "The Willows" is an exemplary weird tale. Like all of Blackwood's best work, it blends the genre of outdoor writing with the supernatural tale, until something indefinable appears to shimmer through the descriptions of winding rivers and looming trees, growing in magnitude and menace until it crowds the characters' peripheral vision. Lovecraft praised the story for exactly this "art and restraint", a quality of controlled tension characteristic of Blackwood's better stories, which, according to him, "evoke as does nothing else in literature an awed convinced sense of the imminence of strange spiritual spheres of entities" (96). Although Lovecraft's account calls to mind the landscapes of "The White People" and *The Hill of Dreams*, suffused with oppressive enchantment and ineffable significance as they are, the weird sublime, as Machen already discerned (cf. supra), operates differently in Blackwood's oeuvre.

In "The Willows", two friends, an unnamed narrator-protagonist and his companion, only referred to as "the Swede," are on a canoe trip down the Danube, when the rising river and the increasing power of the wind leave them temporarily stranded on a little island. Whereas the forces of nature around them seem friendly at first, gradually a change comes over the landscape, and a creeping hostility sets in, slowly permeating everything around them. This ambient malevolence seems to converge most strongly in the willows on the island and the riverbanks, and while initially the narrator tries to reason away his mounting unease, soon enough he and his companion can no longer deny that they have strayed into a region that is hostile to human life. The forces that hide behind the willows (sometimes simply referred to as 'Them' or 'the others') assault them spiritually, feeling around for the travellers' minds and eventually trying to assimilate them. Finally, the Swede enters an ecstatic state and tries to drown himself, only to be narrowly saved by his friend. The story ends rather anticlimactically when the willows release their grasp on the two travellers once they find another sacrificial victim, a nameless peasant who dies in their stead.

[22] This chapter was partially adapted from my contribution to the volume *Nonhuman Agencies in the Twenty-First Century Anglophone Novel*.

As stated previously, “The Willows” builds slowly towards its moments of sublimity. Other aesthetic categories and attendant affects dominate the initial sections of the story. Beauty, familiar counterpart to the sublime, lends a lovability to the landscape the travellers pass through, yet a dormant hostility and resistance to human access is subliminally suggested from the earliest pages. Despite its fairytalesque qualities, this “land of desolation” (Blackwood, “The Willows” 18), uninhabited and untouched by civilisation remains “a separate little kingdom of wonder and magic—a kingdom that was reserved for the use of others who had a right to it, with everywhere unwritten warnings to trespassers for those who had the imagination to discover them” (ibid.). Nevertheless, the beauty of the landscape soon eases the travellers into forming a relationship with it. The Danube especially “impressed [them] from the beginning with its *aliveness*” (19), an aliveness which leads the narrator to describe the river at length as a “Great Personage” (ibid.) whose lifespan runs parallel to their journey, from its sleepy beginnings to its unruly teenage years, during which it delights in playing tricks, to its sudden maturation into an entity that commands their “respect and even [their] awe” (21). Even though the evocation of the sublime increases as the river grows in width and might, the Danube remains “always friendly and well-meaning” (19). The willows, too, take on a benign aspect early in the story, appearing as “an immense army of dancing, shouting willow bushes, closing in from all sides, shining with spray and clapping their thousand little hands as though to applaud the success of [the travellers’] efforts,” (ibid.) bringing to mind Wordsworth’s host of dancing daffodils. However quaint this description may sound, it already suggests an apparent mass agency at work behind the façade of the willows, and indeed it is not long before the landscape turns sinister. The aliveness and friendliness that the protagonist projected upon the world around them first falters when he sees that the willows are “closed about [the river] like a herd of monstrous antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink” (22). The awe and anxiety this scene provokes makes him muse upon the difference between the trees and the still friendly wind, the latter of which allows the protagonist to “[share] in its great game with a kind of pleasurable excitement” (23). In a passage that directly references the sublime, he observes how

> [g]reat revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt. (ibid.)

These classical instances of Kant's dynamical sublime, in which overwhelming natural phenomena that can ultimately still be mentally recuperated and made "comprehensible", are introduced in this passage to contrast with the forces of the weird. The willows evoke "the curious and unwelcome suggestion that [the travellers] had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world, a world where [they] were intruders, a world where [they] were not wanted or invited to remain" (24). The story thus arrives at a natural sublime that does not exalt, but alienates.

This signature weird moment, when human meaning making comes to a stuttering halt before phenomena that no longer "link on intimately with human life and human experience", suggests that the question of human access to and familiarity with the world is a primary concern of Blackwood's. Nonhuman turn theorists tend to view this shift of representation and availability of the nonhuman to the human in ethical terms, and perceive it as an appropriate answer to the anthropocentric impulse which diminishes the significance of other forms of life. Jonathan Newell, for instance, reiterates the well-established view that weird entities are hostile to human meaning making: "The willows cannot be slotted into onto-theological metaphysical systems, resisting assimilation into anthropocentric cultural schemas: their alterity appears absolute. Moreover, Blackwood's willows are not represented as passive plant-life of the sort usually marginalised by hierarchical structures of being" (Newell 107). Newell notes with more than a hint of approbation the "commitment" in Blackwood's tales "to depicting the utter otherness and inhumanness of the universe, their total refusal of anthropocentrism" (96), as if the portrayal of the willows as whispering, antagonistic hosts is by definition truer to their essential nature than a depiction of them as the vegetal equivalent of wallpaper, while both representations in fact betray human mediation and interests, albeit different ones. John MacNeill Miller offers a similar reading: "what we see in "The Willows" and other

weird fiction is a literary realization of what has become a truism among environmental humanists: namely, that ecology reveals a world without background" (Miller 250). Miller maintains that "what really creeps the narrator out is arguably just an accurate view of nonhuman life that suddenly breaks through his anthropocentric perspective" (249). Although I believe Miller is right (although not particularly groundbreakingly so) in pointing out that scene-setting is central to creating the weird affect, I think he does not follow this insight through to its logical conclusion, namely that this is a literary effect, an aesthetic choice, and consequently that the weird life force that haunts the willows is the result of careful stylistic decisions. Following Miller's reasoning, the affective interest of the story lies in the fact that Blackwood and his narrator have stumbled on the commonplace that nature is alive; Miller reminds us that "the notion that plants have agency and even purpose is not particularly controversial; that they are alive is undeniable" (ibid.). The "sickening sense of dread" that weird fiction contains and inspires is, according to Miller, "the most natural response to the realization that you are part of something far larger than you thought, and that you are entangled in complex and even agonizing power relationships with subjects whose significance you are only now belatedly beginning to understand" (250). In my view, Miller and Newell misconstrue the problem of aliveness in "The Willows", and the preoccupation of the story is not a shift of perspective that foregrounds all life (and not only human or human-adjacent life forms), but a renegotiation of animism.

Animism and mystical participation

Stanley Cavell identifies animism as the Romantic response to Kant's bracketing off the realm of Things in Themselves from experiential reality. According to Cavell, Kant's bid for knowledge essentially separates the thinking subject from the world, thereby 'killing' it. The Romantic endeavour is to harness the imagination through poetry to restore a sense of intimacy with the world. Cavell writes:

> Against a vision of the death of the world, the romantic calling for poetry, or quest for it, the urgency of it, would be sensible; and the sense that the redemption of philosophy is bound up with the redemption of poetry would be understandable:

> the calling of poetry is to give the world back, to bring it back, as to life. Hence romantics seem to involve themselves in what look to us to be superstitious, discredited mysteries of animism, sometimes in the form of what is called the pathetic fallacy. (Cavell 44-45)

As we have seen, this Romantic conceptualisation of the imagination had a deep impact on the occultist strands of thought, which in turn had a lasting influence on Blackwood. Wouter Hanegraaff identifies Lévy-Bruhl's 'participation mystique' as the reason magic, in the guise of occultism, survived Weber's disenchanted modernity. This *participation mystique* he defines as a universal human impulse toward "spontaneous animism" (Hanegraaff 374), "a purely 'affective' and non-rational category based upon 'feeling' instead of reflection" (373). Hanegraaff quotes Tambiah:

> Participation ... signified the association between persons and things in primitive thought .to the point of identity and consubstantiality. What western thought would think to be logically distinct aspects of reality, the primitive may fuse into one mystic unity. ... This sense of participation is not merely a (metaphorical) representation for it implies a physical and mystical union. (ibid.)

We are now in a better position to appreciate the real problem of the aliveness of the world. Miller comments on Blackwood's description of the willows as "gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves" (Blackwood, "The Willows" 22) that: "I don't think I have ever heard a better account of the hydrological function of trees in an ecosystem—but in the story, this is a terrifying vision conveyed from the great beyond" (Miller 249-250), yet that comment misrepresents the stakes of the story. 'Aliveness' in Blackwood's stories means more than the presence of certain biological processes, more even than the "agency and purpose" Miller pronounces plants to have. It is something with more pathos, as Cavell indicates, something more like the possession of a soul. 'Soul' should here not be understood here to only mean an entity's spiritual individuality, but instead as a phenomenon which guarantees the continuity between the human subject and nature. This was one of the ways the theory of mystical participation innovated the anthropological study of animism: the 'primitive man', Lévy-Bruhl holds,

"imagines a *continuum* of mystic forces, a principle of continuous life, an *Allbeseelung*", while "individualities or personalities, souls, spirits, only appear in the second place" (Lévi-Bruhl). In his novel *The Centaur*, Blackwood indulges in a fantastical Romantic vision of the protagonist's connection to the 'Urwelt':

> He called it a Return to Nature, but what he meant, I always felt, was back to a sense of kinship with the Universe which men, through worshipping the intellect alone, had lost. Men today prided themselves upon their superiority to Nature as beings separate and apart. O'Malley sought, on the contrary, a development, if not a revival, of some faultless instinct, due to kinship with her, which—to take extremes—shall direct alike the animal and the inspired man, guiding the wild bee and the homing pigeon, and—the soul toward its God. (*The Centaur*)

In "The Willows", similarly, Blackwood presents us initially with a holistic, panpsychic universe, a universe, that is, wholly alive, ensouled, and interconnected. That it appears so, however, is not despite, but because of its human beholder: humans are a part of the holistic cosmos recognizing themselves in the whole. The soul is ineffably drawn towards nature because of a fundamental kinship that is felt on some plane of experience other than that of the rational mind. As I have shown in the previous chapters, Machen's fiction grapples with the idea that the world is only lovable insofar as it contains occult evidence, hieroglyphics, of a higher order of existence, and with the poet's complicity in creating (instead of finding) said evidence. Although Blackwood's weird tales engage in limited capacity with the phenomenal as a 'signifier' of the noumenal (the entities that use the willows as 'masks' are extradimensional, for instance), they are fundamentally less existentially preoccupied with the phenomenal world as a 'referent', encoding a 'correspondence' to another order of existence. In other words, Blackwood does not need to search for proof of God in nature, for both are synonymous: Nature (capital N) is God.

Due to the prevalent scholarly impulse to consider weird texts' main interest to be the abandonment of anthropocentrism and the elimination of human reality, not much critical attention has gone to how the mediation between human and world happens in tales like "The Willows". Since this thesis's point of departure is that the weird effect

occurs precisely during this negotiation of outside reality, we should pay closer attention to how this animistic drive we have identified works in the text. From what we have seen, it is already apparent that what Blackwood in *The Centaur* calls the "faultless instinct" beyond the intellect that is able to recognize kinship with others, is the imagination. "The Willows" is replete with mentions of the imagination, as well as of "spells" which the landscape casts on the travellers, "suggestions" made to their minds, leading them to think "strange thoughts" and having "bizarre fancies". Of course the narrator emphasises that he is of sound mind, not hallucinating, or 'imagining' things, and I do not argue that we should regard him as unreliable or compromised. Rather, the imagination in the sense that I employ it here should be understood not as mere fancy, but as the powerful receptive and creative faculty primarily engaged in establishing lines of kinship between human and world, as in Lévy-Bruhl's *participation mystique*. The interest of the story resides in the way it manages to turn the imagination and its various properties against itself, and this can be seen in the shift Blackwood makes from the beautiful, to the sublime, to the weird sublime to show how the unconscious and involuntary attribution of personhood to the environment (in particular the Danube) is thwarted, and the imagination is cast adrift. It is this initial animation of the landscape that makes the narrator vulnerable to the later mental intrusion of the willows:

> It took us in different fashion, each according to the measure of his sensitiveness and powers of resistance. I translated it vaguely into a personification of the mightily disturbed elements, investing them with the horror of a deliberate and malefic purpose, resentful of our audacious intrusion into their breeding-place; whereas my friend threw it into the unoriginal form at first of a trespass on some ancient shrine, some place where the old gods still held sway, where the emotional forces of former worshippers still clung, and the ancestral portion of him yielded to the old pagan spell. (49-50)

The interplay between mind and world is explored in the many passages in which the narrator muses upon the infectious powers of the willows: "[T]he knowledge that my mind was so receptive to such dangerous imaginings brought the additional terror that it was through our minds and not through our physical bodies that the attack would come,

and was coming" (36-37). The anxiety his musings elicit is contagious, and infects the normally imperturbable Swede, until "[t]his man [whom the narrator] had for years deemed unimaginative, stolid" (54) proves himself to be as sensitive to the willows' influence as his friend, perhaps even more so. "The psychology of places, for some imaginations at least, is very vivid" (29), we are told, and the gradual way the influence of the willows wears on the travellers' psyches is an extension of that. During the final assault, when the spell of the willows takes root the Swede exclaims: "We must keep our minds quiet—it's our minds they feel. We must control our thoughts, or it's all up with us" (52). This turns out to be their salvation, as the Swede faints and the narrator hurts himself during the willows' assault, which "caused me to forget them and think of something else at the very instant when they were about to find me. It concealed my mind from them at the moment of discovery, yet just in time to evade their terrible seizing of me" (57). Over the course of the story, the characters' affective openness to other life is turned against them, and the framing of thoughts as forbidden doorways turns the willows into sublimely hostile forces.

Digression: the recuperation of the *participation mystique* in Blackwood's 'stories of awe'

If the expansion of human consciousness and the participation of the human in the ensouled world are both natural and desirable, the question arises as to why some of Blackwood's stories, like "The Willows", contain such negative affects. In other words, it is remarkable that the overwhelming and terrifying aspects of the sublime are so emphatically present and unable to be assimilated. In order to start formulating an answer to the question of why weird affects are present in, for example, "The Willows", it is instructive to consider Blackwood's other fiction in which weirdness is not, or not as strongly, at play. *The Centaur*, which this chapter touched upon briefly before, was considered by Blackwood "as the closest to his own personal outlook" (Ashley 172). The novel is in many ways an exploration of Fechner's philosophy of panpsychism. Through his encounter of an *urmensch* (primitive man) the protagonist, O'Malley, awakens the

ancestral part[23] of himself that is able to see the world as possessed of an overarching consciousness, the Earth Soul, of which each individual consciousness is merely a projection. His attempt to evangelise his spiritual awakening ends in deep disappointment, as society is too "occupied by the machine-made gods of civilization" (*The Centaur*) to pay him much heed. The solution that will allow him communicate his vision to others comes to O'Malley shortly before his death: "I must get at them from within. To reach their hearts, the new ideas must rise up from within. I see the truer way. I must do it from the other side. It must come to them—in Beauty".

As one might expect, Fechner is referred to repeatedly and extensively throughout *The Centaur*, but several Romantic poets are also approvingly referenced. O'Malley is repeatedly characterised as being of a poetic temperament gifted with 'creative imagination', and near the end of his life he quotes from *Adonais*. Fragments of Emerson, Elisabeth Barrett Browning, and Novalis all make a brief appearance in the text, but perhaps most intriguing is this quotation from 'Dr. Verrall'[24] that remains otherwise uncommented upon:

> It is a lovely imagination responding to the deepest desires, instincts, cravings of spiritual man, that spiritual rapture should find an echo in the material world; that in mental communion with God we should find sensible communion with nature; and that, when the faithful rejoice together, bird and beast, hill and forest, should be not felt only, but seen to rejoice along with them. It is not the truth; between us and our environment, whatever links there are, this link is wanting. But the yearning for it, the passion which made Wordsworth cry out for something, even were it the imagination of a pagan which would make him 'less forlorn,' is natural to man; and simplicity leaps at the lovely fiction of a response. Just here is the

[23] There is an interesting connection here between on the one hand Lovecraft's conception of the weird, as Miller reminds us, of being "rooted in the fears of a primordial biological past"(Miller 250), and on the other the kind of language of 19th century cultural evolutionism which early discourses on animism and participation were couched in. It was, Hanegraaff notes, widely assumed "that magic—and according to many later authors, religion as well—represents a superseded stage in social and cultural development, the present-day remnants of which are now in the process of dying out" (Hanegraaff 359).

[24] Most likely Arthur Woollgar Verrall, a classics scholar Blackwood may have encountered through Verrall's interest in spiritualism.

> opportunity for such alliances between spiritualism and superstition as are the daily despair of seekers after truth. (*The Centaur*)

The despondent tone of this passage at the projected danger of falling into the "lovely fiction" of a world responding to the human participatory drive is never taken up by Blackwood, and this is in itself significant. *The Centaur* has no room for the tension at work in Verrall's account – it is a manifesto. Verrall picks up on an uneasiness in Wordsworth's poetry which Blackwood glosses over in his "yearning" for that poetic communion Verrall cannot quite espouse. In addition to this, the evocation of "The World Is Too Much With Us" is intriguing, since while Wordsworth's poem is often read as a critique of modernity, it does not find a real alternative in the lapse into paganism that *The Centaur* at times indulges in (even the novel's title references the kind of mythological figure Wordsworth deems 'outworn'). Instead, the poem reinstates the ability of the imagination to transform and humanize the natural world by acknowledging the shortcomings of the pagan's unconscious and naïve mapping of human features onto nature. This "process of imaginative restoration through conscious recognition of loss" (Kroeber 188) is something Blackwood engages with in "The Willows" (although he arrives at a markedly different result than Wordsworth does), but it remains curiously absent in *The Centaur*. On a broader thematic level the echoes of the "Immortality Ode" are also present – O'Malley's desire to "recover this strange lost Eden and taste in its fullness the mother-life of the planetary consciousness which called him back" (*The Centaur*) mirrors Wordsworth's nostalgia for the effortless awareness of God-in-nature he ascribes to childhood. Except, as de Graef points out (de Graef 515-516), Wordsworth only arrived at this more general theoretical scaffolding after Coleridge's reply (in the form of the poem "Dejection") to his original verses. The first version of the poem (pre-Coleridge) is much less religiously, or, more broadly, ideologically certain, and indeed much *weirder*. In the Fenwick notes, Wordsworth recalls how, as a child, "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence & I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from but inherent in my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality" (Wordsworth 160). Only later in life, when this direct participation in the world is already 'lost' to him, Wordsworth "rejoiced over the remembrances" (ibid.),

indicative of his embracing of a recuperating narrative that retrospectively orders his experiences as glimpses of divine immanence in nature. I argue that this precisely what happens in *The Centaur*, as well as in much of Blackwood's other non-weird, 'esoteric' work: the participatory drive, which is intrinsically weird in its unconscious and spontaneous merging of self and other, is salvaged by the application of Fechner's theoretical framework. The various citations of and references to other thinkers (Dr. Verrall, Henri Bergson, William James, Frederic W.H. Myers) serve the same purpose: they do not just lend respectability to Blackwood's tale, they elevate the bizarre and perhaps terrifying instinctive workings of the imagination to a veritable religious philosophy. The traumatically weird is thereby sublimated into beauty.

To Blackwood as to O'Malley, Beauty is the aesthetic (literary) quality that serves to signal to the reader how God's consciousness suffuses creation by lending it its particular loveliness[25]. In *The Centaur* Blackwood sometimes reaches moments of sublimity, but these generally only serve to spiritually uplift the subject experiencing them. Mike Ashley generously notes of the climax of *The Centaur*, during which O'Malley witnesses the emanation of earth spirits:

> There follows a transcendental spiritual experience, which is impossible to describe. It is the peak of Blackwood's writing and a major literary achievement. If it falls short of a masterpiece it is because Blackwood is struggling to describe an out-of-this-life experience with the mundanity of our daily language. (…) Blackwood admitted his own limitations. 'The theme, of course, is far beyond my powers,' he wrote to a friend, 'but it flames in me with such pain that I MUST get it out as best I can' (Ashley 165).

The general impression one gets from the scene, however, can be summarised as: "The whole world danced. The Universe was rhythmical as well as metrical" (Blackwood, *The Centaur*). Heartfelt as Blackwood's attempt at describing the harmonizing of various

[25] M.H. Abrams notes how in medieval moral and theological treatises "the beautiful elements in nature are the enduring expression of God's loving benevolence, while the vast and disordered in nature express his infinity, power, and wrath" (101-102).

planes of consciousness is, it lacks the affective extremes of his horror tales. Blackwood's reliance on beauty as an aesthetic category and frequent principal motif tend to lead in such cases to an affective blandness that Lovecraft refers to as "the flatness of benignant supernaturalism" (Lovecraft, 96). It is puzzling, then, that Jonathan Newell sees in *The Centaur*, a work that is to such a degree concerned with the reestablishment of the affective and spiritual bonds between mankind and nature, a confirmation of Blackwood's renunciation of the human. Newell writes: "[O'Malley] seeks not to look upon the world-for-us, the world as human beings see it, but a radically non-human world which escapes our anthropocentric conceptions – to experience Nature fully, in all its unhuman wholeness" (96). To make this claim of a novel not only thoroughly Romantic in its ideology, but devoid of much of the complexity and tension inherent in many Romantic works, is surprising and problematic. If anything, as we have seen, *The Centaur* brushes over the moments of cognitive crisis that engender weirdness. That being said, it is worth noting that the weird does occasionally stir even in Blackwood's benevolent occult numinous. Consider this excerpt from another esoteric novel *The Human Chord*, where the protagonist comes to

> (...) the realization in cold blood that all forms in the world about him were silently a-singing, and might any moment vanish and release their huge bodies into primal sounds; that the stones in the road, the peaked hills, the very earth herself might alter in shape before his eyes: on the other hand, that the viewless forces of life and death might leap into visibility and form with the calling of their names; that himself, and Skale, and Mrs. Mawle, and that pale fairy girl-figure were all enmeshed in the same scheme with plants, insects, animals and planets; and that God's voice was everywhere too sublimely close —all this, when he was alone, oppressed him with a sense of things that were too intimate and too mighty for daily life. (*The Human Chord*)

The shifting and mutating stones and hills, singing and at any time about to vanish while other "viewless forces" might emerge are reminiscent of the sinfully singing roses, swelling stones, and blossoming pebbles in "The White People". Ultimately however, the weird sublime tenor of this passage is only taken so far as it allows for an intensification

of beauty and belonging in a complex but divinely intended order, for in the end "all [are] enmeshed in the same scheme".

