

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Dark Matter: British Weird Fiction and the Substance of Horror, 1880-1927

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In English

by

Anthony Christopher Camara

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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Professor Joseph Bristow, Chair

This dissertation examines the origins of British weird horror fiction, an understudied literary genre that had an extraordinary impact on later writers whose works appeared in popular magazines such as *The Argosy* (1882-1978) and *Weird Tales* (1923-1954). By far the most popular writer associated with the latter publication is H.P. Lovecraft, an American practitioner of cosmic weird horror whose astounding fictions have become emblematic of the genre in the mainstream imagination. This dissertation locates Lovecraft's early modernist predecessors in British authors Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and William Hope Hodgson. By tracking the evolution of the genre through these authors' works, this study addresses the following question: "How does weird horror fiction distinguish itself from prior supernatural traditions, in particular the Gothic romance and the Victorian ghost story?" The chapters answer that inquiry by demonstrating that British weird horror fiction destabilizes scientific and philosophical accounts of physical matter, as well as the materialistic theories of

biological life and the cosmos that issue from such accounts. Accordingly, weird horror writers devise characteristic strategies to “darken” matter, injecting it with incomprehensible, vitalistic energies; hidden, metaphysical realities; and higher alien dimensions. And yet, the genre is hardly mere anti-science; British weird horror draws from mathematics, chemistry, and biology to launch its virtuoso speculations.

The first chapter examines Vernon Lee’s 1880 essay on the supernatural, “Faustus and Helena,” and her short story, “Amour Dure” (1887). While Lee is not typically associated with weird horror, this chapter demonstrates how her work marks the emergence of this genre. The second chapter looks at Arthur Machen’s novella, “The Great God Pan” (1894), and his novel, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), which contest T.H. Huxley’s and Ernst Haeckel’s theories of biological life. The third chapter analyzes the outdoor horror tales of Algernon Blackwood, in particular “The Willows” (1907), which exemplifies the genre’s engagement with mathematics and physics. The last chapter takes an in-depth look at some maritime short fiction by William Hope Hodgson. These works pit the creative powers of ecology against Darwinism, and therefore invite new critical approaches to weird horror that depart from familiar narratives of evolution and degeneration.

The dissertation of Anthony Christopher Camara is approved.

Helen Deutsch

Lowell Gallagher

Kathleen Komar

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2013

For Diep

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Vita

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Introduction

I. On the Matter of British Weird Horror Fiction

In this dissertation, I investigate the origins of a critically underappreciated genre that I call British weird horror fiction, which emerged from fin-de-siècle aestheticism, decadence, and the late Victorian revival of the Gothic. The major objectives of this dissertation are three-fold. First, I trace the evolution of British weird horror so that scholars can better understand its origins and identify its signal innovations, as well as understand how this body of fiction arises from its dynamic conversation with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century science and philosophy. Second, the present study provides in-depth critical attention to a group of writers whose intellectually bold and formally inventive work deserves to be better known by critics and general readers. Thirdly, my research aims to appreciate British weird horror fiction's pervasive influence on the contemporary multimedia genre that is today referred to simply as "horror."

With these objectives in mind, I contend that British weird horror fiction engages with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophic and scientific accounts of physical matter, as well as theories about the nature of biological life and the cosmos attendant upon such conceptions. Rather than simply function as allegories for these theories, I maintain that British weird horror tales question, destabilize, and re-imagine them. Thus the authors featured in this dissertation devise characteristic ways of "darkening" matter. For instance, an author might imbue matter with monstrous metaphysical depths; make it a vessel for higher alien dimensions; or impregnate it with incomprehensible vital forces. Moreover, these fictions not only darken matter at the contextual level, but also at the formal level, by disturbing the representational materials of language and narrative structure. These disruptions in signification emphasize the epistemologically vexed status of matter in British weird horror fiction.

My chapters focus on the works of four major exponents of this genre: Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935); Arthur Machen (1863-1947); Algernon Blackwood (1869-1951); and William Hope Hodgson (1877-1918). To give the reader a foretaste of the dark matter encountered in the works of these authors, as well as provide some examples of quintessentially weird horror that will assist us in defining a genre that has eluded literary taxonomists, here I cite one charged textual moment from each author's work wherein materials take on a blasphemous life of their own, or reveal hidden capacities that explode familiar conceptions of matter as inert, knowable, and finite.

Lee's short story, "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" (1898; trans. 1909), begins with a description of the cathedral dedicated to the titular figure. Lee writes that "[h]uge garlands of pears and melons hang"¹ from the massive structure, while "monstrous heads with laurel wreaths and epaulets burst forth from all the arches. The roof shines barbarically, green, white, and brown, above the tawny stone" (Lee 249). Two weather vanes, depicting hearts pierced by daggers, each stand "pricked up like ears above the building's monstrous front" (249). The overall contours of the building, which suggest a monster with pointed ears, emphasize how the stony walls of the church pulsate with a sinister vital intensity, if not excessive erotic energy. These anarchic forces circulate beneath the aesthetic surfaces of the cathedral's ornamentation, almost as if they were on the verge of breaking through the masonry.

In Machen's "The Novel of the White Powder," an episode from *The Three Imposters; or, the Transmutations* (1895), the negligence of an old apothecary causes a young man to take a weird drug that has nightmarishly corrosive effects on his body, mind, and soul. The mysterious substance ruins him morally, and then physically. During a house call, the doctor and sister of the young man discover his decomposed remains: "[t]here upon the floor was a dark and putrid

mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes, and bubbling with unctuous oily bubbles like boiling pitch.”² Not only does the young man’s sister look into this abysmal black mess, but the mess looks back into her: “out of the midst of it shone two burning points like eyes, and I saw a writhing and stirring as of limbs, and something moved and lifted up what might have been an arm” (Machen 207). As the titular phrase “*the Transmutations*” suggests, this slimy abomination is no mere deliquescing corpse. Its “corruption,” “hideous rottenness,” and resemblance to “boiling pitch”—not to mention its infernal eyes, which glow like “two burning points”—suggest the stain of mortal sin, and therefore tie the spectacle of oozing matter to a damning metaphysical transgression that involves the young man’s soul. Indeed, the mere existence of such a thing as vitalized slime, bereft of form but still alive, suggests a transcendental sin against all creation—a flagrant rebellion against the order of things in the rule-bound realms of physical existence.

Blackwood’s short tale, “The Transfer” (1911), tells of a lush summer garden in full bloom that nevertheless contains an eyesore, one that is not merely offensive in aesthetic terms. In one forbidden corner of the garden lies a blighted, barren patch of earth that sucks the vitality out of any creature, human or otherwise, unlucky enough to come into physical contact with it. Witnessing her employer fall prey to this horrid vampirism, the narrator says: “I saw his hard, bleak face grow somehow wider, spread through the air, and downwards. A similar thing, I saw, was happening at the same time to his entire person, for it drew out into the atmosphere in a stream of movement.”³ She adds: “his face for a second made me think of those toys of india-rubber that children pull. It grew enormous . . . all this vitality . . . [was] being taken from him and transferred—elsewhere” (Blackwood 238). By exerting its own powerful gravitational pull that warps the human body, stretching it to outrageous proportions and twisting it into a

grotesque swirl, this “singular” (230) swath of dark matter inspires a sense of cosmic fear. That this anomaly paradoxically manifests itself within (and as) nature amplifies feelings of cosmic dread, and invites the reader to speculate whether the universe is indifferent to, or hostile toward, human life. Neither possibility, of course, is very appealing.

Hodgson’s little-known novel, *The Boats of the “Glen Carrig”* (1907), recounts the eighteenth-century travels of a lost vessel that encounters a succession of sea-spawned monsters. In one adventure, the narrator and his crew discover the “weed men,” an intelligent but malign race of mucous-slathered, human-slug hybrids. The narrator says: “we each of us stared down upon an unearthly sight; for the valley all beneath us was a-swarm with moving creatures, white and unwholesome in the moonlight, and their movements were somewhat like the movements of monstrous slugs.”⁴ These humanoid mollusks bear “two short and stumpy arms; but the ends appeared divided into hateful and wriggling masses of small tentacles, which slid hither and thither as the creatures moved about the bottom of the valley” (Hodgson 101). Perhaps even more upsetting than the queasy means of locomotion and wretched morphology of the “weed men” is the mental association that the narrator forms at the sight of these creatures. They remind him of “naked humans, very fleshy and crawling upon their stomachs” (101). When attacked by these repulsive beings, he relates: “I could have screamed, had I been in less terror; for the great eyes, so big as crown pieces, the bill like to an inverted parrot’s, and the slug-like undulating of its white and slimy body, bred in me the dumbness of one mortally stricken” (102). The persistent, sexualized association of human flesh with slimy mollusk matter raises the unsavory question of how human beings are related to basal forms of animal life. Is Hodgson dramatizing the knowledge of humankind’s evolutionary ascent from, or degenerative descent into, the primordial cesspits of biological life? Or might the genesis of these creatures be due to

a transformative ecological relationship between man and mollusk, a becoming-slug that adds another slithering obscenity to nature's vast stock of horrors? If such inter-species liaisons can occur, what does this say about the nature of organic materials and their physico-chemical components?

As these examples vividly illustrate, in British weird horror fiction, matter is anything but the solid, opaque, and trustworthy substance that it was often made out to be in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Radically doubting the alleged solidity and consistency of matter, weird horror fiction interrogates substance by excavating it down to the finest of micro-scales (and even farther beyond), delving beneath its surface to explore its labyrinthine catacombs and unwholesome architectures wherein ancient horrors are interred, and perhaps best left undisturbed. For British weird horror writers, the inside of matter houses that which is outside of thought: sprawling alien dimensions heedless of physical laws; impossibly twisted, non-Euclidean geometries; obscure vital forces; insidious metaphysical agencies; and all manner of subversive parasites nested within matter. I show that each of the authors featured in this dissertation contribute some anomalous life-form, or contaminating element of peculiar properties, to the strange ecosystem hidden in matter that produces, and is produced by, British weird horror fiction.

My dissertation necessarily begins with an analysis of Lee's work because her tales register early stirrings of the weird horror genre, and help us to understand how this movement in fiction emerged through its breaks with, and modifications of, preceding supernatural traditions such as the Victorian ghost story and the Gothic romance. Lee, a renowned Victorian intellectual who produced numerous works on art history and aesthetic theory, and whose supernatural fiction has recently attracted renewed attention from critics,⁵ is not typically

mentioned in connection with the weird horror writers who are prominently featured in this study. I therefore argue that her work on the supernatural is situated on the cusp of the genre, if not at its very head. Machen's fiction consolidates a number of major thematic and narratological features of weird horror writing. His tales invite speculation on the nature of exterior reality outside human thought, experience, and perception—a cosmic anxiety that typifies the genre as it develops through the twentieth century. Like Machen, Blackwood draws from mysticism and occultism, but also shows familiarity with mathematics and physics. Such borrowings demonstrate the evolution of the genre into a high-concept blend of science fiction and horror that interrelates, with startling probability, discourses as disparate as mathematics and demonology. In Hodgson's short maritime fictions, weird horror largely abandons its investments in the occultism and the supernatural in exchange for a thorough, albeit speculative, grounding in the sciences. In almost all respects, Hodgson's fiction is most like that of H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), the American author whose work has today become synonymous with the phrase "weird horror." Therefore, by situating Hodgson's work in the genealogical line that passes through Lee, Machen, and Blackwood, my dissertation tracks the development of weird horror as it takes its most widely recognized shape—a slimy, seething mass of tentacles⁶—in the corpus of Lovecraft's writings.

In their recently published anthology *The Weird* (2011), a landmark collection of tales that evinces the genre's mainstream popularity as well as the recent surge of academic interest in it, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer note the challenges of attempting to define a genre that, as its name suggests, centralizes numinous, indefinable, and unknowable phenomena. They write that the evolution of the weird tale is

the story of the refinement (and destabilization) of supernatural fiction within an established framework, but also of the welcome contamination of that fiction by the influence of other traditions, some only peripherally connected to the fantastic. The Weird, in a modern vernacular, has also come to mean fiction in which some other element, like weird ritual or the science fictional, replaces the supernatural while providing the same dark recognition of the unknown and the visionary.⁷

Other commentators, such as the popular “New Weird” fiction writer China Miéville,⁸ have found the teratology of the weird to be useful in defining the genre and accounting for how it departs from prior supernatural traditions heavily invested in mythology, folklore, and theology. Miéville writes that the “monsters of high Weird are indescribable and formless *as well as . . .* described with an excess of specificity, an accursed share of impossible somatic precision; and their constituent bodyparts are disproportionately insectile/cephalopodic, without mythic resonance.”⁹ Miéville crucially adds that the tentacle, the Cthulhuoid icon of weird horror that has penetrated into the mainstream, is a “limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in ‘Western’ aesthetics)” (Miéville 105), and its transition from total absence in pre-nineteenth-century horror literature to its cultural ubiquity in the present day “signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture” (105).

In defining the weird, the VanderMeers and Miéville necessarily emphasize ruptures with prior supernatural traditions. For instance, the VanderMeers write of “some other element” that “replaces the supernatural,” while for Miéville, divergent morphological (or rather, teratological) form indicates different literary function. In this dissertation, I suggest another rubric by which weird horror fiction might be distinguished from the preceding supernatural movements in literature: it devises fresh ways of conceptualizing matter, or proposes metaphysical alternatives

to it that wrest reality away from materiality. The VanderMeers write of “a dark recognition of the unknown and the visionary,” and I argue that in British weird horror fiction, it is matter that is the locus of this recognition. Such knowledge is necessarily “dark” because matter is the “glass darkly” through which the contours of deeper, withdrawn realities are glimpsed. British weird horror writers therefore descry incomprehensible terrors within and through matter, as if its molecular lattice formed a prism showing an image of a fragmented and deformed world all but unrecognizable as our own—an otherworld of horror in which any trace resemblance to our universe is not a reassuring sign of familiarity, but a hideous mockery.

Accordingly, the chimerical bodies that Miéville theorizes—which are whole animal menageries, if not universes, unto themselves—reflect the elemental strangeness of substance, or the weird immaterial forces that alternately undergird and un-ground matter. If British weird horror revels in the spectacle of human anatomy seamlessly spliced with cephalopods, insects, worms, mollusks, plants, fungi, and even minerals, then these haphazardly-grafted horrors also reflect an ontological anxiety about what these bodies consist of, and what the properties of this putative substance (or substances) are. This point redoubles in force when applied to the incorporeal or ambiguously embodied shapes that stalk the scenes of weird horror fiction, such as Machen’s numinous, satyr-like denizens of a parallel plane of existence, or Blackwood’s extra-dimensional alien entities, which posit the insufficiency of conventional concepts of matter (or human thought *tout court*) to resolve the perplexities of the cosmos.

In British weird horror, the investigation of matter proceeds by way of occult and mystical revelation, and/or ontological and metaphysical speculation. The latter approach can lead to an infinite regression of increasingly abstract, far-flung theorizations that transform matter into the most remote, dubious, and foreign aspect of the universe, just as it seemingly

remains the most immediate, knowable, and familiar: What could be more evident to the senses than the existence of matter, with all of its reassuring weight, solidity, and rigidity? From this contradiction issues a feeling of profound alienation from the cosmos. In weird horror fiction, the gap that separates thought from being and concept from object becomes a richly proliferative void breeding all manner of terrors, which thrive on our worst suspicions and gnawing fears about existence. Put simply, weird horror fiction is the literary performance of matter going crazy—and human beings going crazy attempting to understand it.

If weird horror probes the darkness of matter and declares that there is nothing there to be understood, then this fact becomes even more pernicious with the realization that matter is nevertheless still *something*. British weird horror, therefore, does not simply re-theorize matter. Rather, the genre narrates matter such that it emerges as the site of an open philosophical problem that may well be non-conceptual and insoluble. So it is that weird horror unsettles the reader not only by way of its anomalous bestiary and its stock of bizarre plot twists, but also the way in which it persistently gestures towards the limits of knowledge and the horrifying vistas that lie beyond. To foreground such gestures, British weird horror uses an array of formal techniques that dramatize the ontological and metaphysical problems that accrue to matter. Such devices—which include multiple narrative perspectives, nested frame narration, indirection, chronological fragmentation, and the proliferation of plot holes—disrupt the consistency of narrative and query its reliability, suggesting the insufficiency of human cognition and the epistemological limitations of philosophy and science.

This repertoire of techniques indicates that British weird horror stories are self-conscious in regards to their formal, semiotic, and narratological structures as arrangements of matter in themselves, which are denatured just as thoroughly as the frail human bodies that inhabit the

baleful diegetic worlds of such tales. Therefore, the philosophical work of unbinding and ungrounding matter that takes place at the thematic and contextual level constitutes a weird fictional project that is carried over to the formal level. The operations of unknowable forces and intelligent extraterrestrial agencies are thus registered symptomatically through the disruption of aesthetic surfaces, the degradation of the signifier's referential capacity, and the breakdown of narratological structures. A premier example of the latter is found in Lee's "Amour Dure" (1887), which takes the form of diary entries composed by the tale's haunted narrator. Contrary to the reader's expectations, the first-person point of view does not work to render the narrator's psychology transparent. Rather, it creates a blind spot that obscures the unconscious drives, desires, and motives unknown to the narrator. Because these haunt the narrator from the remotest depths of his psyche, to which he remains oblivious, no amount of self-reflection will reveal them. In fact, such self-reflection can only conceal them. By immersing the narrator and the reader in the subjective "I," Lee forecloses on the objectivity of a third-person point of view that would expose the tale's phantoms as figurations of the narrator's imaginative, erotic longings.

If British weird horror reconfigures or dissolves matter at both the contextual and formal levels, we might ask: What specific understandings of matter in the history of science is the genre attempting to subvert? I show that British weird horror fiction resists reductionist scientific accounts of biological life, nature, and the cosmos that were circulating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I use the term "reductionist" rather than "reductive" to emphasize that these accounts—which include Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Ernst Haeckel's "first principle of biogeny,"¹⁰ T.H. Huxley's protoplasmic physicalism,¹¹ and more generally speaking, naturalistic and materialistic philosophies—are anything but simplistic.

Rather, in spite of the fact that such theories reduce biological life and the cosmos down to evolving or changing configurations of physico-chemical materials, they are nevertheless sophisticated theories that represented the cutting edge of science in their day. It is important to grasp this point because the relationship of weird horror fiction to science is ambivalent.

Although we will see that British weird horror fiction contests much of the reductionist science of its day, it cannot be dismissed offhand as reactionary anti-scientism. Quite to the contrary, weird horror also draws from the insights of science in order to fuel its bold philosophical speculations. Thus the critical acuity of the weird's challenges to reductionist theories is itself derived from the genre's speculative redeployment of scientific discourses.

Underlying nineteenth-century reductionist theories of life such as that of Huxley's is an entire materialistic *Weltanschauung* stemming from atomism. Ludwig Boltzmann, an influential Austrian chemist who argued for an ontological understanding of the atom as a real object rather than merely an expedient theoretical model, stated at a meeting of the Imperial Academy of Science in May 1886 that "if you ask me for my innermost conviction whether . . . [the nineteenth century] will be called the century of iron, or steam, or electricity, I answer without qualms that it will be named the century of the mechanical view of nature, of Darwin."¹² Here, Boltzmann's use of the term "mechanical" refers to how the materialistic outlook stemming from atomism shattered longstanding notions of biological life as a privileged quality distinct from physical matter and the rules governing it. Life thus assumes a machine-like quality. In the wake of Darwinian evolutionary theory, animals resemble self-optimizing biological systems driven by the engine of adaptation, which in turn is fueled by the forces of natural selection: geophysical pressures, intra- and inter-species competition, predator-prey interactions, disease, parasitism, and so forth.

In his article on probability and British nineteenth-century science, Silvan Schweber demonstrates that Darwinian evolution was broadly conceived in mechanistic terms. In the history of philosophy, the term “mechanistic” refers to deterministic systems of thought that eliminate chance or randomness. According to Schweber, the deterministic thought of Sir Isaac Newton and Pierre-Simon Laplace heavily influenced “scientific theorizing during most of the nineteenth century” (320). Schweber demonstrates that although Darwin attributed variations to chance, his concept of randomness was fundamentally “Newtonian-Laplacean” until after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 (320). That is to say, when he composed this renowned work of natural history, Darwin did not believe in randomness as a property of things and events in themselves; to him, it was nothing more than the observer’s ignorance of the underlying causal chain of events producing the observed phenomenon. Nevertheless, in deterministic thought, probability and statistics remain preeminently useful for the important purposes of prediction and the demonstration of the lawfulness of the cosmos. And determinism’s influence was not limited to the natural sciences. The Belgian polymath Adolphe Quetelet made use of probability and statistics to explain the nature of complex social phenomena. Thomas Henry Buckle, author of the hugely influential but unfinished two-volume work, *History of Civilization in England* (1857), was inspired by Auguste Comte’s positivism to argue that human history could be reformulated as an exact science composed of laws (Schweber 341-3). These examples help us to gauge the historical scope of nineteenth-century materialism, which included deterministic and radically positivistic forms, even though Lucretian materialism, with its random atomic swerve, flourished in the prior century. In this dissertation, when I use terms such as “mechanistic” or “machinic,” I use them in the more general sense that Boltzmann uses “mechanical” above: to indicate the shift toward thinking life as reducible to matter and

subject to the physical laws that bind it. When I intend “mechanistic” to mean deterministic, I accordingly emphasize this meaning to the reader.

Boltzmann’s meaning of the term “mechanical” suggests why weird horror fiction writers suffuse matter with shadowy vitalistic forces. If materialism extinguishes life by reducing it to a series of mechanized physiological processes and chemical reactions, then British weird horror fiction refuses to let vitality stay dead, resurrecting it in a variety of disconcerting guises. In Machen’s novel, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), the author takes a metaphysical (and even pantheistic) approach to the question of life, re-investing bodies and nature alike with Pagan spirits. Befitting the horror genre, the creature that symbolizes this investiture is a terrifying avatar of the god Pan, a “faun with tingling and pricking flesh”¹³ whose flowing vital energy gives rise to all manner of bizarre life-forms. Describing the protagonist’s encounter with these humanoid creatures, Machen writes: “where the cankered stems joined the protuberant roots, there were forms that imitated the human shape, and faces and twining limbs that amazed him . . . in the hollows of the rotted bark, he saw the masks of men” (Machen 84). Inspired by the implications of non-Euclidean geometry, Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907) speculates that not all life-forces can be contained within three dimensions. In the tale, a multitude of outré happenings turn the narrator’s (and reader’s) attention toward the titular botanical specimens. The narrator’s wilderness guide, however, divines the truth. “*It’s in the willows . . . here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us,*”¹⁴ he says (italics my emphasis). Hodgson’s short maritime fictions articulate what is arguably the most philosophically sophisticated statement of vitalism in the tradition of British weird horror fiction. “The Derelict” (1912) speculates on the existence of a metaphysical ingredient to life, but also considers that life might be an emergent property of materials. That is, life is constructed from

matter, but it crosses a threshold level of complexity that confers it with qualitatively different characteristics than its component parts. Life thus becomes irreducible to matter. The opening of the story, which suggests an almost mathematical formalization of the chemistry of biological life, reads as follows: “[i]t’s the *Material*,’ said the old ship’s doctor. . . . ‘The *Material*, plus the Conditions; and, maybe,’ he added slowly, ‘a third factor—yes, a third factor; but there, there. . . .’ He broke off his half-meditative sentence, and began to charge his pipe.”¹⁵

Because British weird horror fiction is deeply invested in vitalistic modes of thinking, this dissertation, especially its final chapter, extensively engages with Jane Bennett’s recent work, *Vibrant Matter* (2010). In this book, Bennett aims to theorize a “vital materialism” that is capable of appreciating the intrinsic agency of matter, without severing its powers and capacities from its substance by re-depositing them within an immaterial force. In a particularly illuminating passage, wherein Bennett is examining a haphazard assemblage of objects amassed in a storm drain, the sought-after vibrancy of matter surges forth:

they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.¹⁶

In devising her “vital materialism,” Bennett engages with the thought of the major pre-World War I vitalist philosophers, Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson. Her nuanced critical encounter with these too often neglected thinkers is not only theoretically deft, but rich in historical context. In the final chapter, I demonstrate the philosophical and historical significance of the tradition of vitalism which Bennett’s important work brings to light, to Hodgson’s weird horror fiction.

Bennett's assemblage theory is heavily influenced by the joint work of the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and this influence extends into my own research. In their famous plateau, "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming Imperceptible," which appears in their second volume on capitalism and schizophrenia, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980; trans. 1987; *ATP*), Deleuze and Guattari cite the weird horror fiction of H.P. Lovecraft in order to theorize ecological associations that give rise to hitherto unseen forms and modes of life: namely, the process of "creative becoming." In doing so, Deleuze and Guattari help us to recognize that that weird horror fiction constitutes a uniquely powerful site for speculating about the workings of ecological relationships. Therefore, in my engagement with Hodgson's work, I emphasize that the author's fictions are not simply marvelously detailed investigations into nature. Rather, they show tremendous insight into the dynamics of ecological relationships, which in all their weirdly horrific intimacies—graphically brought into relief by Deleuze and Guattari's meeting with Lovecraft—upset concepts of nature. In short, Hodgson uses the strange productivity of ecological relationships to destabilize our assumptions about the existence of a so-called "natural" world. One of the central nineteenth-century theories around which the concept of the natural world takes shape is Darwinian evolution. I demonstrate how Hodgson sees ecology supplant evolution as the engine for the generation of biological novelty (as do Deleuze and Guattari in *ATP*), a shift that signals the need for new interpretive frameworks for weird horror fiction that are not predicated on evolution and degeneration theory, the familiar critical approaches to interpreting this body of fiction.

I have undertaken this study largely because of the mainstream perception that weird horror fiction begins and ends with Lovecraft. S.T. Joshi, in his introduction to Lovecraft's watershed essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927; revised 1939), laments that the work

“has been widely acknowledged as the finest historical treatment of the field, and yet both Lovecraft scholars and scholars of weird fiction do not seem to me to have made as full use of this document as they could have. This edition is an attempt to show . . . how much we can learn from Lovecraft” (7). If we had indeed managed to learn more from Lovecraft’s essay, perhaps we would better appreciate the fact that he is but one (great) author in a genealogy of weird writers whose works deserve far more critical attention than they currently receive. The paucity of criticism on the four British weird fiction authors that Lovecraft refers to in his essay as “Modern Masters”—Machen, Blackwood, Lord Dunsany (1878-1957), and M.R. James (1862-1936)—is nothing short of shocking given their considerable talents. For instance, in leading Lovecraft scholar Robert H. Waugh’s multi-authored collection of essays, *Lovecraft and Influence* (2013), the section titled “Lovecraft’s Predecessors” features just one essay devoted to a “Modern Master,” a piece titled “Lovecraft’s Debt to Lord Dunsany,” by Darrell Schweitzer. Although it would be difficult to conceive of any “Modern Master” enjoying the popular recognition that Lovecraft now commands, these authors certainly deserve a wider readership, evidently among critics as well as general readers.

To draw an analogy to the field of popular horror heavy metal music, I can only guess that the “Modern Masters” attract less critical attention and general readers than Lovecraft for the same reason that Marilyn Manson fans now outnumber those of Black Sabbath. The perception seems to be that in horror fiction, as well as heavy metal, intensity matters most; thus the innovators of a form are passed over in favor of increasingly intense expressions of that form. Certainly, Lovecraft ratcheted up the intensity with such style and to such an extent that he effectively made the genre his own. It would also be ludicrous to think that the wildly imaginative Lovecraft did not innovate in the genre. Cthulhu, the tentacled visage of weird

horror, was likely sprung half from Lovecraft's notorious night-terrors and half from his brutally lucid ruminations on the utter indifference of the cosmos to human life. But Cthulhu was not the first cephalopod in weird horror fiction,¹⁷ and a discerning look at the history of the genre will reveal that Lovecraft built the sprawling and slime-drenched Cyclopean architecture of his own mythos on foundations laid by the British "Modern Masters."