Towards Weird Defamiliarization

Intriguingly, while the singing, dancing, harmonizing objects and entities from *The Centaur* take on a weird sublime aspect in *The Human Chord* before in due course being subsumed by God, so the forces behind the willows at a certain point appear as awesome numinous beings before Blackwood enweirds them further. In "The Willows", Blackwood writes: "They were nude, fluid shapes, passing up the bushes, *within* the leaves almost—rising up in a living column into the heavens" (32). We are also reminded that "the willows *mask* the others" (53). The centaur-shaped projections of the earth spirit are similarly veiled by vegetation: "these ancient bushes screened Activities even more ancient than themselves" (*The Centaur*). Both centaurs and willows (as I will call them for short) are fluid, bronze-coloured, ethereal and majestic hosts emanating from the landscape. But whereas the centaurs are living proof of a Fechnerian nature of which the human beholder is a joyful and inextricable part, the willows inspire a sense of alienation as well as worship. Upon beholding them, the protagonist notes how they seem to be "*not human* at all" (Blackwood, "The Willows" 32). The sense of disconnection and disjunction is persistent: "Our intrusion had stirred the powers of the place into activity. It was we who were the cause of the disturbance, and my brain filled to bursting with stories and legends of the spirits and deities of places that have been acknowledged and worshipped by men in all ages of the world's history" (32-33). The pagan framework notably falters here ("But, before I could arrive at any possible explanation, something impelled me to go farther out (…)" (33)), and the disquieting alterity of the willows is, for the moment, left uncontained.

Blackwood's strategic use of the weird sublime lends affective dimensions to "The Willows" his 'tales of awe' lack. The strangeness it infuses the environment with gives the travellers pause; they have to reorient themselves toward parts of nature they had previously taken for granted. The way in which Blackwood employs the weird sublime presents the characters, and by extension the readers, with a world made anew, which they encounter as if for the first time. "When common objects in this way become

charged with the suggestion of horror, they stimulate the imagination far more than things of unusual appearance" (44), the narrator remarks upon observing the willows shaken by the wind, and that statement carries many resonances. Whether it is Wordsworth's belief in "a revolutionary mode of imaginative perception which accomplishes nothing less than the 'creation' of a new world" (Abrams 338), Coleridge's dejection at the "inanimate cold world" and his ascription of the "power of renovating the earth to an imaginative act of creative perception"(339), or Percy Shelley's shift from a faith in real political revolution to "an inner revolution in man's moral, intellectual and imaginative economy" (343), so that "man's imaginative vision, suddenly liberated, penetrates to the inner forms, both of man and his world, which had been there all the time, beneath the veil"(344), the conviction that the world can be made new and strange again through imaginative processes has a long Romantic legacy. Cavell maintains that the task of Romantic poetry is to rekindle interest in common life (Cavell 7), arguing that "[i]t is an idea that Emerson and any Romantic would be lost without, that the world could be – or could have been – so remade, or I in it, that I could *want* it, as it would be, or I in it" (35). Blackwood, disturbed by the affect-flattening of modernity ("If that outer life were the real one how could any intelligent being think it worth while to live? How could any thinking man hold up his head and walk along the street with dignity if that was what he believed?" (*The Centaur*) turns to the aesthetic of the sublime to shock his characters (and readers) out of a too familiar rapport with their environment. Sublime estrangement effects are used to stimulate the expansion of human consciousness beyond what Henri Bergson[26] calls automatization, the thoughtlessness that results from habituation. As a result, "The Willows" breaks not only with beauty, but also with the kind of sublime that can be bathetically reintegrated into an ecstatically consoling and reinvigorating connection to nature. Instead of showing humans and nature "enmeshed in the same scheme", the willows are pointedly from "another scheme of life, another evolution not parallel to the human" ("The Willows" 50). Blackwood uses the radical alienness of the fourth-dimensional forces that lurk behind the willows to drive a wedge between the

[26] As I have noted, Blackwood shows his familiarity with Bergson in *The Centaur*. Interestingly, Shklovsky also engages with Bergson's concept of automatization in the development of his theory of estrangement or ostranenie (Robinson 81).

human subject and his environment to preserve an alterity that would otherwise be too easily subsumed by the human imagination.

The flipside of the kind of weird writing that employs sublime estrangement effects that are never resolved is that, while it manages to keep the fragile sense of awe intact throughout the story, it also never quite manages to re-establish a secure cognitive-affective link between man and nature. Instead of having enchanted the common experience, that central Romantic undertaking, "The Willows" at certain points even brushes up against a view of the world that is devoid of other life:

> The solitude of that Danube camping-place, can I ever forget it? The feeling of being utterly alone on an empty planet! My thoughts ran incessantly upon cities and the haunts of men. I would have given my soul, as the saying is, for the "feel" of those Bavarian villages we had passed through by the score; for the normal, human commonplaces; peasants drinking beer, tables beneath the trees, hot sunshine, and a ruined castle on the rocks behind the red-roofed church. Even the tourists would have been welcome. (49)

While Blackwood does not end the story on this note of pessimism, it does engage with what Cavell would call skepticism: that is to say, in passages such as these it entertains doubt regarding the existence of an external world and others (other minds) in it, and, more strongly still, doubt regarding our ability to know this world, and others in it. Ultimately, it recovers the world, but only partially, and ends up straddling an uncomfortable line between providing the ideological reassurance of the existence of "others" (the mystical forces behind the willows) and positing those others as fundamentally unknowable.

Here I believe my reading differs from Eugene Thacker's take on "The Willows" and on the weird tale in general; whereas Thacker accurately situates the story's horror in the yawning void of the mind-thing gap, it is his equation of Lovecraft and Blackwood and his revulsion of what he calls 'humanism' that gets in the way of nuance. In *Tentacles Longer Than Night* we encounter a by now familiar line of thinking:

> Cosmic horror positions itself against anthropomorphism – the world regarded in the mytho-poetic shape of the human, the personification of the world as a human world. Cosmic horror also positions itself against anthropocentrism – the world as instrumentally made for the human, the world as a world for human use and benefit. (Thacker, *Tentacles*, ch. 4)

Weird horror, to Thacker, is the horror of philosophy (ibid.), i.e. the horror of thought at the limit of thinking. One cannot help but feel there is a satisfaction he takes in it, a stubborn pleasure in theorizing this "frozen thought" (ibid.) as "black illumination", which is its own kind of enlightened 'opting out' of being human. For Thacker, weird stories go further than merely confronting us with the insignificance of our human-shaped paradigms of knowledge, they suggest that there is nothing *to* know on the outside of thinking. Thacker attempts to opt out of the human by refusing at every turn to believe that there is a world outside interested in or relevant to the human; even thought itself is colonized by the non-human, that "limit without reserve, something that one is always arriving at, but which is never circumscribed within the ambit of human thought" (ibid.). In order to address Thacker's claims, I would like to turn to the last part of the story, in which the willows attack, and 'They' manifest. The forces behind the willows are described as follows:

> It was neither a human figure nor an animal. To me it gave the strange impression of being as large as several animals grouped together, like horses, two or three, moving slowly. The Swede, too, got a similar result, though expressing it differently, for he thought it was shaped and sized like a clump of willow bushes, rounded at the top, and moving all over upon its surface—"coiling upon itself like smoke," he said afterwards. ("The Willows" 56-57)

This passage shows anything but the "state of suspended animation, of frozen thought" (Thacker, *Tentacles,* ch. 4) that Thacker characterizes as the moment the mind brushes up against its own limits. Not only do the human characters encounter *something* rather than nothing, their response is not a "freezing of all affect" (ibid.), but a doubling down on description despite its inadequacy. Thacker is on to something when he likens the prose

used during these weird sublime moments as “an apophatic language, the language of negative theology” (ibid.): these forces can indeed only be described as what they are not (human, animal, tree). What Thacker loses sight of, in my view, is that this passage shows that after the brief ‘hitch’ of skepticism, in which the human is felt to be “alone on an empty planet”, the participation drive picks right back up where it left off. After the stylistic estrangement effects turn nature from a conventional, companionable backdrop to a sublimely strange ‘other’, the imagination cannot help envisioning this other in the guise of willows and horses, even as it realises how those terms fall short of capturing it. Instead of dwelling on the “vacuity of any correlation between subject and object, between self and world” (ibid.), “The Willows” inhabits a much less ideologically certain space. Just like the protagonist experiences “a feeling that [his] consciousness was expanding, extending out into space” which “swiftly gave way to another feeling that [he] was losing it altogether, and about to die” (“The Willows” 57), the story dwells at the edge of human awareness long enough to establish the desire for relationality and see it thwarted. The affective and cognitive void between mind and thing is never bridged decisively, but neither does the participation drive “freeze” and come to a halt. I argue that it is precisely through the staging of this faltering movement across the gap that the characters are confronted with the ungainly workings of their imagination. If the unhuman is “something that one is always arriving at” (Thacker, *Tentacles*, ch. 4), then it is perhaps more accurate to say that it is the human that there is no escaping from. Instead of the “impersonal sublime, a lyricism of the unhuman that shores up the limitations of anthropocentric thinking, as well as evoking the attendant smallness of human beings against the backdrop of this deep time perspective” (Thacker, “Sublime Horror”) Thacker reads in “The Willows”, we find a sublime that is born from human impulses and is always already being assimilated, however poorly, into human terms. It is closer, then, to what Derrida calls the monstrous arrivant:

> All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous arrivant, to welcome it, that is, to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange, but also, one must add, to try to domesticate it, that is, to make it part of the household and have it assume the habits, to make us assume new habits. This is the movement of culture. (Derrida 386-7)

"The Willows" thereby becomes a reckoning with the ways in which the tireless human bid for intimacy discovers alterity as it is already in the process of domesticating it. This is reflected in the ambiguous way in which the text portrays language. The more 'attuned' the protagonist grows to the willows' influence, the more he realises he is in a place "unpolluted by men, kept clean by the wind from coarsening human influences" (Blackwood, "The Willows" 50), and that speech is one such coarsening influence: "(…) the human voice, always rather absurd amid the roar of the elements, now carried with it something almost illegitimate. It was like talking out loud in church, or in some place where it was not lawful, perhaps not quite *safe*, to be overheard" (28). As the willows, in turn, grow more aware of the human interlopers, the Swede reminds the narrator that "[t]o name is to reveal" (53) and "we're wiser not to talk about it, or even to think about it, because what one *thinks* finds expression in words, and what one *says*, happens" (54). However, speech is also liberating. When the Swede talks of his misgivings, the narrator observes: "He composed such curious sentences, and hurled them at me in such an inconsequential sort of way, as though his main line of thought was secret to himself, and these fragments were mere bits he found it impossible to digest. He got rid of them by uttering them. Speech relieved him. It was like being sick" (48). The very inability (and illegitimacy) of communication generates sublimity, but this state of selective muteness is untenable. Words are contrivances that conjure up the sacrality of the world and coarsen its sublimity, simultaneously producing and alleviating the threat of its otherness; in speaking the characters find the alienness of the other, and that alienness subsumed, all at once.

The Wendigo

Whereas “The Willows” ultimately stops short of sacrificing the travellers on the altar of nature, Blackwood’s other famous weird story, “The Wendigo” does take one of its characters across the threshold. In the former story, the Swede warns the protagonist that once the willows discover them, they will undergo a fate worse than death:

> Death, according to one’s belief, means either annihilation or release from the limitations of the senses, but it involves no change of character. You don’t suddenly alter just because the body’s gone. But this means a radical alteration, a complete change, a horrible loss of oneself by substitution—far worse than death, and not even annihilation. (“Willows” 52)

Camara remarks that the “expansion of the mind”, which in Blackwood’s fantasy tales leads to “harmony with the universe”, results in “an insanity-inducing identification of thought and being, of mind and cosmos” (138) in his horror stories. This “horrible loss of oneself by substitution” is exactly what transpires in “The Wendigo”. During the sublime experience, a character is not only brought to the upper limit of his cognitive and experiential abilities and held there teetering on the edge, but driven over it.

“The Wendigo” tells of a disastrous moose hunting expedition in the deepest parts of the Canadian backwoods. The hunting party comprises five men: Dr. Cathcart, his nephew Simpson, their respective guides Hank Davis and Joseph Défago, and their cook, a Native American named Punk. In their pursuit of the moose, which are uncommonly evasive that year, Hank suggests splitting the party and breaking new ground. The following morning, the two parties set out in different directions, while Punk looks after the base camp. Simpson has his first real experience of the vast primordial forest, and its spell begins to work on him, reminding him of his own smallness and insignificance. His companion, Défago, quickly becomes the only bastion of safety and civilisation Simpson can cling to, and the two fall into an easy friendship. It is however not long before a change comes over the guide. While singing one of his old voyageur songs, Défago becomes distracted and wary, and when prompted starts telling Simpson of a great beast called the Wendigo, which Simpson dismisses as a superstition. That night, Simpson

wakes to find Défago weeping in his sleep. Some time later, the stillness of the forest is broken by a strange voice, both soft and roaring, which calls Défago's name. In response, Défago jumps up and runs outside, crying: "Oh! Oh! My feet of fire! My burning feet of fire! Oh! Oh! This height and fiery speed!" ("Wendigo" 165). Before Simpson can react, he is swallowed by the forest. Only a faint, sweet, unidentifiable odour remains, and two sets of footprints: Défago's and those of a large animal. With mounting horror, Simpson follows the tracks, whose interval increases until the strides they suggest become impossibly large, and the prints themselves are tinged with fire. Défago's set of tracks mirrors the larger set in everything but size, until even their shape is the same. All of a sudden, every sign of the trail stops, and Simpson hears the soft wailing voice of the guide far overhead. After a mad and futile pursuit, Simpson returns back to the base camp. His uncle minimises the more fantastical elements of his account, and they set out at once to rescue Défago. Fresh snow has fallen, however, and there is no trace of the lost guide to be found. That evening, the men's conversation is sombre and quickly turns to speculation, before being interrupted by Défago's faint and anguished cry. Before long, a figure approaches the camp. It looks like Défago, but oddly deformed, and when Dr. Cathcart sees its twisted feet, it becomes clear something else has possessed the guide's distorted body. Upon discovery, the thing that is not Défago is rapidly absorbed by the woods and the sky once more, emitting its curious wail. They find the real Défago when they return to their base camp – a broken husk of a man who dies only weeks later.

Défago and the Wendigo

Blackwood typifies his mostly flat characters by emphasizing the differing levels of responsiveness each man has to the spell of the forest (a 'Great Personage' in its own right, much like the Danube in "The Willows"), and consequently his susceptibility to the affects associated with the sublime. Dr. Cathcart is a sober-minded man of science and an outspoken materialist who is inclined to dismiss the events of story as a collective hallucination. His young nephew, despite being a theology student, shares much of his uncle's even-keeled temperament, although his sense of wonder is less blunted. Despite his western dress, Punk remains wholly a racial caricature: he is taciturn, resilient, mysteriously in tune with the environment, and prone to superstition. Hank and Défago

are both “subtly in league with the soul of the woods” (152), and the latter especially is of a sensitive and troubled disposition, leaning closest to Blackwood’s depiction of Punk as a ‘noble savage’, being of “Latin type” (148) himself, and thus far removed from the equanimous frame of mind that characterises the stereotypically Scottish Dr. Cathcart and his nephew.

Défago’s relationship with the Canadian wilderness, mediated through the perspective of Simpson, is the axis around which the affective dynamics of the story revolve. One of the earliest descriptions of him paints a vivid picture of his inner life and his affinity with the woods:

> He was deeply susceptible, moreover, to that singular spell which the wilderness lays upon certain lonely natures, and he loved the wild solitudes with a kind of romantic passion that amounted almost to an obsession. The life of the backwoods fascinated him – whence, doubtless, his surpassing efficiency in dealing with their mysteries. (147)

Défago is of the “imaginative and melancholy” (148) temperament that seems to typify so many weird protagonists; he suffers “attacks” induced by “too long a spell of ‘civilization’”, which “a few days of the wilderness invariably cured” (ibid.). The backwoods, however, do not restore his mental equilibrium so much as exert their own terrible enchantment over him, of which Simpson unwittingly becomes a witness. Margaret Atwood notes that:

> The North has frequently been credited with driving strong men mad, and among Wendigo believers, who have tended to be native people, this madness may take the form of thinking you are turning into a Wendigo. For whites who go north and go crazy too, there are other forms, and names for them as well. "Cabin fever" is one; "bushed" is another. Earle Birney has a well-known lyric poem called "Bushed," in which a man who has attempted a life of solitude within nature starts feeling that a nearby mountain has come alive in unpleasant ways and is out to get him. White people and native people have been interacting in the North, and cross-pollinating one another's inner landscapes, for hundreds of years now, and

> the concepts of getting "bushed" and "going Wendigo" can overlap in interesting ways. In such hybrids the result is likely to resemble a story of the third type, and the Wendigo – or Wendigoization, to coin a term – tends to suggest a split-off element of the protagonist's psyche, which develops a life of its own and takes him over. (Atwood)

Although I have some reservations regarding the way Atwood seemingly equates the cultural-psychological realities of wendigo psychosis with white settlers "getting bushed", she identifies an interesting literary dynamic, and I believe Blackwood's "The Wendigo" (to which she gives a brief nod) is arguably the result of this imaginary cross-pollination. Blackwood borrows bits of Algonquin myth to give form to his own literary project, one which takes the participation drive to its logical extremes. Défago, sensitive and attuned to the forest as he is, possesses that human faculty that elides differences between self and world to such an extent that he is, in the end, absorbed by that world. Because of this attunement to the forest, his disappearance is eerily prefigured well before the Wendigo emerges. When he goes looking for traces of moose, "[h]is small figure melted away like a shadow in the dusk, while Simpson noted with a kind of admiration how easily the forest absorbed him into herself. A few steps, it seemed, and he was no longer visible" (155-156).

The Wendigo, when it appears, functions as an extension of the wilderness that has already taken Défago "into herself". Lest we should be in any doubt, Dr. Cathcart reminds us that "the Wendigo is simply the Call of the Wild personified, which some natures hear to their own destruction" (181). Since Cathcart is such a staunch materialist, his intellectual authority is questioned left and right, but this interpretation of the Wendigo as a simple personification of the attraction of the wilderness is never contested, although he may dismiss it as a psychopathology more easily than the other characters. Hank readily agrees with Cathcart's explanation, adding that "'the Voice, they say, resembles all the minor sounds of the Bush—wind, falling water, cries of the animals, and so forth'" (ibid.). The odour that heralds the Wendigo's arrival and lingers after it is gone reinforces this metaphor, for unnameable though it is said to be, Simpson eventually comes to describe it as "[a]crid rather, not unlike the odour of a lion (…), yet softer and not wholly unpleasing, with something almost sweet in it that reminded him of

the scent of decaying garden leaves, earth, and the myriad, nameless perfumes that make up the odour of a big forest" (167). The Wendigo's scent and its voice both are an amalgamation of (respectively) the subtle smells and sounds that make up the forest.

Jonathan Newell extensively discusses the Wendigo's odour in his analysis of the story, investing it with the power to "[plumb] the depths of abjection" (Newell 119), and in doing so bring to our attention the "presence of an undifferentiated non-human world into which human beings are subsumed" (112). I am inclined to agree that smell plays an interesting role in the text: Newell convincingly argues that by emphasising the indeterminacy of the Wendigo's odour and evoking the primal level on which we register scent, Blackwood attempts to evade the closure linguistic circumscription could offer. However, this evasion is never completely successful. The description of the haunting odour of the Wendigo is reminiscent of the appearance of the 'others' as rippling horse- and willow-shaped smoke phantoms in "The Willows" – although the scent was "unlike any smell he knew" ("Wendigo" 167) and "gone before he could properly seize or name it" (ibid), Simpson does come to an approximate description of the phenomenon: "'the 'odour of lions' is the phrase with which he usually sums it all up" (ibid.). I am consequently not convinced of Newell's claim that the scent "beckons human beings back to pre-semiotic unity with Nature" (Newell 119). The weird sublime quality of the scent is, after all, itself a product of language, its untranslated residue the result of textual effects. Simpson is never "subsumed" into "an undifferentiated non-human world"; the text never plunges into abjection, indeed very little time is wasted in bringing the alterity of the experience back within somewhat understandable parameters, even if those parameters are flagged as inadequate. What is interesting about "The Wendigo" is not that it somehow opens up windows into unmediated non-human reality, but that it manages to weirdly amplify its initially deceptively simple metaphor. The Wendigo thereby comes to stand for the fraught and complicated ways human desire is projected onto nature.

Desire is always present just below the surface of the text. Upon the Wendigo's emergence, the change that comes over the guide is like the "strange fever of the wilderness" that possesses men "when the seduction of the uninhabited wastes [catches] them so fiercely that they [go] forth, half fascinated, half deluded, to their death" (157). An insidious eroticism creeps into Blackwood's description of Défago slowly succumbing

to the same spell – we are witnessing the slow and tantalizing seduction of a man already spiritually compromised; ambient exposure has eroded his defenses over time. The sublime suggestive power of this image entrances Simon: "The passion and mystery of homeless and wandering men, seduced by the beauty of great forests, swept his soul in a way too vivid to be quite pleasant" (158). When the Wendigo calls Défago with its "soft, roaring voice", "hoarse yet plaintive" (165) "of immense volume, while in some strange way most penetratingly and seductively sweet" (ibid.), the guide loses the last grip he had on his senses and sanity, and runs out of the tent, crying in "in tones of anguished terror that at the same time held something strangely like the frenzied exultation of delight" (166). As S.T. Joshi notes: "It appears difficult to deny that Blackwood, like Poe and Lovecraft, was largely asexual, sublimating any such tendencies into his work and his Nature-mysticism" ("Introduction" xiv). From the tracks in the snow Simpson pieces together that Défago's rapture ended in a harrowing orgasmic unity with the thing calling him. Both the wendigo's emergence at the camp afterwards, looking like a horribly shrunk, stretched-out and deformed version of Défago "as though he had been subjected to extraordinary pressures and tensions" (185) as well as Défago's own reappearance later on, suggest that, as Camara puts it, "whatever was left of the poor wilderness guide's self was smeared across the cosmos in his hellish trip and did not make it back to earth with his body" (Camara 139). The grotesque horror of these passages magnify rather than undermine the undercurrent of desire running through the tale, suggesting that what drives the text is not an insatiable pursuit to consume, like wendigo psychosis, but an insatiable desire to be consumed[27].

The wilderness myth

The forests of Northwestern Ontario are the main canvas onto which this desire is transferred. Simpson's inexperience in "wood-craft and bush-lore" (147) lends an alienness to the environment, and as he looks upon the forest,

[27] I am grateful to Bridgette Tuckfield for her insightful comments on the tale.

> (…) the huge scale of things somewhat bewildered him. It was one thing, he realized, to hear about primeval forests, but quite another to see them. While to dwell in them and seek acquaintance with their wild life was, again, an initiation that no intelligent man could undergo without a certain shifting of personal values hitherto held for permanent and sacred. (154)

The forests elicit the complicated affective response associated with the weird sublime; initially they create "an effect of delight and awe that [Simpson's] imagination was fully capable of appreciating" (ibid.), but gradually their "bleak splendours" start "overwhelm[ing] him with the sense of his own littleness" (ibid.). Despite facilitating the kind of cognitive-affective shift Blackwood prizes – the expansion of consciousness that makes one attuned to the panpsychic unity of life – Blackwood repeatedly emphasizes the remoteness and loneliness of the forest. It is "untrodden by foot of man" (153) and characterised by its "indifference to human life, the merciless spirit of desolation which took no note of man" (157). As we have seen in "The Willows", the aesthetic estrangement effects that the sublime provides can be used to deepen affect; characters' rote response to the environment is disrupted by the defamiliarizing irruption of the weird, an irruption already foreshadowed by the disquieting aspect the environment takes on. So, while Simpson takes "pleasure in the sensation" (ibid.) of being alone in the middle of forests that seem to stretch out immeasurably in every direction, it is shot through with a "perfectly comprehensible alarm" (ibid.). When he voices this alarm to Défago, the guide confirms his fear that "[t]here's no end to 'em – no end at all'", and "'[t]here's lots found out *that*, and gone plumb to pieces!'" (ibid.). Madness is always already lurking around the corner. Northrop Frye lyricises the particular Canadian imaginary as an excess of landscape that resits mental metabolization:

> (…) a large tract of vacant land may well affect the people living near it as too much cake does a small boy: an unknown but quite possibly horrible Something stares at them in the dark: hide under the bedclothes as long as they will, sooner or later they must stare back. Explorers, tormented by a sense of the unreality of the unseen, are first: pioneers and traders follow. But the land is still not imaginatively absorbed, and the incubus moves on to haunt the artist. (Frye 201)

The wilderness, according to Frye, unsettles because of "the imaginative instability, the emotional unrest and dissatisfaction one feels about a country which has not been lived in: the tension between the mind and a surrounding not integrated with it" (202). It is easy to see how "the virgin heart of uninhabited regions as vast as Europe itself" ("Wendigo" 154) would form an ideal stage for Blackwood, who is interested precisely in this imaginative instability as one of the possibility conditions for the kind of weird mystical experience the tale supplies. After all, if nature is too prosaically present to truly harbour our spiritual needs, reframing it as "too big to feel quite at home in" (ibid.) wrenches it free from the deadening confines of convention. It is the scale and emptiness of the pristine wilderness that guarantees the world's mystical surplus, its soul.

Considering Blackwood's high stakes investment in nature at its most primeval, it is easy to see why Newell reads the story as an "attack on anthropocentrism" (Newell, 100). As we have seen, the story goes to great lengths to erase the human from the face of nature to ensure sublime estrangement. The Wendigo, too, works as a vehicle for Blackwood's vision of a world untouched by human civilisation. Simpson's reflection on his experience in the Canadian backwoods later in life is instructive:

> Out there, in the heart of unreclaimed wilderness, they had surely witnessed something crudely and essentially primitive. Something that had survived somehow the advance of humanity had emerged terrifically, betraying a scale of life still monstrous and immature. He envisaged it rather as a glimpse into prehistoric ages, when superstitions, gigantic and uncouth, still oppressed the hearts of men; when the forces of nature were still untamed, the Powers that may have haunted a primeval universe not yet withdrawn. To this day he thinks of what he termed years later in a sermon "savage and formidable Potencies lurking behind the souls of men, not evil perhaps in themselves, yet instinctively hostile to humanity as it exists. (189)

Here it becomes clear that Blackwood's interest in the non-human is fundamentally incommensurate with Newell's, or with that of other philosophers or literary theorists who map speculative realism onto weird fiction. Newell, whose approach focusses on the

aesthetic of disgust (hence his interest in the Wendigo's odour), argues that this disgust, which for him is the affective engine of all weird fiction, "emanates from a specific source – the non-human world, what philosophers have called the world-in-itself" (Newell 5). In other words, according to Newell, the real world, unfettered by human thought or language, breaks through the text in certain places, producing feelings of revulsion. In "The Wendigo", more specifically, this is revulsion "destabilises the binary logic of such dichotomies [such as human and animal, nature and civilisation, human and non-human], revealing their fragility and ultimate fictiveness" (Newell 112). This statement is problematic on several levels. Firstly, as I have tried to show, the weird irruptions in stories like "The Wendigo" are not glimmers of the 'world-in-itself' (as opposed to the 'world-for-us'), but textual effects produced by defamiliarisation techniques. The 'non-human' is one such an effect. Weird texts are attempts to stage the Real by puncturing narrative and not allowing it to fully reform as a protective layer so the traumatic breakdown of language is in full view. The gaps these texts leave in language provide us with no knowledge or experience of the world outside of human ken. They are, rather, attempts at reverse-engineering a mystical experience. Secondly, the story's relapse into mythology is clear from the above fragment. Blackwood does not want to leave humanity stranded on the far shores of the Real, his interest lies in producing a blip in conventional perception which allows him to resuscitate the "primeval universe not yet withdrawn". In fact, I believe that this passage shows that "The Wendigo" might be read productively alongside "The World Is Too Much With Us". Only by first denying the characters and the reader conventional ways of relating to the world does Blackwood get to bring back "superstitions, gigantic and uncouth", the occult world as experienced through the mystical participation drive. The presence of "savage and formidable Potencies lurking behind the souls of men" are the powers of the imagination Wordsworth claims we have laid waste to. They are not, as Newell claims, "powers inimical to human civilisation and the idea of 'the human' itself" (Newell 120); they are "instinctively hostile to humanity as it *exists*" (emphasis mine), that is to say, they are hostile to humanity's common

consciousness[28]. What “The Wendigo” shows is the literary process by which Blackwood seeks to make the world more, not less, ‘for us’.

Human erasure

A third objection I have to a reading of “The Wendigo” as somehow concerned with a world stripped of its human presence and human signifiers, is that it perpetuates the unexamined colonialism at the heart of the text. Northwestern Ontario was, of course, not empty, which makes Blackwood’s emphasis on its unhuman aspect disquieting for a wholly different reason. Upon even a superficial reading, there is a definite Native presence in the text, conflicting awkwardly with Blackwood’s assertions of a pristine nature. Most evidently there is Punk, the cook, of whom we are told that “except for his coarse black hair and dark skin, he looked in these city garments no more like a real redskin than a stage Negro looks like a real African. For all that, however, Punk had in him still the instincts of his dying race; his taciturn silence and his endurance survived; also his superstition” (148). While Newell admits that “Blackwood’s racialized language can appear dated and problematic to modern readers” (Newell 113), and the character of Punk appears to be a “[re-inscription of] the problematic racial archetype of the noble savage” (118), he still remains convinced that Blackwood “critique[s] anthropocentric, colonial attitudes towards Nature – and, indeed, Eurocentric attitudes towards indigenous people” (113). I would here like to argue the opposite, namely, that Blackwood’s pursuit of a weird poetics is predicated on an erasure of Native civilizations and Native humanity.

While it could be argued, based on his dress, that Punk does not live in the area in which they are hunting, Dr. Cathcart’s laughing question "Bad Indians up that way?" (150) when he first notices Défago is afraid suggests an awareness that other Native Americans still do, and that conflicts between white settlers and European tourists on the one hand and Native people on the other are not unheard of. But even besides the actual mention

[28] In *Episodes Before Thirty*, Blackwood reiterates: “That unity of life is true, and that our normal human consciousness is but one type, and a somewhat insignificant type at that, hold unalterably real for me to-day” (219).

of Native Americans in text, Native presence is inscribed in the very landscape Blackwood depicts as devoid of human interference. Garden Lake, where Cathcart and Hank travel to, is named for the gardens of the Ojibwe[29]. The canoe Défago and Simpson use is described as a "craft of birch bark" (154), which the Algonquian people traditionally developed to navigate the rivers (Marsh). Blackwood recognizes in it "another symbol of man's ascendancy" (157), but does not seem to acknowledge that its existence implies a long history of Native people's relationship to their environment. Finally, there is the *brulé*, the area of burnt forest Défago and Simpson encounter, and alongside which they make camp. Blackwood describes it as follows:

> Yet there was little underbrush hereabouts; the trees stood somewhat apart, well spaced; and in the clearings grew silver birch and maple, spear-like and slender, against the immense stems of spruce and hemlock. But for occasional prostrate monsters, and the boulders of grey rock that thrust uncouth shoulders here and there out of the ground, it might well have been a bit of park in the Old Country. Almost, one might have seen in it the hand of man. A little to the right, however, began the great burnt section, miles in extent, proclaiming its real character—*brulé*, as it is called, where the fires of the previous year had raged for weeks, and the blackened stumps now rose gaunt and ugly, bereft of branches, like gigantic match heads stuck into the ground, savage and desolate beyond words. The perfume of charcoal and rain-soaked ashes still hung faintly about it. (156)

How this *brulé* came to be is not explained. It is possible lightning could have caused a forest fire in this particular area, and Blackwood's description of the scale and intensity of the fires seems to suggest a natural disaster. I am interested here, however, in Blackwood's characterization of the landscape as a whole, which implies the fires may have had a different origin. The pleasant bit of forest in the first section is remarkable for having well-spaced trees and little underbrush, reminiscent of an English park. The narrator almost sees "the hand of man" in this arrangement, before dismissing it as impossible, for the "real character" of this area is that it is part of the *brulé*, a desolate

[29] For a study on the long-lasting impact of Native American forest gardens on biodiversity in American and Canadian ecosystems, see Armstrong et al.

wasteland. This interpretation we are given by the narrator ignores that burning parts of the forest was, in fact, a common practice in many Native American cultures, who (still) see it as an integral part of maintaining the environment. “Both agricultural and hunting and gathering cultures used controlled fires to alter the environment for their benefit. Fire returned valuable nutrients to the soil, cleared underbrush to facilitate movement, and removed vermin and disease from the surrounding area” (Lewis 19). They would, then, create the kind of pleasant features, the lack of underbrush, and easy passage between trees that the narrator describes in the first part of the fragment. Recent studies show that the Ojibwe people who live in the area of Northwestern Ontario have a rich tradition of maintaining natural areas in this way, and have a very different understanding of the way fire benefits the land and various plant and animal species. Miller and Davidson-Hunt note how:

> Even before forest fires are completely extinguished animals begin to reoccupy areas that have been burned. Moose and rabbits appear in burnt areas while smoke is still rising to eat smoked leaves and char bark because ‘they like the taste’. Many burned areas become preferred hunting spots for moose in the years immediately following the burn. (409)

Considering the trouble the hunters have in finding the “uncommonly shy” (“Wendigo” 147) moose that year, the knowledge that recently burnt areas can become prime hunting grounds supports a reading of the *brulé* not as a horrific site of non-human wilderness but of indigenous anthropogenic land management. Défago may have even sought out the *brulé* for this reason.

But even if this particular *brulé* is not man-made, the stark opposition in the description of the landscape between what “almost” suggests “the hand of man” and the bleak and apparently non-human wasteland is at odds with the way Native people view their land:

> It is the perception of Pikangikum residents that landscape patterns are created through the intentional actions of beings, such as thunderbirds, whom western managers do not recognize. These landscape mosaics are viewed as ordered

> places, intentionally created by the thunderbirds so human beings and other members of the land community can successfully make a living. They are not neutral spaces bereft of human values and meanings that surround more meaningful places which humans manage and travel through. There is no such neutral place within the Pikangikum landscape. (Miller and Davidson-Hunt 411-412)

The Pikangikum do not share the conceptual framework of human versus non-human nature; for them "human values and meanings" permeate the landscape as a whole. The aesthetics of the picturesque (the English park) and the sublime (the wasteland) that Blackwood projects on the environment would simply make no sense to the people who live there and whose own mythology is so tightly interwoven with the land, all the more so because it takes their absence as a fundamental premise. By perpetuating the image of the Canadian forests as blank slates to be inscribed by the European imagination, Blackwood evidently continues a long colonialist legacy:

> One of the most enduring myths of American history is the European discovery of a virgin wilderness – an unpeopled land of pure nature. Of course, there were people in the Americas, but in a subsidiary to this myth, Americans have idealized the 'noble savage,' the Native American who walks gently through the woods of an untouched wilderness, careful not to alter the natural environment in any way lest he or she disturb nature. In deemphasizing the impact of Native Americans on their environment, the noble savage myth ultimately denied their humanity. Supporters of the noble savage myth have drawn sharp distinction between the animistic world view of Native Americans and a detached materialistic European perspective that viewed nature as either a commodity or an obstacle. (Lewis 17)

In making the Wendigo and its odour into "a manifestation of the immanence of Nature, an immanence that undermines anthropocentric and colonial metanarratives that seek to subordinate Nature to human control" (Newell 111-112) Newell misunderstands or undervalues the specific Romantic tenor 'Nature' has in Blackwood's work, and in doing so fails to interrogate the colonialist imaginary on which "The Wendigo" in particular

relies. The “pre-semiotic unity” (Newell 119) Nature supposedly beckons humans into ties in well with the larger framework of speculative realism from which Newell draws, but in his haste to escape the correlationist circle, he disregards the fact that nature in Blackwood is already subsumed in mythology and inextricably tied up with a colonialist ideology. “The Wendigo” uses the charged imagery of the Canadian wilderness and drives the atmospheric elements associated with it (madness, emptiness, imaginative indigestibility) to the fever pitch of the weird in order to stage an elaborate fantasy about being consumed by landscape. Here we find then, after all, not “something altogether more cosmic and unfathomable than a cheaply appropriated indigenous phantom” (Newell 113), but an indigenous myth altered to do the kind of imaginative work a white author needs it to do: to fill the spiritual hole modernity left in the European psyche.

The Man Whom the Trees Loved

"The Man Whom the Trees Loved" is the opening story of *Pan's Garden*, a 1912 collection of short stories "exploring his belief that there is a relationship between human beings and Nature" (Ashley 168), something which might be said of a great deal of Blackwood's work, but which in this collection became a self-conscious theme. Joshi considers it one of Blackwood's "most exquisitely modulated tales of the awe and wonder of Nature" in which "fear has no place" ("The Man" 366). Although awe certainly overshadows horror in this story, Blackwood's 'modulation' of focalisation and tone manages to convey a mix of positive and negative affects. Even more purposely than "The Willows" and "The Wendigo", this story explores the quasi-erotic intimacy between poet and nature, and the sublime translation of man into landscape.

"The Man Whom the Trees Loved" tells the story of David Bittacy and his wife Sophia, an older couple who live on the very edge of the New Forest in the South of England. Their quiet life is disturbed by Mr. Bittacy's friendship with Mr. Sanderson, an artist who only paints trees. Mr. Bittacy, who spent most of his life in India, professionally managing its forests and jungles, harbours a secret strong love for trees, and commissions Sanderson to paint the portrait of the old cedar which stands between their house and the forest. Sanderson's ability to capture the friendly personality of the cedar leads the two to ponder on the aliveness and individuality of trees, to the disquietude of Mrs. Bittacy, who dreads a return of her husband's Indian fevers. Her instinctive dread of the artist's influence on her husband is vindicated when during their conversation something starts emanating from the forest, moving in wide spiralling movements towards the house, before encountering the barrier of the old cedar and returning to the woods. She insists to her husband that the artist should leave, but it is to no avail: the men's speculation has awoken something in the forest. The barrier between Mr. Bittacy's inner life and the massive life force of the forest has been breached, and the remainder of the story details the slow surrender of his soul to the trees. Mrs. Bittacy, a profoundly religious woman unwilling to entertain the very idea of plant souls and suspecting the workings of evil spirits, eventually follows her husband into the woods. There she comes face to face with the overpowering alien presence of the trees, and is forced to acknowledge that her husband's life and wellness are inseparably entwined with it. The

realisation breaks her spirit, and she wastes away as Mr. Bittacy is gradually consumed by the forest.

Gulf

The New Forest possesses a kind of life, or soul, or consciousness (terms which, significantly, Blackwood uses as equivalents) that can be communed with once the Kantian divide is bridged. This divide and the bridging thereof is, of course, what generates the weird sublime. Mr. Bittacy tries to soothe his wife's worries by saying that "between us and—and all that sort of thing—there is a great gulf fixed, a gulf that cannot be crossed—er—while we are still in the body" (236). Jonathan Newell credits the story with proving this gulf to be false: "Blackwood's weird fiction, far from emphasizing the gulfs between humanity and other species, insists on their essential ontic illusoriness" (Newell 122). Eugene Thacker similarly notes that "Seamlessly crossing nature outside and nature inside, waking and dreaming, the animate and inanimate, the eerie forest trees in Blackwood's story literally envelop the characters in an intimate, lulling terror, a 'horrible enchantment' that pulls the human characters further and further away from the human" (Thacker, *Tentacles*, ch. 4). Both Newell and Thacker see in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" the literary expression of their own philosophies, somewhat conflicting though they are. Thacker builds on Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and twists it into *Naturhorror*, the idea that humans are a part of nature folding back on itself to become something like nature thinking the human: "For if the nature that I am thinking about is also in me and coursing through me, then it follows that I am in some way identical with nature, and that nature 'thinks' me just as I think nature." (ibid.). For Thacker, this conception of subjecthood opens up a horrific void populated by non-human forces behind the screen of the ego. If we follow his line of thought, Mr. Bittacy's gradual possession is nothing more than those forces dramatically stepping into view. Newell, on the other hand, comes to a much more pleasant reading of the lack of division between human and non-human in the story, using Bennett's vibrant materialism to argue that "Blackwood conjures a vision of a world untamed, Nature cutting across artificial human hierarchies and supplanting a world of appearances with one of multiplicity and transformation. Primal unity with Nature in all its wondrous, non-human totality is

restored within the pages of his weird stories (…)" (128). Used this way, vibrant materialism becomes a way to perform animism through theory, and Newell comes close to a realization about just how Blackwood manages to restore "non-human totality (…) within the pages of his weird stories", but never follows his arguments to their logical conclusion. Thacker, to the contrary, mired in the nihilism of his *black illumination*, has nothing to say about the specific way Blackwood's text accomplishes the impression of nature thinking the human.

How, then, does Blackwood cross the gulf? Newell opines that: "It is difficult ontological truisms about the human and the non-human that Blackwood's weird fiction brings into focus by means of aesthetic cognition, a cognition intertwined with disgust and an ecocentric inversion of sublimity" (123). Ontological truisms aside, Newell correctly identifies aesthetics as the means by which the text achieves the effect of communion with forces beyond the human. By "ecocentric inversion of sublimity" he means something like the exaltation of nature over the human (the inverse of the Kantian sublime) and the immersion and undifferentiation of the human in a horizontal ontology – subsumed by the non-human soup, as it were. I find Newell's insistence on the pre-eminence of disgust unconvincing, but he does hint at an important process in the text whereby aesthetics generate affect which is then passed back and forth between characters. The sublime, I argue, is the aesthetic the story relies on – more so than disgust – to effectuate human characters' affective response to nature, magico-poetically charging it to feel full of numinous significance. In the remainder of this chapter I will show how Blackwood consistently relies on this aesthetic, and how the crossing of the gulf offers no release into the non-human.

Darkening

The woods that the Bittacys' house borders on stand for nature at its most awe-inspiring. The colonialist sublime of "The Wendigo" lingers in descriptions the New Forest as a piece of the British overseas territories transposed back into England. The Bittacys live where they do because they remind Mr. Bittacy of India: "in the little island there is nothing that suggests the woods of wilder countries so nearly as the New Forest. It has the genuine air and mystery, the depth and splendour, the loneliness, and here and there the strong,

untamable quality of old-time forests as Bittacy of the Department knew them" (247). Before his mystical awakening, Bittacy himself wonders about this: "'Queer," he reflected, "awfully queer, that trees should bring me such a sense of dim, vast living! I used to feel it particularly, I remember, in India; in Canadian woods as well; but never in little English woods till here" (215). This "sense of dim, vast living" that can be felt by those queerly, weirdly, attuned to beauty as Sanderson is (212), is translated into various guises; as is the case with the Wendigo and the 'others' in "The Willows", we are told that there is a definite 'something' that is both manifested and obscured by the trees. Whether this is God remains ambivalent, and a point of contention between Mr. and Mrs. Bittacy. Early on, Sanderson claims that " '(…) there *is* 'God' in the trees, God in a very subtle aspect and sometimes – I have known the trees to express it too – that which is *not* God – dark and terrible'" (225). That 'God' is not Mrs. Bittacy's evangelical God is clear, but it is also not incommensurate with the Christian belief of God suffusing creation. When she asks her husband at one point: "'You are not alone, dear in the trees out there?' (…) 'God is with you?'", Mr. Bittacy confirms her hope: 'Magnificently,' was the immediate answer, given with enthusiasm, 'for He is everywhere (…)'" (265). Mrs. Bittacy's pearl-clutching is no doubt inspired by Blackwood's own religious upbringing – his own nature worship was anathema to his father (Ashley 31) – but it also echoes an old Romantic tension between paganism and Christian faith. That the development of the poetic faculty of the imagination led to pantheistic impulses was something Romantic poets struggled with. The misgivings of Mrs. Bittacy regarding her husband's repressed instinct for beauty resonate with those of Coleridge's wife Sara Fricker in "The Eolian Harp". The poet gently yields : "Well hast thou said and holily dispraised/ These shapings of the unregenerate mind" (lines 54-55). Mr. Bittacy likewise tries to soothe his wife: "'It's only beautiful to hold that He created nothing dead. We are not pantheists for all that!'" (229).