The past five years have also seen the emergence of speculative realism, an orientation in continental philosophy that attempts to lift the injunction on thinking the real-in-itself, or the absolute, imposed by the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Among the speculative realists,¹⁸ there seem to be multiple ways to accomplish this. For Graham Harman, the originator of object-oriented philosophy, the answer rests not so much in finding ways to overcome Kantian finitude, but in radicalizing it, such that the epistemological limitations Kant placed on the human subject become ontological features of all the objects that compose the larger object that is the universe. Still, for others, like Ray Brassier, philosophy has to give way to a rigorous naturalism entirely predicated on the methods and practices of science if the real is to be explored. Of the very different philosophies grouped under the umbrella term "speculative realism" (a term that today is only championed by Harman) all share two things in common. First, they reject "correlationism,"¹⁹ the idea that the domain of philosophy is limited to the correlation between world and thought, such that thought has no access to the inhuman reality of being-in-itself, or thought-in-itself. And secondly, all four founders of this philosophical orientation have professed enthusiasm, at one time or another in their lives, for Lovecraft's work. Harman has recently authored *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), a study that uses the new criticism and close reading to interpret the weird writer's *oeuvre*. My project necessarily engages with speculative realism, as I see it continuing in the formal discipline of

philosophy the project that the weird horror writers began in their fictions. By drawing on the thought of this “new” orientation in philosophy, my project highlights how weird horror tales were using fiction as a site for high-concept philosophical speculation about the inhuman nature of the cosmos.

Lovecraft figures heavily into the work of other major thinkers associated with speculative realism, such as the British philosopher Nick Land, and Iranian philosopher and weird fiction writer Reza Negarestani. The “Dust Enforcer” chapter from the latter’s *Cyclonopedia* (2008), a work that hybridizes theory and fiction, appears in the VanderMeer’s anthology *The Weird*. The central theory that *Cyclonopedia* poses is a poromechanical concept of ontology, which Negarestani calls the “()hole complex.”²⁰ This theory issues from a conceptual cross-breeding of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s notion of “holey space” from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) and a passage from Lovecraft’s short story “The Festival” (1925). According to the “()hole complex,” no material is perfectly solid. All bodies of matter are pervaded by miniscule holes that perturb the structure of the solid as they proliferate (44). Moreover, such holes leave the “infected” solid open to invasion by creatures, materials, and forces from the outside, which in turn further erode and creatively mutate the solid’s structure. In the “()hole complex,” voids are simultaneously the cause and effect of decomposition, and decay is the cosmic motor of all change in the universe—even the emergence of biological life and novelty. The Lovecraftian pedigree of the “()hole complex” highlights the way in which weird fiction constitutes a powerful site for the un-grounding of matter. In this particular case, matter becomes the result of a dynamic process of degradation between solid and void rather than a simple substance. Negarestani’s “()hole complex” is but another depiction of destabilized matter in weird horror (theory-)fiction. While speculative realism and Negarestani’s theory-

fiction have been comparatively slow to catch on in literary studies, the present study demonstrates their applicability and value.

As one might expect, just as the historical evolution of weird horror demands to be charted in more detail, there is a dearth of criticism on the British pioneers of this genre. While a revival of interest in Lee's writings has taken place, there is little work on Machen's, Hodgson's, and especially Blackwood's fiction. Lovecraft's tales have generated a fairly extensive body of critical literature,²¹ but there are few works that examine the output of his British "Modern Masters." At the forefront of this group of critical writings is, of course, Lovecraft's own *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. S.T. Joshi's pioneering study, *The Weird Tale*, is often insightful, especially on H.P. Lovecraft and the objectives of the weird genre as a whole. Joshi, for instance, notes the centrality of philosophy to the genre: "I am convinced that we can understand these writers' work . . . only by examining their metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic theories and then by seeing how their fiction reflects or expresses these theories. In every case we shall see that each writer's entire output is a philosophical unity" (10). Joshi also relates that the "weird tale offers unique opportunities for philosophical speculation—it could be said that the weird tale is an inherently philosophical mode in that it frequently compels us to address directly such fundamental issues as the nature of the universe and our place in it" (10). That said, Joshi's estimation of Machen is too low, for reasons I will explain at length in my second chapter. This low appraisal causes him to overlook the merits of Machen's *The Great God Pan*. He also lavishes praise on Blackwood's work in the fantasy genre, and does not give enough attention to his outdoor weird horror tales. Jack Sullivan's *Elegant Nightmares* (1978) excels on this count. Sullivan notes the cosmic nature of Blackwood's work, yet the contours of the weird as its own genre were not evident to him; consequently, Blackwood's outdoor horror tales, which

are not ghost tales, are fit to a lineage that includes Victorian spectral literature.²² One of the best books in the field is Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body* (1996). This study looks at the fin-de-siècle fiction of the Gothic revival from the perspective of embodiment. Thus Hurley finds the chaotic and entropic forces codified by Darwinian evolution and degeneration theory at work in the late Victorian supernatural novel, making bodies monstrous and deformed. The work is also conscientious about how such novels were anxious about the nature of matter.

These scholars' ideas and insights have influenced my own, and in this dissertation, I often examine the relationship between the body and the cosmos that engenders it. The problem that I find with Hurley's study, which I address in this dissertation, is that weird horror is not visible to Hurley as its own distinct genre with a trajectory that continues on through to Lovecraft in the twentieth century, and beyond. Thus many of the features that make weird fictions unique are overlooked as Hurley collapses weird horror into the late Victorian and Gothic revival period. Let me give an example: Hurley argues that William Hope Hodgson is a materialist—the prominent philosophical and scientific outlook at the end of the nineteenth century. As per my thesis, one of the telltale features of weird horror writing is the extent to which it challenges ambient scientific beliefs, especially those that pertain to the nature of matter. I deny that Hodgson is a materialist, an idea that rings untrue in relation to his novel *The House on the Borderland*. If anything, in that novel, he seems far more like a metaphysician. If Hodgson is a materialist, then he is a *weird* materialist, and that entails something very different than Hurley's criticism can countenance. I make a similar point in regard to Susan Navarette's *The Shape of Fear* (1998). This rich work contains a wealth of technical medical and scientific details that are capably brought to bear on late Victorian horror fiction. Its historical and scientific contexts are also meticulously realized. While Navarette uses theories of heredity and

degeneration to connect many of the novels her work analyzes to Lovecraft's tales, thereby signaling knowledge of the emergent weird tradition, her study is far less useful for understanding the cosmic horror that typifies Lovecraft's later work. Thus, one of the objectives of my study is to demonstrate the origins of Lovecraft's cosmic horror earlier in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, especially in the works of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson.

There is a fairly extensive (and growing) critical literature on Vernon Lee, which includes Vineta Colby's *Vernon Lee* (2003) and Christa Zorn's study of the same title and year. Patricia Pulham's recent *Vernon Lee and the Transitional Object* (2008) is a particularly strong, theoretically-informed work that uses Winnicottian psychoanalysis to approach Lee's essays and fiction. Since I am largely situating Lee's work relative to the weird horror "Modern Masters" in this dissertation, I find little to disagree with in these studies. Arthur Machen tends to enjoy more critical attention than those in his weird horror cohort. Mark Valentine's critical biography, *Arthur Machen* (1995), is authoritative, and perhaps only second to Machen's autobiography. Wesley D. Sweetzer's 1964 study is also noteworthy, and particularly useful in regards to the literary influences that shaped Machen's work. Unfortunately, there is little critical literature on Blackwood. It is likely that the dearth of materials has kept scholars away from this author. Mike Ashley's biography, *Starlight Man* (2001), begins to fill this gap, and will hopefully inspire future studies of Blackwood. Hodgson has also not yet received the critical attention that he is due. There is Sam Moskowitz's *Out of the Storm* (1975) and Ian Bell's *William Hope Hodgson: Voyages and Visions* (1987). Due to this lack of studies, I am especially quick to emphasize Hodgson's relevance to scholars interested in the emerging fields of ecocriticism, post-humanism, and materiality studies. On that note, scholars interested in these fields will be excited to discover that weird horror fiction as a whole has much to offer.

II. On The Uses and Abuses of Lovecraft

Current critical literature—even in those rare instances when it takes weird horror as its central object of investigation—too often neglects to account for the dynamic evolution of the genre. I can only speculate that this oversight is, among other factors, an unfortunate byproduct of the massive mainstream popularity and influence of Lovecraft’s extraordinary tales. So powerfully does Lovecraft embody the central ideas, themes, and affects of weird horror in his tales—and so authoritatively does he theorize the genre in his critical essays and personal letters—a tendency has emerged to treat his corpus as if it were the first and last words written in weird horror fiction. In conducting this study, I have also taken note of a penchant for evaluating early weird horror writers on the basis of Lovecraft’s merits. I would be the first to agree that Lovecraft’s *oeuvre* marks a signal moment within the history of the weird horror genre—indeed, its defining moment. Consequently, in this dissertation, I draw on Lovecraft’s work as a heuristic that helps us to understand the objectives, philosophical import, cultural significance, and progression of British weird horror. That stated, if one is not careful, such an approach as the one mentioned above can produce (and has produced) unfair comparisons that punish early weird horror writers for not espousing Lovecraft’s philosophies in their tales—a move that amounts, in essence, to under-appraising a writer because he or she is not Lovecraft himself. Such bias has a two-fold effect: it essentializes weird horror fiction and effaces its historical grain. Thus, in a broad sense, this dissertation explores the literary history obscured by the long shadow that Lovecraft casts over the genre. By casting a light, however modest, into this shadow, I hope to reveal some truly exquisite horrors that have been neglected for too long.

Yet Lovecraft’s shadow can also help us to comprehend, theorize, and appreciate the cultural significance of British weird horror fiction. Because it creatively mixes elements from

science fiction and supernaturalism, weird horror can prove to be a difficult genre to define. Consequently, I take a brief look at a distinctive example of weird horror composed by that most famous practitioner of the genre, Lovecraft. The tale, “The Dreams in the Witch House,” first appeared in the July 1933 issue of *Weird Tales*. Walter Gilman, the protagonist, is a student at the fictitious Miskatonic University, in the city of Arkham (also Lovecraft’s invention), Massachusetts. Gilman studies “[n]on-Euclidean calculus and quantum physics.”²³ As if these subjects were not mind-bendingly difficult to comprehend in themselves, he has a fascination with the local supernatural legend and lore of Arkham, and mixes these with his mathematical studies, in an attempt “to trace a strange background of multidimensional reality behind the ghoulish hints of the Gothic tales and the wild whispers of the chimney corner” (859). In order to fortify his singular interdisciplinary studies with some field research, Gilman rents a room in a house that was once occupied by Keziah Mason, who was tried in Salem for witchcraft. The statement that Keziah made under torture “fascinated Gilman beyond all reason. She had told Judge Hawthorne of lines and curves that could be made to point out directions leading through the walls of space to other spaces beyond, and had implied that such lines and curves were frequently used at certain midnight meetings” (860). As her statement indicates, no prison ever built could hold Keziah Mason, and after scrawling some bizarre “curves and angles” in blood on her cell walls, she disappeared from the Salem jail in 1692.

Gilman has recently started to have nightmares so frightful that they disturb his studies and threaten his sanity. In these dreams, he is pursued by Keziah and her familiar, a creature that Arkham folklore refers to as Brown Jenkin. Those who have witnessed this abomination—in the 1690’s and, disturbingly, in the present-day—describe it as having “the long hair and shape of a rat, but that its sharp-toothed, bearded face was evilly human while its paws were like tiny hands.

It took messages betwixt old Keziah and the devil, and was nursed on the witch's blood . . . Its voice was a kind of loathsome titter, and it could speak all languages" (862). In Gilman's nightmares, Keziah and Brown Jenkin are getting successively closer to him before he manages to wake up. Worse yet, Gilman starts to suspect that his nocturnal terrors are hardly just bad dreams. It is as if the dream-state unshackled Gilman's mind from its corporeal chains, releasing him from the constraints of three-dimensional space, time, and matter. Thus his "nightmares" are really voyages into the unknown outer regions beyond the temporal and spatial fabric of the cosmos, through which he is pursued by Keziah and Brown Jenkin—as well as a black-skinned, cloven-hoofed figure that goes by the vaguely Egyptian name of Nyarlathotep. When he realizes that these extra-dimensional excursions are in fact taking place, Gilman is informed by a concerned neighbor that he has taken to sleepwalking. This report of somnambulism confirms for Gilman that, in his dreams, he is indeed *travelling* someplace. Lovecraft describes a vista from one of Gilman's voyages as follows:

All the objects—organic and inorganic alike—were totally beyond description or even comprehension. Gilman sometimes compared the inorganic masses to prisms, labyrinths, clusters of cubes and planes, and Cyclopean buildings; and the organic things struck him variously as groups of bubbles, octopi, centipedes, living Hindoo idols, and intricate Arabesques roused into a kind of ophidian animation. Everything he saw was menacing and horrible; and whenever one of the organic entities appeared by its motions to be noticing him, he felt a stark, hideous fright which generally jolted him awake. Of how the organic entities moved, he could tell no more than of how he moved himself. In time he observed a further mystery—the tendency of certain entities to appear suddenly out of empty space, or to disappear totally with equal suddenness. The shrieking, roaring

confusion of sound which permeated the abysses was past all analysis as to pitch, timbre, or rhythm; but seemed to be synchronous with vague visual changes in all the indefinite objects, organic and inorganic alike. Gilman had a sense of constant dread that it might rise to some unbearable degree of intensity during one or other of its obscure, relentlessly inevitable fluctuations. (863)

Gilman's dreams become more unfathomably bizarre as the unholy trinity of Brown Jenkin, Keziah, and Nyarlathotep close in. Keziah and Brown Jenkin begin to communicate with Gilman, telling him that he must join them, that he now understands far too much for a mortal human being, and that he must sign his soul over to "Azathoth at the centre of ultimate chaos" (867). Compared to the fate that is likely in store for Gilman, death would be a blessing...

This is weird horror fiction. And as the excerpt from Lovecraft's tale demonstrates, it is quite unlike the Victorian ghost stories and Gothic tales that came before it. The title of the story seems to suggest a traditional haunted house yarn—perhaps taking place in the stereotypical Gothic locale of the rotting ancestral manor, swarming with ghosts—but the long quotation makes it evident that we are not dealing with this familiar genre. Rather, Lovecraft presents the cosmos itself as haunted, brimming with malign and abstruse beings and forces. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that the Lovecraftian cosmos is not haunted by, as much as composed of, hostile alien entities, paradoxical immaterial forces, and chaotic extra-dimensional anomalies. That human beings live at all in such a universe suggests the astronomical good luck that our civilization has been overlooked (or deemed insignificant) by these alien horrors that thrive among the stars, and in between the regular angles and curves of the known universe. If we live in such a world as Lovecraft describes above, we can be sure that extinction is inevitable and only a matter of time, contingent upon when one of the nameless things in the void finally

notices us. Maybe we have survived for so long only because it *seems* that way on human time scales. In comparison to the presumably eons-old eldritch horrors that Gilman glimpses in his nightly tours of the abyss, we have not been around for so long—and perhaps we will not be around for very much longer. Thus the story does not stage a haunting as much as a becoming of the cosmos into something incomprehensible and unrecognizable: an outrageous monstrosity, one scaled to inhuman dimensions.

Of course, Lovecraft's tale features a witch and her familiar, which are time-honored figurations of the supernatural that have been circulating since before the Middle Ages. These masters of black magic recall the covens of New England witches described in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835). And yet, although Keziah and Brown Jenkin can be recognized as a witch and her familiar, respectively, they resist reduction to these figures. Keziah often seems more like a genius mathematician or physicist than a witch, whose craft coincides with the most recondite insights of Non-Euclidean Geometry, Quantum Physics, and Post-Einsteinian Relativistic Theory. These insights have outfitted her with a superior understanding of the workings of the cosmos and the capability to apply these insights, which only seem supernatural or occult because they have advanced so far beyond our own knowledge. The science that is her witchcraft suggests that rationality, when pursued to its terminus, intensively merges with the unwholesomely irrational. Brown Jenkin also refuses to play true to type. He is no mere animal familiar nursed on blood from his beldame's third nipple. The degenerate rodent-human hybrid has mastered all the languages on Earth—and presumably all of the languages in the *multiverse*. In many respects, these touches of the familiar supernatural serve to emphasize the distance between weird fiction and the various forms and modes of the supernatural that came before it. If Keziah is a witch and Brown Jenkin her familiar, then they

are utterly unlike any such couple that we have known before in literature. Or rather, Lovecraft's weird horror tale suggests that if these characters have previously existed, their presence has never really been understood in the framework of the supernatural. From this perspective, his weird horror tale emerges as a site for the re-imagining (or, indeed, re-conceptualizing) the supernatural in terms of early twentieth-century mathematics, physics, and biology. Yet, at the same time, Lovecraft's nods to the supernatural are very much respectful. If anything, in "The Dreams in the Witch House," the supernatural is not becoming superannuated on account of the forward march of science; quite to the contrary, the supernatural is updated in so far as it engages directly with the philosophical and scientific advances of his time. Lovecraft welds the esoteric nature of the supernatural to that of the cryptic discoveries of modern physics and mathematics, which depict the universe in such an uncomfortably strange light that it might as well be supernatural. Just as the supernatural violates the laws that govern nature's functioning, the remit of Quantum Physics and Non-Euclidean Geometry is an incomprehensible and chaotic mess of a cosmos.

As my analysis above indicates, weird horror blends science and the supernatural—or more specifically, re-deposits the supernatural in a speculative, scientific framework in order to bestow upon its horrors an unsettling plausibility. There is another mixture, however, churning forth from the cauldron of "The Dreams in the Witch House," one that I hope my comments have made equally apparent. For all its evident novelty and quintessential weirdness, the tale keeps on bringing up the supernatural. If weird horror dictates that the supernatural must be filtered through the scientific, then it seems that weird horror itself must also be channeled back through the supernatural. Thus the tale insistently poses the historical problem of the emergence of weird horror fiction; it at once forcefully articulates the emergence of a new genre, but it also looks

back on the previous forms of the supernatural from which this genre was spawned. The strong suggestions of the supernatural in “The Dreams in the Witch House” therefore emphasize that Lovecraft’s narratives drew on and developed from a corpus of previous writings. Although Lovecraft’s use of the term “weird” in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* is often used weirdly in itself—that is, to be clear, not just in reference to the weird horror genre that he was writing in, but more generally to the whole supernatural tradition in literature—Lovecraft’s fictions so powerfully affected his readers’ imaginations that the phrase “weird horror” is almost exclusively associated with him, his output, and the succeeding generation of writers that he influenced. This begs the question: Who were Lovecraft’s late Victorian and early Modernist predecessors, and how did their “first-wave” weird horror fictions influence him? Accordingly, in this dissertation, I ask the following question: What is the relationship between the earlier forms of the supernatural—such as the Victorian ghost story and the fin-de-siècle Gothic revival—and weird horror fiction? Or perhaps more incisively: What are the historical social and scientific developments that facilitated the emergence of weird horror fiction from the prior body of supernatural literature? How do we get from the restless specters of Gothic and Victorian ghost stories to Lovecraft’s seething cosmic terrors that not only haunt Keziah’s witch house, but plague the entire universe—and the yet-to-be-discovered universes beyond?

I contend that we arrive at Lovecraft’s brand of weird horror from that of the earlier British writers through the progressive refinement of the philosophical and scientific tools employed to darken matter. In other words, as science progressed through the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, it became less based on mechanistic and materialistic models that rendered the cosmos and its reality radically knowable. The notion of matter as the solid, unshakeable foundation of reality began to crumble when faced with the discoveries of

Relativistic Theory and Quantum Physics in the twentieth century. By the time we reach Lovecraft later in the twentieth century, science has become strongly non-reductionist, and is already doing the work of un-grounding physical matter and making the universe look like a hideously strange place. At this point, scientific naturalism starts to resemble supernaturalism, and we realize that we are all living inside Keziah Mason's witch house—whatever and wherever that is.

Lovecraft's *Supernatural Horror in Literature* guides my selection of primary source material. This fine work of criticism offers a panoptic overview of the development of supernatural writing, with a special emphasis on works written in the English language. Not only are Lovecraft's critical appraisals acute, but he also proves himself to be—as expected—a deft theoretician of the supernatural and the weird. For instance, he formulates this definition of the weird tale (which is productively considered in relation to my opening comments on “The Dreams in the Witch House”), which may be as good as, or better than, any that have since been written:

The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the demons of unplumbed space.²⁴

It would be impractical to list all of the works and subjects that Lovecraft covers in his essay, but an overview of the piece's highlights will suffice for my purposes here. Lovecraft begins his

essay with an exploration of the earliest sources of the horror tale, which are found in prehistoric ceremonial magic, and “the most archaic ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings” (33). He then compiles a critical literary history that covers Gothic novels by Horace Walpole, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Sophia Lee, and Ann Radcliffe; later innovations in the Gothic novel by Matthew “Monk” Lewis and Charles Maturin; the Romantic “Aftermath” of the Gothic, which includes Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818; revised 1831); Victorian works by Emily Brontë, Wilkie Collins, and Sheridan LeFanu; late Victorian and early twentieth century works by H.G. Wells, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Robert Louis Stevenson; and a discussion of “Spectral Literature on the Continent.” Lovecraft follows these chapters with an extended consideration of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, which “established a new standard of realism in the annals of literary horror” (55). The final three chapters are devoted to “The Weird Tradition.” The first of these chapters surveys the tradition in the British Isles; the second in America; and the third appraises the weird work of “The Modern Masters,” namely Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, and M.R. James.

As Lovecraft emphasizes throughout his essay, between writers such as Poe, Ambrose Bierce, F. Marion Crawford, Robert W. Chambers, and Clark Ashton Smith, America has proved to be remarkably fertile ground for producing weird fruits. Yet it is telling that every single one of his “Modern Masters” of “The Weird Tradition” descended from the British Isles. Moreover, an appendix to *Supernatural Horror in Literature* lists Lovecraft’s favorite weird stories. Compiled by H.C. Koenig and published in the October 1934 *Fantasy Fan* 2, number 2, six of the ten favorites are by authors from the British Isles, and five of these were written by two of Lovecraft’s “Modern Masters.” At the top of Lovecraft’s list is Algernon Blackwood’s “The

Willows” (1907), followed by three tales from the pen of Arthur Machen: “The Novel of the White Powder” (1895), “The Novel of the Black Seal” (1895), and “The White People” (1904).

I do not cite these facts to denigrate the formidable American weird tradition, nor am I simply reiterating that Lovecraft was a sworn Anglophile.²⁵ Rather, these facts help to justify why my dissertation focuses on British weird horror fiction when there are so many specimens of American extraction that richly deserve scholarly attention. In the beginning of “The Modern Masters” chapter, Lovecraft writes:

The best horror-tales of today, profiting by the long evolution of the type, possess a naturalness, convincingness, artistic smoothness, and skillful intensity of appeal quite beyond comparison with anything in the Gothic work of a century or more ago.

Technique, craftsmanship, experience, and psychological knowledge have advanced tremendously with the passing years, so that much of the older work seems naïve and artificial; redeemed, when redeemed at all, only by a genius which conquers heavy limitations. (80-1)

This opening can be read as a testament to the exemplarity of the tales of the British “Modern Masters.” These comments help us to gauge the extent to which the poetry and fiction of these writers influenced Lovecraft’s work. Indeed, the tales of “Modern Masters” are closest in their execution, themes, ideas, and philosophical outlook to Lovecraft’s own stories, and it is through studying the innovations of this remarkable—and unfortunately, critically neglected—group of writers that we can arrive at an understanding of the genesis of weird horror fiction as it is embodied by Lovecraft’s striking *oeuvre*. Here, in the “Modern Masters,” we find Lovecraft’s fin-de-siècle and early modernist predecessors. Consequently, the second and third chapters of

my dissertation focus on the cosmic horror of Machen and Blackwood, respectively, which exerted such a decisive influence on Lovecraft's development as a thinker and weird writer.

To keep my dissertation focused while navigating the nebulous regions of the weird, I have obviously grounded it in weird horror fiction. In large part, this choice reflects the fact that the most recognizable works of the weird genre are horror fictions (which tend to have been penned by Lovecraft). Admittedly, it also reflects my own personal conviction that, among all the outlandish diversions the weird has to offer, its horror fiction is the most consistently rewarding. Weird horror is bold, if not shocking, in its visceral depictions of unearthly grotesqueries and their treatment of human life; emotionally devastating in its pessimistic and frightening outlook on the cosmos; and intellectually stimulating in the subtlety of its philosophical speculations. And, all personal preferences aside, weird horror fiction represents a particularly instructive—even elegant—genre for critical analysis because it lucidly responds to a definite set of historical and scientific coordinates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although his works have a distinct element of weird horror, Dunsany's tales are primarily fantasy. These tales fired Lovecraft's imagination, inspiring him to write the short story "Celephaïs" (1922) and the novel *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (1943), but the topic of weird fantasy lies beyond the scope of the present study. As for James, he is undoubtedly a writer of horror tales.²⁶ Working in the antiquarian strain of horror, wherein haunted artifacts and cursed items fall into the possession of avid and unfortunate collectors, James's short story collections give the impression, befitting his academic research, of medieval bestiaries filled with exotic and fatal objects. While I strongly disagree with Joshi's low estimation of James's work in *The Weird Tale*, I agree with him that the author is almost exclusively interested in narrative technique, and never gives so much as a thought to articulating

a philosophy or weird “*Weltanschauung*,” as Joshi puts it (140). I add that James is very much a writer of Victorian ghost stories—and his meticulously crafted tales embody the culmination of that genre—and so any study of James would do little to indicate where the signal innovations of weird horror fiction in the vein of Lovecraft come from.²⁷

III. British Weird Horror Fiction

I begin my dissertation with an analysis of the fin de siècle work of Vernon Lee. As my prior comments indicate, I believe that Lee can be considered a weird writer; I argue, however, that her work bears few traces of the brand of weird horror Lovecraft popularized. Rather, my inclusion of Lee with the weird writers rests on her highly unconventional conception of the supernatural. We will see that her 1880 essay on the supernatural, “Faustus and Helena,” indicates that a ghost is nothing more than the series of psychological events that unfold when one encounters a work of art. The ghost is the conjunction of sensory stimuli and the succession of fleeting mental impressions triggered by them, all of which issues from interacting with an artwork or emotionally charged object. This thoroughly aesthetic and psychological conception of the supernatural she counterpoises against the figural (although immaterial) specters of the Victorian ghost story and the Gothic novel (at least those novels that feature genuine supernatural effects, as opposed to elaborate tricks mimicking spectral manifestations). What is more, Lee puts this approach to the supernatural to work in her fiction, with utterly weird results. In other words, Lee does not formulate this theory and then proceed to write ghost stories in the old Victorian and Gothic style; instead, she foregrounds her narrators and characters being haunted by their own desires and imaginations, fallen under the influence of artworks. Lee famously comments in her preface to *Hauntings*: “[m]y ghosts are what you call spurious ghosts (according to me the only genuine ones), of whom I can only affirm one thing, that they haunted

certain brains” (Lee 40). Consequently, both her fictions and essays forcibly register dissatisfaction with the previous supernatural traditions. Lee’s fiction becomes even weirder—and comparable to that of Lovecraft’s and the British “Modern Masters”—in its depiction of the supernatural as essentially formless. Because our impressions are always fleeting and metamorphic in nature, her supernatural becomes elusive and refractory to representation—a thing “of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy” (Lee 39). This approach accords with the teratology of Lovecraft and the “Modern Masters,” whose creatures are (by turns, and at the same time, as per Miéville) numinous, extra-dimensional, and physically formless, such that they cannot be directly detected but only symptomatically registered, via their terrifying effects on the human mind and body, or their physical environments.