Rather than giving definite answers on what exactly permeates the trees, the story's speculations range from the scientific to the religious. Mr. Bittacy reads an address by Francis Darwin before the Royal Society[30] in which he conjectures that "in plants there exists a faint copy of *what we know as consciousness in ourselves*" (218). Sanderson, too,

[30] This address, S.T. Joshi reminds us in an annotation, is entirely fictional and never took place, although Francis Darwin did maintain in *The Power of Movement in Plants* "that a plant's radicle is analogous in function with the brain of the lower animals" ("The Man" 367).

turns to pseudoscience, 'darkening matter', to borrow a concept from Camara[31], when he muses how

> The falling apart of rotten wood breeds sentiency; there's force and motion in the falling of a dying leaf, in the breaking up and crumbling of everything indeed. And take an inert stone: it is crammed with heat and weight and potencies of all sorts. What hold its particles together indeed? We understand it as little as gravity or why a needle always turns to the 'North.' Both things may be a mode of life… (229)

This 'darkening' is the "injecting" of matter "with incomprehensible, vitalistic energies; hidden, metaphysical realities; and higher alien dimensions" (Camara 5), something Camara correctly defines as a central weird strategy. I differ from Camara's interpretation in that I believe that in Blackwood, these speculations do not serve in the first place to "dramatize the ontological and metaphysical problems that accrue to matter" (9), that is, to imaginatively contend with any real problem of the sciences straining the limit of human understanding. Camara posits that:

> Blackwood's philosophy unabashedly incorporates both realist and so-called mystical elements, (…) this seeming paradox arises from how he views nature, which does not contain incomprehensible alien forces (as in the mode of a "natural-supernatural" dialectical synthesis) so much as it is dynamically constituted by the un-grounding operations of such forces. (113)

By casting the mystical influences in Blackwood's oeuvre as evidence of his pervasive belief in a nature that is inherently weird, Camara tries to reconcile Blackwood's existentially consoling Fechnerian philosophy with his more horrific stories. The understandable difficulty he has in saying something coherent about the underlying metaphysics in Blackwood's tales culminates in his declaration that: "While Blackwood

[31] It is worth noting that in his dissertation, Camara only provides an in-depth analysis of "The Willows" and a cursory reading of the end of "The Wendigo" beside a more general discussion of Blackwood; I engage with him in this chapter because his concept of 'darkening matter' is relevant to my own reading here.

might have believed that all in the universe was lawful and of a whole, his short stories of outdoor horror strike me as spaces wherein Blackwood explores horrific conceptions of nature that can run counter to his beliefs as he expressed them (…)." (137). Despite remarking upon this tension, he does not explore this much further. Camara is interested in the philosophical and scientific speculations that weird fiction raises in its engagement with contemporary theories on the nature of matter and the provenance of life; the mystical elements in Blackwood's stories are consequently somewhat uneasily explained as anxiety at the "epistemological and ontological problems" concerning "the nature of the universe and our place in it" (112). Despite finding a lot of merit in Camara's teasing out of various philosophical and scientific lines of thought in the writers of the old weird, I would posit that Blackwood's darkening of matter is not the result of cosmic anxiety. This "un-grounded reading of nature and the cosmos" (137) in Blackwood's work underplays the author's aesthetic project. Instead of treating his oeuvre as "lucidly respond[ing] to a definite set of historical and scientific coordinates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" (with bewilderment and horror), I argue that Blackwood employs (pseudo)scientific discourses to further his own end: the literary ensoulment of nature. In making up bogus speeches by the "son of the great Darwin" ("The Man" 218) and ascribing mysterious physical attributes to stones and wood and gravity, Blackwood 'darkens' the natural world, creating new spiritual intensities that revitalize the outworn faith of Mrs. Bittacy, which can no longer offer the kind of ecstatic response he is trying to achieve.

Translation

But these hints at the forest's similarities with the "wilder" colonies of the empire, at the immanence of God or at the enigmatic life-generating properties of decaying matter are only some of the sublime strategies Blackwood uses to make the New Forest thrum with conscious life. "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" is most centrally, I would argue, a meditation on the role of art and poetry in bringing out nature's inner life. The artist Sanderson fills a niche common to many Blackwood stories: he initiates the protagonist into the deeper reality beyond the gulf. Sanderson, we are told in the very first sentence, "painted trees as by some special divining instinct of their essential qualities" (211),

vividly bringing out each "Tree Personality" (ibid.). This special ability is enough grounds for Newell to make the claim that: "Sanderson's simultaneous role as both artist and ontologist affirms a connection between aesthetic experience and the essence of things, the interpenetration of human and non-human existence" (125). The statement that Sanderson is an ontologist is somewhat baffling considering some of his opinions on trees – even if we disregard his opinions on God, and dark and terrible things that are not God, inhabiting nature. For what Sanderson does, ultimately, is anthropomorphising trees. Trees, especially old ones, have, according to the artist "very definite personalities. You can offend, wound, please them; the moment you stand within their shade you feel whether they come out to you, or whether they withdraw'" (224). No "difficult ontological truisms about the human and the non-human" (Newell 123) are being brought into focus here; if anything, Newell has himself fallen under one of Blackwood's "horrible enchantments" (as he titles his chapter). Blackwood is able to weave these enchantments through, as we have seen, pseudoscience and metaphysical speculation alike, appealing to colonialist imaginaries as well as human religious instinct. Like Sanderson, who has a way "of making a tree look almost like a being – alive" ("The Man" 211), Blackwood uses these conduits of affect to achieve the same effect in his story. (Late) Romantic influences slip into the tale through the evocation of Holman Hunt and Rossetti (223), as Sanderson and Bittacy talk about how painting by moonlight exposes "the naked being of the thing" (ibid.) that one is trying to capture. Finally, Sanderson quotes a section of William Ernest Henley's "Not to the Staring Day", which imagines the transformation of a forest by the night. The trees, previously said to be "God's sentinels" now "tremble and are changed", the night bringing out a different aspect in them. Tellingly, the quoted section ends on the ominous line "They brood – they menace – they appal", cutting off before the ending stanzas in Henley's poem in which God walks through the forest as a craftsman through his workshop. Passages such as these invite reflection on how Blackwood uses framing devices to achieve the effect of "dim, vast living"[32] which so much of his fiction relies on. Citing poetry and carefully cutting out before the recovery of God is, like his darkening of matter, one of the strategies Sanderson uses to induct Bittacy fully into his nature mysticism. Metamorphosed through

[32] This phrase also seems to be adapted from Henley's poem, cf. "dim life" (line 42).

metaphor, trees assume a soul, a bit of God darkened until it is able to catalyse the kind of mystico-religious alteration of consciousness Blackwood requires.

It follows, then, that it is Sanderson the artist who bridges the gulf – not through any ontologizing, but through the weaving of a spell. Mrs. Bittacy, distressed though she is by the suspicion that what he is saying trivializes her God, nevertheless cannot deny the effect his words have on her: "Whatever the actual meaning of his language might be, however, and whatever subtle dangers lay concealed behind them meanwhile, they certainly wove a kind of gentle spell with the glimmering darkness that held all three delicately enmeshed there by that open window" (230). Hovering on the edge of revelation, with the open window presaging the forest's attempted invasion into the everyday domestic sphere, the three of them become aware that "the talk had somehow brought the whole vegetable kingdom nearer to that of man. Some link had been established between the two. It was not wise, with that great Forest listening at their very doors, to speak so plainly. The Forest edged up closer while they did so" (225). When Mrs. Bittacy triumphantly contends that the Bible says that God breathed into men, but trees do not breathe, Sanderson muses that they do, and a whole range of other things besides. But the "*breath* of life" (229) can here be understood more broadly, for it is speech – Sandersons' speech – that endows the trees with their particular life. When Mrs. Bittacy sees the forest's psyche coalescing into a visible presence and moving towards the house, she knows who to blame: "'I knew it… if you went on. I knew it. (...) Your talking has brought it out!'" (232). Sanderson agrees: "'It came because we talked of it; our thinking made it aware of us and brought it out" (233). Later, Mrs. Bittacy reflects on this pivotal moment, she sees how "[t]here *was* a gulf fixed between the two [humans and trees], and Mr. Sanderson *had* bridged it, by his talk, his explanations, his attitude of mind. Through these her husband had found the way into it" (265). Sanderson's words cast strange shadows through which things "tremble and are changed". They reveal a more alien aspect to the trees, but this is again the kind of defamiliarization that, in the end, produces a stronger sense of kinship. Shocked out of conventional ways of regarding nature, the human characters respond to trees as they would to fellow humans. Once nature is sufficiently darkened, Sanderson argues that humans have an emotional response to it because it exhibits the same hidden life as they do:

> "The moods," he continued, "that people waken in us are due to their hidden life affecting our own. Deep calls to deep. A person, for instance, joins you in an empty room: you both instantly change. The new arrival, though in silence, has caused a change of mood. May not the moods of Nature touch and stir us in virtue of a similar prerogative?" (230)

Mystifying his audience with false syllogisms, Sanderson induces them to recognise the fundamental psychic similarity between humans and the rest of nature: "Well … whence come these powers? Surely from nothing that is … dead!" (231). The fact that Sanderson takes our emotional responses to nature as proof of nature's aliveness and fundamental affective connection to humankind is patently anthropocentric, and hard to reconcile with the kind of "non-human totality" (Newell 128) Newell and Thacker each read into the story in their own way.

It is worth exploring further how speech, especially poetic speech, is able to bridge the gulf between human and plant life in the story. Although this bridging is only brought about by literary devices and offers no encounter with the non-human beyond that, it is revealing to trace how the workings of human desire bring about this transformational merging. It is in "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" that we find the Tennyson poem to which Machen referred to Vincent Starrett (cf. supra). Mrs. Bittacy finds her husband sitting up on their bed reciting the poem fragment in the middle of the night, struck by the loneliness the cedar must feel "when all her Eastern brothers call to her in sleep" (232). This passage illustrates how, in Blackwood's story, nature is charged poetically, before this poeticality is in turn literalized into the kind of animism Machen disparaged as "damn nonsense". In a review in 1912, twelve years before his comment to Starrett, Machen wrote a more extensive commentary on Blackwood's use of the Tennyson poem, observing that "what was a poetic fancy to the lover in "Maud" is a logical and scientific statement to Mr. Bittacy" ("Among My Books" 6) – a fact perhaps all the more remarkable given the mental instability of Tennyson's narrator. This is what Machen perceived to be Blackwood's fatal flaw – a flaw which according to him marred all the stories in *Pan's Garden*: "Again and again a beautiful and poetical fancy, a theme—or rather an emotion—apt for the making of exquisite literature is degraded to this pseudo-scientific, sham-logical level, losing all or almost all of its charm in the process" (ibid.).

Machen regularly took a shot at the scientizing of myth and poetry[33], but I believe more is at play here than Machen's usual fulminations against materialism, all the more because of the way Blackwood infuses science with the marvellous – it is very hard indeed to read Blackwood as anything like a materialist. Instead, I argue that there is a certain uneasiness Machen may have felt, due to being so closely associated with Blackwood, regarding the latter's nature worship. Machen, who had such an uncomfortable understanding of his own poetic complicity in the sublimation of the world must have found Blackwood's seemingly naïve animistic faith rather baffling. When he writes: "I don't think that haunting and secret and mystic charm of the county is to be rendered or translated or made manifest by the invention of these dendro-morphic deities" (ibid.), it is hard not to read it in the light of his own self-professedly 'failed' experiment with "The Great God Pan".

Similarly, rather than seeing the difference between Mr. and Mrs. Bittacy in strictly religious or philosophical terms, we can view it as a difference in poetic attitude: he is able to anthropomorphise the trees to the point of feeling kinship with them, whereas she cannot, and is unwilling to. The "secretly tenacious love of nature" and the "sense of beauty (unusual) for its vitality" (212) Mr. Bittacy possesses feed this ability to translate trees into human terms; Mrs. Bittacy views trees' only significance as a part of God's creation, and a somewhat humble part at that (exclaiming: "'Pah! the vegetable kingdom, indeed!'"(219) early on in the story). This is the same conclusion Mrs. Bittacy comes to when she follows her husband into the forest one day:

> Her husband knew them, knew their beauty and their awe, yes, but for her they were out of reach. She might not share with him the very least of them. It seemed that behind and through the glare of this wintry noonday in the heart of the woods there brooded another universe of life and passion, for her all unexpressed.

[33] An example of this is his treatment of Frazer's "The Golden Bough" in *Far Off Things*: "Of course, I am quite willing to allow that, as a general rule, an anxiety about the spring crops fully explains the origin of all painting, all sculpture, all architecture, all poetry, all drama, all music, all religion, all romance: I admit that the Holy Gospels are really all about spring cabbage, that martyrdom and mass are spring cabbage, that Arthur is really arator, the ploughman; that Galahad, denoting the achievement and end of the great quest, is Caulahad, the cabbage god" (92).

> The silence veiled it, the stillness hid it; but he moved with it all and understood. His love interpreted it. (261-262)

Love is the complex and messy affect circulating in the story between Mr. and Mrs. Bittacy and the forest. It impels her to go after him ("Her love *must* bring her something of what he felt himself – the huge attraction, the suction and the pull of all the trees" (257) before having to admit defeat, and realizing that the trees "wanted him because they loved him" (262) and how "loving her husband, she had crept beneath [the forest's] skin" (263). Having been forced to renounce all claims on Mr. Bittacy, she realizes that now "her husband knew continual access to the world his alien love had furnished for him" (267). Love provides access to the beloved object, interprets it, and transforms it. Consequently, Mr. Bittacy's slow absorption by the forest at the end of the tale is not the natural culmination of the kind of 'ontological truism' that is the complex biochemical-social entanglement of the human in the non-human (Newell 123), but rather the result of poetically animated nature returning Mr. Bittacy's affection. Initially, the transformation only goes one way, with Mr. Bittacy's love ensouling and humanising the trees: "He spoke all day of their sensations: how they drank the fading sunshine, dreamed in the moonlight, thrilled to the kiss of stars" ("The Man" 251). Eventually, however, their love 'interprets' him in return. Mrs. Bittacy starts noticing how "[h]e moved with a restless, swaying motion that somehow blanched her cheek and sent a miserable shivering down her back. It reminded her of trees" (256); similarly, the "mild, faint glory" of ecstasy on his face "made her think of moonlight falling upon a wood through speckled shadows" (ibid.). His interpretation by the forest's love escalates after his wife's capitulation. At her admission that she followed him into the woods, his "gentle *ennui*" makes her think "of some garden tree the wind attacks too suddenly, bending it over when it does not want to bend—the mild unwillingness with which it yields. She often saw him this way now, in the terms of trees" (263). Finally, as the forest wears down her mental resistance, Mrs. Bittacy, too, is translated into its language.

> And through the darkness that stretched behind, the power of the trees came close and caught her, twining about her feet and arms, climbing to her very lips. She woke at night, finding it difficult to breathe. There seemed wet leaves pressing

> against her mouth, and soft green tendrils clinging to her neck. Her feet were heavy, half rooted, as it were, in deep, thick earth. Huge creepers stretched along the whole of that black tunnel, feeling about her person for points where they might fasten well, as ivy or the giant parasites of the Vegetable Kingdom settle down on the trees themselves to sap their life and kill them. (272)

The Vegetable Kingdom, so scorned as it was before by Mrs. Bittacy, now assumes its full majesty; in parallel with Blackwood's deification of 'Nature', it is even capitalised. Having been loved into full-fledged subjects with their own terrible mass agency, the trees are not just able to reciprocate the affects humans project onto them, but project their own affects onto the human characters themselves. The poetic personification of nature has opened a pathway that can be travelled both ways, allowing trees to return the human gaze. This is the horrific conclusion Mrs. Bittacy comes to in the forest: "Till now it had been otherwise: she had looked at them from her own point of view; now they looked at her from theirs" (259). "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" is a study in how these transformational affects are harnessed by weird writing. Like Sanderson, Blackwood breathes uncanny life into nature, which becomes able to seep into the human characters' permeable psyches and work its own dark magic there.

William Hope Hodgson

Introduction

William Hope Hodgson's work had already fallen into obscurity before he received a mention in "Supernatural Horror in Literature". Lovecraft had not heard of Hodgson before he published his essay, but upon reading three of his novels (*The House on the Borderland*, *The Ghost Pirates*, and *The Boats of the Glen-Carrig*), pronounced them "*magnificent*", and mentioned in his correspondence: "I've prepared a note to insert in my article at the proper point (near the end of Ch. IX) & sent it to Hornig. Hodgson simply can't be left out of any historical survey of this sort — & he certainly deserves to be brought to notice" (*Essential Solitude* 106). Hodgson was promptly added to the revised study, ensuring the survival of his fiction into the twenty-first century. Whereas clear parallels can be drawn between the work of Machen and Blackwood – even if Machen may have been less than pleased about this fact – placing their work alongside that of Hodgson may seem like less of a straight-forward choice[34] for several reasons, on the part of Lovecraft or indeed this thesis. The following section will therefore reflect on the existing narrative surrounding Hodgson's life and work, and how it relates to Machen and Blackwood.

Hodgson's life was an eventful one. He was born the second son of a large family (he had eleven siblings), clashed regularly with his father, an Anglican vicar of the "'fire and brimstone' sort" (Gafford, "Rev. Samuel Hodgson") who was frequently moved to other parishes as a result of his unorthodox beliefs – Hodgson's family moved eleven times in a period of twenty-one years (Harris-Fain 187). Hodgson ran away to sea when he was only thirteen, where he would spend eight years, during which he underwent the poor working conditions of the mercantile navy as well as the bullying of fellow sailors, who picked on him for his small stature. In response, Hodgson developed a keen interest in physical culture, effectively becoming one of England's first bodybuilders. Beside his

[34] One interesting if trivial connection between Machen and Hodgson mentioned by R. Alain Everts is that the daughter of Hodgson's elder brother, Una Hope Hodgson, ended up marrying Arthur Hilary Blair Machen, Arthur Machen's only son (Gafford, "The Life").

physical strength, Hodgson was known for his courage. During his time at sea, he managed to photograph the ship caught in a cyclone – his pictures of 'stalk lighting' (lightning branching upward from the earth or sea to the sky) are among the first ones recording the phenomenon (ibid.). On another occasion he received a medal for heroism for saving another sailor from being eaten by sharks. After leaving the navy, Hodgson started one of the first 'Physical Schools', the reputation of which floundered when he antagonised Harry Houdini. Left without an income, Hodgson turned to writing. The four novels he produced (*The Boats of the Glen Carrig* (1907)*, The Ghost Pirates* (1908)*, The House on the Borderland* (1909)*,* and *The Night Land* (1912)) were highly imaginative but sold poorly. Sam Gafford has suggested that the novels were published in the reverse order that they were written, meaning that the magisterial but unreadable *The Night Land* was Hodgson's debut novel. If this is the case, Gafford holds, "[i]t means that he began his novel writing career with an explosion of originality that he found to be totally unmarketable" ("Writing Backwards"). Gafford maintains that while Hodgson "was a 'working man's' writer" (ibid.) who wrote in order to be able to eat, there was a part of him that chafed against writing for the market. He quotes an excerpt from Hodgson's correspondence in which he talks about *The Boats of the Glen Carrig*: "(…) I've tried hard to be commonplace with it; but, I'm afraid, with poor success. I cannot ride above that failing of mine which urges me to write original stuff" (ibid.). Eventually he would turn to writing short stories, which would include fewer imaginative and stylistic excesses, often taking the shape of nautical adventures. With his characteristic lack of fear, Hodgson signed up to fight in World War 1 not once but twice (re-enlisting after a mandatory discharge due to a head injury). He died in April 1918 from the impact of an artillery shell. One of the letters Hodgson wrote to his mother from the front, months before his death, is often alluded to for explicitly linking his weird writing with the horrors of the war:

> What a scene of desolation, the heaved-up mud rimming ten thousand shell craters as far as the sight could reach, north and south and east and west. My God, what a desolation! And here and there, standing like mute, muddied rocks — somehow terrible in their significant grim bashed formlessness — an old concrete blockhouse, with the earth torn up around them in monstrous craters, and, in some cases, surged in great waves of earth against the sides of the blockhouses.

> The sun was pretty low as I came back, and far off across that Desolation, here and there they showed — just formless, squarish, cornerless masses erected by man against the Infernal Storm that sweeps for ever, night and day, day and night, across that most atrocious Plain of Destruction. My God! talk about a lost World — talk about the END of the World; talk about the "Night Land" — it is all here, not more than two hundred odd miles from where you sit infinitely remote. And the infinite, monstrous, dreadful pathos of the things one sees — the great shell-hole with over thirty crosses sticking up in it; some just up out of the water — and the dead below them, submerged. (Moskovitz 115)

Because of his life at sea and his death at Ypres, Hodgson's afterlife has been quite different from that of weird authors more explicitly connected to the Decadent tradition. James Machin has written extensively about the influence of 'connoisseurship' on the reception and valorisation of fin-de-siècle weird fiction, revealing how Machen especially has been uplifted and mythologised by weird 'cognoscenti' as a 'lost' writer. In a sense, Machen's reception is as tinged with the sublime as his style: the rarity and obscurity of his work, which is readily available in a range of cheap paperbacks[35], is celebrated by a coterie of connoisseurs who enjoy the cultural capital which the appreciation of esoteric literature confers on them. Hodgson, self-taught and from a very different social milieu, never received that treatment. Instead, since it has been salvaged, Hodgson's oeuvre is praised for its 'muscularity' (Miéville, "And Yet" vii), a certain proletarian virility that contrasts favourably with Lovecraft's "effete scholars and genteel mad men" (ibid.), a rather questionable projection of a different kind.

Weird fiction, Timothy Murphy writes, has "ever since its inception in the late nineteenth century, (…) been riven by conflicts between idealism and materialism" (225). Machen and Blackwood are classed by Murphy as 'idealist', a term presumably supposed to be understood as denoting a belief in the preeminence of a certain spiritual realm over that of material reality, whereas Hodgson is regarded as a materialist. There undeniably exists a significant divergence in Hodgson's work from the mystical paradigms presented

[35] Machin writes: "Collectors and bibliophiles would ignored the garish, pulpy paperback editions and enjoy the grander mythopoeic narrative of a great writer languishing in obscurity in his lifetime, who bequeathed rare bibliographical treasures to a dedicated and dogged cognoscenti: narratives that can and do slip between and obfuscate the borders of fact and fiction" (132).

by Machen and Blackwood. An all-pervasive spirituality colours the oeuvre of the latter two authors, and both frequently – admittedly to different degrees – took on anti-materialist positions in their writings. Hodgson, on the contrary, was an atheist, and his tales often reflect his interest in contemporary science, as well as, on rare occasions, his criticism of religion. For these reasons, they are often read as drawing on and presenting a worldview tending towards nihilism, a bleak look at the fragmentation of meaning in the advent of modernity. The sublime, however, is never absent. Miéville calls Hodgson's works "*bloated* with visions, with a sense of vastness, of apocalyptic wonder, of the alien horror of an unsympathetic universe" ("And Yet" vii). The following chapters aim to place some important caveats on the prevailing view that Hodgson's fiction confronts the reader with a world depleted of meaning, with its sublimity deriving from a radically despiritualised cosmos. The first chapter will focus on Hodgson's second novel, the visionary tale *The House on the Borderland* (written in 1904 and published in 1908). The second chapter will analyse two of Hodgson's short stories, "The Hog" (published posthumously in 1947) and "The Derelict" (1912), both of which feature the sublime slipping into Hodgson's materialism. Finally, the third chapter will take a closer look at two of Hodgson's lesser-read stories, "Out of the Storm" (1909) and "Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachthani", also known as "The Baumoff Explosive" (published posthumously in 1919), which centre on the problematic literary production of weird numinosity.

The House on the Borderland

The House on the Borderland is, if we follow Sam Gafford's revised chronology of Hodgson's literary output, the second novel he wrote, following the stylistically bloated monster that is *The Night Land*. It is less extravagantly long and formally abstruse than the former, but it is still an idiosyncratic whole of embedded and fragmented narratives comprised of disparate sections that read as equal parts adventure story and cosmic vision. This chapter will consider the mismatch of contested ideas about matter and the psyche at the heart of the novel, and attempt to distil the "greater story within the lesser" (*The House* 108) which Hodgson in the preface exhorts us to find.