As much as Lee deserves her place among the luminaries of the weird tradition, she cannot be placed in the specific branch (or, befitting the genre, *tendril*) of that tradition formed by the lineage of “Modern Masters” culminating in Lovecraft. Whereas the weird horror of Lovecraft and the “Modern Masters” revolves around the destabilization of matter, nature, and the cosmos, and is thus intrinsically ontological and/or metaphysical, Lee’s fiction does not show the slightest interest in destabilizing physical reality. Reality in Lee’s work gets distorted not in itself, but through the narrator’s pathological sensibilities and damaged mind. Thus Lee never fundamentally questions reality itself. And issues of reality in her fiction can be left to reductionist science, as her materialist psychology and aesthetics indicates. From this perspective, we can see that Lovecraftian weird horror takes shape by opposing the very tendencies embodied in Lee’s fiction. Therefore, even though Lee’s works register the early

stirrings of the modern weird, the developmental trajectory of the “Modern Masters” that leads to Lovecraft takes shape by and large through opposing the tendencies embodied in Lee’s fiction.

My second chapter looks at the fictions of Arthur Machen, a fin-de-siècle weird horror writer who Lovecraft often called his favorite author and, in his personal letters, “a Titan—perhaps the greatest living author.”²⁸ Machen’s preferred method for destabilizing matter is metaphysics, and his fictions—which draw heavily from Greek and Roman mythology, occultism, esotericism, and Christian mysticism—explore the notion of an immaterial plane of existence that is populated by malicious fauns and satyrs. While Machen has been taken to task by critics such as S.T. Joshi for being ignorant of science,²⁹ I find ample evidence in his fictions of engagement with scientific theories. I first examine his infamous 1894 novella, *The Great God Pan*, which tells of an experimental brain surgery gone horribly wrong. By slicing into a specific group of nerve cells in the grey matter, this surgery is supposed to render the test subject capable of perceiving the metaphysical reality that underlies superficial, physical existence—what the mad doctor in the tale refers to as “seeing the Great God Pan.” The test subject does see this mighty god, and the result is a coupling that produces a hideous offspring: Helen Vaughan, the novella’s supernatural antagonist, who can summon the satyr-creatures from the outer metaphysical realm. Helen’s death sees her undergo a startling series of changes into lower forms of animal life, before disintegrating into a puddle of protoplasm: “nothing but a substance like to jelly” (Machen 62), reports Dr. Robert Matheson, who is witness to the bewildering scene. I build on Susan Navarette’s observation, in her critical work *The Shape of Fear* (1998), that the novel registers anxieties about Huxley’s theory of protoplasmic physicalism and Haeckel’s first principle of Biogeny.³⁰ I argue, however, that Helen’s miraculous transformations cannot be explained by these theories, and that Machen is suggesting that life

cannot be reduced to a physico-chemical phenomenon worked on by the gradual processes of evolution.

I then turn to Machen's masterpiece of a novel, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). Rather than using metaphysics to resist reductionist theories of biological life, I contend that Machen threatens metaphysical transcendence and spirituality with them—an approach that ostensibly reverses that of *The Great God Pan*, but which is arguably more terrifying in its implications. Nevertheless, life remains a fundamentally open philosophical question in the novel. It could be a spiritual mystery, or it could be nothing more than the result of random arrangements of filthy, base matter. Consider, for instance, the protagonist's reflections in the wake of a mystical experience: “[h]e was full of a certain wonder and awe, not unmixed with a swell of strange exultation . . . yet, he had experienced so clearly the physical shame and reluctance of flesh . . . the sight of his own body had made him shudder and writhe as if it had suffered some profoundest degradation” (Machen 91). Hence the novel centralizes mycological life forms; the simplicity of their morphology makes them proximate to inorganic matter, thus enabling the creatures to pose the specter of reductionist theories of biological life, yet fungi could also be interpreted as a startling and mysterious vitalization of inert matter itself. The novel's fascination with mycological life-forms marks the emergence of the fungal as a motif in weird horror fiction, one with a very long history extending into the twentieth century. Consistent with my thesis, weird horror cultivates fungal terrors because such creatures resemble nauseating chunks of ungrounded matter, imbued with strange vital energies. Given the amount of fungal fiction in the annals of modern weird horror, the fungal filament could perhaps vie with the tentacle as the emblem of weird horror fiction.

My third chapter examines Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" (1907), a tale that Lovecraft refers to as the best piece of weird fiction written in the English language (*Supernatural Horror*, 97). While Blackwood favors many of the tools for destabilizing matter as Machen does—such as spirituality, esotericism, and theosophy (both men were members of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn during the same period)—in this chapter I am particularly interested in Blackwood's use of multidimensional mathematics, to which he was introduced by English author and mathematician C.H. Hinton. In Mike Ashley's critical biography of Blackwood, *Starlight Man* (2001), he writes that Hinton's "A New Era of Thought" (1888) and *The Fourth Dimension* (1904) were among Blackwood's favorite reading."³¹ Explaining Hinton's mathematics (which also inspired H.G. Wells), Ashley writes that he "had postulated the idea of a fourth dimension in space, the next stage on from a cube, which he called a tesseract. He even argued that under certain conditions you could see a ghost of this fourth dimension by constructing a series of specially colored cubes" (255). Ashley claims that such cubes were popular among theosophists, and that Blackwood would have been familiar with them from his studies (255).

In "The Willows," I argue that Blackwood re-conceives Hinton's fourth dimension as an otherworldly plane harboring malicious extraterrestrial forces, "dwellers in some outer space" (Blackwood 37), which fatally interfere with life on Earth. Hence, in Blackwood's weird horror classic, nature and matter are both pervaded and enveloped by higher alien dimensions. The multidimensionality of nature emphasizes its incomprehensibility and status as a philosophical problem, reminiscent of how Machen's fictions refused to resolve the enigma of biological life. Thus weird horror fiction is philosophical not so much because it proposes alternative theories and answers, but because it functions as a site for the mining of irresolvable philosophical

problems that can only be investigated through speculation. It is as if weird fiction extracts these (horrendous) problems from matter itself. Due to all of its foreign and inhuman dimensions, nature in Blackwood is something infinitely greater than humans are capable of comprehending. To emphasize the foreignness of these dimensions in and to nature, Blackwood makes them convergent with outer space. Thus we are given a powerful reminder that nature, which we tend to limit to the planetary bounds of Earth, is part of a greater and mysterious cosmos with which it is continuous. And this cosmos houses marvels—and terrors—which we are scarcely capable of imagining. In this weird fictional innovation, we can see the first stirrings of Lovecraft’s trademark style of cosmic horror, so prominently on display in “The Dreams in the Witch House.” I close this chapter by briefly referring to Blackwood’s other famous outdoor horror tale, “The Wendigo” (1910). Rather than depicting the titular demon in the fashion of Algonquin Indian folklore—as a hungry, hairy, flesh-eating ghost—Blackwood instead depicts it as a “great Outer Horror” (Blackwood 181), a pure quantum of energy from deep space that burns out, rather than eats up, human life. Thus Blackwood dissociates life from matter by merging it with pure energy. The Wendigo is a malign energetic life-force without a definite, matter-based body.

My final chapter takes an extended look at the critically under-appreciated weird horror fiction of William Hope Hodgson. As opposed to the “Modern Masters,” Hodgson was not a recognized influence on Lovecraft’s work. Joshi writes that “Hodgson was brought to HPL’s [Lovecraft’s] attention only in 1934 by H.C. Koenig,”³² a fantasy fiction enthusiast and collector who championed Hodgson’s art, and convinced editors to re-print the author’s stories. This fact would probably surprise many aficionados and critics of weird horror fiction. For example, in an entry to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Samuel Bruce writes that the “influence of the works of William Hope Hodgson on the literature of fantasy and science fiction has yet to be

fully charted. Writers as diverse as H.P. Lovecraft, Olaf Stapledon, and Dennis Yates Wheatley have clearly been influenced by Hodgson's work."³³ Indeed, Hodgson's and Lovecraft's tales share uncanny similarities and thematic resonances. It is understandable that someone could think a tale such as Lovecraft's "The Dreams in the Witch House" was influenced by Hodgson's outstanding 1908 novel, *The House on the Borderland*, which deserves the reputation of weird horror classic just as much as anything the former author ever penned. The similarities it bears to the former work are so obvious, they hardly merit pointing out. The novel tells of an old man living in a cursed house that is situated at a nexus between alien dimensions. The man, armed with his shotgun and accompanied by his trusty dog, is plagued by an invasion of loathsome, swine-faced outsiders.

As if that were not unpleasant enough, a series of cosmic perturbations hurl the protagonist through time and space, forcing him to witness the extinction of the human race, the heat-death of the solar system, and the intergalactic reign of a race of sublimely horrifying alien gods. That Lovecraft's tales were not swayed by Hodgson's powerful fictions turns out to be an asset, as I demonstrate the extent to which the innovations of weird fiction were derived from the sciences, or from philosophy conditioned by scientific discourses. By the time I conclude my analysis of Hodgson's work, it should be evident that many of Lovecraft's major ideas were already in play in the fiction of the "Modern Masters." Rather than focus on *The House on the Borderland*, which would be all too easy to liken to Lovecraft's tales of cosmic terror, I examine some of Hodgson's maritime short fictions, which are among the best his *oeuvre* has to offer. These have some decidedly cosmic touches (that might erroneously be referred to as "Lovecraftian" by readers), but in their sophisticated inquiries into the nature of biological life, they resound powerfully with the tales of the British "Modern Masters" who are the focus of this

dissertation; Lovecraft is but the frame. And yet, for any fan or critic seeking to understand the scope of weird horror fiction, Lovecraft is not the alpha and omega of the genre. In my coda, I briefly trace out the legacy of his fiction, and that of his British “Modern Masters,” in today’s literature, cinema, television, and various other media. In doing so, we can begin to appreciate the profound impact weird horror has made on the contemporary horror genre.

¹ Vernon Lee, “The Virgin of the Seven Daggers,” *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell & Patricia Pulham (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2006), 249. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

² Arthur Machen, “The Novel of the White Powder,” *The Three Imposters and Other Tales*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Oakland, CA: Chaosium Inc., 2001), 207. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³ Algernon Blackwood, “The Transfer,” *Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood*, ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), 238. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁴ William Hope Hodgson, *The Boats of the “Glen Carrig,” Bordercrossings: The Fantasy Novels of William Hope Hodgson* (Landisville, PN: Coachwhip Publications, 2009), 101. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁵ See Catherine Maxwell’s and Patricia Pulham’s recent annotated edition of Lee’s work, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (2006).

⁶ Here I invoke the most well-known creature in Lovecraft’s cosmically vast bestiary, Cthulhu. This gigantic, tentacled alien horror resembles an octopus atop a winged, humanoid body.

⁷ Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, “Introduction,” *The Weird*, eds. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2011), xvi. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁸ The VanderMeers write that Miéville “managed to reinterpret, rewire, and overhaul The Weird in novel form, synthesizing the tentacled horrors of Lovecraft with the intellectual rigor of the New Wave” (xx). Other writers who have been associated with “New Weird” include K.J. Bishop, Michael Cisco, and Brian Evenson (VanderMeer, xx).

⁹ China Miéville, “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire” *Collapse IV* (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2008), 105. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁰ This principle states that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. In other words, the embryonic development of an organism proceeds along a trajectory of increasing complexity, passing through all of the less complex life-forms in its evolutionary history. This theory seemed to explain why the developing human embryo resembled other forms of animal life during its morphogenesis. Haeckel, whose theory heavily influenced the young Sigmund Freud, proposed the first principle of Biogeny in his 1874 masterwork, *The Evolution of Man*.

¹¹ In a disquieting 1869 article titled “On the Physical Basis of Life,” which ran in the *Fortnightly Review*, T.H. Huxley proposed that all life was composed out of a clear, semi-fluid substance that he called “protoplasm.” Huxley

claimed that this ooze was the most fundamental component of life, and therefore questioned the existence of human souls and mysterious vital forces that were thought to animate matter.

¹² Quoted in Silvan S. Schweber, “Demons, Angels, and Probability: Some Aspects of British Science in the Nineteenth Century,” *Physics as Natural Philosophy*, eds. Abner Shimony & Herman Feshbach (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1982), 319. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹³ Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams, The Great God Pan and The Hill of Dreams* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 2006), 85. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁴ Algernon Blackwood, “The Willows,” *Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood*, ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973), 42. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁵ William Hope Hodgson, “The Derelict,” *Adrift On the Haunted Seas* (Cold Spring Harbor, New York: Cold Spring Press, 2005), 86. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

¹⁷ These abound in the work of William Hope Hodgson, and of course before his tales, in Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870).

¹⁸ There are four founding members of speculative realism: Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant.

¹⁹ The term is Quentin Meillassoux’s, which he uses in his essay *After Finitude / Après la finitude* (2006). This work marked the emergence of speculative realism, and contains the first diagnostic critique of “correlationism.”

²⁰ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008) , 43-5. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²¹ This body of literature includes academic works, such as Robert H. Waugh’s *The Monster in the Mirror: Looking for H.P. Lovecraft* (2006) and *A Monster of Voices: Speaking for H.P. Lovecraft* (2011). The most prolific Lovecraft critic is S.T. Joshi, who has produced and edited numerous volumes of critical essays, such as *Dissecting Cthulhu: Essays on the Cthulhu Mythos* (2011) and *H.P. Lovecraft: The Decline of the West* (1990). Joshi has also produced edited versions of all Lovecraft’s tales and poetry, as well as collected his letters. He recently wrote a two-volume biography titled *I am Providence: The Life and Times of H.P. Lovecraft* (2010; revised 2013). Much of this critical literature—which is consistently meritorious—has been issued through small specialty presses, such as the American houses Hippocampus Press, Necronomicon Press, Arkham House, and Miskatonic River Press. See the *H.P. Lovecraft Archive* for a thorough list of secondary materials pertaining to the author: <http://www.hplovecraft.com/study/>.

²² Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1978), 123-4.

²³ H.P. Lovecraft, *The Complete Fiction* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2011), 859. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁴ H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012), 29. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text. This edition, thoughtfully annotated by Joshi, also contains an extensive bibliography of works by the authors that Lovecraft features in the essay.

²⁵ Although Lovecraft hailed from New England, he always used proper British spelling in all of his works. His poem, “An American to Mother England,” which first appeared in *Poesy* in January 1916, concludes with the following lines:

From British bodies, minds, and souls I come,
And from them draw the vision of their home.
Awake, Columbia! scorn the vulgar age
That bids thee slight thy lordly heritage.
Let not the wide Atlantic’s wildest wave
Burst the blest bonds that fav’ring Nature gave:
Connecting surges ‘twixt the nations run,
Our Saxon souls dissolving into one!

For more of Lovecraft’s poetry, see *The Ancient Track*, ed. S.T. Joshi (San Francisco, CA: Nightshade Books, 2001). Also see *Fungi from Yuggoth and Other Poems* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971). *The Fungi from Yuggoth* is Lovecraft’s brilliant, but seldom-read, sonnet cycle.

²⁶ James also served as Provost of Eton College, as well as Kings College, Cambridge. A successful academic, James studied and wrote on cathedral history and medieval manuscripts. He composed his horror tales purely for the sake of enjoyment; he loved to read them aloud to his friends during Christmastide (Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror*, 91).

²⁷ The appearances of James’s ghosts, however, occasionally do bear more than a trace of weirdness, even though they largely function like traditional specters. For instance, in James’s well-known tale “Count Magnus” (1904), the scholarly protagonist is pursued by a short *thing* in a hooded cloak, out of which protrudes an obscene limb reminiscent of “the tentacle of a devil-fish.” See M.R. James, *Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Michael Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52. The tentacles of squid, octopi, and cuttlefish have become emblematic of the weird due to H.P. Lovecraft’s most famous teratological creation, Cthulhu. In Lovecraft’s mythos, this malicious entity is one of the “Elder Gods,” an omnipotent alien domiciled on Earth, asleep on the seafloor amidst the ruins of the ancient city of “R’lyeh.” In “The Call of Cthulhu” (1926), a novella that describes the waking of this creature, Lovecraft describes a statue of the colossal fiend: “[i]t seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form which only a diseased fancy could conceive. If I say that my somewhat extravagant imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. A pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings; but it was the *general outline* of the whole which made it most shockingly frightful” (357).

²⁸ Quoted in *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 136.

²⁹ See S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1990), 14. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³⁰ See Susan Navarette, *The Shape of Fear* (Lexington, Kentucky: the University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 190-1. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³¹ Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man* (London: Constable Press, 2001), 255. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³² In the introduction to *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Joshi writes that the section of the essay which considers Hodgson's novels and tales was added separately in 1934, and "is an earlier version of the essay later published as 'The Weird Work of William Hope Hodgson'" (12) in the February 1937 *Phantagraph* (133). The beginning of that essay reads: "Mr. H.C. Koenig has conferred a great service on American 'fandom' by calling attention to the remarkable work of an author relatively unknown in this country, yet actually forming one of the few who have captured the illusive inmost essence of the weird. Among connoisseurs of phantasy fiction William Hope Hodgson deserves a high and prominent rank; for triumphing over a sadly uneven stylistic quality, he now and then equals the best masters in his vague suggestions of lurking worlds and beings behind the ordinary surface of life" (133-4).

³³ Samuel W. Bruce, "William Hope Hodgson," *The Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Fantasy and Science-Fiction Writers Before World War I*, ed. Darren Harris-Fain, v. 178 (Detroit, MI: 1997), 121.

I. Vernon Lee: Weird Psychological Aesthetics

Here I situate the supernatural fiction and essays of Vernon Lee in relation to the work of the weird horror writers who are featured in my subsequent chapters. At first glance, it may seem incongruous or willful to place Lee—who is associated with fin-de-siècle Aestheticism and Walter Pater’s circle—alongside of a group of authors that H.P. Lovecraft, in his influential long essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927; revised 1939), identified as the “modern masters” of the weird tradition.¹ I begin this dissertation with a consideration of Lee’s work because it provides a vivid contrast that helps to define the stylistic and thematic characteristics of weird horror writing as it is practiced by Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson, such that their work can be differentiated from the Victorian ghost story and the literature of the late nineteenth-century Gothic revival. Although weird horror fiction does in fact originate from the aforementioned subgenres and movements,² we will see that it is not reducible to them, and that weird horror has its own distinct trajectory that leads to the work of Lovecraft in the twentieth century, and beyond. Moreover, I contend that examining the historical and scientific contexts of Lee’s fiction helps to reveal the forces that drove the emergence of the weird horror genre. In this chapter, I look at Vernon Lee’s landmark 1880 essay on the supernatural, “Faustus and Helena,” as well as her short story “Amour Dure” (1887), which was reprinted in her collection of supernatural tales, *Hauntings* (1890). I demonstrate that Lee’s conception of the supernatural is psychological or phenomenological in nature, and usually the result of an intense emotional and/or imaginative response to an aesthetic impression. For Lee, ghosts do not haunt locales or antiquarian objects as much as the minds that behold them. Accordingly, I contend that Lee’s work is less concerned with the nature of the outside world—that is, the world in itself, independent of human perception and cognition. Furthermore, when this real world of physical

matter is not bracketed by Lee, it is presented as explainable by reference to the geological and biological sciences. In keeping with this staunchly naturalistic outlook, I demonstrate that Lee conceives of human subjectivity and the forces that haunt it as explicable by the mechanisms of heredity. If the characters in Lee's story are plagued by ghosts that seem more like possessing demons, it is because they find themselves in the grasp of powerfully self-destructive biological drives and desires that have been inherited from unknown ancestors.³ Thus does the past haunt in Lee's supernatural fiction.

Quite to the contrary, we will see that the weird fiction of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson is intimately concerned with the nature of the outside world, as well as the obscure realities that potentially underlie it. More specifically, these works of weird horror's "modern masters" philosophically speculate on the nature of matter, and devise unique ways of destabilizing conventional accounts of physico-chemical material that treat it as the substratum of reality: the inert, hard kernels of existence out of which the cosmos and biological life is formed. Such an approach would be absolutely foreign to Lee. In her view, science is sufficient to explain reality, and any phenomenon termed "supernatural" can be reduced to psychic events. Thus Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham report that in July 1885, Lee attended a meeting of the Society for Psychical Research—an organization devoted to studying paranormal phenomena in an objective, scientific manner—and found the proceedings "a very dull business."⁴ If anything, the fictions of the so-called "modern" masters of weird fiction would have seemed *pre-modern* to her, in the sense of coming before the "Copernican" revolution of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy,⁵ and indulging in baseless metaphysical speculations about the nature of reality (Kant's *noumenon*) that have as much empirical, evidential weight as dark-age superstitions. Although Lee's work centralizes haunted aesthetic objects that seem to have a

spectral, undead “vitality” to them, we will see that these hauntings do not affect a physical animation of the material out of which these artworks are crafted. Rather, the aesthetic impressions and affects that the artwork creates spawn the ghost in the mind of the observer. All of this goes to say that Lee’s fiction does not destabilize matter in itself. For her, the paranormal disturbances of haunting transpire within intensive psychological states rather than the extensive realm of physical matter. Therefore, if artworks in Lee seem disconcertingly alive, it is not so because they have an intrinsic vitality to them; rather, it is because human psychology mediates, and manipulates, the presentation of physical matter. In short, Lee’s supernatural is not anomalous in the ontological or metaphysical sense, as it is in the works of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson; it is a reflection of aberrant psychology that often has a hereditary etiology.

That said, it is not the purpose of this chapter to declare once and for all whether Lee’s fiction can be considered weird or not. In *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, Lovecraft writes:

Serious weird stories are either made realistically intense by close consistency and perfect fidelity to nature except in one supernatural direction which the author allows himself, or cast altogether in the realm of phantasy, with atmosphere cunningly adapted to the visualization of a delicately exotic world of unreality beyond space and time, in which almost anything may happen if it but happen in true accord with certain types of imagination and illusion normal to the sensitive human brain. (81)

While the first part of Lovecraft’s description of “serious” weird fiction recalls the work of Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson, in which scientific discourse and the seemingly unexplainable are coupled and made receptive to one another’s influences, the second part of the description focuses on tales crafted around “phantasy” worlds. Thus Lovecraft suggests that a story transpiring in the realms of psychology or the imagination can be a bona-fide weird tale as

well. Even though Lee's fictions in *Hauntings* do not take place solely in the human brain—such as, for example, Lovecraft's short story "Celephaïs" (1922)⁶—one could argue that they fit the description of second kind of weird tale close enough.⁷ Paraphrasing Lovecraft in their preface to *The Weird* (2011), Ann and Jeff VanderMeer write that a weird tale "is a story that has a supernatural element but does not fall into the category of the traditional ghost story or Gothic tale . . . it represents the pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world beyond the mundane" (xv). The fictions of *Hauntings* are emphatically not "traditional ghost stories," although they have much in common with the Gothic, and this genre's explorations of the pathological interior spaces of human psychology. And Lee's tales certainly reach beyond the mundane in that they deal with hereditary impulses and desires that are mysterious and not fully understandable because they seem to originate from outside the human subject. Therefore, there is no reason why weird horror fiction cannot also be imminently psychological.⁸

This notion would seem to hopelessly complicate my proposed genealogy of weird horror literature. If Lee's psychologically-inflected tales can themselves be considered weird, then how can they illustrate the emergence of this genre—one that purportedly evolves in reaction to the tendency to explore psychology and marginalize the outside world? The answer is that Lee's work can be regarded as weird based on the fact that it articulates an alternative, counterintuitive conception of the supernatural based on a thoroughgoing scientific rationalism, one that leaves the supernatural as nothing more than the artifact of the operations of sensation and the imagination. This approach, however, runs counter to how the weird developed along its major axis that passes through Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson—the main vector of weird fiction that leads to the characteristic blend of science-fiction and horror that is the hallmark of the high

weird, which arguably achieves its most intense expression in the later fictions of Lovecraft.⁹ Put somewhat differently, there are many ways to be weird; in this dissertation, however, I am predominately concerned with tracing out the developmental trajectory that leads to Lovecraft's later work, and this trajectory takes shape by opposing many of the tendencies embodied in Lee's fiction. To further distinguish Lee's weird fiction from that of Machen's, Blackwood's, Hodgson's, and Lovecraft's, we might note that her fiction is ultimately concerned with the *anti-human* as opposed to the *inhuman*. Lee's fiction might be termed anti-human because it dissolves the human subject in the acid of analysis, presenting it as nothing other than the locus of a manifold of different sensations, impressions, desires, and hereditary influences that can exist in open antagonism with one another. Such thinking accords with the critical, scientific spirit of Lee's philosophical outlook. In contrast, the "modern masters" of weird horror concern themselves with inhuman realities: anonymous and impersonal forces in the cosmos, and alien life-forms that have no intrinsic connection to human psychology, and thus resist being fully comprehended, although science can occasionally shed some explanatory light on such creatures. Lee's horror fiction seems to be fascinated with the nonhuman too, given the way that it appears to animate aesthetic objects, such as haunted portraits, living statues, and magical wedding chests. Nevertheless, the human subject cannot be dissociated from these objects; in fact, it is human psychology that bestows these objects with their allure and significance. Only on account of human thought and perception can these objects "come alive." Therefore, Lee never leaves the confines of an introverted anthropocentrism. In contrast, the "modern masters" of weird horror dispense with human psychology, opening up a space in their fiction to investigate the inhuman and terrifying mind-independent reality of the cosmos.

In her remarkable essay on the supernatural, “Faustus and Helena” (1880), first published in *Cornhill Magazine*, Vernon Lee describes the antipathy between artistic representation and the supernatural. Lee perceives the artistic genius of Marlowe and Goethe everywhere in their respective plays: Faustus the wizard is very much a creation of Marlowe; Gretchen, the young girl seduced by Faustus, is just as much so an invention of Goethe; the fiend of the Englishman is majestic, whereas the German’s devil is cunning.¹⁰ The meeting between Faustus and Helena, however, impresses Lee as something that issues from the old Faust legend more so than the conscious, artistic choices made by either dramaturge. As such, it “does not give the complete and limited satisfaction of a work of art; it has the charm of the fantastic and fitful shapes formed by the flickering firelight or the wreathing mists; it haunts like some vague strain of music . . . the artist may see it, and attempt to seize and embody it . . . but it vanishes out of his grasp” (292). If the artist cannot successfully capture the meeting between Faustus and Helena, it is because its essence is to be found in the legend, which is of the medieval age. Both Marlowe and Goethe, therefore, are working with this legend from a historical remove that makes all depictions of it into anachronistic misrepresentations that are too Elizabethan or too Romantic. More to the point, however, the meeting between Faustus and Helena is a *legend*, and need not have any actual basis in historical fact in order to be accepted as such. Consequently, for Lee, the legend exerts the power of an “infinite suggestion,” and the mind is swept up in the continually flowing stream of its own imaginings that attempts to “recreate” this event that never even occurred. Accordingly, Lee writes that “[w]e forget Marlowe, and we forget Goethe, to follow up the infinite suggestion of the legend . . . we lift our imagination from the book and see the mediæval street at Wittenburg, the gabled house of Faustus, all sculptured with quaint devices and grotesque forms” (293). Lee’s essay continues, using parataxis to generate a ghostly

succession of visions that recreates not only Faustus and Helena, but all of Wittenberg—and more generally, the medieval age itself: “scholars in furred robes and caps”; “burghers’ wives in high sugar-loaf coif and slashed bodices”; “knights in armor”; “tonsured monks,” and so forth (294). The bustling street scene gives an overall impression that could be described as a Dürer engraving come to life. And, perhaps most importantly, we see “vague crowds, phantoms following in the wake of the specter woman of Antiquity, beautiful, unimpassioned, ever young, luring to Hell the wizard of the Middle Ages” (294). But as soon as we look down at Marlowe’s or Goethe’s book, everything vanishes, and we cease to see ghosts.

Lee focuses on the legend of Faustus and Helena because it furnishes a powerful example of her concept of the true supernatural, which is of the order of the human mind. The “ghosts” that we saw in the prior paragraph—which were not limited to the persons of Faustus, Helena, and the villagers, but also included the whole of medieval Wittenberg, which rose from the oblivion of past ages like a specter—are products of the imagination, which was stimulated to form impressions by the vagueness of the legendary meeting. For Lee, then, the “real supernatural” (299) is nothing but the creative, restless flux of the imagination as it responds to a vague stimulus, becoming captivated by it, and giving it an endlessly changing array of forms. Thus the supernatural cannot be reduced to any one of these particular forms; it is itself the imaginative act of conjuring up “a chaotic fluctuation of incongruous shapes . . . all melting into each other, indistinct, confused, like the images in a dream” (294). Inhering less in the individual personages, places, and objects that Lee includes in her descriptive passages, the real supernatural is instead the metamorphic movement between these various things. Thus Lee’s supernatural is Dionysian in nature, constantly undergoing alteration, and therefore resistant to definite form. It is shapeless because it has all the plasticity of human thought and its

transformative powers: “[t]his is the real supernatural, born of the imagination and its surroundings, the vital, the fluctuating, the potent” (299).

Art is antithetical to the supernatural because the former fundamentally arrests the transfiguring movement of the latter within a fixed form. In an often cited passage, Lee writes: the supernatural is nothing but ever-renewed impressions, ever-shifting fancies; and that art is the definer, the embodier, the analytic and synthetic force of form. Every artistic embodiment of impressions or fancies implies isolation of those impressions or fancies, selection, combination and balancing of them; that is to say, diminution—nay, destruction of their inherent power. (304)

The “inherent power” of the “impressions or fancies” is their capability to always become otherwise—to morph into something else. Art suspends the free play of this changing, and assigns a distinct form to the supernatural that accordingly limits it. Lee suggests that the contouring lines of form establish borders that prevent the supernatural from imaginatively exploding forth into a whole spectral world. In the above description of Wittenberg, we saw that the legend of Faustus and Helena led to their ghostly manifestation, followed by Faustus’s house, the street in Wittenberg, the villagers occupying the street, and so on, until the very picture of an age emerged. It is as if the items in Lee’s paratactic lists fed off one another—suggestions creating ever more suggestions—until a long-dead world was raised to life. The assertion of the artistic form constitutes a limiting force that checks the imagination, making the form of the artwork inimical to the freely-flowing essence of the supernatural. Consequently, in Decadent literature, aesthetes often seize upon any incident affecting the artwork, no matter how slight, and turn it into a total upheaval in the artwork’s being and its meaning. A fleeting impression, a change in mood, an alteration in the angle of viewing, a dance of light and shadow across its

surface: all of these essentially remake the artwork for the aesthete, subjecting its meaning to the play of chance, undoing the arresting forces applied in its composition, and re-charging it with supernatural energy. The Faustus and Helena legend, which according to Lee was not successfully embodied in either Marlowe's or Goethe's plays, was easily prized free from the restrictive representational forms imposed by these works. Made even more indefinite, it was therefore able to generate the imaginative engagement that resurrected the spirit(s) of the medieval age. Christa Zorn thus writes that "art can create a more immediate contact with the past than can historical scholarship. Lee's supernatural, which stages our intuitive and subjective connections with the past, thus can be seen as a metaphor for an unrealized historical method."¹¹ We will see that this interpenetration of different temporalities is a key feature of Lee's supernatural fiction; just as Lee (and the reader) summons the spirit of medieval Wittenberg in "Faustus and Helena," the protagonists of her supernatural fiction raise the spirits of ages long past, with disastrous and pathological results.

In "Faustus and Helena," Lee identifies her conception of the supernatural with the force of conviction behind pagan spiritual beliefs, and uses her aesthetic theory to understand the historical progression of religious traditions. Pagan beliefs withered and died "not, as Hegel imagines, due to the fact that Hellenic art was anthropomorphic. The gods ceased to be gods not merely because they became too like men, but because they became too like anything definite" (300). As the pagan gods were embodied in ever more definite artistic representations, their powers accordingly waned. She writes: "[e]ven the most fantastic among pagan supernatural creatures, those strange monsters who longest kept their original dual nature—the centaurs, satyrs, and tritons—became, beneath the chisel of the artist, mere aberrations from the normal, rare, and curious types like certain fair-booth phenomena, but perfectly intelligible and rational"

(300-1). For Lee, capturing the supernatural in the static forms of art confers perfect intelligibility and rationality to their subject matter, such that a centaur can be comprehended by way of an anatomy lesson: half-human and half-horse. As they became increasingly defined in artworks, the gods were dissociated from the mercurial fabric of the cosmos—a development that was hastened by the custom of representing deities as human beings. The emergence of “mature” art is for Lee marked by the artist’s relinquishment of all desires to represent the supernatural (hence abandoning its superstitious, juvenile fascination with the numinous), and the practice of referring to the supernatural only through the use of symbols: “attempts at supernatural effects are almost always limited to a sort of symbolical abbreviation, which satisfies the artist and his public respecting the subject of the work, and lends it a traditional association of the supernatural; a few spikes around the head of a young man are all that remains of the solar nature of Apollo” (305). The tendencies of “mature” art are perhaps most pronounced in the Christian tradition, which contains an elaborate vocabulary of symbols. A “gilded disc behind the head is all that shows that Giotto’s figures are immortals in glory; and a pair of wings is all that explains that Perugino’s St. Michael is not a mere dainty warrior; the highest mysteries of Christianity are dispatched with a triangle and an open book,” writes Lee (305). Lee’s comments suggest that the supernatural has all but perished because artistic representation affects the way one conceives the supernatural itself. The use of symbols in “mature” art idealizes the supernatural, and indicates that it has been conceptualized as a fixed reality that corresponds to a sign, which contradicts the true supernatural as Lee describes it above. Because the supernatural owes its existence to fleeting fancies and impressions, the supernatural itself dies if the artworks that depict it are powerless to fire the imagination.

If the claims made by Lee in “Faustus and Helena” are taken at face value, and the supernatural is indeed refractory to aesthetic representation, then this begs the question: can there be such a thing as a great supernatural artwork? According to Lee, one of these is Raphael’s *Stregozzo*: “a master-piece of drawing and of pictorial fancy, it is perhaps the highest achievement of great art in the direction of the supernatural” (307). The *Stregozzo* depicts a witch riding through reed-choked swamps to the Sabbath. She sits aside an “unearthly car” constructed of the “spine and ribs of some antediluvian creature” (306). Beside her chariot are two naked youths, presumably to observe the fleshy rites of the Sabbath. The witch cowers amongst the bones, and in one hand holds “a heap of babies” (306), and in other a fire-filled vessel “whose smoke, mingling with her long, disheveled hair, floats behind, sweeping through the rank vegetation, curling and eddying into vague, strange semblances of lions, apes, chimæras” (307). A boy—evidently the witch’s servant, snatched from his crib like a changeling child—leads the ghastly procession, riding on the back of a shaggy goat, blowing a horn, and carrying “little stolen children packed behind on his saddle” (306). In such a strange and morbid work of art, one might expect Lee to find numerous suggestions of the real supernatural. Surprisingly, Lee claims that if we are not informed of the subject matter of the drawing, then we might not perceive anything supernatural about it at all. It is only when we are told that that the drawing depicts a witch do our imaginations “fly on the track of the supernatural” (307). Of the true supernatural, Lee states that there “is in it but one touch: and that is the only part of the drawing which is left vague; it is the confused shapes assumed by the eddying smoke among the rushes” (308). Given Lee’s theory, it makes sense that the part of the drawing that is the least figural and the most abstract would be evocative of the supernatural. Or, more specifically, the smoke suggests the supernatural because its flowing reality cannot be captured by the fixed lines

of a drawing. Any artistic representation of smoke can only gesture to its fluid reality, and the imagination must intervene so as to conjure up a sense of its protean nature, thus supplementing the drawing. Lee finds the smoke in the *Stregozzo* so suggestive because Raphael drew the hideous and evil phantasms in smoke, thereby intimately associating the formlessness of smoke with the weirdness and evil of the supernatural. There would be no better *form* for Lee's true supernatural to take in a drawing than smoke because smoke is itself *formless*. The human mind breeds all manner of supernatural evils out of smoke because the imagination confers forms on it, sees snakes and worms in its curling wisps one second, and then "lions, apes, chimæras" (307) the next second. And even though the forms smoke takes are airy, evanescent, and unreal, smoke is itself heavy, suffocating, and toxic. We will see that this noxious brewing of reality and unreality is applicable to Lee's supernatural tales, which feature narrators that are haunted by such aesthetic ghosts as Lee describes in "Faustus and Helena." Their imaginations and fancies prove, of course, not to be intrinsically real—no ghosts exist such as those pursued by the Society for Psychical Research—but their imaginations and fancies are real in the sense of being fatally real, of exerting murderously consequential effects.

If the technical masterpiece that is the *Stregozzo* has only the merest touch of the supernatural about it, then what would an artwork that is steeped in the supernatural look like? For Lee, this work was glimpsed "once, many years ago, among a heap of rubbishy smudges at a picture-dealer's in Rome . . . a picture painted by some German smearer of the early sixteenth century; very ugly, stupid, and unattractive" (308). Poorly drawn—and uniformly in a drab brown—the piece childishly illustrates a landscape with rivers, towns, and a castle bristling with spires in the background. The mid-ground depicts a scene of daily life in one of these country towns. Peasants are doing agricultural field labor; horsemen ride forth from the castle; men-at-

arms repose about town; and burghers are going about their business. Eerily proximate to this scene, in the foreground a field laborer lies asleep, ringed by diabolical magical circles scrawled out of arcane symbols. A helmeted and cloaked demon with wings and horns prowls about, reaching its bony arms toward the laborer. In the skies above, two “half demon, half dragon” creatures float, apparently the guardians or familiars of the fiend below. Lee claims that no one can tell what the exact subject of this picture is, but nevertheless, “its meaning is intense for the imagination, it has the frightful suggestiveness of some old book on witchcraft . . . of a page opened at random of Sprenger’s *Malleus Malificarum*”¹² (308). The “nameless smearer” that created this work succeeds where the Renaissance master fails “because he suggests everything and shows nothing, while Raphael creates, defines, perfects, gives form to that which is by nature formless” (309).

I have examined the passages on the *Stregozzo* and the untitled drawing by the anonymous German “smearer” at length because they exemplify Lee’s insistence that the supernatural is essentially formless. In a densely theoretical essay, these two passages stand out because they furnish examples of the true supernatural in art. More than that, however, they register the appearance of the real supernatural in art through the very undoing of the representational regimes of art. The supernatural is only visible in the beautifully rendered *Stregozzo* at the point where figuration and form break down: where the protean smoke becomes a “vague” and “confused” (308) menagerie of evil shapes, spawned from the multiform (read: formless) smoke. In the case of the shabby drawing found in the shop of the dubious “picture-dealer” (308) in Rome, its overall composition is shockingly poor. Smearred, scrawled, and distorted as if executed by a child, it consequently exerts a powerful suggestion of the supernatural because it only operates—and perhaps *can* only operate—at the level of imaginative

suggestion. The artistic talent is altogether lacking for the artist to actually figure something definite. This lack of capabilities for the technical aspect is inversely proportional to the suggestive power that it wields, and accordingly the intensity of the supernatural feeling it creates. In stark contrast to the *Stregozzo*, its very power issues from its *crudity*. Whereas Lee writes of the *Stregozzo* as a critic would when encountering a magnificent work of art in a museum, she writes of the piece by the German “smearer” as a found object—a piece of trash, pulled from “a heap of rubbishy smudges” (308). And not only is the drawing amongst garbage, but it *is* garbage. The picture that it composes is inseparable from the dirty brown smears that streak its surface.¹³ Its filth, however, only but enhances its supernatural power. Whereas Raphael’s *Stregozzo* is a masterwork, in the final analysis, it is only mere art. To the contrary, the anonymous sketcher’s piece is not as much an artwork as it is a recovered supernatural relic—a talisman with a curse. To Lee, it resembles a page ripped from an old book on witchcraft, one of the “hammers” (*Mallei*) written by medieval Inquisitors. Given the overwhelming *frisson* of the supernatural it engenders, it might as well be one of the cursed pages from the spell-book of a witch. In Lee’s imagination, the sensation of the supernatural that the drawing creates is utterly convincing to the point of being palpably threatening (as befitting a filthy object). Not so for the *Stregozzo*, which at the end of the day is only (great) art.

The “work” of the German “smearer” emphasizes that the supernatural in art manifests itself through representational disturbances—detours into the vague and the formless—that fire the imagination. Although the found sketch seemed to be charged with a supernatural force all its own, this charge came from Lee’s mind. It is not so much that the sketch derives its supernatural power from the possibility that it could have come from the pages of a witch’s grimoire. Lee, after all, did not believe in ghosts and witches (here I speak of “actual,” magic-

wielding witches, as opposed to the mortal women and men who have been accused by religious institutions of connivances with the devil). Rather, the supernatural power of the sketch issues from the impression that it gives of being an occult object—an impression so convincingly forceful that it makes us forget that it is impossible that such a thing could come from a witch's magical spell-book. Thus the real supernatural is not so much the becoming plausible of the impossible; rather, it is a chilling *feeling* of plausibility attached to the impossible. The real supernatural is the suspension of impossibility in the mind when it becomes immersed in the imaginative and the unreal. Put differently, the real supernatural does not exist ontologically or metaphysically, but instead lives through the emotions, imagination, and superstitious compulsions, from which one is never completely free no matter how skeptically rational one is. The supernatural illusion is so convincing not because of some definite impression that the artwork gives off, or some telling detail; the illusion is convincing because it is generated from within, by the individual's mind. Thus the supernatural names a point of maximum contact, or rather interpenetration, between the artwork and viewer. Therefore, in her ekphrastic descriptions of the *Stregozzo* and the found sketch, Lee's own personality and subjective impressions were just as much objects of analysis as the works of art themselves. Lee will employ this paradigm in her supernatural fiction, in which the narrators' imaginations come under the influence of the work—or the narrators come under the influence of their own imaginations, which are influenced by the work—and their desires and fancies run riot, making the artwork into a ghostly presence. All of this is possible because the formlessness or fluidity of the artwork imaginatively captivates the narrator—not to mention that some mental pathology often factors into this process.

In the notion of an essentially formless supernatural, we discover the weirdness of Lee's writing. Of course, anomalous horrors are not the sole province of weird fiction. Examples occur in the classics, such as Hesiod's depiction of Chaos in the *Theogony*. In English literature, there is Death and Night in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), and one could argue that there are plenty of obscure terrors between both the *oeuvres* of S.T. Coleridge and William Blake. It is telling, however, how prominent formless and indescribable horrors become in weird fiction in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer write that "[i]n its purest forms, The Weird has eschewed fixed tropes of the supernatural like zombies, vampires, and werewolves, and the instant archetypal associations these tropes bring with them" (xvi). The formless horrors of weird fiction suggest nothing so much as the hypertrophy of this impulse to break with the familiar supernatural traditions of the past—traditions that, in an era of technological and scientific development, and skeptical materialist outlooks, were no longer quite so disturbing. The case, however, is slightly different with Lee. Ghosts cannot be included in the realm of the possible, but they can still be *felt*. Thus Lee writes that "[w]e none of us believe in ghosts as logical possibilities, but we most of us conceive them as imaginative probabilities; we can still feel the ghostly, and thence it is that a ghost is the only thing which can in any respect replace for us the divinities of old" (309). Here, the ghost itself is entirely supplanted by the feeling of the ghost, of the sensation of being haunted. Lee extrapolates on this idea in the following paragraph, which I quote at length:

By ghost we do not mean the vulgar apparition which is seen or heard in written tales; we mean the ghost which slowly rises up in our mind, the haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies. Just as the gods of primitive religions were the undulating, bright heat which made mid-day solitary and solemn as midnight; the warm damp, the

sap-riser and expander of life; the sad dying away of the summer, and the leaden, suicidal sterility of winter; so the ghost, their only modern equivalent, is the damp, the darkness, the silence, the solitude; a ghost is the sound of our steps through a ruined cloister . . . [a ghost] is the scent of mouldering plaster and mouldering bones from beneath the broken pavement; a ghost is the bright moonlight against which the cypresses stand out like black hearse-plumes, in which the blasted grey olives and gnarled fig trees stretch their branches over the broken walls like fantastic, knotted, beckoning fingers, and the abandoned villas on the outskirts of Italian towns . . . a ghost is the long-closed room of one long dead . . . each and all of these things, and a hundred others besides, according to our nature, is a ghost, a vague feeling we can scarcely describe, a something pleasing and terrible which invades our whole consciousness, and which, confusedly embodied, we half dread to see behind us, we know not in what shape, if we look round. (309-10)

Here Lee's ghosts not only emerge as figments of the imagination, but they are also sensations. The paragraph repeatedly uses the phrase a "ghost is," such that the supernatural attaches to practically any sensation or impression whatsoever, so long as it is invested with a psychic charge by the viewer. What is more, the ghostly can also attach itself to markers of absence, which convey the supernatural's psychological nature. For instance, the ghost can be "darkness," "silence," and "solitude"—the conditions conducive to putting one into contact with his or her imagination, so that it can then raise a specter from the past. This close analysis of the sensations, and Lee's awareness of the manner in which the ghost attaches itself to a manifold of sensory stimuli (or the lack thereof), recalls Walter Pater's aestheticism, which was a profound influence on her. The above passage, which traverses a series of sensations and the ghosts that haunt them, recalls Pater's infamous conclusion to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*

(1873), wherein he encourages to the reader to go ever in search of new sensations. Indeed, in the above passage, Lee is going ever in search of new ghosts. In the conclusion, Pater writes that “when reflection begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions—color, odor, texture—in the mind of the observer.”¹⁴ The result of this reflection is a flow of “impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them” (157). The way in which the objects themselves become obscured—or as Pater says, “dissipated”—refers to the way in which the impressions that an object creates occludes the object in itself. Hence Lee’s concept of the supernatural is, in contrast to the weird horror masters, not concerned with the outside world, or reality as things-in-themselves.

The connection with Pater also emphasizes Lee’s materialism, which initially seems to be at odds with her imaginative or unreal conception of the supernatural. Near the beginning of the aforementioned conclusion, Pater writes that sensations and thoughts can be reduced to physical events. He writes, “[l]et us begin with that which is without—our physical life. Fix upon it in one of its exquisite intervals, the moment, for instance, of delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat. What is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names” (156)? He adds that the sophisticated processes of organic life “science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces,” until life is but a conjunction of forces that must part “sooner or later on their ways” (156). These comments bring into relief that the framework Lee is depositing the supernatural into is thoroughly materialistic. Just because the content of a thought or impression is in itself unreal, it nevertheless refers to a real physical process taking place—the firing of neurons, or as Pater says, “the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound” (156).

Christa Zorn explains this notion: “[t]heorists of the human mind from William James to James Ward [both of whom Lee read] investigated psychological processes as scientific matter and recognized them to be as real as anything physical” (Zorn 141). Thus Lee’s ghosts can be considered real because the psychological events that constitute them are real. Angela Leighton remarks that “‘sentiment of the body,’ no longer spirited into otherworldliness but fleshed with sense, pervades both French and English aestheticism. The physics rather than metaphysics of being attract the aesthete.”¹⁵ Leighton also reports that Lee took pride in being labeled “only a poor materialist” by a French cousin (2).

While Lee’s unconventional conception of the supernatural registers dissatisfaction with the prior supernatural traditions and their figural ghosts, as well as the inception of the weird horror imagination, the latter genre largely took shape by opposing the materialist tendencies that Lee’s supernatural is based on. Arthur Machen, for instance, uses metaphysics in his fiction to relocate reality from physical existence to a withdrawn, immaterial plane of being. Additionally, while life for Pater and Lee can be reduced down to simple physical and chemical reactions, all of the “Modern Masters” featured in this dissertation contest this notion. Blackwood adopts a similar, albeit more mathematically and scientifically sophisticated approach, than Machen. For him, three-dimensional matter both contains and is pervaded by higher dimensions unknown to human beings. Lovecraft’s approach in “The Dreams in the Witch House” is reminiscent of Blackwood’s. Because Lee’s “ghosts” do seem to be grounded in reality—because grounded in matter and science—this does not mean that Lee is concerned with external, mind-independent reality in the way that the “Modern Masters” and Lovecraft are. Lee claims that the “things in our mind, due to the mind’s constitution and its relation with the universe, are, after all, realities; and realities to count with, as much as the tables and chairs and hats and coats” (quoted in Zorn,

141). While the things of the mind are indeed realities in the way that Lee describes them, they are not *the only* realities out there; there are mind-independent realities. Additionally, much of the force of Lee's fictions and essays do not issue from this idea of the reality of psychological events. We register psychological events as real because they *feel* real. The point with Lee is not whether ghosts exist, which is an ontological or metaphysical point. The point is that the ghost as Lee defines it engenders such strong emotional reactions and ties to a lived past—thus creating such a convincing sense of the supernatural—that they might as well exist. Her ghosts are real because of the force of the emotions that they create; they are real because they exert consequences, and can motivate people to pathological actions. Lee's specters are as real as our feelings are real. Weird horror fiction in the lineage that leads to Lovecraft stages confrontations with mind-independent reality time and again, when protagonists encounter incomprehensible creatures from the farthest reaches of the universe that have nothing to do human beings or human psychology. Whereas Pater and Lee propose a kind of anti-humanism wherein life can be reduced to various physical and neurological events, the outlook of the "Modern Masters" is by contrast in-humanist and non-reductionist.

In her fiction, Lee stages her theory of the supernatural. That is, the ghosts featured in her tales, as she announces in the introduction to *Hauntings* (1899), are "things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy" (39). Her tale "Amour Dure" (1896) is stylized as passages from the diary of Spiridion Trepka, a Polish professor of history who is in Italy to write a chronicle of the remote village of Urbana. In the process of doing so, Trepka comes across a number of portraits, in particular a miniature of Medea da Carpi, a late Renaissance *femme fatale* who rose to power by serially murdering all of her aristocratic husbands. She persists in town

legend and lore as a powerful witch who flies through the air on the back of a hideous goat, kidnapping naughty children. Da Carpi seemingly met her match in Duke Robert II, a man of the cloth who was able—by virtue of his vow of chastity or his sexual orientation—to resist Medea’s fatal charms and put her to death. Trepka, however, is not so lucky. After an encounter with the miniature, he feels himself impossibly desiring da Carpi, and in a series of meetings with her “ghost” in the abandoned church of San Giovanni Decollato, Trepka suffers a nervous breakdown and has to convalesce in the countryside. While there, he visits the villa where da Carpi was forcibly detained by Duke Robert II. On this trip, his ghostly lover requests of him a task: to defile Duke Robert II’s resting place so that his wandering spirit will be made vulnerable to her revenge. Trepka knows full well that this act will not only incur the wrath of the villagers, but also secure his eternal torment in hell. Robert II.’s soul rests within a silver winged victory statue ensconced within another statue of a conquering Robert II on horseback, which is at the town center of Urbania. On Christmas Eve, after being warned by the damned souls of da Carpi’s former lovers, Trepka nevertheless breaks open the statue, removes the victory, and dashes it to pieces against the ground. A footnote added to Trepka’s diary informs the reader that he was found dead from a stab wound in the heart—da Carpi’s preferred method of murder—later on that evening.

A crucial moment in the story that demands examination is Trepka's first “encounter” with Medea da Carpi, when he discovers a portrait miniature of her, which is also the moment the work of haunting begins in the tale. In recollecting the circumstances of his finding this *curio*, Trepka relates that most of these portraits “must have been destroyed, perhaps by Duke Robert II.'s fear lest even after her death this terrible beauty should play him a trick”¹⁶ (51). Trepka's observation prosaically refers to a destruction of all works of art with Medea as their

subject, such that the cultural memory of her cannot do any damage to Robert II.'s sterling historical reputation, made evident by the grandiose sculpture that memorializes him at the center of Urbana. In this sense, the systematic destruction of all of the portraits of Medea is a white-washing of her from history by the unscrupulous duke. Trepka's observation could also be read, however, as a gesture toward the supernatural plot of the story, in which Medea has seduced the professor in order to do harm to Robert II.'s spirit. By smashing the victory statue, Trepka exposes Robert II.'s soul to a vengeful haunting by Medea, hence Robert II.'s “fear lest even after death this terrible beauty should play him a trick.” That the contours of the supernatural plot are visible before Medea even begins to haunt Trepka—let alone tell him the specific plan she has in store for Robert II.—indicates that this haunting is a creation of Trepka's own mind, worked on by the powerful influences of the art objects that bear Medea's image. The multiple meanings of the phrase “terrible beauty” both index and deepen these possibilities. “[T]errible beauty” can be read as an epithet for Medea herself, and in this vein refers to her undead presence. On the other hand, “terrible beauty” can be read as an attribute belonging to her or to the artwork. This slippage between the historical personage and the artwork, which effectively fuses her with beauty, suggests the way in which the artwork and its impressions generate haunting in Lee's theory of the supernatural, and perhaps the way in which women themselves, throughout history, were conceived of as beautiful aesthetic surfaces. From this perspective, it makes sense that Robert would want to destroy all the portraits; even though he first destroyed Medea, this would not be good enough. He would have to destroy all of the portraits (read: ghost-generators) of her, with which men fall in love and in turn threaten him with retaliatory violence, just as Trepka is doing. It is fitting, then, that only a few portraits survive, and that this portrait that Trepka has

found is an easy-to-conceal miniature that once likely belonged to a lover of Medea's, who in turn was “loved” by her.

Lee's description of Medea da Carpi reads as follows:

The face is a perfect oval, the forehead somewhat over-round, with minute curls, like a fleece of bright auburn hair; the nose a trifle over-aquiline, and the cheek-bones a trifle too low; the eyes grey, large, prominent, beneath exquisitely curved brows and lids just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth also, brilliantly red and most delicately designed, is a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth. Tight eyelids and tight lips give a strange refinement, and, at the same time, an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness; they seem to take, but not to give. The mouth with a kind of childish pout, looks as if it could bite or suck like a leech . . . A curious, at first rather conventional, artificial-looking sort of beauty, voluptuous yet cold, which, the more it is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind . . . I often examine these tragic portraits, wondering what this face, which led so many men to their death, may have been like when it spoke or smiled, what at the moment when Medea da Carpi fascinated her victims into love unto death—“Amour Dure—Dure Amour,” as runs her device—love that lasts, cruel love—yes indeed, when one thinks of the fidelity and fate of her lovers.