The story comprises two embedded narratives: an author's preface briefly introducing a found manuscript, followed by the framing device that is the account of its finding in Kraighten, Ireland, by two English tourists among the lonely remnants of a ruined building perched on a rock jutting out above a bottomless chasm. The manuscript itself is a journal recording the various visions and fantastical experiences of a reclusive old man who used to live in an ancient house with his sister, Mary, and his dog, Pepper. The first of these events is an out-of-body experience that takes the protagonist across the known universe into the darkness beyond, until eventually he arrives at the desolate dreamscape he baptizes 'the Plain of Silence'. Beyond it stands an exact replica of his own house, although much larger and made out of a phosphorescent substance, in an arena surrounded by mountains and large beast-headed gods. A swine-like creature is circling the house, evidently trying its defences, before noticing the old man and hungrily charging towards him. Before it can attack, the recluse rises above the plain, and eventually is borne back to earth, and into his body. After this vision, he is inexplicably drawn to the dark ravine on his estate, and soon he starts seeing pig-like creatures emerging from it. The swine-things mount an attack on the house, and the recluse manfully stands his ground; his sister, however, seems unaware of the peril they are in and starts treating him with barely concealed fear. Having survived the siege, the old man carefully examines his estate, and comes to the conclusion that the ravine outside is only a small part of a larger abyss that runs underneath the house itself. The realisation that only a layer of rock separates him from the pig-filled darkness below almost prompts him

to leave, but then he receives another vision. From a silent, sleeping ocean his beloved rises up and warns him of the danger he is in, but ruefully admits she could not visit him elsewhere. This encourages him to stay, and soon another strange revelation comes to him: time accelerates enormously, the recluse loses his dog and his own mortal body as he witnesses the passing of aeons, until finally the sun is extinguished and the earth travels towards a green star. Swine-creatures emerge and swarm the house, until a fire shoots up from its centre and eventually house and swine are swallowed by the pit underneath. The recluse rises into the air as the earth, and finally the dead sun, sink into the green star. Passing through a stream of luminous globules into another dimension, he arrives once again at the Sea of Sleep, and is reunited with his spectral lover. Their meeting is cut short by the emergence of another sun, dark and dead, and the recluse speculates on whether the whole universe revolves around the green sun and the dark one, and on the intelligences at work behind them. He passes through a dull red nebula and arrives once more at the Plain of Silence and the arena on which stands the jade replica of his own house, which shows the same signs of damage that his own house sustained during the attack of the swine-things, leading him to surmise that there is a link of some sort between both. He enters the other-dimensional house, and finds himself back inside his own study. Nothing seems to have changed, except that Pepper is still a little mound of ash. Weeks pass and the new dog the recluse buys to replace Pepper is attacked by the swine-thing from the arena, which leaves a glowing wound on its flank. The recluse himself barely resists the thing's hypnotic influence, but manages for a time to shut it out. Eventually, however, the dog infects him with the same glowing fungal affliction, and the manuscript breaks off as the recluse, now much weakened, describes the sound of the cellar trapdoor opening and something approaching.

Style

When introducing the manuscript – and disavowing authorship – Hodgson acknowledges the story's stylistic deficiencies, while simultaneously ascribing to them the tale's potency.

> I read, and, in reading, lifted the Curtains of the Impossible, that blind the mind, and looked out into the unknown. Amid stiff, abrupt sentences I wandered; and,

> presently, I had no fault to charge against their abrupt tellings; for, better far than my own ambitious phrasing, is this mutilated story capable of bringing home all that the old Recluse, of the vanished house, had striven to tell. (108)

The Curtains of the Impossible, like Machen's veil, are the threshold of the sublime, an aesthetic that, as Lyotard already noted[36], thrives on stylistic mutilation. Hodgson's prose overall bears the marks of this mutilation, but nowhere more explicitly than in the chapter entitled "The Fragments", where Hodgson in his guise of editor notes that the following section contains "*[t]he legible portions of the mutilated leaves*" (161), adding in a footnote how "[t]he severest scrutiny has not enabled me to decipher more of the damaged portion of the MS" (162). Beside material damage there are the many assertions of the unfamiliarity and inconceivability of "those visions and sights of unknown and unexplainable things" (159). Like the literal narrative fragmentation, these moments serve to momentarily suspend the reader's imagination. The flow of the narrative is interrupted as the text flags the inadequacy of the images it uses, leaving the reader to wander "[a]mid stiff, abrupt sentences". The fits and starts with which the story presents its metaphors before partially erasing them heighten the potency of the represented experience.

Other formal features of the story contribute to this effect, not in the least the device of the found manuscript itself. Machen already noted in *Hieroglyphics* how this literary technique can produce estrangement, achieving "the hiding of the author, as it were, behind a mask" (200). Mark Blacklock, additionally, observes how the nested narratives formally mirror the narrator's jumping between dimensions, and how the textual spatiality mirrors the story's expanding and fantastic borderlands. "Hodgson's spaces", Blacklock writes, "are narratively slow, spatially excessive and highly visual" (1109). The "'thickening' [of] narrative time through spatial excess", in other words, the narrative slowness which results from the dense and detailed descriptions of space, Blacklock considers "a cousin of delayed decoding" (ibid.). Delayed decoding foregrounds

[36] Lyotard writes: "Shortcomings in this *métier* [that of style] are apparently therefore trifling matters, if they are the price to be paid for 'true grandeur.' Grandeur in speech is true when it bears witness to the discrepancy between thought and the real world. […] So, the kind of perfection that one might reasonably expect within the domain of *techne rhetorike* (something between the art and the technique of rhetoric) isn't necessarily a desirable attribute for matters sublime in feeling" (32).

the exegetic effort the reader has to make when presented with inexplicable events unfolding before any causes are revealed or explanations given, which, incidentally, is another technique Hodgson regularly employs in his novel. The recluse's bewilderment at the story's unravelling closely parallels the reader's own, sometimes amusingly so:

> As I sat there, silent and watchful, the thought came to me—Why was all this? What were these Things? What did it mean? Then my thoughts flew back to that vision (though, even now, I doubt whether it was a vision) of the Plain of Silence. What did that mean? I wondered—And that Thing in the arena? Ugh! (135)

The journal format which structures the novel makes delayed decoding difficult, in part because the recluse cannot write and, say, battle pig creatures simultaneously, and in part because, as he notes himself, "I have never been able to write these things down, directly (sic) they happened. It is as though I have to wait a time, recovering my just balance, and digesting—as it were—the things I have heard or seen" (162). Despite this circumstantial impediment, Hodgson manages to keep the gap between these two levels of focalization minimal, in no small part because the recluse seems to have little more knowledge at the level of narration than he did at the moment the events took place. In spite of the above declaration of narratorial distance, most of the recluse's concerted efforts at making sense of his circumstances happen immediately, and produce the same perplexity in the reader.

Moments during which the narrator has to concede defeat because of his inability to process or describe what he is going through are offset by his general clarity of thought and oddly sober-minded attention to detail. Thus he notices, for instance, when he gazes at the dying sun, that it is ringed with black and red bands:

> For a time, I was at a loss to account for their presence. Then it occurred to me, that it was scarcely likely that the sun would cool evenly all over; and that these markings were due, probably, to differences in temperature of the various areas; the red representing those parts where the heat was still fervent, and the black those portions which were already comparatively cool. (173)

He continues to be amazed at the regularity of the rings "until I remembered that, possibly, they were but isolated patches, to which the enormous rotatory speed of the

sun had imparted a beltlike appearance. The sun, itself, was very much greater than the sun I had known in the old-world days; and, from this, I argued that it was considerably nearer" (ibid.). His mental lucidity and sober scientific interest in the phenomena he is witnessing add a complexity to the highly emotionally charged images of the solar system's decline and eventual annihilation. This is in itself a very science fiction-like narrative move: the estrangement on the diegetic level (the unusual occurrence) is in part formally naturalized[37].

Macrocosm

This stylistic strategy reflects Hodgson's partial departure from the weird poetics of Machen and Blackwood. The narrator of *The House on the Borderland* encounters phenomena beyond the ordinary that are framed as sublime, but nevertheless examines at every turn the materialist possibility conditions of the experiences he is relating. S.T. Joshi says of Hodgson's short stories that "(…) in large part they gain their significance by exhibiting a multiplicity of gradations between pure non-supernaturalism and pure supernaturalism, with some of the most provocative of them failing to resolve definitively into the one mode or the other" ("Things in the Weeds" 83). The tension between the formal naturalization of diegetically estranging phenomena and their further defamiliarization, between the semi-religious, marvellous *novum* and its incorporation into expanding paradigms of knowledge, also pervades the *House on the Borderland*. Despite Hodgson's materialist convictions which shine through periodically in the text, the novel prompted Clark Ashton Smith to credit Hodgson with a "profound and pervasive familiarity with the occult" (36), like "a seer who has dwelt overlong on the perilous verges and has peered too deeply into the regions veiled by invisibility from normal sight" (ibid.). Weird purple hyperbole aside, this unlikely marriage of miracle and matter requires further attention, as it is precisely the mediation between the two which the use of the sublime facilitates.

[37] I use Simon Spiegel's elaboration/correction of Darko Suvin's critical paradigm for examining estrangement in science fiction. Spiegel maintains a more rigorous and nuanced distinction between diegetic and representational estrangement than Suvin does.

We find this uneasy juxtaposition in Timothy S. Murphy's coinage of the term "fantastic materialism" (226). Murphy argues that weird fiction in general, and Hodgon's work in particular, is marked by "decognitive narration, that is, narrative that takes the logical universalism and normative subjectivity implied by triumphalist scientific rationality as objects of suspicion, evasion, and disruption" (228). He makes this claim in reaction to Suvin, who famously tried to delineate science fiction and promote it as an object for serious study by maintaining its capacity to 'estrange' the reader from reality in such a way that it could be a socially and politically relevant literary phenomenon[38]. This bid for legitimacy naturally came at the cost of excluding "myth, but also (…) the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy" (Suvin 27), among which weird fiction, which do not "use imagination as a means of understanding the tendencies latent in reality, but as an end sufficient unto itself and cut off from the real contingencies" (ibid.). Although he outlines some obvious problems with Suvin's disdain for the weird, Murphy still tries to wrench weird fiction away from all that is "anti-cognitive (and therefore irrationalist, ideological, and reactionary)" (Murphy 228). Against Suvin's devaluation of the weird and the looming shadow of Lovecraft's racism, Murphy tries to claim Hodgson as a "rigorous materialist alternative" (ibid.), believing scientific materialism to be a possible gateway to dialectical materialism and a radical social awareness. Murphy's attempt at making Hodgson a "politically subversive alternative to the philosophical and political conservatism that dominates mainstream fantasy and weird fiction alike" (244), causes him, I would argue, to overdetermine the stylistic estrangement present in the stories as 'decognitive', as well as to overemphasise the rigour of Hodgson's materialism.

That said, it is undeniably true that materialist thought shapes the novel, not in the least in the way the universe is conceptualised as a complex mechanism. Thus, for example, is the end of the solar system heralded by the sound of a tremendous clock winding down: "Suddenly, a distinct tremor shook the house, and there came a faint and distant, whirring buzz, that grew rapidly into a far, muffled screaming. It reminded me, in a queer, gigantic way, of the noise that a clock makes, when the catch is released, and it is

[38] As Suvin writes: "In the twentieth century SF has moved into the sphere of anthropological and cosmological thought, becoming a diagnosis, a warning, a call to understanding and action, and—most important—a mapping of possible alternatives" (30).

allowed to run down" (162). Later this metaphor is made more explicit. The recluse experiences the events "as though the governing quality of time had been held in abeyance, and the Machine of a Universe allowed to run down an eternity, in a few moments or hours" (169). The novel dwells on descriptions of gardens, furniture, and bodies falling apart, leaving only dust and debris to settle on the dead earth. In Murphy's reading of Hodgson's work "thermodynamics is the foundation of materialist cosmology as well as ontology, and entropy is the ultimate fate of the material universe and all its contents, including the human spirit" (Murphy, 231). Keith Leslie Johnson even goes so far as to say that, like *The Night Land*, *The House on the Borderland* is something like an exercise in dying; its plots are epiphenomena, distractions, there only to divert the main character "by romantic quests, elaborate pantheons of monstrous gods, even the thrilling sense of acceleration through time and space—anything, in fact, but the brute truth before us" (542). This truth, which the narrative produces but does not face, is, he contends, the ultimate meaninglessness of meaning, not simply the disintegration of human signification but the realization of its utter hollowness. The crisis Hodgson's fiction presents us with is then not so much "a confrontation with loss, but the loss of loss" (548). This unbearable knowledge secures a spot for Hodgson among the modernists, as a kind of Eliot on steroids, seeing as, in Johnson's words, "the frame of urban anomie, for example, seems comparatively tame and provincial against the Night Land"[39] (542).

Reading Hodgson's novel as a resistance fantasy sucked into a vortex of alienation under capitalism (Murphy) or modernism (Johnson) falls short of appreciating how the sublime effects it produces already inscribe occult significance onto the universe. The novel's engagement with thermodynamics, for example, does more than present the reader with new ways to contemplate mankind's desolation, be it cultural or cosmic. Emily Alder shows how the story draws from the energy discourses of fin-de-siècle physics as well as esotericism in its portrayal of the heat death of the solar system. Evidently this less than rigorous materialism affects the reading of the novel's tone. Alder writes: "Weird tales (…) don't succumb to gloom entirely, but also look for new possibilities or formulations of energy, from the sun, or at least a sun, or from the more-

[39] Oliver Tearle likewise reads the novel in conjunction with Eliot, calling it a 'dustopian' engagement with the nothingness one is left with after the collapse of meaning; it gestures "towards a void that is somehow full, a vast world of nothingness which is yet everything there is" (Tearle 142).

than-visible world, again taking their cue from physics and its occult versions" (205). One such alternative formulation Hodgson borrows from, Alder demonstrates, is the theosophical postulation of a central sun, which was an esoteric means of renegotiating the first law of thermodynamics in order to counter the second. For many late Victorians, the second law, establishing the concept of entropy, "seemed to undermine the prospect of either afterlife or human civilisation's earthly survival"(23). The anxiety engendered by entropy was, as Luckhurst and Sausman observe, a natural consequence of the way thermodynamics was co-opted by occultist writings at the time[40], and accordingly required creative circumvention. As a grave for other stars, the Green or Central Sun becomes an energy repository in Hodgson's tale. It is a consolatory presence, at first because it pierces the untold ages of darkness the recluse passes through after the death of the earth sun, and afterwards because it is implied to be in some oblique way connected to the pale globules – one of which is a portal to the Sea of Sleep, thereby hinting at a metaphysical conservation of the soul as well as of solar energy. Alder sums up the effect this has on the narrative as follows:

> The astral journeys and the invasions from the Pit together constitute a search for the meaning that lies beyond the physical world, which take the ambivalent weird form of both inexplicable horror and spiritual consolation. Energy is not lost in Hodgson's vision; the energy of the universe is far greater than what is visible in the solar system and contains, in the Central Sun, a perpetual source. (209)

Theosophy is not the only occultist undercurrent in the novel. Darryl Jones notes how even the novel's "very title self-consciously recall[s] that of W.T. Stead's high-profile spiritualist periodical of the 1890s", *Borderland,* and how it itself "is a compendium of occult and spiritualist themes and ideas, from the two-worlds hypothesis and astral journeys of the spiritualists, to the theosophical 'Esoteric Buddhism' of Madame Blavatsky and Alfred Percy Sinnett, to the Occult Celticism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn" (Jones 40). Especially his understanding of Celticism is interesting in this regard, as

[40] Occultists, Luckhurst and Sausman write, through "analogical reasoning argued that human life could not be destroyed, but, like energy, persists after it has been made use of by the body. Of course this conveniently ignores the second law of Thermodynamics, in which the process of entropy determines that energy becomes less and less available for work, leading to anxieties over the heat death of the universe" (427).

it parallels some of the narrative strategies of Machen and Blackwood, whose stories strongly draw on non-Anglo-Saxon settings and characters to evoke weird aesthetic effects and affective responses, ranging from Lucian in *The Hill of Dreams* feverishly imagining savage half-human creatures emerging from the hills and bearing him away to Punk's eerie racial attunement to the Wendigo. The fictional Irish town of Kraighten, geographically, culturally and linguistically isolated from the rest of the world, is in this sense an ideal setting for the recluse's house: it stands on what Jones calls a "geomantic omphalos, the borderland between the two worlds" where "English incomers and tourists find themselves caught in this portal, assailed by the terrifying beast-men who are simultaneously nightmare denizens of the other world and grotesque versions of the native Irish" (ibid.). In addition to the unfortunate equation of the villagers to the swine-things, the Irish landscape itself becomes imbued with weird forces. One of the English tourists muses upon the scenery: "Somehow, as we went forward, a sense of the silent loneliness and desertion of the old garden grew upon me, and I felt shivery. One could imagine things lurking among the tangled bushes; while, in the very air of the place, there seemed something uncanny" (113). The "unholy – diabolical" (116) influence of the pig creatures trickles into the setting, making the very sense of "sublime backwash" Miéville identifies as characteristic of the weird, i.e. the spillage of sublime awe and dread back "into angles, bushes, the touch of strange limbs, noises, etc." ("Weird Fiction" 511), tinged with Celticism in the novel.

Microcosm

Other factors also complicate an understanding of the narrative universe as having strict materialist underpinnings, not in the least the astral journeys the recluse undertakes. The novel posits not only the survival of human consciousness *outside* of the body, but *after* the decay of the body as well, resulting in the disoriented narrator looking at his own mouldering corpse and describing it with a certain distance: "The body under that coating, that shroud of dust, was neither more nor less than my own dead shell. I did not attempt to prove it. I knew it now, and wondered I had not known it all along. I was a bodyless thing" (170). The first time the narrator travels towards the Plain of Silence, he is "a fragile flake of soul dust, flicker[ing] silently across the void, from the distant blue, into

the expanse of the unknown" (119). The image of "soul dust" renders the complex relationship between body and consciousness in the novel intuitively understandable: for Hodgson, matter is a concept capacious enough to include semi-religious or spiritual phenomena like souls. Shifting the goalposts of materialism was a common practice among occult and pseudoscientific discourses of the time. As Alder notes in her overview of contested scientific ideas: "At root was a simple adjustment of what was conceived as 'natural,' or indeed 'material'" (21). Nowhere is this clearer than in Hodgson's preface, where he provides a covert authorial interpretation of the recluse's second astral journey:

> I cannot but look upon the account of the Celestial Globes as a striking illustration (how nearly had I said "proof"!) of the actuality of our thoughts and emotions among the Realities. For, without seeming to suggest the annihilation of the lasting reality of Matter, as the hub and framework of the Machine of Eternity, it enlightens one with conceptions of the existence of worlds of thought and emotion, working in conjunction with, and duly subject to, the scheme of material creation. (108)

"The account of the Celestial Globes" is one of the more idiosyncratic passages in an already highly unusual[41] novel. During his second astral journey, the recluse encounters pale spheres containing shadowy human faces, which fill him with a sense of companionship and great contentment. Passing through one of the spheres, the recluse finds himself on the Sea of Sleep, the dwelling place of the spirit of his beloved. These luminous spheres have their grim counterpart in the dark nebula, a gloomy cosmic mist containing red orbs in which the recluse sees blind faces contorted in expressions of sorrow. One such sphere holds the passage to the Plain of Silence, and the mountainous arena on which stands the strange replica of his house. Later, he more clearly connects the celestial globes to the influence of the Green Sun, and describes them as all floating on the Sea of Sleep. The dark nebula, on the contrary, is "moving always within the shadow of the Dark Sun, sweeping along on its stupendous orbit, wrapped eternally in gloom" (191). The Green Sun and the Dark Sun, around which all the universe revolves,

[41] Although Hodgson's novel is certainly idiosyncratic, Brian Stableford notes a certain affinity with Poe's *Eureka*, as well as Humphry Davy's *Consolations in Travel*, as both contain strong visionary elements. It is unclear whether Hodgson knew these works, however.

are then two complementary but agonistic forces, each holding sway over their own dimensions, and each connected to specific human emotional states. One ecstatically rambling passage describes violet rays moving to and from the Green Sun, evoking in the mind of the recluse the idea of messengers sent out from, and coming into, the great star.

> An idea evolved itself, slowly. Was the Green Sun the abode of some vast Intelligence? The thought was bewildering. Visions of the Unnamable rose, vaguely. Had I, indeed, come upon the dwelling-place of the Eternal? For a time, I repelled the thought, dumbly. It was too stupendous. Yet....
> Huge, vague thoughts had birth within me. I felt, suddenly, terribly naked. And an awful Nearness, shook me.
> And Heaven ...! Was that an illusion? (186)

Brett Davidson remarks that the Central Suns are "*metaphysical* suns" (Davidson 186); they are "meaning made visible, quasi-Manichean order manifested in the cosmos, radiating motive throughout the universe as they radiate light and gravitational force" (188). Davidson emphasises the novelty of this conception of the universe as not being governed by an ordering entity or by the principle of "as above, so below" of magical thinking, but by "life and death, fulfilment and desolation" imagined as "analogues of radiative force operating exactly like light or gravitation" (187). With the caveat that, as we shall see, the law "as above, so below" does govern an important part of the novel, Davidson's interpretation is convincing – Hodgson's cosmology is, curiously enough, at once mechanistic and filled with intent. The "old gods of mythology" that stand gazing over the Plain of Silence – Kali, "the Hindu goddess of death" (121), and Seth, "the Destroyer of Souls" (122), are named, others are "utterly strange, beyond the power of a human mind to conceive" (ibid.) – are similarly imagined less as great intenders, and more as material beings existing in hitherto unthinkable states of life. He describes this as

> a state of life-in-death—a something that was by no means life, as we understand it; but rather an inhuman form of existence, that well might be likened to a deathless trance—a condition in which it was possible to imagine their continuing, eternally. 'Immortal!' the word rose in my thoughts unbidden; and, straightway, I grew to wondering whether this might be the immortality of the gods. (ibid.)

We are far removed here from Machen's and Blackwood's grappling with paganism as a by itself untenable but metaphorically useful gateway to sacramental awareness or pantheistic ensoulment respectively. Hodgson's narrator somewhat naïvely indicates that these gods are "something more than the mere [deification] of men, animals, and elements" (122), a statement that is strangely informative as to Hodgson's accomplishment in this novel. Whereas Machen and Blackwood strove to sublimate matter and bring latent godhood or the soul into sharper relief, Hodgson does the opposite here. By expanding the capacity of matter so it can encompass gods and various other teleological and eschatological forces, Hodgson safeguards their existence. Marvelous powers and intelligences can be brought into the world of the novel if they are shown to consist of atoms or work along vaguely scientific lines. This kind of strategy is remarkably similar to those employed by writers of pseudoscientific and occultist treatises of the time, who also, in their various ways, tried to demonstrate "the actuality of our thoughts and emotions among the Realities" (108). In a fitting parallel to the novel itself, the recluse, after his fantastical visions, finds himself "wandering, mentally, amid an odd chaos of fragmentary modern theories and the old Biblical story of the world's ending" (172). *The House on the Borderland* is not, however, a pseudoscientific treatise; it does not merely adopt an eccentric assortment of ideas from theosophy, religion, or thermodynamics. The way it manages to expand matter is primarily through the deployment of weird literary strategies: matter is sublimely ungrounded in order to contain "the Unnamable" and "the Eternal" (186).