(52)

In keeping with how Lee's supernatural short stories put her aesthetic theory into practice, Trepka's aesthetic reactions to the portrait determine what Medea's “ghost” is like. Trepka sees a “sinister seductiveness” in the portrait, but whether such a quality is evident in the portrait or not is unverifiable; he seems to *want* there to be a diabolic allure there. Phrases such as “looks as if,” “an air of, ” and “a little too,” and verbs like “give” stress that we are reading Trepka's

impressions, and according to Lee's theory, it is these impressions which will constitute her ghost. Trepka also seems to be reading Medea's historical reputation into the portrait; because he is so fascinated, and so in love, with her historical personage, he reads these traits into her portrait. Hence he is able to detect the coldness of her beauty from just looking at the portrait. His expert aesthetic judgment of the portrait is anything but that; instead, it is a reflection of his own desires and fancies. The phrase "the more it [Medea's visage] is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind" nods to the fact that, as Trepka becomes more obsessed with Medea, the more he becomes psychologically unhinged, hallucinating meetings with her ghost at the cathedral. The implication here is that Trepka has a *troubled mind*, which Lee emphasizes later in the tale, as Trepka's diary reads: "[w]ith the case of my uncle Ladislas, and other suspicions of insanity in my family, I ought really to guard against such foolish excitement" (61). Here Lee draws on degeneration theory to explain why Trepka fixates on the portrait. In a detailed article exploring Lee's considerable knowledge of diverse scientific theories of heredity, Shafquat Towheed writes that Lee was equivocal with regard to degeneration theories, but she occasionally articulated them.¹⁷ For instance, she claimed that "later Darwinism . . . [was] training us to perceive that in the process of evolution there is, alongside of the selection of the fittest, the rendering even unfitter of initially unfit, degenerative tendencies as well as tendencies to adaptation" (quoted in Towheed, 46). By implying that Trepka's (suicidal) obsession with Medea is due to inheriting degenerate traits from an ancestor, she once again poses a reductionist, materialistic scientific theory to explain the "ghost" that haunted Trepka. In the following chapters, we will see that weird horror writers contest the very accounts around which Lee constructs her fictions and essays.

¹ See H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2012). While Lovecraft includes critical appraisals of Machen's and Blackwood's work in the tenth section of the essay, titled "The Modern Masters," he writes on Hodgson's fiction in a previous section, "The Weird Tradition in the British Isles." There, Lovecraft writes: "[o]f rather uneven stylistic quality, but vast occasional power in its suggestion of lurking worlds and beings behind the ordinary surface of life, is the work of William Hope Hodgson, known today far less than it deserves to be. Despite a tendency toward conventionally sentimental conceptions of the universe, and of man's relation to it and to his fellows, Mr. Hodgson is perhaps second only to Algernon Blackwood in his serious treatment of unreality. Few can equal him in adumbrating the nearness of nameless forces and monstrous besieging entities through casual hints and insignificant details, or in conveying feelings of the spectral and the abnormal in connexion with regions or buildings" (77). That Hodgson's remarkable weird writing is second only to Blackwood's, and that few can equal him in crafting cosmic horrors, indicates why I include Hodgson among the masters. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

² See *The Weird*, eds. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2011). In the introduction to this recent, groundbreaking anthology, the VanderMeers write that "influences on The Weird in the twentieth century, streams of fiction that fell into its watershed, included many traditions: surrealism, symbolism, Decadent Literature, the New Wave, and the more esoteric strains of the Gothic. None of these influencers truly defined The Weird, but, assimilated into the aquifer along with Lovecraftian and Kafkaesque approaches, changed the composition of this form of fiction forever" (xvi). All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³ Here I must acknowledge that my thinking on Lee's engagement with heredity staged in "Amour Dure" is influenced by Lindsay Wilhelm's insightful work on the tale, which she presented to the UCLA Nineteenth Century Group on 30 October 2012, in her paper "The Irresistible 'Vibration of Long-Past Acts': Vernon Lee, Heredity, and the Supernatural."

⁴ Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell & Patricia Pulham (Toronto, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006) p. 40.

⁵ See Andrew Bowie, *Introduction to German Philosophy* (Oxford, U.K.: Polity, 2003). Bowie writes that "Kant refers to what he is initiating as a 'Copernican Turn.' During the first half of the sixteenth century, Copernicus had been the first modern thinker to oppose the view that the earth was the centre of the universe with mathematically based arguments . . . the odd thing about Kant's turn is that it can be seen as involving the opposite of Copernicus's turn, though it is just as revolutionary. Copernicus began to take us away from the center of the universe, and thereby helped set in motion the development of the scientific image of the universe . . . Kant, on the other hand, makes our thinking the very principle of the universe's intelligibility, thus putting the human mind at the centre of everything" (16). I relate Kant's philosophy to Lee's supernatural fiction because her ghosts are of the order of *phenomena* rather than *noumena*. Just as *noumena* are fundamentally unknowable and bracketed in Kant's philosophy, Lee's fiction limits itself to exploring phenomenal "reality." In contrast, the weird horror fiction of Blackwood, Machen, and Hodgson is often concerned with *noumenal* reality, or reality-in-itself. From this perspective, it is easy to see why philosophers associated with speculative realism, such as Graham Harman and Reza Negarestani, have been intensely interested in weird fiction, in particular Lovecraft's myths.

⁶ See H.P. Lovecraft, *The Complete Fiction* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2008), 110-4. The head notes to the tale read: “[o]ne of the most moving and delicate of Lovecraft’s “Dunsanian” tales, it is somewhat similar in conception to Dunsany’s “The Coronation of Mr. Thomas Shap” (in *The Book of Wonder*) in its portrayal of a man who leads an alternate life in a dream, as recorded in an entry in Lovecraft’s commonplace book: ‘Dream of flying over city.’ Another entry may also be of relevance: “Man journeys into the past—or imaginative realm—leaving bodily shell behind”” (110).

⁷ Jack Sullivan includes Lee’s fiction in a chapter titled “Psychological, Antiquarian, and Cosmic Horror,” in editor Marshall B. Tynn’s *Horror Literature* (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1981), 221-75. The chapter gives an overview of the work produced during 1872-1919—a period that critic and editor Philip Van Doren Stern dubbed the “golden age” of horror. Sullivan remarks that Van Doren Stern bestowed this moniker in “the introduction to his famous 1942 collection of ghost stories” (221). This collection, however, was not published until 1949, and its title, which Sullivan does not mention, is *The Moonlight Traveler*. Also noteworthy is the fact that the prestigious Bodley Head Press of London published this collection, which included tales from Somerset Maugham, Lord Dunsany, H.G. Wells, E.M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, O. Henry, Saki, Walter De La Mare, Ian Struther, and James Stephens. While Sullivan’s chapter title reflects the diversity of horror subgenres that flourished during these years, it also indicates the multifaceted nature of the weird. That Vernon Lee’s fictions are discussed alongside of Blackwood and Machen’s cosmic horror tales, and the weird antiquarian stories of M.R. James, indicates the underlying shared sensibilities of these authors.

⁸ A premier example of modern, psychological weird horror fiction is found in the work of American writer Thomas Ligotti. Much of his fiction, which might be described as ontologically nihilistic, indicates that there is no underlying reality to matter and the exterior world. His protagonists are consequently mired in the unreality of their own psychological spaces. Ligotti’s work also demonstrates a fascination with brain science, in particular the way neurological functioning creates the illusions of selfhood and the outside world. See Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010) for a philosophical discussion of the ramifications of materialist brain science. Also see James Trafford, “The Shadow of a Puppet Dance: Metzinger, Ligotti, and the Illusion of Selfhood,” *Collapse*, ed. Robin Mackay, v. 4 (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2008), 185-206. Immediately following Trafford’s article, this edition of *Collapse* happens to contain a draft chapter from *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, titled “Thinking Horror.”

⁹ It should be noted that Lovecraft, like Lee, was a proponent of scientific naturalism. Given the way in which weird horror fiction makes use of scientific materials, it is hardly surprising that Lovecraft should be a naturalist, even though Machen, Blackwood, and Hodgson evidently were not.

¹⁰ Vernon Lee, “Faustus and Helena,” *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell & Patricia Pulham (Toronto, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 292. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹¹ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), 147. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹² In a footnote to “Faustus and Helena,” Maxwell and Pulham write that the *Malleus Maleficarum* or “Hammer of Witches” “is an infamous 1487 textbook designed to help identify witches and advise on their interrogation and

torture. It was written by two Dominicans, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, who were operating as members of the Catholic Inquisition in Germany in the 1480's" (308). In one of Jules Michelet's famous studies, *Satanism and Witchcraft* (1939), he writes that "[s]orceresses took small pains to hide their proceedings. They rather boasted of their powers; and it is out of their own mouths Sprenger gathered a large proportion of the strange stories which adorn his Manual. The said Manual is a highly pedantic work, following with grotesque servility the formal divisions and subdivisions in use among the Thomist logicians—yet at the same time the single-minded, earnest and serious production of a man quite genuinely frightened, a man who in the awful duel between God and the Devil, in which the former generally allows the Evil One to get the best of it, sees no other possible remedy but to pursue the latter with firebrand in hand, burning with all practicable speed those mortal frames wherein he chooses to take up his abode" (New York: The Citadel Press, 1967), 129.

¹³ The dirty sketch is productively compared to a passage from Lee's essay, "The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists," in *Euphorion* (1884). The passage describes the English sacking Italy for its archaeological treasures, which Lee describes in terms similar to the grubby sketch: "To Italy they flocked and through Italy they rambled, prying greedily into each cranny and mound of the half-broken civilization, upturning with avid curiosity all the rubbish and filth . . . [a]nd then, impatient of their intoxicating and tantalizing search, suddenly grown desperate, they clutched and stored away everything, and returned home tattered, soiled, bedecked with gold and with tinsel, laden with an immense uncouth burden of jewels, and broken wealth, and refuse and ordure, with pseudo-antique philosophy, with half-mediæval Petrarchesque poetry, with Renaissance science, with humanistic pedantry and obscenity, with euphuistic conceits and casuistic quibble, with art, politics, metaphysics—civilization embedded in all manner of rubbish and abomination, soiled with all manner of ominous stains" (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1884), 63-4.

¹⁴ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (New York: New American Library, 1959), 157. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁵ Angela Leighton, "Ghosts, Aestheticism, and Vernon Lee" *Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁶ Vernon Lee, "Amour Dure" *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* ed. Catherine Maxwell & Patricia Pulham (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2006), 52. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁷ Shafquat Towheed, "The Creative Evolution of Scientific Paradigms: Vernon Lee and the Debate over the Hereditary Transmission of Acquired Characters," *Victorian Studies*, 49:1 (Autumn 2006) , 46.

II. Arthur Machen: Metaphysical Terror

In contrast to Lee, who in her supernatural fiction either brackets the outside world or makes it amenable to naturalistic explanation, the focus of Arthur Machen's weird horror fiction is the outside world—and even more than that, *the outside of the outside world*. What I mean by this seeming tautology is that Machen's horror tales speculate on metaphysical realities that underlie concrete, matter-based existence. Donald M. Hassler writes that Machen “experienced an early moment of insight, just before beginning the poem *Eleusinia* (1881), in which he sensed that there exists a timeless and spiritual reality underneath what humans perceive in the material world. A major proportion of his large literary output was devoted to the skillful and repeated expression of this vision.”¹ In doing so, reality is for Machen no longer an issue of radically-knowable configurations of atoms and void. This move, however, occasions an interesting fictional (as well as philosophical) problem: if reality is indeed metaphysical, and therefore beyond the perceptive powers of the five senses, then it cannot really be explored, but only hinted at—adumbrated forth through the plots and themes of Machen's stories as if through a veil. Moreover, we will see that this hidden, immaterial plane of being does not resemble the spiritual afterlife described by Judeo-Christian holy writings. Although Machen was deeply interested in Christian mysticism and possessed strong High Anglican religious beliefs (that nevertheless tended toward Catholicism),² the metaphysical worlds he crafts in his weird horror fictions are fearsomely Pagan. If the fauns and satyrs that populate these shadowy outer worlds bear any resemblance to the Judeo-Christian God, it is because they recall the terrifying deity of the Old Testament who induces the shuddering of the *mysterium tremendum*, or even death, if one beholds his face. There is also a pronounced aspect of the “left-hand sacred” to Machen's

metaphysical creatures. In his book *Ecce Monstrum* (2007), Jeremy Biles incisively defines the “left-hand sacred” as follows:

In contradistinction to its lucent and form-conferring ‘right-hand’ counterpart, the left-hand sacred is obscure and formless—not transcendent, pure, and beneficent, but dangerous, filthy, and morbid. This sinister, deadly aspect of the sacred is at once embodied in, and communicated by, the monster . . . it is in beholding the monster that one might experience the combination of ecstasy and horror that characterizes [the left-hand sacred].³

Machen was familiar with the “left-hand sacred” through his fascination with occultism, which he heavily researched, and presumably through his membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.⁴ The obscurity and formlessness that Biles mentions are crucial features of Machen’s horrific fauns because of their metaphysical natures, which are to some degree refractory to full ontological presence. Biles also emphasizes the erotic dimension of the “left-hand sacred.” It not only induces “ecstasy” (one of Machen’s favorite terms, we will see) in the beholder, but it is also “filthy” in the sense of sexually sullied, as opposed to the holy “purity” of the “right-hand sacred.” Of course, fauns and satyrs are legendary for their carnal appetites, and the case is no different in Machen’s weird fictions. These occult, erotic, and Pagan aspects to Machen’s tales indicate that they are quite unlike the Victorian ghost stories that preceded them. Moreover, despite the fact that Machen’s fiction is steeped in an antique world, it is also at the same time thoroughly modern in terms of its settings, formal experimentations, and engagement with the sciences. This interpenetration of temporalities, in which an ancient and dark Pagan past survives—if not thrives—in a modern Christian metropolis, is a central feature of his work.

In this chapter, I examine Machen's novella *The Great God Pan* (1894) and his novel, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). In the former work, I argue that Machen uses the device of a metaphysical, alternate plane of existence in order to destabilize reductive, mechanistic accounts of nature and biological life. Chief among these accounts is T.H. Huxley's protoplasmic physicalism, a theory which he proposed in his paper, "On the Physical Basis of Life," in the 1 February 1869 issue of *The Fortnightly Review*. In that paper, Huxley contends that biological life is in no way independent of matter, namely that there is no spiritual vital principle or soul housed by the corporeal frame, and that all of the diverse forms of life are in essence composed of the very same kind of basal matter, which he terms "protoplasm."⁵ In *The Shape of Fear* (1998), Susan Navarette writes that protoplasm is "a semifluid, semitransparent, colorless substance,"⁶ and insightfully proposes that the primary supernatural antagonist in *The Great God Pan*—a sinister "woman" by the name of Helen Vaughn (read: faun)—undergoes decomposition into this compound at the time of her death. Whereas Navarette predominately interprets this scene as an expression of the fear of humanity's reduction to base matter as per the discoveries of *fin-de-siècle* science, I read the scene as proposing the irreducibility of biological life into protoplasm, hence resisting Huxley's theory. In keeping with Machen's metaphysical vision, if the creature is reduced to protoplasm, it is because life has fled to another plane beyond worldly existence and accordingly cannot maintain its shape or animate physical material any longer. Moreover, Helen undergoes a series of startling corporeal transformations before her death, changes which see her switch gender and shift through a series of animal becomings of diminishing organismic complexity, culminating in the total protoplasmic meltdown of her body. The viscid puddle left behind in the wake of this event suggests that the protoplasm is but a

remainder—a gross, physical residue leftover from this spectacle—and not in the least the very essence of it.

I also argue that, in addition to Huxley's reductionist biology, *The Great God Pan* also challenges neurological discourses that were marshaled by degeneration theorists for the purposes of pathologizing mystical experience. Among the earliest of the degeneration theorists was French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809-1873). Morel believed that the stress and strain of metropolitan life produced an array of diseases that could be classified under three headings: “physical deformity, perversion of the organism and disturbance of the faculties.”⁷ What was novel about Morel's theory was the notion that these diseases were transmitted through the mechanisms of heredity, and could not only afflict a generational family line, but also civilization at large, causing it to retrogress and ultimately collapse (Greenslade 16). Morel's debt to the idea of the heritability of acquired traits and conditions, which was proposed by the biologist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, is evident, and as the nineteenth century progressed, degeneration theory was upgraded by “Darwinian popularizers” such as Herbert Spencer (Greenslade 17). Perhaps the most influential—and certainly most inflammatory—work produced by the degeneration theorists was Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892), which appeared in English as *Degeneration* in 1895. A practicing physician and writer, Nordau dedicated his book to Italian professor of criminology Caesar Lombroso, whose masterwork *Criminal Types* connected degeneracy and criminality, and suggested a propensity for illegal activities could be identified by certain tell-tale physiological features of atavism, such as excessively bushy hair, facial asymmetry, attached earlobes, and so forth (Greenslade 88-9). In other words, underlying the social pathology of crime was the physiological pathology of degeneration, which exhibited pronounced physical symptoms. Nordau's work makes use of degeneration theory to diagnose

artists as specific degenerate types, among them hysterics, egomaniacs, and mystics. In this chapter, I am interested in how Nordau uses the developing science of neurology to diagnose and pathologize the latter class of degenerate. In my reading of *The Great God Pan*, I show how Machen, ever the defender of mysticism, emphasizes that the vast majority of the brain's structures and functions still had yet to be explored at the *fin-de-siècle*, thus contesting the radically positivistic discourse of neurology Nordau uses to stigmatize mystics.

In the second part of the chapter, I turn to what is arguably Machen's masterpiece, his novel *The Hill of Dreams*.⁸ This work continues to explore many of the themes and ideas of *The Great God Pan*, in particular those pertaining to the nature of biological life. As does his infamous novella of 1894, Machen's novel foregrounds the debate posed by Huxley's protoplasmic physicalism: that is, whether or not vitality is the result of a spiritual phenomenon, or if it is nothing more than the evolved product of slowly changing arrangements of matter. I argue, however, that this mature work does not resist reductive scientific theories so much as plumb the horror of their possibility, if not their basis in indisputable fact. Consequently, Machen divides his semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman* into two parts: the first, in which the novel's young protagonist has mystical visions of the god Faunus in the forest-encircled ruins of an old Roman fortress, and the second, in which the older protagonist travels to London to become a writer, suffering savage indignities in a merciless and depraved metropolis that threatens to reveal his boyhood visions as empty dreams—if not the pathological hallucinations of a degenerate. In the first part of the novel, the visions of Faunus implicate a spiritual vital force at work, animating the haunted ecosystem that thrives in the ruins of the fortress. To the contrary, almost every experience that Lucian has in London is debasing, threatening to reduce his life to nothing more than the bare facts of its material existence.

In order to investigate the nature of biological life in *The Hill of Dreams*, I show that Machen centralizes exemplars of fungal life. This comparatively primitive biological species had become more than ever before a source of fear and fascination in the late nineteenth century. Machen's use of hideous fungal specimens enables him to explore the strange and horrifying conclusions issuing from nineteenth-century theories of biological life. Thus the novel participates in the longstanding Victorian debates about the ways in which, as Kelly Hurley writes, "new discoveries in the biological and geological sciences required a radical rethinking of humanity's position relative to its environment."⁹ It is not of course the case that earlier writers had no interest in mycological life-forms. References occur in Shakespeare, Shelley, and Dickens,¹⁰ but the increasing 1890s cultural engagement with fungal life¹¹ remains obscure because this topic has received virtually no attention from scholars¹² outside of specialists in the field of mycology, upon whom it has devolved to chronicle the fungus's long history in myth, folklore, and literature.

Although the references to fungal life in the tale initially seem like background details that contribute to the pervasive gloom and mephitic atmosphere of decadence that pervades Machen's novel, there are too many prominent references to mycological life in the tale to ignore or simply dismiss as mere Symbolist ornamentation. I argue that Machen is interested in fungal life because it is situated at the very junction between base inorganic materials on the one hand, and vital organic substance on the other hand. Consequently, fungal life destabilizes the relationship between life and matter, injecting dead materials with a paradoxical undead life, and corrupting life with rotting matter. For Huxley, it was easy "to admit that the dull vital actions of a fungus, or foraminifer, are the properties of their protoplasm, and are the direct results of the nature of the matter of which they are composed."¹³ For Machen, however, the powers of

growth, propagation, and regeneration of the fungus were hardly “dull” vital actions, and its lineaments of life were so thin as to suggest a miraculous vitalization of base matter itself. Although Huxley emphasized that protoplasm was the physical basis of life, his theory does not account for *how* life emerges from it. In *The Hill of Dreams*, Machen emphasizes the liminality of fungal life so that vitality is recast as a philosophical problem that can be informed by the various researches of mycology, biology, and physics, but not necessarily resolved by these disciplines. Given the strangeness of these forms of creaturely life, and the manner in which they problematize the distinction between life and death, it is understandable that fungi have a long history in legend and folklore, wherein they are associated with fairies and the devil. In regard to the latter, British author William Delisle Hays writes that

By precept and example children are taught from earliest infancy to despise, loathe, and avoid all kinds of ‘toadstools’ . . . This popular sentiment, which we may coin the word ‘fungophobia’ to express, is very curious . . . It is a striking instance of the confused popular notions of fungi in England that hardly any species have or ever had colloquial English names. They are all ‘toadstools,’ and therefore thought unworthy of baptism.¹⁴

Here “baptism” is not just a colorful figure of speech meaning “nomination.” It also refers to sacramental christening because of the persistent association of the demonological and fungal, reflected in the colloquial names of some species of fungi, namely the “Devil’s snuff box” and the “Devil’s Stink-pot.”¹⁵ Additionally, the malodors emanated by fungi are often described as evil-smelling, and their colors lurid (Woodard 10). In the popular imagination, therefore, fungal organisms are damned: life-forms so degradingly close to the base material substrate of physical being, that they are thought not to possess animal or vegetable souls. As soulless creatures, they are not the creations of God, but the perversions of the Devil. Their reduction to sheer material,

the rapidity of their life-cycles, and their morphological plasticity all bespeak the disposability of their lives, and hence their unworthiness of “baptism.” Here we might recall the features of the “left-hand sacred”—vile, filthy, and formless. Machen’s engagement with fungoid life not only allows him to interrogate the ontological and metaphysical basis of vitality in *The Hill of Dreams*, but it also exemplifies the emergence of the fungal in weird horror fiction as a site where the relationship between life and matter is destabilized. In the life of fungi, vitality is threatened by the prospect of its reduction to physico-chemical components; yet mycological life also exhibits matter assuming agency, becoming more than just a passive receiver of mechanical forces.

Due to the personal, semi-autobiographical nature of much of his weird horror fiction, I offer some notes on Machen’s life that help us to appreciate the intricacies of his work. Machen was born in Gwent, the borderland between England and Wales that, as Mark Valentine so insightfully puts it, “was for him also a borderland between this world and another world of wonder and strangeness” (7). In the first part of his autobiography *Far Off Things* (1922), Machen writes that “I shall always esteem it as the greatest piece of fortune that has fallen to me that I was born in that noble, fallen Caerleon-on-Usk, in the heart of Gwent . . . anything which I may have accomplished in literature is due to the fact that when my eyes were first opened in earliest childhood they had before them the vision of an enchanted land.”¹⁶ The only son in a line of Welsh priests and scholars, Machen and his family faced the hardships of poverty when the great agricultural ‘smash’ of 1880 wiped out the parish and forced Machen’s father to declare bankruptcy. Nevertheless, the youngster found in nature an enduring source of comfort and inspiration, and took to going on long walks “in solitude and woods and deep lanes and wonder” (Valentine 9). Next best to communion with nature was time spent in his father’s old library,

which contained the works that were to have a decisive influence on his imagination. Machen cherished *The Arabian Nights*, *Don Quixote*, *Parker's Glossary of Gothic Architecture*, *Wuthering Heights*, and the well-researched series of essays on alchemy that appeared in Charles Dickens's *Household Words* periodical (Valentine 10). His favorite authors included Sir Thomas Browne, William Hazlitt, and Thomas De Quincey, writers 'whose prose was all carven and curious with twisting simile and gilded metaphor,' writes Valentine (11).

Machen eventually moved to London in order to secure work as a journalist. His London years were "a time of penury and isolation, during which he got work where he could, as a junior in a publisher's office, and as a private tutor, and spent his free time wandering in London as he had in his home country, shocked and morbidly compelled by the squalor and crudity of the surroundings" (Valentine 14). These experiences doubtlessly fueled Machen's later tales of the weird and supernatural. His literary career started to take off with the publication of *The Anatomy of Tobacco* (1884), an ode to the pleasures of smoking that parroted Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. He followed this comedic essay with a translation of Marguerite de Navarre's *The Heptameron*, the very first full-length translation of this work.¹⁷ By the 1890's, he was regularly producing fiction and articles for periodicals like the *Globe*, *Whirlwind*, and *St. James Gazette*. In 1894, John Lane's Bodley Head press—notorious for producing *The Yellow Book*, a quarterly that featured writings and graphic art by Aesthetic and Decadent artists—published Machen's novella *The Great God Pan*, which prompted a public outrage due to its outré and sexual content.¹⁸ Oscar Wilde famously congratulated Machen on 'un grand succes.'¹⁹ Indeed it was, and in more ways than one, for *The Great God Pan* secured Machen's reputation as a master of the horror genre.

The novella begins with a Londoner by the name of Mr. Clarke visiting his friend, Dr. Raymond, in the west English countryside. Clarke has been summoned by Dr. Raymond to bear witness to an extraordinary medical experiment. Dr. Raymond, a self-professed expert in “transcendental medicine” (Machen 9), is about to perform an experimental brain surgery that will allow the test subject to perceive metaphysical reality. Describing the outcome of the operation, Dr. Raymond says:

[t]here *is* a real world, but it is beyond this glamour and this vision, beyond these ‘chases in Arras, dreams in career,’ beyond them all as beyond a veil. I do not know if any human being has ever lifted that veil; but I do know, Clarke, that you and I shall see it lifted this very night from before another’s eyes . . . the ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan. (10)

Clarke inquires as to whether the experimental procedure is safe, to which Dr. Raymond replies that it will only involve shifting the position of a small cluster of cells in the grey matter—a response that seems somewhat incongruous with his reassurance that this alteration is “microscopical,” and that the resulting change would be overlooked by “ninety-nine brain specialists out of a hundred” (10). The willing test subject is Mary, a young girl that Dr. Raymond rescued from poverty, evidently with not the best of intentions in mind. As the metaphysician begins preparing his laboratory for surgery, the smell from what is likely a chloroform anesthetic lulls Clarke to sleep. In his dreams, Clarke wanders from his father’s country house on an old path that takes him to the center of a primeval forest. There, he senses a presence that is “neither man nor beast, neither living nor dead, but all things mingled, the form of all things but devoid of all form” (14). He wakes from this presentiment of Pan with a start, as Dr. Raymond announces that he is off to fetch Mary. After she consents to the surgery, Mary is

placed in the chair, kissed by Dr. Raymond, and given the anesthetic. The doctor cuts a “tonsure” from her hair and goes to work with a “glittering instrument” that makes Clarke shudder and turn away (16). The surgery is completed rapidly, and the men wait for Mary to reawaken. When her eyes open, they are wide with wonder as she reaches out, as if embracing something invisible. Her expression suddenly changes to stark horror as she is seized by a fit of convulsions and screaming, which ends with the young woman unconscious on the floor. Three days later, accompanied by Dr. Raymond, Clarke visits the bedside of Mary, who is “wide-awake” but “grinning vacantly” (16). Nonchalantly, Dr. Raymond announces that “it is a great pity; she is a hopeless idiot. However, it could not be helped, and, after all, she has seen the Great God Pan” (16).