Considering the degree to which the metaphysics of *The House on the Borderland* is interwoven with human meaning, I am inclined to resist reading the novel as espousing a particularly hard-line materialism and/or nihilism, nor do I believe it is particularly conducive to a non-human theory-inspired analysis. The "'siege' mentality" (Gafford, "Decay and Disease" 115) that is so typical of Hodgson's work, i.e. the constant impression of external menace bearing down on the central characters, which I will come back to in later chapters and which finds a very literal expression in the novel through the attack the pig-creatures mount on the house, is too often read as symptomatic of some anxiety. Jonathan Newell holds that "[t]he revulsion the protagonist of *The House on the Borderland* experiences at the sight of the swine-things – and, concomitantly, the disgust

that Hodgson's text may excite in treaders – is clearly informed by anxieties about the distinction between human and animal" (Newell 150). As a result, he interprets the novel as being "preoccupied with the intertwinement of contamination and gnosis, disgusting violation with post-human revelation" (136). Human subjects imperilled by disease-bearing creatures from the beyond understandably form a fertile basis for non- or post-human theorizing. Nevertheless, I believe that, seen in conjunction with the recluse's astral travels, the particulars of which Newell avows little interest in (145), the swine-things and their assault are not to be taken as manifestations of the fear of blurred boundaries between the human and the non-human, but as the embodiment of the forces associated with the Dead Sun. These forces, the novel implies, are at work on a greater, metaphysical level, as well as on a smaller, psychological level. The Thing attacking the larger replica of the house on the Plain of Silence stands for the force of entropy, bringing with it death and decay. The real-world house, as various scholars have noted (Gafford "Decay and Disease" 115, Stableford 49), invites a reading comparing it to the human psyche. Alan Moore in his introduction to *The House on the Borderland*'s comic book adaptation says of the novel:

> Jungian without recourse to Jung, the teetering multileveled edifice from which the story takes its name, with bestial swine-things bursting up from the ancestral depths beneath the lowest cellar, is a perfect metaphor for human consciousness; the attic towers of the mind whose windows overlook vistas of prophecy and vision, with the dreaming basement dark beneath. The hog-eyed brutal impulses that sometimes surface.

Newell dismisses this interpretation, fearing it "could reduce many of the events depicted to hallucinations" (Newell 146), and because he is hesitant to consider the pig-things as the uncanny return of the repressed. I would argue that it is an interpretation expressly suggested by the novel, which is, after all, concerned with grounding psychological states (thoughts and emotions) in material reality. This does not reduce the events of the book to mere hallucination; on the contrary, it confers an extraordinary significance onto the human mind. After all, we are told that both houses are "*en rapport*": the actions of the recluse, defending his abode from the onslaught of the swine-like creatures, are helping

to guard its metaphysical double. Macrocosm mirrors microcosm: human psychological reality overlaps with that of the cosmos.

The novel dramatizes epic forces at work beneath the surface of the universe as well as the human psyche, and ensconces them in reality by slyly adjusting the parameters of what counts as matter. This process, in conjunction with the stylistic estrangement that Hodgson achieves, lends a dizzying dimensionality to the story without overtly relying on the supernatural. The "glimpse[s] of the terrors that underlie many things" (188) witnessed by the recluse, rather than hinting at a definite cosmic pessimism, are – much like Machen's bad numinous and Blackwood's malevolent tree souls – a means to increase the scope and intensity of a novel that is, at heart, preoccupied with slipping sublime forces and entities into the cosmos that are, for good or ill, responsive to the human imagination.

The Hog and The Derelict

The Hog

"The Hog" is one of the stories featuring Carnacki, the Ghost-Finder, a detective investigating hauntings and other supernatural phenomena. Hodgson is likely to have created Carnacki to piggy-back on the success of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, or that of Blackwood's *John Silence – Physician Extraordinary*: the tales feature examples of the supernatural demystified and revealed to be a hoax (Doyle), as well as ones in which the strange occurrence is the result of maleficent forces encroaching on the everyday world (Blackwood). A few, interestingly, straddle the divide. Opinions on the merit of the Carnacki stories are divided. Lovecraft considered their quality "conspicuously below the level of the other books" (87), and although he never read "The Hog", which was only published in the 1947 collection (Lovecraft died in 1937), it is probable he would find it as "badly marred by an atmosphere of professional 'occultism'" (36) as the ones he did read. Despite being poorly regarded by the weird cognoscenti, the Carnacki stories remain among Hodgson's most accessible work. Mark Valentine even contends that "[w]e should regard the stories as providing a tauter, more disciplined evocation of the vision Hodgson lays out at greater length in his novels, with a greater concentration on the possibilities of human resistance" ("Against the Abyss" 90). Hodgson's commercial opportunism aside, "The Hog" indisputably goes beyond the more or less conventional if gimmicky detective story it easily could have been. The story, rather than being "unequivocally supernatural" and "spoiled by incomprehensible occultist pseudo-science" (Joshi, "Things in the Weeds" 82), derives its power from being on the fringes of the occult and the scientific, making it an interesting experiment in weirdly warped materialism.

In typical fashion, the tale begins in Carnacki's drawing room, as Joseph, Arkright, Taylor, and the narrator (Dodgson, possibly a corruption of Hodgson) sit and smoke and wait for Carnacki to begin the account of his latest adventure. Carnacki tells of a man referred to him by a doctor who can make heads nor tails of what ails his patient. Bains, as the man is called, is plagued by dreams in which he hears a cacophony of swine grunts, and feels himself being pulled ever deeper into an infernal dimension, which fills him with

indescribable fear. The dreams are so real that waking up costs tremendous effort, and the horror clings to him even after waking. He finds a sympathetic listener in Carnacki, who suspects Bains' spiritual protection barrier is compromised, and promises to help him. Setting up various devices all over the room (including a special camera, a modified phonograph, a glass disc, and seven vacuum tubes in rainbow colours – the usual electric pentacle is absent) and equipping Baines with an electrode headband, Carnacki begins his examination of what is afflicting the man. When the malignant force manifests in the room, it produces unpleasant colours in the glass disc, while the phonograph allows Carnacki to record the sounds Bains is hearing. The exhausted Bains, however, falls asleep, and the monstrous entity grows in strength, its power amplified by the coloured glass tubes, which work as a focus. Alarmed, Carnacki switches the colours from focus to defense, and tries to wake Bains, to no avail. The influence of the entity grows further, producing the impression of a shadowy pit opening up in the middle of the defensive circle, and a wall of cloud pressing in around the defense, from which the sound of pig squeals and grunts can be heard. The unconscious Bains, meanwhile, has started to grunt in reply. Caught between the growing pit and the evil influence circling the defense, Carnacki is powerless to do more than bear witness as a gargantuan hog face starts to emerge from the void. When things seem most dire, and Carnacki is contemplating killing Bains, the Hog is encased in a dome of blue light with three green bands as beneficent spiritual entities intercede and expel its evil energy. Bains wakes up with his soul intact. His story over, Carnacki fields questions from his guests, and speculates about the forces that manifested during the events.

Sublimity is mingled heavily with disgust in the story. The monstrous entities residing in the Outer Circle are "exquisitely horrible and vile" (186). Even their weakest emanations make Carnacki feel like he brushed up against "something no human has any right to be near, for his soul's sake" (193). Consequently, Jonathan Newell argues for the use of the sublate as an aesthetic lens through which to understand the textual effects present in "The Hog", declaring that "[a] kind of negative or inverse counterpart to the sublime, the sublate offers a means of interrogating Hodgson's texts without insisting on a Kantian or correlationist account of the autonomous, transcendental subject or employing aesthetic formulations that exclude the disgusting as a matter of course"

(158). Newell argues that there is no room in the classical Kantian or Burkean sublime for disgusting affects, as these undercut the salvaging of the transcendental human subject, and show the boundaries of the self and non-self to be porous and vulnerable to intrusions from the non-human outside. Kelly Hurley makes a similar case, even adopting the word 'Ab-Human' from Hodgson's *Carnacki* stories to denote a specific kind of gothic embodiment in fin-de-siècle literature. Abhuman bodies, according to Hurley, are liminal, monstrously reconfigured bodies that express "an anxiety generated by scientific discourses, biological and sociomedical, which served to dismantle conventional notions of 'the human'" (Hurley 5). Hodgson's 'Ab-human' is thereby brought in close proximity to Julia Kristeva's concept of 'abjection'. Hurley states that "[w]hile Hodgson's 'Ab-Human' at times denotes a condition of being in pure opposition to that of 'the human,' the opposition is continually in a state of collapse within his fiction" (168). It is important to note that while Hurley's interest lies in the transposition of broad historico-cultural developments onto literature (in the form of various anxieties), Newell is invested in moving past cultural discourses and views weird stories as aesthetic conduits to some kind of truth, or "the wisdom of the unhuman" (Newell 202). Hurley treats the (ab)human as a construct that comes into being through the interplay of various cultural contexts, whereas Newell takes the existence of the nonhuman as a metaphysical given that weird texts reveal to us. As a result, Hurley will emphasise the way matter manifests as an extension of fin-de-siècle scientific discourses (particularly materialism) in Hodgson's work, while Newell reads "The Hog" as a "vision" in which "the human and the other-than-human are intermeshed and enfolded, where the great outside is forever trespassing on the supposed sanctity of the human" (160). In both these approaches, disgust works as a great levelling influence, exposing the shoddy construal of the human against the backdrop of impinging Thingness (in the case of Hurley) or the non-human (for Newell). Somewhat regrettably, this means that the truly prodigious body of work Hurley and Newell analyse is similarly levelled into signifying variations on the same (new) materialist theme.

The disgust that the characters feel, and that also suffuses the narration, is tightly bound up with the fact that the entities they encounter are hostile to the human spirit. When Carnacki brushes up against the influence of the Hog, he psychically experiences

that same “dreadful *soiled* feeling which the healthy human always experiences when he comes too closely in contact with certain Outer Monstrosities” (198). The fate that would have befallen Bains had he been touched by the monster’s “‘inductive forces’” (206), Carnacki tells us, would have been “a pathological, spiritual change - literally in other words, soul destruction” (ibid.). The exposition Carnacki provides at the end of the story – one of its most remarkable aspects – sheds more light on this psychic pathology. After having regaled his friends with a tale in which he more narrowly escaped death than in his usual yarns, Carnacki sits back and grounds his horrific experiences in what Timothy S. Murphy calls “a full-scale materialist metaphysics” (229). The Hog, we are told, is one of the million-mile-long attenuated nebulas that Carnacki speculates to float in the enormous “Psychic or Outer Circle” (224) which lies around the earth, at an enormous distance. As one of the “Outer Monstrosities”, which have spontaneously developed out of the Outer Circle, the Hog preys on the psychic aspect of human beings, just like a regular predator feeds on the physical body. Carnacki clarifies: “They are tremendous psychic forces, bred out of its elements just as an octopus or shark is bred out of the sea, or a tiger or any other physical force is bred out of the elements of its earth-and-air surroundings” (224). Crucially, Carnacki makes a comparison between the origin of human life and that of the predatory entities of the Outer Circle. Just like “earth and air breed within themselves the materials of the body and the brain, and therefore, presumably, the machine of intelligence”, so does the “attenuated” matter of the Outer Circle contain “all the elements for the production of certain phases of force and intelligence” (ibid). Murphy draws the conclusion that

> [i]f we accept Hodgson’s definition of the “Psychic Circle” as material, along with his materialist definition of human intelligence and its status as prey to the entities of that circle, then it seems fair to assume that the “evil” described here is physical and psychological predation, and that he intends the “human spirit” in this passage to be interpreted materialistically as well, as an emergent property of biological evolution. (231)

Despite his careful attention to Hodgson’s stylistic innovation and his understanding of the weird as an imaginative supplement to reality, Murphy does not remark upon the amount of literary jiggery-pokery that is involved in transforming Legion into a cloud. The

creation of the Outer Circle, a physical manifestation of a psychical reality, home to demonic forces and intercessory entities, does not indicate a worldview as "ideologically disenchanted and logically consistent as Lovecraft's cosmic indifferentism" (244) so much as illustrate how Hodgson utilises the literary possibilities of the weird to create a world in which the human mind and all its products are inscribed into matter. The Hog is not merely an alien, not just a fantastical life form that spontaneously generated in space; it is a supernatural force which is recuperated into nature. The story is like one of the faux-scientific apparatuses Carnacki uses. Like the phonograph that records imagined sounds, or the camera that translates those sounds into colours, it is one more technique, one more pseudoscientific excuse, to tell an exorcism story. It has, in this sense, something in common with Ann Radcliffe's popular conceit of "the supernatural explained". Radcliffe's enlightened audiences and critics could only accept the thrill of spectral and marvellous entities and events if they were at the end revealed to be nothing more than the machinations of human actors or the result of natural causes. E.J. Clery outlines a number of caveats against a too simplistic conception of how this device operated in gothic fiction, however, pointing out that the 'return to reason' was an integral part of the literary effect:

> The impact of the narrative depends on the temporary 'hoodwinking' of reason; to experience 'the strange luxury of artificial terror' requires some sort of surrender to 'the weakness of superstitious credulity'. The 'strangeness' lies in the indeterminacy of aesthetic experience, voluntary and involuntary at once, just as terror must be real while it is felt, although the artificial mechanism that produced it remains clearly visible. (107)

Just as, if we follow Clery, Radcliffe's gothic fiction still contained leakages of the supernatural into the everyday (whether through the triumph of divine providence, or the gothicity of description altering the mundane world), so does Hodgson's story leave a substrate of the marvellous in the story, all the easier to accept because of the evocation of physical forces to describe 'psychical' phenomena. It is, after all, easier to posit "inscrutable forces which govern the spinning of the outer circle" (215) which "only [intervene] between the human *soul* and the Outer Monstrosities" (207), than it is to take direct recourse to divine interference.

Moreover, just like in Radcliffe's work, the sublime effect is established partially through the modulation of closeness and distance. Carnacki's exposition creates the same contemplative remove that we find in Radcliffe's "supernatural explained", allowing his audience as well as Hodgson's reader to take a backseat and reflect on the larger cosmic scheme of things. Newell does not recognise this remove, which prompts him to class "The Hog" as exhibiting horror rather than terror. As discussed in the introduction, Radcliffe famously formulated the terror-horror divide, which defined terror as the effect which "expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life" whereas horror "contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them" (Radcliffe 149), associating terror with the sublime, because of its emphasis on obscurity and partial description. The terrible image "is not distinctly pictured forth, but is seen in glimpses through obscuring shades; the great outlines only appearing which excite the imagination to complete the rest" (150). Descriptions of the Hog follow this paradigm: "I saw it pale and huge through the swaying, whirling funnel of cloud - a monstrous pallid snout rising out of that unknowable abyss... It rose higher like a huge pale mound. Through a thinning of the cloud curtain I saw one small eye..." (211). Quite literally "seen in glimpses through obscuring shades", the Hog is wreathed in cloud; descriptions of it range from its vague outline to specific and horribly suggestive but inadequate detail. Even at the moment when it has almost broken free, it remains mostly concealed: "Within the swaying veil of cloud the monster showed as a vast pale, faintly luminous mound" (214). The pervasive feeling that is inspired is that of awe, even if the influence of the Hog is repulsive. Let us turn then, to one of the passages which, to Newell, illustrates the soul-contracting, annihilating power of horror, which is the description of the Hog's sounds:

> It had in it something so inexplicably *below* the horizons of the soul in its monstrousness and fearfulness that the ordinary simple fear of death itself, with all its attendant agonies and terrors and sorrows, seemed like a thought of something peaceful and infinitely holy compared with the fear of those unknown elements in that dreadful roaring melody. (204)

Carnacki's language here, Newell claims, "bears a close resemblance to that of Ann Radcliffe, discussing the distinction between terror and horror, as the distinction between a fear which uplifts the soul and a horror which contracts and annihilates the self:

Carnacki's worry is not death but 'soul destruction'" (155). Here, I believe, Newell interprets Radcliffe somewhat liberally – her conception of horror has nothing to do with the annihilation of the self, but with the annihilation of the faculties, that is to say, horror benumbs because of the immediacy and concreteness of the threat. In fact, the fear of soul destruction is infinitely more sublimely resonant than the fear of death, as the threat is both overwhelming yet unspecified, creating the kind of anticipatory uncertainty that is the benchmark of terror. Another indication that the affect conveyed here leans in closer to terror are the lines framing this description which Newell does not quote. Carnacki despairs: "It is no use, I can't give it to you. I get dumb with the failure of my command over speech to tell you what that grunting, howling, roaring melody conveyed to me" (204), in the by now exceedingly familiar formula of the weird sublime, where the inability of adequate portrayal is dramatized, before the narration segues into some truly evocative images. Consider the lines following the above block quotation: "And the sound was with me *inside* the room - *there right in the room with me*. Yet I seemed not to be aware of confining walls, but of echoing spaces of gargantuan corridors. Curious! I had in my mind those two words - gargantuan corridors" (ibid.). Not only the image, in this case, but the actual words "gargantuan corridors" are very specific in describing how the cavernous sound is projected and acoustically amplified, but that specificity is undercut by the impossibility of the sound being "*right in the room*" with Carnacki. More generally, Carnacki's most grating conversational habit is on full display in this particular story, dotting the text with the endless repetition of questions along the line of: "I wonder if I make it clear to you?" (192), "I wonder whether you can understand" (192), "Can you chaps understand?" (217), "Do you follow me?" (220), "Do you understand at all?..." (200) whenever dwelling on an extraordinary thought or impression. Together these techniques (the creation of impossible images and impressions witnessed partially or through a haze, with the narrator's powers of description constantly flagged as being compromised) develop the atmosphere of undecidability, the suspension of understanding that the story is trying to achieve.

Despite not being convinced that horror and disgust are more predominant in the story than terror and the sublime, nor indeed finding the argument that the two by definition cannot coexist persuasive, I do think that the porosity of the human subject

which both Newell and Hurley underline warrants further attention. As was the case in *The House on the Borderland*, Hodgson's signature 'siege mentality', his preoccupation with weakness, contamination, and disease, structures much of the plot of the novel. Rather than signalling anxiety at the budding awareness that humans share the same material substrate with other beings, I think "The Hog" might be productively read as a play on the same thematic concerns of *The House*. This would be in line with Mark Valentine's remark that the Carnacki stories should be considered a much condensed iteration of the vision Hodgson elaborates on in his novels (cf. supra), or Brian Stableford's assertion that "The Hog" in particular is "an inter-dimensional fantasy clearly associated with the allegory of *The House on the Borderland*" (51). Even at first glance, the tale and the novel have many elements in common: an outer-dimensional swine-like entity, a yawning pit waiting to swallow the protagonist, and a spiritual battle waged for a man's soul. Might the same microcosm-macrocosm structure we find in the novel then not also hold true for "The Hog"? Bains, we are told has "a gap or flaw" in his "protection barrier", which is to say "[a] failure to be (…) efficiently insulated - spiritually - from the outer monstrosities" (177). The implication is that but for this protection barrier, human beings are somehow directly *en rapport*, to use the term the recluse employed in *The House on the Borderland*, with forces beyond human ken. The Hog exerts a pull over Bains, calling out to him; Bains grunts back "as if in reply" (182). When he describes the pull of the Outer Circle, Bains comments: "my brain seems to fill my body like the ghost of my soul. I can even open my eyes and see with my brain, or consciousness, out of my own eyes. I can see the bedclothes, and I know just how I am lying in the bed; yet the real me is down in that hell in terrible danger" (179). Bains has a body, a brain, and a soul (which is the real 'him', of which his mental consciousness is only a ghost). It is the latter part of him, his "psychic entity" (225) which is under attack, an entity which is made of the same substance as the Outer Monstrosities. Bains' small human-scale reality mirrors the large-scale monstrous reality which spawned the Hog. To illustrate how a sphere of reality can be both physical and psychical, Carnacki repeatedly takes recourse to the metaphor of electricity:

> The best off-hand illustration I can think of is the all-familiar electricity - a force which, by the way, we are too prone to imagine we understand because we've

> named and harnessed it, to use a popular phrase. But we don't understand it at all! It is still a complete fundamental mystery. Well, electricity when diffused is an "imagined and unpictured something", but when concentrated it is sudden death. (222)

Extremely attenuated matter passes beyond our understanding, within the sublime realm of the unimagined and unpictured. Later on, Carnacki uses this metaphor again, and makes his conception of reality more explicit: “just as electricity discovered itself to us as something quite different from any of our previous conceptions of matter, so is the Psychic or Outer Circle different from any of our previous conceptions of matter” (223-224). Here we find then not an attempt to strip human consciousness of its privileged position, but rather a thorough inscription of human soul into matter which sections off a part of that material reality from common understanding. Hodgson’s work, as I have tried to show, moves away from embracing a straight-forwardly supernatural metaphysics. Nevertheless, claims of rigorous materialism are equally off-base, and I would argue that the reason Hodgson presents the human subject as so fundamentally vulnerable and permeable is precisely because it allows him to portray a narrative universe in which ‘psychic’ reality bleeds into material reality. Just like the Outer Circle that birthed the Hog is “a huge psychic world, bred out of the physical” (225), the psychic entity of the human finds its origin in matter. The “Psychic Doorways” (ibid.) that are always implicitly understood to exist between the two, the “tremendous mystery” (ibid.) of which Carnacki promises to tell us more in a later yarn, allow for a sublime spillage of affect into the cosmos.

The Derelict

This brings us to a Hodgson tale that does, in fact, lean more strongly towards horror, filled as it is with descriptions of gore and bodily harm, yet also has a thin strain of sublime terror woven through it. “The Hog” is concerned with the provenance of life and consciousness, drawing parallels between the marvellous origin of the Hog and the origin of human intelligence, which both are bred out of their respective material elements. “The Derelict”, as we shall see, also dwells at length on the spontaneous generation of life and agency, and is in fact often considered to be the paradigmatic example of Hodgson

encoding a particular worldview in his fiction, often one of strict materialism or of 'dark' vitalism, featuring a kind of reverse colonisation of the human by the forces of matter or life. However, "The Hog", as we have seen, cannot rightly be considered to espouse any disenchanted conception of human consciousness, which it regards not as a peripheral by-product of evolution, but as something connecting us to "a huge psychic world" (225) full of entities which have their own designs towards the human psychic entity. Given the ways this story complicates materialism, using 'matter' as a device to secure the existence of pig monsters and human souls alike, perhaps the narrative regarding the nature of life which we find in "The Derelict" likewise deserves to be reexamined.