The tale resumes decades later in Clarke’s chambers in London. He is perusing a scrapbook that he calls his “Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil,” which collects various anecdotes of paranormal and otherwise diabolical happenings. He is pouring over an account that he has read ten times previously. It tells of Helen V., presently aged twenty-three; Rachel M., now deceased; and Trevor W., “an imbecile, aged eighteen,” all of whom lived in a remote Welsh village that was once a Roman encampment (19). When she was eleven, Helen allegedly took up residence in the village under strange circumstances. She was known to spend much of her time by herself, in the woods adjacent to the Roman roads. One day, Trevor W. ran to his father in a shrieking fit of terror, claiming that he saw Helen in the woods with a “strange naked man” (22). Trevor subsequently underwent a bout of “violent hysteria” from which he eventually recovered, but he relapsed into a state of permanent mental impairment after seeing a sculpted satyr head that had been unearthed from the perimeter of the village (21-2). Rachel M., a close friend of Helen’s, endured a similar—although fatal—ordeal.

Meanwhile, in the streets of London, man-about-town Villiers of Wadham encounters an old classmate from his Oxford days, Charles Herbert, who has fallen on hard times. So ruined in fortune, mind, and body is Herbert that he is scarcely recognizable to his friend. He informs Villiers that he was corrupted by the woman he married. On the night of their wedding, Herbert says that she was “sitting up in bed, and I listened to her as she spoke in her beautiful voice, spoke of things which I dare not whisper in blackest night, though I stood in the midst of a wilderness” (26). Taking leave of his unlucky friend, Villiers asks Herbert the name of his wife: Helen Vaughn. A few days later at his supper club, Villiers asks Austin, a gentleman who is “famous for his intimate knowledge of London life, both in its tenebrous and luminous phases,” if he has heard of Charles Herbert (28). Astonished, Austin connects Herbert with a murder that occurred three years ago. The victim, a high-society man, died at the suspicious hour of five-o-clock in the morning, immediately in front of the Herbert residence. Moreover, the medical inquest revealed that he died of sheer fright. Inquiring about Mrs. Herbert, Villiers learns from Austin that “[e]veryone who saw her . . . said she was at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on” (31). His curiosity fired, Villiers resolves to inspect the former Herbert residence, as well as discuss the case with an acquaintance that has a reputation for being supremely practical man of good sense: Mr. Clarke.

At Clarke’s quarters, Villiers recites the story of Herbert (who recently died on the streets) and tells Clarke of the investigation he conducted of the condemned house, which was steeped in such suffocating, unspeakable evil that it was almost tangible. Villiers also shows Clarke a sketch he recovered of Mr. Herbert from the house, the sight of which causes Clarke to blanch “white as death” (36) and excuse Villiers from his quarters, without ever having revealed any information about Helen. Several days later, Villiers receives an extraordinary letter from

Clarke, demanding that he halt his investigation. Villiers discusses this incident with Austin, who listens gravely and informs him that the promising young London painter and socialite, Arthur Meyrink, has passed away, and that he has something back at his quarters that he must show Villiers. This object turns out to be Meyrink's final legacy: a book of sketches, contaminated with palpable malignancy, depicting a "frightful Walpurgis Night of evil, strange monstrous evil, that the dead artist had set forth in hard black and white. The figures of Fauns and Satyrs and Ægipans danced before his [Villiers's] eyes . . . a world before which the human soul seemed to shrink back and shudder" (43). The nearly unbearable odiousness of the drawings, however, does not prevent Villiers from realizing that Helen Vaughan is depicted therein.

Soon after this incident, a rash of suicides afflicting upper-crust men grips London. After some sleuthing, Villiers determines that Helen is back in London, under the alias "Mrs. Beaumont." As the deaths pile up, Villiers builds his case against Mrs. Beaumont. One night, he calls Austin to his quarters and explains all of the facts of the case to him. He then shows Austin a hang-rope and noose and announces his intention, with Clarke in tow, to call upon Mrs. Beaumont. Says Villiers: "I shall offer a choice, and leave Helen Vaughan alone with this cord in a locked room for fifteen minutes. If when we go in it is not done, I shall call the nearest policeman. That is all" (59). The rest of the tale is conveyed through two fragments: one from the papers of Dr. Robert Matheson, who witnesses Helen's startling metamorphosis at the time of her death, and the other from a letter written by Dr. Raymond, who divulges that Helen was Mary's daughter, conceived when she was raped by the Great God Pan.

In *The Weird Tale* (1980), S.T. Joshi observes that "Machen was quite consciously reviving, in the horrific mode, the ancient tale of Semele, who wished to see Zeus as he really

was—as Hera saw him—not in the various disguises (swan, bull, shower of gold) by which he masked his awesome reality. She too is overwhelmed and transported to heaven” (20-1). Joshi, however, finds little in tale to recommend it upon, ultimately denouncing it as a “profound failure” (22): “[b]ut for all the powerful conceptions and symbolism Machen is suggesting here, the actual tale degenerates into a frenzied expression of horror over illicit sex” (21). Ironically, Joshi’s own criticism almost exclusively focuses on the sexual elements of the tale that he takes Machen to task for fixating on. Such an approach would be perfectly acceptable if not for the fact that it overlooks the most praiseworthy features of the work, strengths that should be evident despite the novel’s prurient fascination with, as Joshi writes, “aberrant sex” (21). While the story does contain multiple allusions to Pagan orgiastic rites (these Helen holds at her various residences, corrupting the promising youth of London so profoundly that they commit suicide, sealing their eternal damnation) the place of *The Great God Pan* in the weird literary canon rests on its brilliant vision of urban horror—its depiction of a malicious and primeval metaphysical force circulating underneath the veneer of everyday London metropolitan life. Much like the artist Meyrink’s chiaroscuro sketches, the merit of the tale inheres in its skillful adumbration of this occult force, which the novel handles indirectly through accounts of the interactions taking place in London’s social fabric. Machen’s novella is so unsettlingly effective because the reader only overhears accounts of supernatural events—almost as if he or she were a participant in the novella’s social circles, overhearing lurid gossip and outlandish secrets. The outré first scene depicting the surgery so powerfully impacts readers and critics not only because of its grisly subject matter (as well as its suggestions of ethical and sexual indiscretions), but also because it is the only scene in the novella that gives the impression of directly relating any horrific or supernatural events. Of course, the fragment that describes Helen’s death and spectacular

decomposition seems to do so as well, but its directness is diminished by the way the novella foregrounds it as a fragment. As such, Matheson's account is separated from the major narrative stream issuing from Villiers, and to a lesser extent, Clarke. Additionally, the supernatural horror recounted in the surgery scene is only *symptomatic*, registered through the screaming and convulsions of Mary's body, and therefore indirect. Obviously, Dr. Raymond and Mr. Clarke cannot directly witness the Great God Pan's rape of Mary. This impossibility to perceive metaphysical reality, and the resulting lack of knowledge it creates, directly bears on the narratological structure of the tale and the challenges that it poses. Joshi argues that the "story is in fact extremely clumsy in construction and written in a horribly florid and stilted style" (22) when it is neither of these: the novella's narratological approach suits its themes and subject matter.

Joshi also finds fault with the story's excessive reliance on its lurid secret. Once the reader has discovered that Mary was raped by Pan, and Helen the issue of this union, Joshi contends that there is no reason at all to revisit the tale. Joshi points out that Machen perceived this very fault in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).²⁰ The story seems, however, to treat of a larger secret than Joshi acknowledges: namely, the hidden metaphysical foundations of the cosmos. Machen's urban horror questions modernity, its notions of progress, and its technological breakthroughs with the specter of a metaphysical force from the remote past that invades civilization from its wild outside. Hence the reason why the story begins in the English countryside and proceeds to London, and why Machen stresses, through Clarke's dream, that Pan is from the ancient forests. The account in Clarke's "Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil" also takes place in Welsh village that was the site of a Roman encampment; this not only connects Pan with the historically remote, but also the

culturally remote. As “neither man nor beast, neither living nor dead, but all things mingled, the form of all things but devoid of all form” (Machen 14), Pan is nothing less than the flowing fabric of the cosmos itself—meaning that Pan is also within human society.

From this perspective, we can see why this evil agency is so closely allied with sex. Like the force of libido, Pan is so old as to be anterior to all civilization, is essentially formless and so can take on any form, exerts compulsively powerful forces over humans, and thrives within society—even in those progressive, modern ones that attempt to expunge all outward traces of forces that resist domestication. The metaphysical and the sexual are conjoined in *The Great God Pan* because both are hidden, nocturnal forces in society that underlie public, day-to-day life. And while the metaphysical force in *The Great God Pan* is closely associated with the sexual, it cannot simply be reduced (as Joshi does) to sex—no more than could the erotic, or the sexual itself, be reduced to the act of sex. The libidinous nature of the metaphysical force adds to its characterization as a manifestation of the “left-hand sacred.” Machen’s novella treats the divine as sexualized, Pagan, and malicious: a formless, metaphysical force on the loose in nature and society that effectively renders the whole cosmos hostile to humans. In the tale, this hostility is reflected in the way humans who participate in Helen’s orgies go insane and commit suicide. Human life and sanity are thus temporary and delicate conjunctions of matter that are easily undone by malicious forces in the cosmos. Consistent with late Victorian fears about the degeneration of civilization, society is also subject to the same falling apart, as the tale’s rash of suicides suggests.

Similar to Joshi’s comments, Kelly Hurley’s criticism of the tale focuses on outbreaks of hysteria over repressed sexuality: the “trauma that Helen represents is absolutely central to the novel—manuscript after manuscript masses itself around that center—and yet the novel will not,

or cannot, say what the trauma is. Instead the novel erupts into symptoms, as one character after another succumbs to nausea, and more and more language is produced . . . to identify the trauma as one that exceeds language” (Hurley 48). Hurley adds that to “assert that something is too horrible to be spoken of is the privileged utterance of the Gothic, but it also the privileged utterance of the hysteric . . . Freud argues that the precondition of hysteria is a “disturbance in the sphere of sexuality” . . . so intolerable that it must be repressed (48). Supporting her argument, Hurley cites the fact that most of Helen’s victims are “fatally hystericized” and perish from nervous disorders, heart attacks, or suicide (49). What must be emphasized in conjunction with Hurley’s interpretation is the metaphysical nature of the supernatural disturbances the characters in the tale are faced with. If the horrors in the tale cannot be spoken of, it is because they are of an ontological or metaphysical order that makes them incompatible with language. The nausea and hysteria that Hurley describes suggest reactions to phenomena that are so completely incongruous with reality as we know it, that they simply cannot be described in words. Descriptions of such phenomena would be so absurd and ridiculously unbelievable that they must be passed over in silence. The vertigo and sickness the characters in the novel experience are their physiological responses to an incomprehensible unmaking or alteration of their cosmos and fundamental reality. Hurley’s omission of such a reading, and her reduction of the character’s malaise to sexual hysteria, indicate that the shapeless metaphysical horrors of the story have disturbed critics sufficiently as to force their hands in giving them form, reducing them down to a set of physical or sexual symptoms that are easily interpretable. This all goes to say that Hurley and Joshi have refused to read *The Great God Pan* as a quintessentially *weird* horror tale.

Susan Navarette seems to follow a similar path as Joshi and Hurley, interpreting the protoplasm in the penultimate fragment of the novel as a reflection of *fin de siècle* fears over the reduction of vitality by the biological sciences to a physical, radically positivistic phenomenon. While this reading is valid, and insightfully connects Machen's work to Huxley's protoplasmic physicalism, it pushes against the grain of the tale's metaphysical outlook. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that protoplasm had come to exemplify collective fears over a naturalistic, deflationary interpretation of biological life that left no room for spirit; hence protoplasm figures so heavily into the final scene of the work, as if to emphasize that Huxley's theory could never account for the spiritual mystery of life. Describing Helen's death and transformations, Dr. Matheson writes that "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 . . . at last I saw nothing but a substance like jelly" (Machen 62). Less cited than this passage are the lines that follow it: "[t]hen the latter was ascended again . . . [here the MS. is illegible] . . . for one instant I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not further describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of" (62). The descent and ascent along the ladder of animal complexity recalls Ernst Haeckel's "fundamental law of organic evolution," or "first principle of Biogeny," which he proposed in *The Evolution of Man* (1874). Haeckel states the law as follows:

Ontogeny is a recapitulation of phylogeny . . . the series of forms through which the Individual Organism passes during its progress from the egg cell to its fully developed state, is a brief, compressed reproduction of the long series of forms through which the

animal ancestors of that organism (or the ancestral forms of its species) have passed from the earliest periods of so-called organic creation down to the present time.²¹

The aforementioned ascension up the ladder reverses the downward movement that culminates in protoplasm. Machen's allusions to Haeckel's biogenetic principle, which occur during this scene that depicts nothing short of a (horrific) miracle, suggest that such evolutionary theories, alongside with protoplasmic physicalism, do not explain biological life in its entirety. There still remains an inexplicable, metaphysical element to life. The upward progression through all of the animal forms—which goes one higher form than the human, up to the Great God Pan—suggests an ascent to a new, metaphysical life. This speculation is substantiated by very last words of the novel, spoken by Dr. Raymond: “[a]nd now Helen is with her companions. . . .” (Machen 66).

The story's use of neurology likewise argues for a non-reductive view of biological life. At the time of the novel's composition, degeneration theorists like Max Nordau were using the new field of brain science to diagnose the morbid conditions associated with individual and societal degeneration. Nordau proposed that mysticism was a result of “the incapacity, due to weakness of will, either innate or acquired, to guide the work of the association of ideas by attention, to draw shadowy, liminal representations into the bright focal circle of consciousness, and to suppress presentations which are incompatible with those attended to.”²² Although Nordau speculates here on the psychology of the degenerate, he later elaborates on another form of mysticism, which is generated by a neurological disturbance in the physical structure of the brain. This type of mysticism is caused by “an anomaly in the sensitivity of the brain and nervous system. In the healthy organism the afferent nerves convey impressions of the external world in their full freshness to the brain, and the stimulation of the brain cell is in direct ratio to the intensity of the stimulus conducted to it. Not so in the department of a degenerate or

exhausted organism” (61). In this form of mysticism, the brain’s sensitivity is blunted, so no clear thoughts or impressions can take shape. In these passages, Nordau connects a distinct psychic type with a particular structural feature of the brain, as if one’s outlook on the world were wholly explainable by reference to the physical condition of their brain. The surgery described in *The Great God Pan* emphasizes the brain as a site that has not yet been fully explored by the nascent science of neurology. Machen poses the idea that different configurations of the brain’s matter might attune one to different frequencies of reality. Whereas Nordau would see any physical deviation from a healthy brain type as pathological and deleterious, Machen suggests that a different configuration of brain tissue could in theory result in new perceptive powers (with, nevertheless, horrific ramifications).

In the next part of this chapter, I continue looking at Machen’s investigation of vitality, which is a central issue in his masterpiece of a novel, *The Hill of Dreams*.²³ This semi-autobiographical work recounts the story of Lucian Taylor, a country priest’s son who struggles to become a writer in *fin-de-siècle* London. This *bildungsroman* focuses on episodes from Lucian’s dream-like and haunted childhood, the formative event therein being his exploration of the ruins of a Roman fortress. I will close read this event later, but for now it suffices to say that it culminates in a mystical experience that determines the course of his life. Impoverished and forced to withdraw from school, Lucian retreats to his father’s library, studying treatises on magical *arcana*, alchemy, and exploded philosophical systems. He soon takes to writing, honing his verse and penning a *Don Quixote*-like novel. As Lucian is increasingly subjected to the shocking cruelties capitalism heaps upon the poor, he flees into a hermetic world of dreams, imagination, and bizarre rituals that recall the medieval ascetics’ mortifications of the flesh. Ever in search of experiences that enhance his literary creativity, Lucian turns to masochism and

starvation to induce mystical ecstasies. The second part of the novel sees him in London, eking out a dreary existence in a nightmarish urban wasteland. Despite some hard-won success, he still leads the difficult life of a Grub Street hack. This picture of Lucian becomes unnervingly suspect, however, as Machen suggests his insanity. The novel ends with a nasty surprise: Lucian's death and the realization that he was not only appallingly abused unto his last, but also frustrated in his highest ambition of becoming a writer. Mere minutes after his death, swindlers who took advantage of his mental illness descend to claim his paltry estate, while the discovery of his manuscripts reveal them to be nothing more than reams of paper covered in hieroglyphic scribbling.

It would be easy to interpret the novel as a tale that explores the dangers of following a Decadent ethos of composition that recommends sensory derangement and ego dissolution for the sake of art. Lucian idolizes the opium-eaters Coleridge and De Quincey, and the last eighty pages of the work descend into the maelstrom of Lucian's drugged and dying brain, coupling the act of fictional composition with the progressive decomposition of reality. Yet these details can distract us from what lies at the heart of Machen's fictional enterprise, which is the metaphysical status of mystical experience and subjective vision, an issue that I argue is taken up by the novel's treatment of biological life. The decisive event in Lucian's life is his exploration of the titular hill of dreams, *Isca Silurum*, the Roman fortress outside of the Welsh village of Caermaen. This adventure culminates in a visitation from the great god Pan, while the rotting periphery of the fortress has been colonized by his hideous denizens: cankered trees, lichen-mottled rocks, strange species of nettle, and poisonous herbage. In the deepest part of the thicket about the fortress, where no antiseptic rays of sunlight can penetrate, Machen writes that "[t]he earth was black and unctuous, and bubbling under the feet, left no track behind. From it, in the darkness

where the shadow was thickest, swelled the growth of an abominable fungus, making the still air sick with its corrupt odor, and he [Lucian] shuddered as he felt the horrible thing pulped beneath his feet.”²⁴

Here Machen imagines the fungus as the very nadir of life, or more specifically, a life-form indistinguishable from the nonliving base material out of which it composed and into which it decomposes. R.T. and F.W. Rolfe note that many species in the genus *Coprinus* “erect their caps, fructify, and deliquesce into a collapsed, black and semi-liquid mass, popularly regarded as a ‘horrible putrescence’” (258). This autophagic deliquescence is actually a reproductive strategy that disperses spores and returns water and nutrients to the environment for future generations (259). Physically continuous with the bubbling, *nigrescent* excretions issuing from the earth’s bowels and its own decaying parts, the fungus cannot be conceived of as a living organism separate from the nonliving black ooze. In this respect, the fungus and its puddle are analogous to the slime in Machen’s *The Great God Pan* and *The Three Imposters* (1895), works that Susan Navarette argues reflect anxieties over T.H. Huxley’s researches into the physical basis of life (182). While both protoplasm and the fungus are symbols of the materialism that threatened theological narratives and human autonomy, Machen’s depiction of the fungus is especially distressing because it captures the organism in the middle of the process of emergence, such that it is half-fungus and half-slime, or rather half-alive and half-dead. Thus the fungus brings out the terrifying news that is only implicit in protoplasmic physicalism: life is always already dead. Despite the steady creep of life, it seems as if the fungus could never actually complete its ascent from the black primordial substrate and enter a distinct phase of being called life that ends in death. If it could do so, it already would have, and Lucian would have discovered just a fungus, its decayed remains, or nothing at all. Therefore, the fungus

replaces a linear conception of life with a cyclical or processuality wherein vital and non-vital matter enter into an intimate exchange that disrupts the conceptual difference between life and death.

The fungus joins the ranks of literary monstrosities in the late-nineteenth century because the extreme morphological plasticity characteristic of this phylum graphically figures the essential formlessness of life in the wake of Darwinism, which stressed that organisms were continually changing in response to selective pressures in the environment. Far from holding the promise of a radically open-ended and continuous human evolution, the dysmorphic fungal body instead poses the threat of human devolution and a degrading return to a less organized state of being, if not a return to the primordial ooze of protoplasm. These devolutionary concerns have been researched by critics like William Greenslade and Susan Navarette.²⁵ With Darwinism, the sense of the human as a created being emanating from God is undermined. Wildly variant fungal morphology erodes the religious notion of the teleological finality of divinely-created life. Instead of radiating from on high as the eternal image and emanation of God, the fungus sprouts up from down low, emerging from excreta and decayed remains only to return to them after the briefest season lived in darkness and filth. As a both a product and agent of decay, the fungus is simultaneously of and for death. I contend that what is at stake in *The Hill of Dreams* is not so much the matter of one particular species of life becoming-fungus, but rather the abysmally horrific becoming-fungus of life itself. I argue that Machen uses fungal life in the novel as a site to stage the confrontation between opposed nineteenth-century theories of vitalism and materialism. Rather than simply resolve the conflict between these theories, we will see that the inherently contradictory tendencies of fungal life reveal a disturbing tension within biological

life, one that suggests neither the reality of a universal life-force nor of matter, but rather a kind of horrifying unreality of life.

A thoroughly materialist conception of fungoid life runs throughout *The Hill of Dreams*, but it is especially prominent when the novel broaches the vexatious theme of cruelty. After he witnesses some boys amusing themselves with the torture and hanging of a puppy, Lucian shudders with disgust—the same reaction he had when he crushed the fungus underfoot (139). Machen writes that “[t]he 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 [Lucian] a shock” (138-9). Here Lucian compares the boys to fungi in an attempt to think the unthinkable: an appalling form of human life that, bereft of thought, emotion, and spirit, has become patently inhuman and capable of unfathomable cruelty. Fungal life is also pervasive in the dehumanizing and decaying London cityscape of the second half of the novel. As the fungus at *Isca Silurum* depicted life trapped in the primeval sludge of its own becoming, Machen writes that “[n]othing exquisite, it seemed, could exist in the weltering suburban sea, in the habitations which had risen from the stench and slime of the brickfields. It was as if the sickening fumes that steamed from the burning bricks had been sublimed into the shape of houses, and those who lived in these grey places could also claim kinship with the putrid mud” (220). During one of his perambulations, Lucian encounters a dilapidated house that he is inexplicably drawn to. Machen writes that ‘the old house amongst its mouldering shrubs was but a dark cloud, and the streets to north and south seemed like starry wastes, beyond them the blackness of infinity. Always in the daylight it had been to him abhorred and abominable, and its grey houses and purlieus had been

fungus-like sproutings, an efflorescence of horrible decay' (230). The passage draws on the black boundlessness of outer space to suggest a nihilistic cosmology of prototypically fungal rotting matter that is gradually deteriorating into the void.

I argue, however, that there is another conception of life at work in the novel that issues from the paradox of living death that is the hallmark of fungal life. Thinking life and death as synchronous negates them both, leaving two possible outcomes: that, as we have seen, there can only be death and inanimate matter, or that there can only be life and vitalized matter. Returning to the undead flora and fauna of *Isca Silurum*, these organisms' mode of being in the world suggests an ontological contradiction that is the very stuff of horror. It might be objected that science does an adequate job of explaining these creatures—that there is nothing genuinely contradictory or supernatural about them—but the issue here concerns Lucian's perceptions of these animals and his insight into the inherent strangeness of nature that is amplified by the horror genre's stock-in-trade zombies and living marionettes, figures that suggest a vital force behind the scenes, busy animating dead bodies and wreaking metaphysical mayhem. From this perspective, the undead ecosystem evokes not so much a rotting liveliness, but the liveliness of rot itself. Here, a metaphysical vital force is glimpsed through the decomposed and diseased lineaments of physical being. Indeed, the withered and twisted trees seem to thrive both because of and in spite of their disease and deformity, as if they were animated by something that freed biology from the space-time constraints of materialism: "stunted and old, crooked and withered by the winds into awkward and ugly forms,' the trees nevertheless form a 'dense thicket of . . . beech and oak and hazel and ash and yew'" (84). This horticultural catalogue indicates a productive biodiversity or, as hinted at in the entwining of the trees, an even deeper inter-species penetration, a miscegenation that produces strikingly new individuals "of no common

kind”—something that might be said of Lucian himself, an ancient Roman soul in a modern body (147).

Lucian’s journey from the periphery to the center of the Roman fortress charts a devolutionary movement that passes through a botanical series of decreasing biological complexity *en route* to the very origin of life. Lucian first encounters oak trees, then nettles, the aforementioned thicket of degraded trees, lichens, and finally the abominable fungus mired in *nigredo* (83-4). When one considers the fungus’s classification by nineteenth-century systematic biology, the contours of this regressive movement become even sharper. Not until the last three decades, with the appearance of molecular techniques, were fungi revealed to be more closely related to animals than plants. Nineteenth-century science predominately accounted for their evolutionary history by proposing a degenerative theory that held that fungi were plants that lost their chlorophyll (Rolfe 42), the light-sequestering pigment that allows carbon fixation and sugar synthesis. Fungi could no longer produce their own food, an ability called autotrophy. Thus the fungus was a degenerate, a shameful criminal organism that turned to heterotrophy and forfeited its self-sufficiency within the solar economy. Lucian walks over this degenerate and arrives at the center of the fortress only to have another encounter, one that indicates there is more to life than base materiality and that we will see suggests a vitalistic metaphysical paradigm of life. Stumbling out of the noxious thicket, Lucian discovers that the center of the fortress is open and bathed in sunlight. Exhausted, he lies down, removes his clothes, and drifts to sleep. Machen writes that Lucian glanced

all the while on every side at the ugly misshapen trees that hedged the lawn . . . there were forms that imitated the human shape, and faces and twining limbs that amazed him. 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. His eyes were fixed and fascinated by the simulacra of the wood . . . the wood was alive. (87)

I would like to put pressure on the most important word in this passage: “alive.” Machen does not mean that the wood is alive in the prosaic sense that science would declare it to be so, that is, consisting of organisms displaying metabolism, growth, reproduction, sensation, and so forth—all the cookbook characteristics of life. Given the literal anthropomorphizing of the wood, Machen suggests the possibility that the wood is alive because it is imbued with the same vital force as human beings. It stands to reason that this force would be immanent to all life. The double meaning of ‘wood’ suggests the extension of this indwelling creative power into the dead wood of the blasted trees, making both basic biochemical substances and raw matter alive. Consequently *The Hill of Dreams* contains a current of vitalism that, in the words of Evelyn Underhill, “is materialism inside out: for here what we call the universe is presented as an expression of life, not life as an expression or by-product of the universe.”²⁶ This vitalism is contrapuntal to the physicalist interpretation of fungal life in which organisms are not alive insomuch as undead.

After these fantastic visions, Lucian falls sleep, and in his dreams is visited by a faun. In Roman mythology, Faunus is equivalent to the Greek god Pan. As vitalism resembles a sort of Pantheism that posits the cosmic life’s identity with the universe, Pan or Faunus is a nature spirit animating all of creation. Thus the faun expresses the truth of the vital force in a mythological and divine register. At this point, we must ask some questions that bear on the viability of the novel’s two competing paradigms of life. Are Lucian’s dreams and visions real? If so, how are they real? In the sense that there really is a faun, or that they intuit the vital force of which the faun is only the outward symbol? Affirmations of these questions produce mystical and vitalist

readings, respectively, of the text. There are many grounds, however, on which to negate such affirmations. Perhaps the notion that pure life is revealed to Lucian in the guise of the Faun posits that vitalism, despite its philosophical lineaments, is at core no different from the superannuated religious beliefs and mythologies from which Faunus is drawn. This reading corroborates the *bildungsroman*'s progressive physicalism and Lucian's renunciations of his childhood fantasies and visions. Moreover, much of the horror of the novel springs from the reduction of Lucian's life to its sheer materiality—to the point of leaving him a corpse—and in way that reveals all of his thoughts, dreams, literary work, and selfhood to literally be nothing. In his death spasms, Lucian considers that “[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). The vital fire suffusing the first half of the novel dwindles to a simulacrum of a flame compassed by the cold eye of a dead man.