Like "The Hog", "The Derelict" contains an embedded story framed as a true tale told in the comfort of a smoking room. This time, the storyteller is an old, eccentric ship's doctor, talking to an expectant audience of crewmembers. He muses upon the provenance of life, and the role of matter in expressing it. The young narrator interrupts his conjectures on the purely chemical composition of the life force with theological concerns, and to illustrate his point the doctor decides to tell of an event he witnessed in his younger years during his time on a ship called the Bheospse. He recounts how, one day, after a storm throws them off-course, the crew of the Bheospse spy an old derelict vessel some way off. A small group consisting of Captain Gannington, the second mate, the ship's doctor, and a handful of sailors, set out to examine it more closely. Upon approach, they notice the derelict is surrounded by a kind of scum that seems to seep from it, and a haze is rising from its decks. The ship itself is abandoned, and covered with heaps of whitish mould, exuding a heavy animal odour. Trying to get below deck, Captain Gannington kicks at the mould, from which gushes a purple fluid, and a soft thudding sound starts up inside the ship. Then the mould starts rippling and sucking at the sailors' boots. One man is devoured alive by the ship; the second mate can be wrenched free but not before his feet are partially digested. The three survivors are eventually saved by the sailors who stayed in the dinghy, and the derelict makes one final attempt at catching them, seeming to lap at them with a great protruding tongue-like organ, confirming that it has become a live organism. The captain fends it off, and the little boat makes it back to the ship safely. The doctor concludes his tale by expressing his ambivalent feelings about

having escaped the derelict – he is glad to have survived, but mourns having lost this singular chance of solving the chemical mystery of the life-force.

The opening argument which the doctor makes regarding the material origin of life is a deceptively simple one. He posits the necessity of "the *Material*" and "the Conditions" and perhaps "a third factor" (128), clarifying that matter works as a "fulcrum", a necessary medium through which the life-force expresses itself. The life-force does not discriminate between various types of matter, and the Doctor expresses the belief that it would "if given the right Conditions, make itself manifest even through so hopeless-seeming a medium as a simple block of sawn wood" (ibid.). Despite this straight-forward enough explanation, he then goes on to compare it to fire and electricity in that

> [i]t is a force generated by conditions; but, nevertheless, this does not bring us one iota nearer to its *explanation*, any more than to the explanation of electricity or fire. They are, all three, of the outer forces — monsters of the void. Nothing we can do will *create* any one of them, our power is merely to be able, by providing the conditions, to make each one of them manifest to our physical senses. (ibid.)

Here we find, then, that singular resurgence of the sublime. If in "The Hog" Carnacki compared the Outer Circle and its predatory forces to the mysterious nature of electricity, here physical phenomena (life, fire, electricity) are explicitly recast as monsters of the void. Life becomes a weird agent in its own right, not by anything it is or does, but by being framed as unexplainable. This sublimity is suppressed (but never quite exterminated) when the narrator contends that life, unlike fire and electricity, is "a kind of spiritual mystery", to which the doctor tells him to be careful, or he might ask him "to demonstrate the spiritual mystery of life of the limpet, or the crab" (ibid.). He ends his tale on the same note, deploring the fact he never got the derelict's bill of lading, as the nature and juxtaposition of its various articles of cargo, the ship's age and the temperature of her hold, "plus one or two other only guessable quantities" (157) would have helped account for the way it was able to come to life the way it did.

Considering how the story is framed explicitly as a scientific speculation on the origin of life, it is not surprising that it has lent itself well to the mapping of all kinds of theories onto it. Kelly Hurley sees in "The Derelict" "an attempt fully to realize such concepts as life, volition, consciousness in materialist terms" (37). As Anthony Camara observes, this reading holds little ground, since the story does not rule out a metaphysical element entirely, and moreover seems to suggest quite the opposite, namely that life cannot be reduced to the material elements from which it originates (Camara 205). Emily Alder, although not contesting Hurley's views, takes a more nuanced approach, considering it a typical example of weird stories which work as "countersites in relation to the conventional known world" in which "discredited scientific ideas can be revived and marginalised theories or practices can occupy a central position" (187). Both disproven and mainstream scientific theories fuel Hodgson's vision of the derelict as a biological excrescence – the influences Alder cites include the theory of spontaneous generation and a more exaggerated, unbounded version of Bergson's *élan vital*, as well as the taxonomical disruption[42] caused by the inclusion of the 'boundary kingdom' of the protists (the ship-thing seems to be mostly composed of mould, but also has the skin and cardiovascular system belonging to a more complex order of eukaryotes). She concludes by saying that the Derelict "test[s] the capacity of known science to explain the world, in an attempt to reconcile it with a conviction that wonder and terror can still infuse a material universe" (159). Anthony Camara provides an excellent close reading of the story, but has a harder time acknowledging that the science "The Derelict" leans on could be outdated, arguing against the idea that the tale is Hodgson's creative exploration of the imaginative potential presented by spontaneous generation and for the concept of emergence. According to him, the reconceptualization of life as an "emergent phenomenon" (Camara 189) in the mid-nineteenth century meant that life could no longer be imagined as a sum of its constituents, but rather an ever-surprising, alien force erupting into matter. Just like water has properties that can be found in neither oxygen

[42] Alder explains how the inclusion of protists as a kingdom shook up the nineteenth century conception of the plant and animal kingdoms. Fungi had always been a categorically disruptive presence, but had historically been conveniently grouped with plants. The 'boundary kingdom' of the protists, however, further problematized classification, which had far-reaching consequences, allowing as it did "for the existence of liminal organisms, extending the notion of common ancestry beyond animals alone to propose a shared physical basis for all life (however 'life' might be defined)" (Alder 179).

nor hydrogen, life contains properties that cannot be found in the materials and conditions it is derived of. In this way, Camara argues,

> emergence raises all of the fears associated with the *spontaneous generation* of malignant life-forms, but without falling into error by resurrecting that scientifically discredited theory. Quite to the contrary, emergence operates within the domain of the sciences to show that generation is not at all spontaneous, but entails a time-intensive, chemically-driven process of synthesis that involves irrational leaps in complexity and non-linear causation. (190-191)

The desire to have the story be compatible with early twentieth century scientific insights plagues Camara's reading. Spontaneous generation is, after all, not by definition incompatible with an understanding of life as an emergent phenomenon. Similarly, he holds that "the vitalism of 'The Derelict' is the kind that Jane Bennett refers to as 'critical' or 'modern'" (179), i.e. theories (like those of Bergson) that posit life as an immaterial force that nevertheless still falls within the purview of science, rather than that of theology or metaphysics. Later, his perceptive reading of the story thwarts this too facile projection of theory onto text, and he has to conclude: "Ultimately, being able to decide whether or not the vitalism of 'The Derelict' is 'critical' strikes me as less important than the more fundamental realization that 'critical' vitalism influenced the tale's philosophical outlook, and that it need not adhere at all points to 'critical' vitalism's tenets" (192). It is very hard to approach the story in all of its textual idiosyncrasies and still expect it to present a straight-forward theory as to what life is. There is something *like* Bergsonian vitalism at work in "The Derelict", but this theory is challenged, warped by the tale's sublime estrangement strategies.

Camara nevertheless hits on an important point here, even if this is perhaps not entirely in line with his own argument: Bergson and Hodgson both in their own ways insist on a potentiality and complexity to life that are irreducible to the mechanistic underpinnings of conventional materialism. Just like Bergson was driven to poetic prose and intuitionism to puncture the Darwinist (or perhaps Spencerian) idea of evolution which he thought too "mechanistic and artificial", focused as it was "on chance and

natural selection" (Miquel 42), so does Hodgson take recourse to a kind of weird stylistics. Life, we are told in quick succession, is "an evolved product, manifested through matter and bred of conditions" (128); it is an unspecified combination of materials exposed to certain temperatures and left to their own devices for an indefinite amount of time, which seems to point to a materialist framework, but then we are told that there might be an ill-defined "third factor", and that the life-force exerts its own agency *over* matter, and that it is one of the "monsters of the void" (ibid.), completely outside the confines of human understanding, yet is *not* a spiritual mystery. The quick succession of half-elaborated theories that ultimately defer explanation indefinitely serve the same role as Carnacki's eloquent inarticulacy or the recluse's sober-minded description of the indescribable – Hodgson is reconciling nature and supernature, bringing the marvellous within the purview of science before at the last moment withdrawing it from any systematic understanding. When the narrator contends that the doctor's recourse to chemistry means he is denying life after death, the latter responds "what objection have you to material life after death?" (129). Just as matter in Hodgson's work is time and again shown to be strangely capacious and malleable, able as it is to contain souls and gods, we are invited to conceptualise life in the same terms. Like in "The Hog", where Carnacki speculates on the origin of the monstrous entity, and on that of the human spirit, as a phenomenon bred out of material forces, the material basis for life that is put forward in "The Derelict" does very little to take away its fundamental unknowability. Matter, it is implied, is groundless – capable of manifesting just about anything. We can conclude, then, that materialist and vitalist templates which the text employs are not attempts at theorising life or consciousness, but are instead invoked as means through which weird affects can be brought into the text, precisely because of their partial but unsuccessful attempt at explanation. The resulting "limitations on comprehension" which Camara speculates "could be inherent to human thought, or possibly due to the nature of life in itself" (188) are instead intentional textual effects, taking the reader beyond their common understanding of what life is, whether this understanding is metaphysical or mechanistic. The instability caused by casting the life-force as a "monster of the void" creates terror at life's abyssal potentiality, causing the sublime to thread its way through the text. The sense of disgust felt at the derelict's oozing corporeality does not drown out the thrill of wonder at the impossible configurations of life the story makes possible.

Out of the Storm and Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachtani

Out of the Storm

I would now like to turn to two of Hodgson's short stories which most remarkably exhibit his use of the sublime, presenting excellent case studies for reflecting on the way literary affect is created and conveyed. Both stories explicitly feature questions regarding the material transmissions of thought and emotion, and plumb the blasphemous potential of their premises. "Out of the Storm", according to Sam Moskowitz, "is so emotionally charged that it almost seems a cry of torment from the author" (69) and proved, according to him, that, ironically, "Hodgson, whose literary success would be in a large measure based on the impressions he received at sea, actually hated and feared the waters with an intensity that was the passion of his life" (69-70). Moskowitz continues: "He hated the sea, he hated ships because they sailed upon the sea, he hated the sailors on those ships (tempered with pity), and at times he hated God because He created the sea!" (70). While these claims seem exaggerated, and many alternative reasons can be found for why Hodgson may have disliked his time as a sailor (his surviving essays regarding the labour conditions in the mercantile navy come to mind), it is indisputable that "Out of the Storm" is one of his tales containing the most powerful, condensed expressions of awe and terror.

The tale begins with a frame story (albeit one which is never completed) in which a scientist receives a distress call through the tappings of an unspecified 'instrument' that nevertheless seems to be working much like a telegraph relaying morse code. The distress message in question is sent by a sailor on a sinking ship, and is the rambling account of his last moments. Deliriously, he talks of the sea as the 'Thing' which has taken over the vessel, and he renounces God, believing the Thing to be more powerful. He describes the atmosphere of sin it suffuses the air with, and relates the way in which the last survivors are swept into its jaws, or have given in to their worst impulses and killed each other. Finally he seemingly comes to his senses, repents of his blasphemy, and drowns.

All the usual markers of the incommunicable and the inconceivable can be found here: "I wonder if you really understand what I feel at the present time – you sitting

comfortably in your laboratory, I out here upon the waters, already one among the dead" (Hodgson 43), the sailor says to the scientist. Describing the horribly arched waves that curve over the ship before descending upon it, he exclaims: "Think of it! You cannot" (45). Nevertheless, his message is as much a distress call as a perverse initiation; the sailor is compelled against his better judgment to speak the unspeakable: "I have no right to tell of it to you; to speak of it to one of the living is to initiate innocence into one of the infernal mysteries – to talk of foul things to a child" (44). His descriptions of what is happening on deck suggest the world has turned upside down, in more senses than one. Earth and sky seem to have traded places: "The sky is the colour of mud – do you understand? – grey mud!" (ibid.), the clouds are "monstrous, mildewed-looking hulls" that "show solid, save where the frightful wind tears their lower edges into great feelers that swirl savagely above us, like the tentacles of some enormous Horror" (ibid.). On deck, on the other hand, all sense of solidity has been lost. The ship itself is "little more than a sort of breakwater for the giant seas" (ibid.), most of it "swamped" (45) by the Thing. By reversing earth and sky, the story gives the impression the ship has already sunk. This loss of stability and topsy-turviness moreover also affects the quickly unravelling social fabric aboard the ship, as evidenced by the behaviour of what few survivors remain. We are told that the Thing is "teaching them" (45) violence, its exhalations cloud the air with "an infection of sin" (ibid.). The sailor sees a mother and child hanging from a rail, the child clinging to its mother, who bites at its hands "like a foul beast" (46); a young girl, "her soul hideous with the breath of the *Thing*" (ibid.), struggles with her lover for shelter, striking at him and smiling as he falls to his death. Although she does not address "Out of the Storm", Emily Alder has productively used Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia to talk about ships in Hodgson's fiction. The vessel caught in the gravity well of the Thing is just such a "countersite" (Alder 158) where "cultural and scientific norms are inverted" (181). With "the mud overhead" ("Out of the Storm" 45) and "shrieking foam" (ibid) below, the ship allows for a distortion of those norms, where even the bonds of maternal and sexual love are subject to unravelling, and the soon-to-be-dead may speak their unbearable secrets to the living.

Although, as we shall see, the dismaying truth the sailor desires to impart to the living goes beyond the tragedy of shipwreck, nevertheless the link between the sea and

the afterlife is significant: the Thing, we are told, is "the death-side of the sea" (ibid.). The sailor even goes so far as to say that the sea and the grave "are one and the same" (ibid.); death, in other words, is merely the true nature of the sea, a secret which it has kept "hitherto so well-guarded", but now, through the use of the telegraph, can be revealed "in all its hideous nakedness" (ibid.). The importance of the telegraph goes beyond being a convenient contraption that facilitates the story, it becomes a means to convey knowledge that would spoil the innocence of the living, who are likened to children. The sailor remarks with wry triumph: "Death knows not of this little instrument beneath my hands that connects me to the quick, else would he haste to quiet me" (ibid.). The reliance of the conceit of the story on wireless transmission together with the fact that the sailor asserts that he is "already one among the dead" (43), one of the "alive-in-death" (44) opens up an interesting connection to, on the one hand, the use of telegraph machines in spiritualism and, on the other, the parallel between telegraphy and literature. The development of wireless telegraphy during the fin-de-siècle was deeply imaginatively linked to the exploits of spiritualists and telepaths. Richard Noakes observes that for many psychical researchers

> electrical communication and in particular, wireless telegraphy seemed to be analogous to and lend credibility to psychic forms of communication. Telepathy, for example, involved the exchange of intelligence or impressions without material channels of communication and usually involved people who acted as receivers or recipients and senders or agents. (143)

Noakes moreover shows that this overlap between the disciplines of spiritualism and wireless technology was acknowledged by practitioners of both to go beyond mere analogy: "many wireless practitioners turned out to have interests in spiritualism and psychical research, and many spiritualists and psychical researchers had considerable interests in electrical and wireless experimentation" (145). W.T. Stead, whose journal *Borderland* is evoked by Hodgson, as we have seen, in both the title and content of his novel *The House on the Borderland*, was one of the great enthusiasts of the possibilities wireless technology opened up for the elaboration and recognition of telepathic communication as well as messages from the beyond (Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* 138-139). A second consideration is that the telegraph lays bare the mediacy of

affect, which connects to Derrida's concept of teletechnologies. The artificiality of the elaborate SOS message, cutting off in a grotesque: "'I am dr-own-ing! I – am – dr –'" (48), the very tension between the events (a man drowning) and the constraints of the medium (requiring the painstaking formation of dots and dashes to represent each letter), emphasises the impossibility of the illusion of the direct transmission of acute emotional distress the story produces. The "cry of torment" Moscowitz speaks of is generated by the literary devices of the weird story as much as it is produced through the technology of the ship-to-shore wireless telegraph. Just like the ghostly electrical tele-technology enables the conveyance of sublime if blasphemous messages from the dead or dying so does the story do the same – its literary machinery enables the creation of sublime affects and their distribution to the reader.

This consideration of the story as a ghostly medium relaying cosmic anguish brings us closer to understanding the emotional charge of which Moskowitz speaks. Timothy Murphy holds that "[e]vil in Hodgson's weird fiction is simply the incomprehensible alien that threatens the human, whose survival is the only practical measure of good" (Murphy, "William Morris" 327). He considers "Out of the Storm" to be exemplary in its illustration of Hodgson's brute materialist philosophy and aggressive denouncement of supernaturalism. His point of departure is the sailor's declaration that "*The sea is now all the God there is!* That is one of the things I have learnt. Listen! *it* is laughing again. God is *it*, not He" (45). "In other words," Murphy concludes,

> "it" is protean matter, not anthropomorphic spirit. On this basis he [Hodgson] pioneers a mode of narrative in which the horrifying threats arise not from supernatural entities inherited from religion, folklore, or mythology but from material entities emerging at the extreme limits of scientific plausibility, the biologically alien rather than the spiritually demonic. (Murphy, "Labor" 229)

What I would argue Murphy ignores here is that the story does not become stranded in the contemplation of an empty, presence-less cosmos. Its central scandal is not the absence of spirit, but an illicit presencing of spirit sans God. When the sailor says "I ignore God; for there is a stronger than He. My God is here, beside me, around me, and will soon be above me" (45), the sea in all its crude materiality is sublimated into godhood, becoming a Thing that calls ("It is calling to me! call – I must go – The sea calls!" (ibid.)).

The sailor's most shocking act of which he repents in the end is not the denial of God so much as the fact that he has exposed, through the exaltation of the Thing, the arbitrariness of the religious impulse, the proclivity of the human subject to wantonly animate and bestow spirit unto nature. What he experiences "in the last extremity" (43) is not much different from what Rudolf Otto's calls "creature-feeling", the feeling of smallness before the overwhelming supremacy of the numen. His response is a (re)lapse into what Otto characterises as an earlier and superseded stage of religion, that of 'daemonic dread'. In this way, powerless fear and awe renders indifferent matter into an animate entity that laughs, calls to and teaches humans, and is given to "monstrous gloatings" (44) over them. After all, Otto concedes, "even when it [the numinous feeling] has long attained its higher and purer mode of expression it is possible for the primitive types of excitation that were formerly a part of it to break out in the soul in all their original naïveté and so to be experienced afresh" (30). This also goes some way to explain the breakdown of the bonds of love and community on the ship into a bestial frenzy of survival (the mother biting at her child's hands because he weighs her down, the girl striking her sweetheart because they are competing for shelter): the foundational ethical fiction of human community is exposed and collapses in the same way the moral dimension of God dissolves into irrational impulse. "Out of the Storm" stages and problematises how "protean matter" becomes invested with "anthropomorphic spirit" both on the level of nature (the sea becoming 'daemonic') and on a social level (the establishment of a community out of a group of human animals bent on individual survival). Its framing as a telegraph message amplifies and underscores the way in which weird affects are distributed to a readership already faced with pressing questions concerning the transmission of consciousness and spirit in a steadily secularising society.

There is moreover a profusion of parallels between "Out of the Storm" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"[43]. Both Hodgson's story and Coleridge's poem portray the hardships of a sailor lost at sea, who are both in different ways compelled to reach out to a listener – the mariner is "forced" (line 580) to do so, while Hodgson's sailor acts against his better judgment. The agency of their listeners is similarly compromised: the wedding guest "cannot choose but hear" (line 18) the mariner's grisly account; the narrator of

[43] I am once more relying on the readings of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Cavell, and de Graef.

"Out of the Storm" is ordered to "Read!" (43) (the scientist is unable to hear but is nevertheless told to "Listen!" (45)). Their audience thus transfixed, the sailor and the mariner relate their crisis of faith. In Coleridge this crisis is brought along by a denial of animacy: the mariner kills the albatross, denying it a Christian soul, and effectively kills the world with it; his fellow crewmembers are similarly deprived of spirit, and consequently turn into shambling corpses. In Hodgson the crisis takes the shape of a careless, extravagant attribution of animacy through which the sea is theomorphised into the Thing, displacing God. The mariner's loss of faith is accompanied by the loss of the ability to pray that mercifully returns to him once he blesses the water snakes ("The selfsame moment I could pray" (line 289)), while Hodgson's sailor is rudely shaken out of his blasphemy when he hits his head, and upon regaining consciousness he similarly turns to prayer. Where Hodgson's tale departs from Coleridge is in its broken frame narrative. When the sailor drowns and the morse code message breaks off, there is no comforting return to the scientist's laboratory; there is no resolution, no moral to be drawn from the sailor's fate, as there is from that of the mariner ("He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast" (lines 613-614). The horror that the tale ends on is not one that is easily recuperated into an uplifting sermon (something that Coleridge, too, struggled with). Instead we are left with "a cry of torment"; a long, hard look at the human aptitude for sublimation which cannot fully be resolved into religion.

Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachtani

In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes that a storm is not in itself sublime, but rather evokes sublime feeling in the human mind. By itself, the storm is merely "horrible" (245), and a rich set of ideas have to be internalised by the mind in order to raise the mere intuition of the storm to an image capable of arousing "the pitch of a feeling which is itself sublime – sublime because the mind has been incited to abandon sensibility and employ itself upon ideas involving higher finality" (246). Thus, a storm is not sublime because it is the direct evidence of the power and wrath of God (which, to Kant, would make religion no better than superstition), but rather, it is through the sublime that we come to know our ability to raise ourselves above nature and contemplate it calmly, and

that we are able to approach the idea of God, "that Being Which inspires deep respect in us, not by the mere display of its might in nature, but more by the faculty which is planted in us of estimating that might without fear, and of regarding our estate as exalted above it" (264). In "Out of the Storm" this operation fails, the storm is exalted above God, and the faculty of the human mind which is sensitive to the sublime becomes suspect. "Eloi Eloi Lama Sabachtani" takes this problem further in its refusal to uplift the weird into the 'proper' god-fearing sublime, positing an essential performativity at the heart of the central story of Christianity, the Crucifixion.