It would be easy to argue that *The Hill of Dreams* does not attempt to resolve the philosophical quandary of life. At the conclusion of the novel, the vital flame that bathed nature during the account of Lucian's childhood comes to rest in his eye: “[t]he flaring light shone through the dead eyes into the dying brain, and there was a glow within, as if great furnace doors were opened” (236). A vitalist reading of this quotation might hold that the “glow within” suggests some sort of indwelling life-force or transcendent spiritual life, which is made all the more evident—and miraculous—precisely because it manifests itself in Lucian's outwardly lifeless body. A vitalist reading might also suggest that Machen's placement of the fire in Lucian's eye indicates the truth of his youthful subjective visions, in which he saw metaphysical forces inhabiting nature. Quite to the contrary, a materialist reading would have it that the ‘vital’ flame is merely a reflection, playing across the glassy surface of Lucian's dead eye, of the

meager lamplight put before his corpse. This interpretation would deflate Lucian's subjective visions, denouncing them once and for all, with the finality of his death, as mere illusions. If there is any sort of 'vital' flame in Lucian's eye, so goes the materialist reading, it is the sputtering remainder of his life which is burning low, about to be totally extinguished in the eternal darkness of death.

Rather than argue that Machen's novel could make no other intervention into the debate between vitalism and materialism than to declare it un-decidable, I would like to give the author more credit than that, and take seriously the idea that the catastrophe for life hinted at by fungal materialism necessitates a more sophisticated response, one more complicated than merely positing the impossibility of a decision between the two paradigms of life. Certainly, Machen believes life to be a mystery—one that is by turns both fantastic and horrifying, as the bipartite novel would indicate—but the apparent un-decidability here should be read not as the impossibility of deciding between vitalism or materialism, but rather that life's strangeness and richness exceeds that which these possibilities allow for. Put differently, I want to suggest that life is "sinful" in a way similar to how Vincent Starrett describes it in his essay on Machen:

[Machen's] books exhale all evil and all corruption; yet they are as pure as the fabled waters of that crystal spring De Leon sought. They are pervaded by an ever-present, intoxicating sense of sin, ravishingly beautiful, furiously Pagan, frantically lovely; but Machen is a finer and truer mystic than the two-penny occultists who guide modern spiritualistic thought . . . I am speaking of sin as an offense against the nature of things, and of evil in the soul, which has very little to do with the sins of the statute book. Sin . . . is conceivable in the talking of animals. If a chair should walk across a room, that would be sinful, or if a tree sat down with us to afternoon tea. The savage who worships

a conjurer is a far finer moralist than the civilisé who suspects him—and I use the name moralist for one who has an appreciation of sin.²⁷

Starrett's comments allow us to see how Machen defines sin: as a transgression against the normal order of things, a metaphysical paradox that assails our notions of reality and plunges us into the fantastic. Starrett cites examples of anthropomorphized animals and objects, and in these figures of animated materials, we can glimpse how life itself, conceived of as a disturbing vitalization of raw matter, can be considered 'sinful' or supernatural in the sense that Machen uses the term. With Starrett's passage in mind, we can appreciate one of the most profound horrors *The Hill of Dreams* has to offer us: its investigation of biological life insinuates that it is a *thing that should not be*. The story's essential weirdness inheres in how it takes the mundane fact of organismic life and transforms it into a figuration of the starkest supernatural horror, of being "dead-alive," which is evident in Machen's treatment of mycological life. Following Eugene Thacker, we might say that the fungus, in all its putrescent vigor, is an exemplar of "blasphemous life," a life that is so repugnantly contradictory in its mode of existing that it should not be living at all.²⁸ Thacker crucially adds that "[t]his contradiction is not a contradiction in terms of medical science; the blasphemous life can often be scientifically explained and yet remain utterly incomprehensible" (104). This comment bespeaks a quintessential gesture of Weird fiction and indicates the genre's relationship to philosophical thought. To elaborate on the former, the Weird presents nature as preeminently unnatural, as rived with "supernatural" phenomena such that the occult and the scientific not only exist in a continuum, but inquiries undertaken in one field can lead directly into the precincts of the other. Michel Houellebecq incisively illustrates this point when he asks, "[w]hat is Great Cthulhu? An arrangement of electrons, like us. Lovecraft's terror is rigorously material. But, it is quite

possible, given the free interplay of cosmic forces, that Great Cthulhu possesses abilities and powers to act that far exceed ours. Which, *a priori*, is not particularly reassuring at all.”²⁹ As for the latter, the Weird often pursues the vector of scientific inquiry far beyond its rationally-circumscribed, epistemological limits by speculating about metaphysical forces that are recalcitrant to being directly or absolutely known, and that underlie scientifically intelligible phenomena and objects.

To return to Machen’s novel, the fungoid corrodes the notion of life at its root, problematizing it by recasting it as undead animation. Thus life is not what lives so much as what *remains*, a fact evinced by the deteriorating, decadent life-forms that shelter among the ruins of the fortress at *Isca Silurum*; the species of rare Roman nettle that Lucian finds there, called *urtica pilulifera*, that is the living remainder of a dead civilization (87); and finally Lucian himself, who is possessed of, and by, an ancient Roman soul named Avallaunius (147). If anything, in a novel so willing to dwell with and in death, it is life itself that ironically seems to be the spectral revenant that haunts the tale, pressing us with proofs of its existence—such as the experiences, thoughts, and memories of Lucian—immaterial though these may be. If life is but the persistence of the dead, then it bespeaks the emptiness of vitality. This nothingness at the heart of life recalls Thacker’s theorization of ‘Dark Pantheism’ in *After Life* (2010), which he calls “the thought of the conjunction of immanence and life, under the sign of the negative. And the question this poses would be, quite simply: does life = generosity = *nihil*?”³⁰ Dark pantheism dissolves the vital force within the void, and so life can be generous—that is, immanent to everything—through its very inexistence. This idea stems from the works of Eriugena, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Nicholas of Cusa—thinkers that Machen, given his occult and mystical interests, would likely have been familiar with.

Here, however, I am not arguing that Machen was a card-carrying Dark Pantheist, nor that such a complicated novel could be reduced to an unambiguous endorsement of this or that philosophy (with the exception, perhaps, of Machen's own). Rather, I cite Dark Pantheism because it demonstrates a tendency in the history of philosophical thought to dispense with the concept of life altogether—and 'tendency' may be a far too dispassionate way to put it. Dark Pantheism's courting of the void, and the manner in which it weds nothingness to vitality, betrays not so much suspicion as an unremitting pessimism towards life. In the wake of life's negation, however, Machen—unlike the good Dark Pantheist—seems less interested in tarrying with nothingness than he does with exploring the ramifications that follow from the liquidation of life. To wit, considering that life and human experience are commonly taken as grounds for the existence of some reality, if our lives amount to nothing, then we are immersed in the unreal. This notion is implicit in fungal life, which in revealing biological life to be unreal, also suggests that life in the sense of subjective lived experience is equally as unreal. It is this horrifying possibility of being steeped in phantasmal unreality that *The Hill of Dreams* poses to the reader, rather than just being a narrative of Lucian's progressing insanity. Hence Lucian's lament that "[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). Accordingly, Machen's novel might be read as an anti-realist, idealist work of horror in the sense that Thomas Ligotti describes it in his collection of notes and aphorisms, "We Can Hide from Horror Only in the Heart of Horror" (1994). The "ideal horror tale" crafts

a thoroughly symbolic universe, its every aspect contemplated and expressed in the Symbolist manner, portraying the horrific essence of things and creating with the greatest possible intensity the dream-sense of the world's horror . . . [the] [b]ehavior of

characters always betrays their lurid knowingness anent the nightmarish nature of their world . . . [the] [w]aking world requires a superficial sense of cause and effect, which occultism provides; dreams, the true occult realm, need no such ersatz rationalism, only the sensation of revelations that feel horribly true . . . [the] [w]orld [is] populated exclusively by vile creatures like Aubrey Beardsley's ideally grotesque world.³¹

The "ideal horror tale" exchanges the tangible certitudes of stable reality for the fluid, metamorphic unrealities of nightmares, fantasies, and hallucinations. The nature of the cosmos in the "ideal" tale of horror is "nightmarish" in the most exacting sense of the term; more than just superlatively malignant, it is cruelly capricious, utterly inscrutable, and as imaginatively perverse as the hermetically sealed fever-visions of the most brain-sick Symbolist mind. To ignore the novel's questioning of reality and the stakes attendant upon it, and to read *The Hill of Dreams* as nothing more than an account of a man's descent into madness, induced by a degenerate genetic inheritance from Roman ancestors or decadent experimentation with psychotropic drugs, would be interpretations just as vulgar as that which reduces the novel to a programmatic statement of whatever philosophy.

In contrast to, say, Lovecraft's later works, which wrest from the deep time and space of the cosmos a realist, naturalistic system of thought, the merits of *The Hill of Dreams* are to be found less in some coherent worldview or theory of life than in the web of tensions it creates between the sacred and the horrible; the physical and the spiritual; mind and body; reality and unreality; agony and ecstasy; life and death; and the plenitude of the phenomenal life-world and the desolation of existential horror. In the novel, one member of each of these couplets alternately haunts its counterpart, making the novel into series of ordeals and ecstasies that adumbrate a true picaresque of the soul. Seeking out the shadow-spaces between immanence

and transcendence, the novel finds there both proof of the human spirit and a chilling lack thereof. In his influential study *The Weird Tale* (1990), S.T. Joshi observes that Machen's "whole work is inspired by one idea and one only: the awesome and utterly unfathomable mystery of the universe."³² He then cites a crucial passage from Machen's *Beneath the Barley* (1931) that illuminates the author's conception of literary aesthetics: "[f]or literature, as I see it, is the art of describing the indescribable; the art of exhibiting symbols which may hint at the ineffable mysteries behind them; the art of the veil, which reveals as it conceals" (13). Similarly, Machen's literary-theoretical treatise, *Hieroglyphics* (1902), asserts that "[m]an is a sacrament, soul manifested under the form of body, and art has to deal with each and both and to show their interaction and interdependence" (Joshi 13). The aesthetic effect of such literature is to produce "ecstasy," which Machen describes in the aforementioned work as "rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown . . . 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" (Joshi 14).

Joshi contends that these characteristic ideas of ecstasy, the veil, and the sacrament are "sufficient to unlock the mysteries of Machen's entire output" (14). I close this chapter by briefly suggesting how my reading of *The Hill of Dreams* complicates these ideas, which in Machen studies have become a bit too familiar for their own good, by questioning both their metaphysical implications and their status as interpretive keys. As Joshi points out, in much of Machen's *oeuvre*, sacrament, ecstasy, and veil are figurations of cosmic mystery that gesture toward a transcendent reality. Often religious in nature, this reality implies that horror is but one visage of a Janus-faced God, or the expression of overwhelming intensity (indeed trauma) that the face of the divine inspires when it is beheld by human eyes. This is the horror of the rent or

diaphanous veil. While sacrament, ecstasy, and veil are prominent in *The Hill of Dreams*, I argue that they do not work to generate horror in the straightforward, schematic way that they are laid out to do in much Machen criticism, as well as in the author's own literary-theoretical works. Rather, I argue that they create horror insofar as they are themselves called into question by the events of the tale, such that the higher realities that they are supposed to represent are jeopardized, threatened to be exposed as no more than the most hollow and desperate of human dreams. Thus Lucian's vision of the faun may be one of those vivid dreams of adolescence (or, given its sexually-charged oneirism, the first subconscious stirrings of *eros*); his wanderings in the Garden of Avallaunius, in which he defies time to explore antique civilizations and converse with Roman aristocrats, just flights of imagination; his whole account of life in London, and all its failures and triumphs, the delusions of a drugged and damaged brain; and the Pentecostal tongue of flame in his eye not a soul, but a life disappearing into the night forever. The *bildungsroman* harnesses the *agon* between these possibilities to teach painful lessons, to expose the ecstatic realities behind the veil and the sacrament to darkness and debasement, just as human beings, from Machen's perspective, seemed to be one part soul and the other part slime: *divine filth* akin to the grotesqueries of the haunted ecosystem at *Isca Silurum*, or the degraded witches' sabbath in London. Of course, it is only in exposing the figures of sacrament, veil, and ecstasy to jeopardy and emptiness that they have any meaning whatsoever, and can persist as genuine spiritual mysteries. Only under the condition of their possible nullity can they truly be *believed in*. Thus *The Hill of Dreams* not only rigorously questions physical realities, but also contests metaphysical ones. This explains why the novel is not explicitly supernatural, as the unequivocal manifestation of extraordinary beings or events—as in *The Great God Pan*—would entail transcendent realities. In the novel, every appearance of a faun or a witch is suspect. By dint of

this approach, Machen probably horrified his religiously-inclined readers even more so than if he had treated them to a work that was conventionally supernatural. Yet there is more at stake here than just a weird horror writer's desire to unsettle his readership. For Machen, great mystic and staunch High Anglican, his semi-autobiographical novel was to be a record of his own spiritual *agon*, with all of its ordeals, ecstasies, and wild terrors.

In the end, it seems that the only thing that we can deem real in *The Hill of Dreams* is horror itself. Ligotti contends that the one thing we know that is real is horror:

[i]t is so real, in fact, that we cannot be sure it could not exist without us. Yes, it needs our imaginations and our consciousness, but it does not require our consent to use them. Indeed, horror operates with complete autonomy. Generating ontological havoc, it is mephitic foam upon which our lives merely float. And, all said, we must face up to it: horror is more real than we are.³³

Less about the horror of reality than the reality of horror, Machen's exquisite *The Hill of Dreams* is at least in one respect like the reams of strange hieroglyphics found in Lucian's apartment after his death: it is all fevered dreams, and fire in our eyes.

¹Donald M. Hassler, "Arthur Llewelyn Jones Machen," *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Before World War I*, ed. Darren Harris-Fain, v. 178 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1997), 175. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

² See *Arthur Machen: A Miscellany* (Carmathenshire, U.K.: St. Albert's Press, 1960). In this biographical work on Machen that collects impressions and memories of the author, Father Brocard Sewell relates that one of Machen's obituaries claimed that he had converted to Catholicism. Fr. Sewell writes that this mistake arose from the fact that Machen was nursed in his final illness by the Sisters of Bon Secours at St. Joseph's. Nevertheless, writes Fr. Sewell, "no one was more of an *anima naturaliter catholica* than Arthur Machen. He was a consistent upholder of Catholic doctrinal and moral teaching, in something of the same fashion as G.K. Chesterton prior to his conversion in 1922. But, unlike Chesterton, Machen never made the move from Canterbury to Rome" (20).

³ Jeremy Biles, *Ecce Monstrum* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ Machen was a member at the same time as Algernon Blackwood, Y.B. Yeats, and Aleister Crowley.

⁵ T.H. Huxley, “On the Physical Basis of Life” *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Laura Otis (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009), 273-6. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁶ Susan Navarette, *The Shape of Fear* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 182. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁷ William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880-1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 16. All subsequent references to this book appear in the text.

⁸ Mark Valentine identifies this work as his masterpiece in his authoritative biography, *Arthur Machen* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 1995), 49. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁹ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁰ See R.T. & F.W. Rolfe, *The Romance of the Fungus World* (New York, Dover Publications Inc., 1974) for a thorough discussion of the history of fungi in mythology, folklore, and literature. In addition to outlining this cultural history, the authors detail various aspects of mycological anatomy, physiology, and ecology, and offer a wealth of miscellanea pertaining to fungal life.

¹¹ This interest is evident in the scientific romances of H.G. Wells. See his short story “The Purple Pileus” (1896), which details the effects of psychoactive mushrooms, and his novel *The First Men in the Moon* (1900), which includes a description of a rapidly-growing lunar jungle of fungi. The Weird fiction of the twentieth century evinces the persistence, if not intensification, of this fascination with fungal life. William Hope Hodgson’s short story “The Voice in the Night” (1907) narrates the grotesque becoming-fungus of a man and his fiancée, while his novel *The Boats of the ‘Glen Carrig’* (1907), an episodic tale of high-seas adventure written in an archaic style, features encounters with killer mushrooms and fungi grown into hideous simulacra of trees with human faces. Appearing later in the century, H.P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931) suggests the evil designs of a race of fungoid aliens called the Mi-Go, and “The Shunned House” (1937) narrates a descent into a habitation infested with a malicious mycological specimen. Notably, Lovecraft’s sonnet cycle is titled *Fungi from Yuggoth* (1943). The fungus seems to vie for popularity with the cephalopod as the preferred natural-supernatural menace among practitioners of Weird fiction, a genre in which Machen deserves recognition as both a pioneer and master.

¹² A recent, notable exception is the aforementioned *Slime Dynamics*, by Ben Woodard (Winchester, U.K., Zero Books, 2012), which investigates the philosophical implications of fungal life and its various representations in Weird horror fiction. Woodard is particularly interested in drawing out the problematic ontological ramifications of fungal life as a materialized process that binds generation to decomposition, making putrefaction creative. “The fungal,” he writes, “as the spatial extension of unified production and decay is ultimately troublesome as it appears as a corrupting production” (36).

¹³ Quoted in Navarette, 183.

¹⁴ Quoted in David Aurora, *Mushrooms Demystified* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1979), 1-2.

¹⁵ Ben Woodard, *Slime Dynamics* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011), 30. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁶ Arthur Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen* (London: The Richards Press, 1951), 18. The first part of Machen's autobiography, *Far Off Things*, was published in 1922, while the second part, *Things Near and Far*, appeared a year later.

¹⁷ Machen did extensive work as a translator. In addition to *The Heptameron*, he translated *The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova* and *Le Moyen de Parvenir* by Béroalde de Verville.

¹⁸ The 2006 Dover edition of *The Great God Pan* includes an introduction that Machen wrote for a reprint of the novel. In the introduction, Machen relates that he scrapbooked, with much pleasure, the most morally outraged reviews of his work. An excerpt from the best of these, by an unnamed reviewer from the *Westminster*, reads as follows: “[*The Great God Pan*] is an incoherent nightmare of sex and the supposed horrible mysteries behind it, such as might conceivably possess a man who was given to a morbid brooding over these matters, but which would soon lead to insanity if unrestrained . . . innocuous from its absurdity” (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 8. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁹ Quoted in Valentine, *Arthur Machen*, 25. Machen distanced himself from Aestheticism and Decadence, although many of his fictions are clearly indebted to these movements. Valentine notes that in *The Hill of Dreams* “Machen allies himself with the Decadents by wickedly parodying a typical society reviewer, who fulminates against ‘the abandoned artist and the scrofulous stylist,’ preferring ‘a faithful reproduction of the open and manly life’ . . . Though he [Machen] had no time for the emblems of the movement, ‘peacocks and lilies and sunflowers’ as he summarized them, there is no doubt that his imagination was imbued with the themes associated with the Decadents, implying a deeper familiarity than he ever admitted” (23).

²⁰ Mark Valentine writes that “Machen's book was perceived and received partly in the shadow of this macabre classic. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, for example, saw *The Great God Pan* as a straight successor: ‘Since Mr. Stevenson played with the crucibles of science in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* we have not encountered a more successful experiment of the sort,’ and *The Glasgow Herald* concurred; ‘Nothing more striking or more skillful than this book has been produced in the way of what one may call Borderland fiction since Mr. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*’” (26-7).

²¹ Ernest Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man, Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Laura Otis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 294.

²² Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 61. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²³ See H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York, Dover, 1973). Here, Lovecraft has the following to say about Machen's novel and career: “Mr. Machen, a general man of letters and master of an exquisitely lyrical and expressive prose style, has perhaps put more conscious effort into his picaresque *Chronicles of Clemency*, his refreshing essays, his vivid autobiographical volumes, his fresh and spirited translations, and above all his memorable epic of the sensitive aesthetic mind, *The Hill of Dreams*, in which the youthful hero responds to the magic of that ancient Welsh environment which is the author's own, and lives a dream-life in the Roman city of Isca Silurum, now shrunk to the relic-strewn village of Caerleon-on-Usk. But the fact remains that his powerful

horror-material of the nineties and earlier nineteen-hundreds stands alone in its class, and marks a distinct epoch in the history of this literary form” (88).

²⁴ Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (Mineola, New York, Dover Publications Inc., 2006) p. 84. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁵ See William Greenslade, *Degeneration, culture and the novel 1880-1940* and Susan Navarette, *The Shape of Fear*.

²⁶ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York, Penguin Books, 1974), 27.

²⁷ Vincent Starrett, *Arthur Machen: A Novelist of Ecstasy and Sin* (Chicago, Walter M. Hill, 1918), 13-5.

²⁸ Eugene Thacker, *In The Dust of This Planet* (Winchester, U.K., Zero Books, 2011), 104. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁹ Michel Houellebecq, *H.P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life* (San Francisco, Believer Books, 2005), 32.

³⁰ Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010), 234.

³¹ Thomas Ligotti, ‘We Can Hide from Horror Only in the Heart of Horror: Notes and Aphorisms,’ *Das Schwarze Geheimnis*, ed. Dr. Marco Frenschkowski (no. 1, 1994) <http://www.angwa.de/Ligotti/essay/heartofhorror_e.htm>.

³² S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1990), 13. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³³ Thomas Ligotti, “Professor Nobody’s Little Lectures on Supernatural Horror,” *Songs of a Dead Dreamer* (Burton, MI, Subterranean Press, 2010) , 211.

III. Algernon Blackwood: The Cosmic Horror of Nature (and Matter) Unbound

In his landmark essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), H. P. Lovecraft declares Algernon Blackwood “the one absolute and unquestioned master of weird atmosphere”,¹ which is high praise indeed, considering that it comes from an author many critics regard as unqualifiedly deserving of that very title. Lovecraft’s estimation of Blackwood is all the more significant because *Supernatural Horror in Literature* is both a critical inventory of the most accomplished writers in the genre and a literary-theoretical treatise that distills the abstruse essence of the weird tale, which exudes a “certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” (15). This baleful ambiance insinuates “that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (15). Given Lovecraft’s definition of the prototypically weird, into which the depredations of a lawless protean universe figure so heavily, in this chapter I analyze an outdoor horror story by Blackwood, paying special attention to its astonishing cosmic implications. In “The Willows” (1907), I argue that the natural and the supernatural converge in the blackness of outer space, yet the tale problematizes the orderly dialectical synthesis performed by the concept of “natural supernaturalism.” Rather, “The Willows” depicts the cosmos as an outside space that continually infiltrates, un-grounds, and subverts nature, subjecting it to strange transformations and eruptions of novelty that cause nature to exceed humans’ limited conceptions and definitions of it.

To be sure, the plot of “The Willows” transpires in a resolutely earthly setting. The story features a wind-swept, river-fed swamp haunted by the eponymous willow bushes. Despite this environment, which abounds with the churning of Earth’s elements and the vital creeping of its

endemic flora and fauna, it could hardly be said that the weird phenomena depicted in this fiction remain confined to the terrestrial and atmospheric bounds of Earth. The tale stages an incursion of inapprehensible cosmic forces into the planet's biological and physicochemical systems, subjecting the wilderness to an alien transmutation that renders it teratological and, more to the point, absolutely otherworldly.² As Lovecraft's definition of the weird indicates, the violation of natural laws brings an incomprehensible chaotic flux of cosmic darkness coursing through the breach in nature. These violations, I argue, un-ground and unbind nature, which spectacularly exceeds all of our fixed, narrow conceptions of it. Blackwood's great outdoors is continuous with an even greater outdoors, namely the starry expanses and abyssal depths of space, and all of the wonders and terrors it harbors in its infinite dimensionality. By turning a microscope towards nature, Blackwood turns a telescope towards the universe, and his subtle cosmicism³ registers glints of light from distant galaxies and strange perturbations from other dimensions that are never to be reached, but have a palpably horrifying way of reaching his protagonists.

While Blackwood's penchant for cosmic horror has not gone unnoticed,⁴ critics have largely taken it for granted by neglecting to inquire into the various intellectual contexts that inform it, as well as its wider ramifications for the author's philosophy of nature. I use the term "philosophy" here to gesture towards Eugene Thacker's assertion that works in the horror genre are not "philosophical" in the strict disciplinary sense, but nevertheless facilitate thinking about the world philosophically.⁵ Their outlandish and unsettling proceedings stoke the desire to theorize even, and perhaps especially, when we know that this compulsion will likely be thwarted. This point resonates with S. T. Joshi's comment that the "weird tale offers unique opportunities for philosophical speculation—it could be said that the weird tale is an inherently philosophical mode in that it frequently compels us to address directly such fundamental issues

as the nature of the universe and our place in it” (11). In this chapter, I use philosophy not as a vaunted interpretative key to Blackwood’s horror fiction, as if the latter could only be understood with reference to the former, but rather as a lens for bringing into focus the epistemological and ontological problems with which his stories are grappling. That said, I will occasionally argue that Blackwood’s work bears some traces of the influence of nineteenth-century philosophies, in particular the *Naturphilosophie* of Gustav Fechner and the process thought of Henri Bergson, but it is important to keep in mind that Blackwood was as little a dogmatist in matters of philosophy as he was in religion,⁶ and so his stories should not be read as mere fictional expressions of extant systems of thought. With good reason, Peter Penzoldt writes that the “influence . . . of literature on occult, or semi-occult, semi-philosophical, and religious subjects is discernible in certain details of Blackwood’s work. But it would be a great mistake to pretend that these books suggested the deeper meaning which most of Blackwood’s tales contain.”⁷ All the same, the tale of outdoor horror and the work of philosophy search for this “deeper meaning” in nature, and here they happily coincide, complicit in offering us glimpses of unsavory secrets mercifully obscured by the dark universe.

Even in the finest works of criticism that Blackwood’s tales have occasioned, scholars have been surprisingly inattentive to the cosmic peregrinations of the author’s imagination. Jack Sullivan’s insightful exploration of Blackwood’s ominous nature in the path-breaking study *Elegant Nightmares* (1978) argues that

Blackwood’s primitivism is Poe turned inside out. Instead of positing an “otherness,” Poe creates settings which emerge from and embody the human psyche. The horror in Poe is the solipsistic horror of being entombed in one’s own mind. Blackwood’s fiction, like D. H. Lawrence’s, represents a militant assertion that the outer world does exist—

sublimely apart from human psychology. Although the unconscious is an active force in Blackwood's stories, it is not Freudian, not limited to human beings (or even collective human beings in a Jungian sense); it is a pre-human energy which infuses not only Lawrence's birds, beasts, and flowers, but patches of dirt.⁸

There is much to be commended in Sullivan's comments, which propose that Blackwood is a "militant" realist who tirelessly proclaims the veracity of the existence of "the outer world," a truth that is to some extent inscrutable to human comprehension. Sullivan's counterintuitive depiction of Blackwood's thought offers a contrast to that presented by Joshi, who emphasizes the author's interests in the occult and the theosophical, and professes to not understand Blackwood's philosophy: "I frequently cannot follow the courses of reasoning—if they can be called that—by which Blackwood arrives at his conclusions and attitudes. I am not a mystic and do not understand the mystical temperament" (90). We will see that Blackwood's philosophy unabashedly incorporates both realist and so-called mystical elements, and that 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.

Sullivan also insightfully postulates a pre-Freudian unconscious at work in Blackwood's horror fiction, a force that saturates both organic and inorganic material alike. "The Willows" undoubtedly imagines a vitalized—and perhaps even panpsychic—universe, but I would add that as a consequence of this all-pervading vital force, things are alive in deeply uncertain, necessarily contradictory, and ultimately frightening ways. Furthermore, although the energetic unconscious circulates through entities as diverse as birds, beasts, flowers, and clods of dirt, Sullivan's comments imply that its circuit is closed, confined to Earth's life-forms and geological

formations. Quite to the contrary, the anomalous botanical specimens of “The Willows” are extra-dimensional creatures; hence they are literally out of this world. This cosmic teratology indicates that the pre-human unconscious energy of which Sullivan writes must flow through the greater universe and into its abyssal dimensional depths, far beyond the circumscribed planetary economy that the above quotation traces out. Despite nods to a “world beyond time and space” (Sullivan 124) and a “distinctively ‘cosmic’ fusion of horror and ecstasy” (124), Sullivan's criticism is in the main Ptolemaic, trading anthropocentrism for geocentrism, but Blackwood’s outdoor horror stories invite a Copernican perspective that gets off the ground, so to speak, by giving a much wider scope to the author’s vision of nature—that is, one that thinks nature as always already cracked open and accessible to an unnatural cosmic outside.