The frame story of "Eloi Eloi" is set in a gentlemen's club, where four friends talk about the recent explosion near Berlin. The event was especially remarkable for having been followed by a period of darkness, and the papers speculate about the late chemist Baumoff's involvement in the development of the bomb to aid the war effort. At this, one of the four, a medical man who turned secret agent by the name of John Stafford, breaks his silence. Stafford assures the group that Baumoff was a great man and a good Christian, and would have never allowed his discoveries to be used in warfare. He then relates what he knows of Baumoff's work, and reveals to have been present at the moment of his death. Baumoff, we are told, was in the process of compiling evidence for the miracles that are said to have transpired during the life and death of Christ, and had recently begun to make a breakthrough in proving that the 'Darkness of the Cross' had physically transpired as a direct result of Christ's suffering. The chemist's theory was that luminiferous aether darkens ever so slightly when a person is in distress, the intensity of which depends on the force of personality the sufferer exerts. From this it follows that "the Enormous Personality of the Christ" (82) would have been able to greatly affect the aether during his final agony. Baumoff produced a chemical compound which, when combusted, disrupts the aether, creating a temporal and highly localised darkness. His final experiment serves to show that its combustion by the human body would produce a much stronger effect. Assisted by Stafford, Baumoff swallows the compound, and, wishing to recreate as closely as possible the conditions of the crucifixion, proceeds to push steel spikes through his hands and feet. Focussing his thoughts on Christ's death scene, Baumoff's suffering produces a rippling, distorting blackness in the room, and his words eventually even manage to project images into the mind of Stafford. The latter

grows more and more awestruck and uncomfortable, and tries to end the experiment. Ultimately, the room begins to tremble as the disturbance of the aether affects matter itself, thereby proving the earthquake that occurred during the crucifixion. Baumoff's condition, however, is worsening, and when he cries out the words "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani!", they are repeated by a monstrous mocking voice that is not his. Stafford runs away, falls, and passes out. When he comes to, he sees Baumoff has died, his face gruesomely deformed and leering. Trying to come to terms with what happened, Stafford speculates on medical explanations for Baumoff's death, but cannot shake the conviction some monstrous force took possession of him in his final moments.

Given its publication in 1919, a year after Hodgson's death in Ypres, it is hard not to read "Eloi Eloi" as foreshadowing the war. China Miéville, as we have seen, considers the weird fiction tradition on the whole to be "pre-Aftermath fiction" ("Weird Fiction" 514), an anxiety-driven response to modernity culminating in the crisis of the First World War, its characteristically destabilising sublime force deriving from "the burgeoning sense that there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality" (513). Miéville references Hodgson's letter from the front (cf. supra) as proof of the explicit "connections between the bad numinous of weird fiction, its obsessive focus on formless monstrosities and, to use Hodgson's own preferred formulation, *abhuman* landscapes, and the epochal enormity of the First World War" (Miéville, "5 to Read" 100-101). He even goes so far as to say that "Hodgson provides a uniquely *uncluttered* insight into Weird Fiction as the literature of crisis. His work cannot be understood without reference to the war in which he died fighting" ("Weird Fiction" 514). He makes a particular case to read "Eloi Eloi" in this light, calling it "Hodgson's single greatest work", "a story of the war itself", "a neglected classic of First World War literature, a key text deserving of a place alongside the poetry of Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon" (ibid.). In the introduction and throughout the analyses of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson's work I have set out the problem of treating weird fiction as a coherent literary movement; I have struggled with the consequent difficulty of making any general statements about a corpus retroactively assembled by Lovecraft based on his personal predilections, and have attempted to embed each text back into its context. I therefore find Miéville's attempt to represent weird fiction as constituting a

more or less clean break with (Gothic, or more broadly fantastic) tradition unhelpful, and I suspect the effort to make *tabula rasa* and consider the weird a 'new' mode of writing is informed by his own desire (as a key figure in the modern resurgence of the weird) to write against certain fantastic conventions. That said, the correlation of this particular story and the War is certainly interesting. Miéville notes regarding the mounting sublime charge of the story: "An irruption of humane yet visionary terror overwhelms what starts as relatively workmanlike prose, until the text invokes 'some Christ-aping monster of the void'. A ghastly implication is not stated, but hangs there: that there is no aping at all, that this monster is the deity that allows the Somme" (ibid.). In what follows, I will trace out and complicate the ways in which such horrors are invoked.

More explicitly than in any of the other stories discussed, except perhaps "The Derelict", (pseudo)science is used here to smuggle the marvellous into the everyday. Baumoff's aim is to furnish "most extraordinary and convincing proofs in support of the more inexplicable things concerning the life and death of Christ" (Hodgson, "Eloi Eloi" 79). Against him stands the atheistic Hautch, a professor of physics, who uses "the 'marvellous' element of the life and death of Christ, as a fulcrum from which to attack Baumoff's theories" (80). Whereas someone like Machen would have parodied the reliance on scientific discourse to generate weird sublime effects[44], Hodgson makes abundant use of disproven or marginal scientific theories to prop up the central premise of his story. The most notable among these theories are that of the convertibility of different kinds of force, and that of ether (or aether). The latter, the hypothesis that light waves require an invisible medium to travel through, had been dealt a serious blow in 1887 by the Michelson-Morley experiment, and later by Albert's Einstein's relativity theory, but nevertheless persisted in both scientific circles up to 1920, as Luckhurst shows (*The Invention of Telepathy* 91), as well as in the popular imagination. The persistence of aether allowed for the formulation of widely divergent forces as interconvertible.

[44] In *The Three Impostors*, a man of science who is nevertheless enlightened beyond materialism to accept the sacramental essence of human life so treasured by Machen pokes fun at the superstitiousness of the scientifically-minded: "You must not, it is true, believe in witchcraft, but you may credit hypnotism; ghosts are out of date, but there is a good deal to be said for the theory of telepathy. Give a superstition a Greek name, and believe in it, should almost be a proverb" (174).

Luckhurst writes that at the end of the nineteenth century physicists formulated an energy discourse in which "[h]eat, light, sound, electricity, or magnetism were seen not as substances, or as forces acting at a distance, but as different states or conditions of etherial tension, communicated by the little wheels, vortexes or cogs held to make up ether" (*The Invention of Telepathy* 88). The leap from physical to psychical forces was an easy one, although never uncontested. Chemist and physicist William Crookes firmly believed in a kind of "psychic force" (ibid.), offering "general and scientific audiences an updated version of an older hypothesis that the brain might be able to transmit and receive physical vibrations in the ether of space which somehow carried the thoughts and impressions involved in telepathy" (Noakes 143). Others, like William Barrett, were more skeptical of physical explanations of telepathy, or, like Oliver Lodge, objected to particular premises like the brain wave theory, but nevertheless "continued to employ implicit or loose analogies between wireless and psychic communication" (Noakes 144). Lodge, moreover, continued to believe in the ether as a medium able to convey spiritual and psychical messages until his death in 1940.

In "Eloi Eloi", correspondingly, Baumoff's transition from "so well-known a statement" (81) as the assertion that light travels through the aether to the claim that there is such a thing as 'personality-force' able to affect and darken the aether is nothing but "a quick, mental stride" (ibid.). This interpenetration of the material and the mental intensifies further when Baumoff predicts the occurrence of "certain physical and psychic phenomena" (85) during the experiment, which can be attributed to "the vibration it [the darkness] will throw off, [that] will be blent (sic) into what I might call the emotional-vibrations, which I shall give off in my distress" (86). By inflicting physical pain upon himself and mentally focussing on the death scene, Baumoff manages to produce a "parallelisation" of conditions (92), gaspingly explaining to Stafford that he requires the "[r]ight association of – of ideas – emotions – for – the – best – results" (ibid.). The influence of Baumoff's "emotional-vibrations" creates certain sensations in Stratford's mind, which he describes as "almost hypnotic" (94). When Baumoff speaks ("'Hush! I'm carrying the Cross'" (95)), "the effect of those simple words, spoken in that new, toneless voice, in that atmosphere of almost unbearable tenseness, was so powerful that, suddenly, with eyes wide open, I saw Baumoff clear and vivid against that unnatural

darkness, carrying a Cross" (ibid.). Besides these psychical phenomena, Baumoff's experiment causes physical effects as well. The most notable among them, aside from the darkness, is the earthquake that happens near the end. Stafford painstakingly exposits how its occurrence is explainable by the fact that in its most primary aspect, matter is nothing but "a localised vibration" (98), capable of being disorganised by a disturbance in the surrounding aether. In his recollection of an earlier lecture by Baumoff, Stafford recalls the scientist's imaginative speculation that "given a machine capable of creating a vibration of the Aether of a sufficient energy, he would engage to destroy not merely the world, but the whole universe itself, including heaven and hell themselves, if such places existed, and had such existence in material form" (99). This statement is remarkable coming from a devout follower of Christ, but if interpreted as coming from Hodgson provides an interesting perspective on the possibilities which this view of the all-encompassing reach of vibration and matter opens up.

Taking into account the way spirit and matter have inextricably merged in Baumoff's research, we are now perhaps in a position to reconsider the project of the "Experimental Chemist" (79) from another angle. Stafford tells us that we are not to understand the scientific explanation for the "Darkness of the Cross" (82) as a detraction from the mystical potency of the image of Christ. Rather, as he realises himself with stupefaction during the experiment, Baumoff "had evolved and made practical to the average understanding a proof that would make to live again the *reality* of that wonder of the world – CHRIST" (96). There is a definite parallel, then, with a tendency we have identified weird fiction to revolve around: the rekindling of a mystical awareness of a world brimming with marvellous life, an awareness which Hodgson manages to firmly inscribe in reality through appealing to "the average understanding". In other words, just like Baumoff's proof (or, perhaps more accurately, performance) of Christ relies on easily comprehensible if unsound physics, so does Hodgson couch his weird phenomena in scientific discourses that they nevertheless always seem to escape in order to reveal a weird substrate to reality. The hypnotic effect Baumoff exerts on Stratford and the image he manages to conjure into his mind reinforce this parallel between the experiment and the story. The right association of ideas and emotions, we are told by Baumoff, facilitates the channeling of Christ, just like the weird tale's evocation of the marvellous relies on

the inducement of the most impactful affective states. Stratford sees Baumoff carry the cross through the combination of "simple words, spoken in that new, toneless voice, in that atmosphere of almost unbearable tenseness" (95); in the same way does the story rely on (respectively) language, style, and mood to create the well-known weird substrate of reality, with its attendant impressions of spiritual ecstasy and looming monstrosity. Accordingly, the imaginary machine from Baumoff's lecture that would be able to topple the world and all its metaphysical extensions (heaven, hell) is Hodgson's story itself. Like "Out of the Storm" it produces an aberrant religiosity that never passes into genuine religion. The sea is not God, but nevertheless "*is now all the God there is*" ("Out of the Storm" 45), just as the thing that possesses Baumoff is not Christ, but a "Christ-apeing (sic) Monster of the Void" ("Eloi Eloi" 104). Both manifestations are described as distinctly scornful and mocking: the sailor in "Out of the Storm" repeatedly describes the Thing as laughing derisively: "the Sea is laughing, as though Hell cackled from the mouth of an ass. It is jeering" (45). The voice in "Eloi Eloi" is also described as "sneering in an incredible, bestial, monstrous fashion" (103), and again as "a horrible mocking voice roar[ing] out in the room, from Baumoff's chair: 'Eloi Eloi, lama sabachtani!'"(ibid.); genuine existential torment at the Lord's abandonment of the world is parodied as the Things in both stories suggest He is no less dependent on sublime performance than they are themselves. What Hodgson creates, in both stories, are the literary mechanisms to tap into the religious impulse and sustain religious feeling, but which nonetheless cannot be entertained as 'the real thing' – leaving only the Thing. It could still be argued, in order to find a compromise with Miéville's vision, that Hodgson is unable to endorse the authenticity of the strong ecstatic charge he creates in his fiction because of the spiritual shellshock of the First World War. However, the emphasis on the interconvertibility of vibration, matter, and emotion in the story bespeak a curious faith in the power of human imagination and literature not yet hollowed out by disillusionment. For this reason, and because I find the concept of "pre-Aftermath fiction" rather unconvincing, I would argue that what "Eloi Eloi", and "Out of the Storm" provide us with is somewhat less of an "*uncluttered* insight" into the crisis of the war, and more of a glimpse into Hodgson's struggle with religion and the aesthetic power of manifesting the numinous that literature has. The most explicit example of criticism of religious zeal can be found in Stafford's description of Baumoff's club, "'The Believers and Provers of Christ'" (86). The bulk of its

members, we are told, are “men fanatically crazed to uphold the Christ” (86), and Stafford considers them “well worthy one of the religio-maniacal extrudences which have been forced into temporary being by certain of the more religiously-emotional minded of our cousins across the water” (ibid.). Hodgson engages in the same religiously-emotional performance, his story is a religio-maniacal extrudence all of its own, but one which despite its weird enchantments pointedly refuses to produce God.

Conclusion

This dissertation has taken a look at some of the works of an incongruent trio of authors – an ornery Welsh mystic, a globetrotting animist, and a shark-fighting bodybuilder – and asked how each of them came to produce fiction that would retrospectively be considered 'weird', how this weird mode operates in their work, and what function it serves. These authors, whose literary output only recently, under the enduring influence of H.P. Lovecraft, started receiving meaningful critical attention, have rarely been considered outside of prevailing paradigms, such as the degeneration model often applied to late Gothic fiction, or various Nonhuman Turn theories. By connecting the weird back to the longer tradition of the sublime, I was able to focus on some aspects that I believe are crucial, yet often overlooked in current scholarship. I distinguish in these works a pervasive current of late-Romanticism, responding as they do to the complex renegotiations of the relationships between man, God, and nature at the *fin de siècle*. This recontextualization has brought into sharper relief how the works of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson in their own ways reconfigure and meditate on the human religious drive in an age marked by rapid changes in the way matter, nature, and spirit are conceptualised. Close attention to the texts reveals how the weird mode lends itself particularly well to the intimation of all manner of presences and absences, its reliance on sublime representational strategies mirroring, or perhaps (depending on the particular story's successful realisation) triggering, a sense of religiosity. The religious feeling these texts evoke is opaque and often without clear direction – the success of the weird tale depends, after all, on the elicitation and careful preservation of an atmosphere of sublimity that dissipates when it is redirected towards God. The meticulously maintained state of unknowing and unknowability that is necessary to accommodate this stray sacrality obstructs materialist paradigms of knowledge, but rarely dissolves into metaphysical comfort. These stories then problematise their own efforts at re-enchantment, not only because they can never provide the consolation of a religious framework without losing their essential affective charge, but also because the undecidability on which they rely calls into question the relationship between the human imagination and the ensoulment of the world. The invocation of the sacred tends to

backfire in weird fiction – "The Great God Pan" is the archetypical example of this – resulting in the summoning of things that are not God, and in a certain self-reflexivity regarding the role of literary performance in generating the altered states of consciousness the weird mode relies on.

Part of the ambition of this project was to leave room for the idiosyncrasies of each author and to depart from texts instead of themes, so as to extricate Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson from the narratives that are currently coalescing regarding what the weird is or does. Nevertheless, I have found the term 'weird' useful to think with, despite its retrospective application being potentially problematic. In my experience, 'weird' becomes a dubious marker if it is used as shorthand to denote a certain literature's philosophy, ideology, anxiety, or their radical break with tradition; I have tried to treat it as a set of aesthetic (formal/affective) strategies stories partake in so as to bring as few presuppositions into the stories as possible. Although I have distilled a more or less coherent thesis out of these disparate texts – something like "weird texts all attempt to perform a kind of dark verbal summoning ritual closely related to the project of Romanticism in order to bring various agencies and presences into the world" – I have found that Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson each realise this in very different ways, and with different ends in mind. Machen alternates uneasily between his faith in the sacramental system and his own complicity in poetically manifesting the divine trace (and botching the job). Blackwood aims to commune with nature by investing it with an all-pervading consciousness, and in doing so is confronted with a host of problems inherent in imagining the other. Hodgson stages sublime forces in nature by drastically expanding the properties of matter, which he tightly interweaves with the workings of the human psyche, sometimes resulting in moments of wry self-awareness regarding the provenance of the numinous. Each author uses the weird to formulate his own distinctive response to the uncertainty of the affective relationship between the human mind and the external world.

The set-up of this thesis – combining close reading and aesthetics to read some long-dead late-Victorians (and somewhat obscure ones at that) – is rather old-fashioned, perhaps all the more so because I have somewhat doggedly refused to situate them in more fashionable theoretical frameworks. I nevertheless believe there is value and

relevance in reading these works as historical records in a long-standing tradition of literature attempting to imaginatively restore the affective links between humans and their environment, especially given the urgency that has in recent years made itself felt throughout the humanities of finding new ways to imaginatively contend with the Anthropocene. I hope this dissertation has shown that weird fiction does not lend itself well to grand projects of decentring the human, or making the nonhuman speak. However, if the weird is not the key to unlocking new, more ethical ways of relating to the planet and all the teeming multitudes of entities that inhabit it, it does reveal the enduring ways in which we as humans have an innate tendency to project soul and significance onto the world, and yearn for intimacy and kinship with others, be they human or not. There is a danger in being dazzled by the discourse of weird sublimity, and by the renewed and revitalised connection it promises to a world which we are, it seems, already grieving for. The relapse into Romanticism in the twenty-first century is understandable: our alienation from our environment seemingly increases at the same rate as our understanding of all the ways we are entangled with it; the intricacy and precarity of ecosystems is (re)discovered as they are destroyed. Remorseful attempts at taking up our moral obligations as individuals in a changed and changing climate by extending personhood and agency to other life forms, or to whole ecological networks, risk concealing the human agency that makes possible these projections – projections that are by necessity contingent on, and limited by, our own mental worlds. Assertions of the reality, and the fragility, of the world around us can go hand in hand with the knowledge (as devastating as it is banal) that we cannot but encounter this world through the lens of our own anthropocentric delusions. Critique fatigue, which many Nonhuman Turn theories that appropriate the weird suffer from, can blind us to the fact that our own susceptibility to poetry and to the ecstatic states of consciousness weird fiction wishes to impart does not open the door to “ecognosis” (Morton), or any “wisdom of the unhuman” (Newell). Weird fictions and aesthetics offer only ways of recalibrating our affective position towards our worlds and our selves, essential to our existence perhaps, but insidiously suffused with human concerns nonetheless.

Moreover, when the flicker of the sublime in weird fiction is taken as a window onto unmediated nonhuman reality, the cultural and political forces that produce and

condition it tend to remain unacknowledged. In my readings I have focussed on the ways in which early weird texts imaginatively use scientific, pseudoscientific and occult frameworks to unground everyday understandings of self, nature, matter, consciousness, life, and spirit in order to attain their ecstatic effects. These specific ruptures of the quotidian could only occur within the cultural landscape of the *fin de siècle*; their context is what makes them significant. No less productive of sublime aesthetics are the constructions of race and empire that underpin many of these works, whether it is Celticism – taking on very different connotations in each author's body of work – or the colonial imagination chiefly at work in the oeuvre of Blackwood. "The Wendigo" in particular illustrates how contingent the categories of human and nonhuman are, and how easy it is for weird fiction to perpetuate colonialist fantasies in its pursuit of the sublime. It has become impossible to pretend H.P. Lovecraft's visions of unspeakable eldritch monstrosity were not fuelled by his virulent racism – why should the excesses of affect that sustain his predecessors' works be any less profoundly shaped by the cultural discourses in which they were written? Studies of weird fiction which motivate their lack of attention to its historical context by espousing the logic that anything tainted with anthropocentrism is suspect risk reifying various kinds of human biases into ontology.

This brings me to my own study's biases and limitations. The decision to work on Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson was in no small part informed by their inclusion in Lovecraft's "Supernatural Horror in Literature". While I believe the work of these authors presents an interesting cross-section of weird stories, I initially took the authority of Lovecraft for granted in a manner I started to question along the way. I have come to reflect on the essay's power of canon formation more thoroughly, and I wonder if the energy many scholars expend passionately defending minor weird writers like the ones in question – urging a wider readership to engage with them for their alleged philosophical reflections, speculative knowledge, or aesthetic qualities – is not better spent on broadening this emerging canon. The inclusion of authors who are not white men is especially necessary in a field that is so thoroughly defined by a figurehead with a reputation like Lovecraft's – the notion that the latter's connoisseurship is tainted and limited by the views he held should not be controversial. It is my view that the expansion of the canon to include a diversity of writers is urgently needed to test and rethink

theories of what the weird can be and can do. An example of an author not generally included in the early weird tradition is Vernon Lee (the pseudonym of Violet Page), whom Anthony Camara suggests presents a "psychologically-inflected" (47) weird. While I have exhaustively argued in favour of reading my own corpus as psychologically-inflected, Camara makes a good case for Lee's placement alongside Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson in her attention to the extra-mundane, while also emphasising that the nature of her work (in its inclination towards aestheticism) complicates general understandings of weird fiction. This short passage from Lee's introduction to *Art and Man*, in which she recalls her collaboration with Clementine "Kit" Anstruther-Thomson[45], suggests a rich comparative reading in conjunction with Blackwood's "The Willows":

> When the last red of sunset shone like enmeshed threads among the thin hill-side spinnies, and the dusk rose from the half-reaped cornfields into the green clearness of the sky, and, under the mixed twilight and moon, the sea seemed to curdle and swell in livid marble masses beyond the salmon-nets, she would point with her chin, as it were, and, without removing her eyes from it all, say in a hushed voice (her voice was of a very lovely dark but clear medium) and not without mystery; "Now we have become mere intruders. Now it is *They* who are in possession". (12)

Some efforts are being made to redress the gender imbalance in the representation of weird fiction writers, such as the recent collections of short stories published in two volumes by Lisa Morton and Leslie S. Klinger, *Weird Women: Classic Supernatural Fiction by Groundbreaking Female Writers*, although not all of the women included could be considered 'weird' writers, as opposed to writers of ghost stories or supernatural fiction more broadly. The publishing conditions for authors of colour were evidently even more difficult than they were for white women, and substantial work remains to be done on the non-white writers who carved out a space within speculative fiction genres later in the twentieth century. Anthologies such as *Dark matter: a Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* try to offer a counternarrative.

[45] Lee's psychological aesthetics were suffused by her attraction to Anstruther-Thomson, giving a queer slant to her artistic experience and expression.

The current surge in weird fiction publications (the so-called 'New Weird') has seen the resurrection and reinvention of literary styles associated with *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and early twentieth century pulp, dreaming up fresh worlds heavily laced with the sublime. The excessive focus in current scholarship on a conception of the new weird as even more concerned with the 'nonhuman', 'unhuman', 'inhuman' or 'anti-human' than its precursors, means that a lot of work remains to be done regarding new weird fiction's late-Romantic inheritance from such writers as Machen, Blackwood, Hodgson, and Lovecraft. If the old weird is unyoked from the task of undercutting anthropocentrism, and is taken seriously as an aesthetic project concerned with transforming human affective relations to the environment, I hypothesise that new perspectives will open up to read, say, the fiction of China Miéville, K.J. Bishop, or Jeff VanderMeer, paying closer attention to the psychological realities, cultural forces, and power relations that define it. This thesis may serve as the groundwork to explore in what guises the weird sublime has entered the twenty-first century, and what enchantments it effectuates in our reconfigured relationship to a world now marked by late capitalism, climate change, persistent structural violence, and environmental destruction.

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