Considering the critical acclaim that “The Willows” has garnered,⁹ it is surprising that this masterful tale has received so little scholarly attention. The narrator and his travel companion, known only as “the Swede,” set out from Vienna in a canoe on the Danube, heading towards Budapest.¹⁰ This voyage takes them through a poorly-mapped region of wetlands called the *Sümpfe*. The only inhabitants of note in this aquatic wasteland, or so the narrator believes, are the willow bushes. Swaying rhythmically in the wind, their undulations impress him with an uncanny sense of aliveness that extends to the entire *Sümpfe*. The narrator states that the “willows never attain to the dignity of trees . . . [they sway] on slender stems that answer to the least pressure of the wind; supple as grasses, and so continually shifting that they somehow give the impression that the entire plain is moving and *alive*.”¹¹ As the narrator and the Swede set up camp on an island, a boat headed out of the marsh appears on the river. As it speeds by, its pilot gesticulates wildly, shouting at the adventurers. Neither man can decipher his message, although both get the distinct impression that he was repeatedly making the sign of the cross.

In the middle of the night, the narrator wakes to a horrifying vision of shapeless, gargantuan spectral beings lurking among the willows, creatures which he describes as “huge figures, just within the tops of the bushes—immense, bronze-coloured, moving, and wholly independent of the swaying of the branches . . . they were very much larger than human, and indeed . . . something in their appearance proclaimed them to be *not human* at all” (Blackwood 18). Unsure of whether he dreamt the encounter, in the morning he inspects the campsite for tell-tale signs of the nocturnal visitors. The narrator is startled to find that the willow bushes have advanced, surrounding his tent, and that the sand-flats where the formless creatures were roving have become pockmarked with curious holes. Later, as he converses with the Swede, he discovers that the canoe’s steering paddle has been swept away, and that the bottom of the vessel has been torn open.

The narrator is also increasingly disturbed by the changes he notices in his companion’s personality. Believing the Swede to be a rational and unshakeable man wholly lacking in superstitions, the narrator is deeply affected by his companion’s apparent receptivity to the psychic influences of the extra-terrestrial entities. Worse yet, the rushing waters of the Danube threaten to wash away the island on which the travelers are camping. Ludicrous theories about the willows are proposed which, in the absence of alternatives, nevertheless must be accepted—in particular one theory that has the explorers being hunted by inter-dimensional beings that detect human thoughts and emotions. Even more terrifying, the Swede surmises that the beings will not relent until they receive a human sacrifice.

As night falls, suspicion, arguments, and the chilling discovery of an eerie, low-frequency humming being emitted from the willow bushes begin to erode the men’s civility and sanity. “‘I’ve heard it all day,’ says the Swede, ‘While you slept this afternoon it came all around the

island. I hunted it down, but could never get near enough to see—to localize it correctly . . . I could have sworn it was not outside at all, but *within myself* . . . the way a sound in the fourth dimension is supposed to come” (33). With no other choice than to wait until morning to depart in the repaired canoe, the men resign themselves to a night of terror. As they prepare dinner, the preternaturally-sensitive Swede unsettles the narrator with an unhinged, but nevertheless frighteningly probable, account of the nature of the creatures pursuing them: “‘You think,’ he said, ‘It is the spirits of the elements, and I thought perhaps it was the old gods. But I tell you now it is—*neither*. These would be comprehensible entities, for they have relations with men, depending upon them for worship or sacrifice, whereas these beings who are now about us have absolutely nothing to do with mankind, and it is mere chance that their space happens just at this spot to touch our own” (Blackwood 41).

Later that night, the narrator and the Swede narrowly escape the dimensional outsiders after the former suffers an emotional outburst that allows the creatures to locate and attack them. After returning to the tent, the explorers are set upon by the willows shortly before morning. Convinced that they demand a sacrificial victim, the Swede resolves to offer himself, but is restrained by the narrator before doing so. That very moment, the humming stops. The Swede guesses that somewhere in the *Sümpfe* an unfortunate traveler has fallen victim to the outsiders, and in the light of dawn, the men discover a corpse floating face-down in the Danube.¹² The Swede claims that it is imperative to give the sacrificial scapegoat a proper burial, so he wades into the river with the narrator to retrieve the body. Turning it over, both men are horrified by a sudden outburst of the strange insectoid humming, which abruptly fades as if its source were ascending into the sky. In a final gruesome twist, the face and chest of the body are revealed to be riddled with holes matching those previously seen on the sand-flats.

Blackwood begins “The Willows” with the narrator’s description of the uncanny setting: After leaving Vienna, and long before you come to Buda-Pesth, the Danube enters a region of singular loneliness and desolation, where its waters spread away on all sides regardless of a main channel, and the country becomes a swamp for miles upon miles, covered by a vast sea of low willow-bushes. On the big maps this deserted area is painted in a fluffy blue, growing fainter in color as it leaves the banks, and across it may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe*, meaning marshes. (1)

It is difficult to pinpoint the location of the *Sümpfe*. In the narrator’s mind, it lies in a vague psycho-geographical space somewhere “[a]fter leaving Vienna” but “long before you come to Buda-Pesth,” which means that it could be virtually anywhere along the hundreds of kilometers of river that separate these cities. Physical maps fare little better with locating the marsh, which can only be represented as a formless, “fluffy blue” zone of indeterminacy with no clear borders. Thus cartographies of the *Sümpfe* fail to delimit its boundaries, and insofar as it can be said that the express purpose of a map is to do just that, the *Sümpfe* is not merely un-chartable, but also unsettlingly seems to call into question the entire logic that underpins cartography, a logic that relies on the supposedly ironclad law that a physical place must exist in a determinate position in space. Here Blackwood suggests what scientist-philosopher Alfred Korzybski famously stated: “[a] map *is not* the territory.”¹³ Cyberneticist Gregory Bateson elaborates on this statement by defining the map-territory relationship in terms of the difference between the Kantian *phenomenon* and *noumenon*, in which the latter is the inaccessible reality that underlies the immediate sensible presence of the former.¹⁴ Bateson’s point brings into relief Blackwood’s suggestion that mind and map, human thought and *technē*, are alike incapable of representing nature in itself. What is at stake in the opening of “The Willows” is not the efficacy of

cartography in the narrow sense of charting out terrain and designating political borders—a human endeavor that on the whole gets along just fine despite the nonidentity of map and territory—but rather the human inability to fully comprehend nature (if not the intrinsic incomprehensibility of nature itself). In the opening of the story, this epistemological problem is conveyed by the uncertain location and borders of the *Sümpfe*. The impossibility of discerning the *dimensions* of the marsh hints at its unfathomable mode of existence in space and time, its utter strangeness as a place where an alien order of being not so much juts into our world discernibly (a horrifying possibility), but mutually and imperceptibly interpenetrates with it (a worse possibility by far), making it impossible to say where one world ends and the other begins, where the natural leaves off and the supernatural picks up. In the *Sümpfe*, dimensions do not meet so much as lay stacked on top of and bleeding into one another, such that the marsh is in at least two different places at the same time—or rather, that it is *no place* at all.

Drawing on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, in *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) Noël Carroll proposes that monsters are “impure” entities.¹⁵ Here Carroll does not just mean that their grotesqueries invoke feelings of abhorrence and nausea. “Impure” also refers to “[t]hings that are interstitial, that cross the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture’s conceptual scheme” (Carroll 31-32). To illustrate this idea, Carroll cites Douglas’s analysis of the “abominations of *Leviticus*,” in which hideous creatures that crawl from the sea are said to be ‘impure’ because crawling is an action associated with terrestrial rather than aquatic life-forms (Carroll 31). Thus the abominations of *Leviticus* are wretchedly amphibious, displaying an amorphous blend of traits from landlocked and sea-based creatures. This taxonomic melding generates a category confusion that is not just an isolated instance of cognitive chaos; this “impurity” threatens to contaminate classification itself, rendering the universe unintelligible.

Sociologist Peter Berger calls this wholesale cancellation of the conceptual classifying grid “the nightmare par excellence, in which the individual is submerged in a world of disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly transformed into meaningless figures of horror.”¹⁶ To lose the ability to classify entails the loss of nomization, and being unable to name something means losing a fundamental power over it, one that furnishes the primordial distinction between human and animal in the book of *Genesis*. Consequently, for Berger, the loss of classification schemes precipitates a plunge into “the ultimate insanity of . . . anomic terror” (Cardin 88). The terror of anomy is presaged in the word Blackwood uses to “name” the swamp. Over the blurred patch on the map that represents it “may be seen in large straggling letters the word *Sümpfe*, meaning marshes” (Blackwood 1). In spite of and because of its astronomical singularity, no word can *properly* name it. The *Sümpfe* represents “a new order of experience . . . in the true sense of the word *unearthly*” (Blackwood 38). The generic “marshes” bespeaks an extravagant failure of nomization and the unnamable horror of what the *Sümpfe* holds, of what it is.

The *Sümpfe* is also interstitial in terms of its location, which the opening paragraph relates is somewhere between Vienna and Budapest. Later, however, the narrator places the swamp outside of Pressburg (Blackwood 2), but this fact hardly clarifies where in the marshes nature undergoes the metamorphosis from benign to malignant. Because this transformation is effected by a dimensional bleed-through, it takes place both outside and inside of the swamp simultaneously, in a kind of space-time interstice. Furthermore, the geological topography of the marsh conveys a distressing interstitiality that queasily straddles wetness and dryness. Because the *Sümpfe* is comprised of “wetlands,” one might ask if it is a terrestrial or aquatic body—a question that largely amounts to asking whether mud is made of dirt or water. The *Sümpfe* is

soggy, and therefore “impure” in the sense that Carroll uses the term. Additionally, Blackwood writes of a constant elemental interplay in the *Sümpfe*, a perpetual geophysical disquietude wherein water and earth are confluent in “the muddy waters” (Blackwood 2), but at bitter war with each other nonetheless: “the waters pour with a shouting sound; making whirlpools, eddies, and foaming rapids; tearing at the sandy banks; carrying away masses of shore and willow-clumps; and forming new islands innumerable which shift daily in size and shape and possess at best an impermanent life, since the flood-time obliterates their very existence” (Blackwood 1). Seemingly just a description of nature’s dynamism, a closer inspection of the passage reveals a scene of elemental carnage as senseless and exorbitant as any war waged by human combatants. The elements combine to create the marsh, but the issue of this coupling is an inconceivably strange birth, one in which attractive, life-giving forces are monstrously conjoined with their repulsive, death-dealing counterparts. Again, nature is vexingly interstitial. The “tearing” and “shouting” associated with the watery tumult that “obliterates” the “very existence” of the islands are evidently signs of death, but through their sheer vigor, become traces of a maliciously energetic species of life. Here Nature engages in unending, frenzied self-mutilation and self-cannibalization that present a vision of disorder as horrifying as any King Lear had on the blasted heath or Francisco Goya committed to canvas.

This vision of an insatiable autophagic nature can productively be compared to that of contemporary weird fiction writer and essayist Thomas Ligotti’s description of nineteenth-century German philosopher Julius Bahnsen’s metaphysical system:

all reality is the expression of a unified, unchanging force—a cosmic movement that various philosophers have characterized in various ways. To Bahnsen, this force and its movement were monstrous in nature, resulting in a universe of indiscriminate butchery

and mutual slaughter among its individuated parts. Additionally, the “universe according to Bahnsen” has never had a hint of design or direction. From the beginning, it was a play with no plot and no players that were anything more than portions of a master drive of purposeless self-mutilation. In Bahnsen’s philosophy, everything is engaged in a disordered fantasia of carnage. Everything tears away at everything else . . . forever.¹⁷

Many works of weird fiction spring from vicious cosmologies of the sort Ligotti, by way of Bahnsen, articulates here, and while they are a far cry from Blackwood’s own personal beliefs as he expressed them, the horror of “The Willows” invites speculations of just such a nature. The *Sümpfe*, having become its own predator and prey, lives off of devouring and metabolizing its own elemental members. As this bizarre life extends into the substance of the soil and water, these inanimate entities take on a ferocious, zombie-like existence. In the *Sümpfe*, the Earth itself becomes monstrous in way that muddies up the most fundamental category distinctions of life and death, which mingle like water and soil to create a complete epistemological mess for human beings.

In discussing the physical composition of the *Sümpfe*, however, we broach issues that are not just epistemological but ontological in nature. On the one hand, epistemology pertains to questions of how we know something, which are often independent of the nature of the thing-in-itself. In epistemology, the reality of a thing-in-itself can be bracketed, or takes a backseat to questions of how we access that thing. On the other hand, ontology interrogates the being of a thing, attempting to describe its reality in direct and/or indirect ways. To clarify the difference between the epistemological and the ontological here in a way that foregrounds its relation to Blackwood’s story, we might ask how the *Sümpfe* seems monstrous to us as opposed to how it is monstrous in itself. As we have seen, the *Sümpfe*’s interstitiality renders it epistemologically

problematic, as it defies the categorical logic that organizes our experience of the world. The *Sümpfe*, however, does not merely defy categorical thinking; it also indeterminately exists in time and space, poised between different dimensions. Thus the epistemological difficulties of the *Sümpfe* devolve on a larger ontological problematic: how it is that the *Sümpfe* can exist scattered across multiple dimensions as if drawn and quartered by the space-time fabric of the universe. Interstitiality therefore has everything to do with the intrinsic being of the *Sümpfe*, which exists on radically different yet intersecting planes of existence. As if it were a categorical transgression too horrifying for the conscious mind to fathom, the narrator insinuates continuity between the quotidian and weird dimensions when he speaks of all in the *Sümpfe* having “been robbed of its natural character, and revealed in something of its other aspect—as it existed across the border in that other region” (Blackwood 38).¹⁸ Like the mud in the *Sümpfe*, a compound in which the elements of water and earth have become inseparable, the marsh is an unclassifiable and deterritorialized hybrid zone, the result of a cosmic anomaly that incises a transversal cut across worlds, bringing them into strange communication: “[n]ever, before or since,’ says the narrator, ‘have I been so attacked by indescribable suggestions of a “beyond region,” of another scheme of life, another revolution not parallel to the human. And in the end our minds would succumb under the weight of the awful spell, and we should be drawn across the frontier into *their* [the willows’] world’” (Blackwood 38). The *Sümpfe*’s composition is perplexing not only because it presents a non-linear phenomenon—a novel region with its own unique set of emergent properties that does not simply correspond to the summed individual properties of its constituent dimensions—but also because its aberrant cosmogenesis entails a nauseating decomposition of the fundamental difference between dimensions, analogous to the way mud indistinguishably blends water and earth without regard for the primordial boundaries that

separate the four elements. Extended being in the marsh is therefore hopelessly mixed up, awash in a cosmic insanity that differentially erodes the laws of physics that provide for discrete spatiotemporal regionality. The strange happenings in the *Sümpfe* make manifest the way in which reality is a matter of horrifyingly incalculable greater dimensions than our limited sensory-cognitive organs can parse and process.

In his theory-fictional weird horror novel *Cyclonopedia* (2008), Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani writes that

Monsters and alien vistas are indexed by climate and meteorology. In these stories [middle-eastern fairy tales and bedtime yarns], the universe is ideated by elemental alignments in which air, fire, and earth are paired with questionable liquidities which either possess deranged properties or share more than two properties at the same time with their neighboring elements . . . the additional or so-called extraneous properties attest to missing links. In other words, these properties betoken other outsider elements to which the weird liquid species are coupled. This speculation leads to another conjecture, graver than the previous: If these fomenting fluids link earth, fire, and air to outsider elements, they also impose the otherworldly building processes peculiar to such outsiders upon the worldly elements. A cosmos crafted by its outside is not only profoundly awkward, but it is also fiendishly indifferent to the ideas pertaining to its elements and inhabitants . . . the weather itself is a teratological set; wind, rain, fog, and other atmospheric phenomena import properties and hence building processes from outsider elements.¹⁹

Negarestani's discourse on "meteorological teratology" focuses on the strategic role of liquidity as a covert elemental transport system that facilitates the dispersion of "outside elements," or

“xeno-agents,” dissolved in water. These alien outsiders thus become subversive geophysical insiders that exploit topographical features such as rivers and lakes, and meteorological events such as rain and fog, in order to propagate themselves.²⁰ The hydrophilic nature of the other dry elements becomes complicit in this undercover dissemination and infiltration. Once introduced into the other elements, the xeno-agent initiates a process of environmental reverse-engineering, interfering with the ecosystem’s endogenous creative processes in order to further its own obscure agenda. Its twisted re-engineering projects couple the deformation, degradation, and decay of the endemic flora, fauna, and physicochemical environment with the emergence of bewildering new alien life-forms at multiple scales of the ecosystem. As the title of Blackwood’s story suggests and its plot bears out, the weird phenomena gravitate around the willows. At the end of the story, however, the Swede’s sacrificial designs culminate in an attempt to throw himself into the river, as if the water were the locale of the most intense dimensional interpenetrations—if not their very source. As the narrator attempts to stop the Swede, he relates that “he already had one foot in the river! A moment more and he would have taken the plunge” (Blackwood 49). As the narrator pulls the Swede shore-wards, he notes that his companion “struggled furiously, making a noise all the time just like that cursed humming, and using the most outlandish phrases in his anger about ‘going *inside* to Them,’ [sic] and ‘taking the way of the water and the wind.’ [sic] and God only knows what more besides, that I tried in vain to recall afterwards, but turned me sick with horror and amazement as I listened” (Blackwood 49). Here the narrator emphasizes how the river is the origin of the weirdness, its fluidity and deranged hydro-dynamism insinuating it as a zone of maximum inter-dimensional trafficking between the *Sümpfe* and the unthinkable world beyond. Presumably, the xeno-agents smuggle themselves into the willows and their surrounding physico-chemical milieu by way of

the river. As if to emphasize the unfathomable strangeness of the river and its abyssal dimensional depths, Blackwood opens several plot-holes around it: do the travelers see an otter, a corpse of a man, or a yellow-eyed and black skinned demon bobbing in the rushing waters when they first enter the *Sümpfe*? Also, after surviving the ordeal, the Swede surmises that the pilot of the skiff who made the sign of the cross was something other than human—but what?

Negarestani's theory-fictional meteorology of hidden extraterrestrial agents wrecking havoc with Earth's distempered elements proposes that nature is sick with an alien disease. This idea implies that nature has an outside, and that this outside has also contaminated the inside—an issue that we will soon see pertains to interpretations of "The Willows." *Cyclonopedia* operates by a spatial logics of nestedness and impurity that brings into relief Blackwood's conception of space in "The Willows" as always already holding nested dimensional outsiders, creatures that could have been in space even before the formation of the earth, laying in wait for human victims. Multi-dimensionality, for Blackwood, means that any space always already contains interiorly nested outer spaces, and that all space is confluent with the outer spaces that envelope it. The manner in which Negarestani's inhuman xeno-agents are not encountered directly recalls how the narrator and the Swede are terrorized by inter-dimensional creatures which can only but partially manifest themselves in a range of inchoate forms, and through their effects on the geophysical elements and biological life of the *Sümpfe*, in particular the willow bushes. Here it is important to emphasize that the *Sümpfe* does not connect dimensions in the manner of a portal, that staple plot device in genre fiction that opens up a passage between worlds. Rather, the *Sümpfe* allows dimensions to interpenetrate by degrees and never completely, meaning that the unnamable things can enter our dimension only but partially, enjoying a limited though fatally malicious agency, a fact that is both profoundly good and bad news. The narrator says that he

and the Swede strayed “into some region or set of conditions where the risks were great, yet unintelligible to us; where the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us . . . a point where the veil had worn a little thin” (Blackwood 37). The veil is not torn but tattered, which gives the outsiders “a sort of peep-hole whence they could spy upon the earth, themselves unseen” (Blackwood 37). Although the alien entities can murderously meddle with human affairs through these wormholes, they can never fully present themselves, no more so than a three-dimensional object could be properly represented in two-dimensional space.

The outsiders are interstitial with respect to their ontological being, and consequently engaged in various processes of becoming, twisting themselves into convoluted intimacies with Earth’s biological life-forms and inorganic elemental materials. Their most familiar incarnation is that of the willow bushes, which they possess in a manner comparable to the demons recounted in works of theology and folklore. As the Swede points out one night when the travelers are surrounded by the unearthly vibrations, “‘it’s the sound of their world, the humming in their region. The division here is so thin that it leaks through somehow. But, if you listen carefully, you’ll find it’s not above so much as around us. It’s in the willows. It’s the willows themselves humming, because here the willows have been made symbols of the forces that are against us’” (Blackwood 42). This instantiation of the entities involves determinate biological life, but the narrator and the Swede also see the outsiders in differentially de-corporealized forms on two occasions: “these huge figures . . . immense, bronze-coloured, moving . . . they were very much larger than human, and indeed that something in their appearance proclaimed them to be *not human* at all . . . They were interlaced with one another . . . forming this serpentine line that bent and swayed and twisted spirally . . . into the heavens” (18). This mode of becoming is elemental, a giant cyclone of whirling life that associates the alien intruders with the more

mundane forces tearing through the *Sümpfe*. Lastly, there is the humming that emanates from the willows. Contrary to what the Swede says in the above quotation, this vibration is not a mere sign of the proximity of outsiders' world, but is instead a swarm of de-materialized predators. This misrecognition furnishes the shock at the conclusion of the story, when the travelers attempt to recover the sacrificial peasant's corpse and the mistaken Swede gets traumatized by the experience. Says the narrator: "the moment we touched the body there rose from its surface the loud sound of humming—the sound of several hummings—which passed with a vast commotion as of winged things in the air about us and disappeared upwards into the sky, growing fainter and fainter till they finally ceased in the distance. It was exactly as though we had disturbed some living yet invisible creatures at work" (Blackwood 51). These formless creatures, which suggest a pestilential swarm of insects, fly out of the hole-ridden body that they were nested in upon being disturbed. Their total de-corporealization affects a becoming-imperceptible of the outsiders, and the whole series of becomings reveals a trend toward increasing disembodiment, emphasizing the unknowability of these creatures and the subtle forms that they can take. Their imperceptibility not only indicates their recalcitrance to ontological presence, but also makes space itself threatening.²¹

In his essay on Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space," Anthony Sciscione writes that "[s]ymptomatic horror describes works that attempt to encounter the radically non-human without recourse to ontological presence and positive conceptualization, instead channeling the incompatible agency through its effects on the landscape and representing it in the text primarily with reference to the discursive and hermeneutic gaps it occasions" (131). "The Willows" most certainly fits within the rubric of "symptomatic horror," but it does something more: it makes space itself terrifying. The story reveals that space is full, pregnant with unimaginably unsettling

possibilities. The multidimensionality of space means that there are always alien insiders nesting within it, and alien outsiders enveloping it. It is in space that the outsiders lurk, and out of which they precipitate in a multiplicity of horrifying ways. It is as if space itself were decaying and spawning strange life from its putrefaction, which unbinds terrors from other regions beyond Earth. As the Swede says, “[t]here are things about us, I’m sure, that make for disorder, disintegration, destruction, *our* destruction . . . We’ve strayed out of a safe line somewhere” (Blackwood 36). Rather than becoming an empty, transparent container, the realization of the multidimensionality of space and the malefic agencies that it holds—and fails to hold in abeyance—makes space dense, suffocating, and black with swarming possibilities. In short, space is becoming outer space, the cosmic space that gives rise to every individuated existence in the universe, and back into which all of these existences will eventually pass. Blackwood suggests this continuity between temporal Earthly space and outer space when he has the narrator declare that in the *Sümpfe* “the frontiers of some unknown world lay close about us. It was a spot held by dwellers in some outer space” (Blackwood 37).

This continuity of cosmic and Earthly spaces indicates the thematic importance of the curiously-bored holes in the story. Holes architecturally connect inside and outside spaces, suggesting the way in which the cosmic and the terrestrial have become confluent in “The Willows.” The morning after the creatures first appear to the narrator in their cyclonic form, he notices that “[t]here were deep hollows formed in the sand . . . basin-shaped and of various depths and sizes, varying from that of a tea-cup to a large bowl” (Blackwood 27). Later, the narrator asks the Swede what he thinks about the strange sand-funnels around the island: “‘No!’ he cried, forgetting to whisper in his excitement. ‘I dare not, simply dare not, put the thought into words. If you have not guessed I am glad. Don’t try to. They have put it into my mind; try

your hardest to prevent their putting it into yours” (43). The holes are particularly vexing for the Swede and the narrator because they evince the way in which the outsiders cannot fully enter our dimension, but evidently have no problem with manipulating the physical matter inside of it. While the explorers expect to be attacked mentally, the holes reveal a disturbing physical mode of assault that additionally makes apparent the interpenetration of the cosmic outside into Earth’s territory. Thus the holes evince our world’s porosity, its haphazard openness to invasion by extraterrestrials.

Holes bespeak not only the immanence of invasions to come, but infiltrations that have already taken place. After the narrator and the Swede narrowly escape destruction, the former reports that “[a]ll round the tent and about the fireplace where we had seen the moving shadows there were deep funnel-shaped hollows in the sand, exactly similar to the ones we had already found all over the island, only far bigger and deeper, beautifully formed, and wide enough in some instances to admit the whole of my leg and foot” (Blackwood 47). The cyclonic, corkscrewing motion of the outsiders allows them to dig deeply into the Earth, explaining the formation of the holes. By making contiguous the dark skies and the very insides of the Earth, the outsiders demonstrate how the planet is shot through with the foreignness of outer space. Turning solid matter into agglomerations of holey space, the outsiders also suggest the frightening erosion of ontological and epistemological knowledge—for the very ground is disappearing under the explorers’ feet.

In *Cyclonopedia*, Negarestani proposes an ontology based on the hideous creative powers of decay proper to the dynamic interaction between the cosmic outside and solid bodies. He draws on a grotesque passage from H.P. Lovecraft’s ‘The Festival’ (1925) in order to elaborate his concept of the “()hole complex” (the parenthesis represent a dissolving “w,” denoting

“degenerate wholeness”), which “speeds up and triggers a particular subversion in solid bodies such as the earth. It unfolds holes as ambiguous entities—oscillating between surface and depth—within solid matrices, fundamentally corrupting the latter’s consolidation and wholeness through perforations and terminal porosities” (Negarestani 43). “()hole complex” starts with the unsettling thought that from the beginning, all solid bodies are infected with miniscule voids, small holes that are of and for the outside, which proliferate and avail the insides of the solid to foreign materials, marauding parasites, and other avatars of exteriority. The un-grounding activities of the proliferating hole as it spreads throughout the interior of solid and the corrosive effects of the agents the void invites inside are transmitted to all parts of whole along the solid’s material infrastructure, resulting in gross deformation and dissolution.

In a suggestive passage, Negarestani relates that decay “is the metastasis of scales and dimensions through the act of decomposition or unfolding scales and dimensions inherent to the forms of new beings which emerge from the decaying entity” (Negarestani 185). In other words, the differentiation of a novel entity is accomplished precisely in and through the dimensional wreckage of the old entity. Differential decay unbinds, proliferates, and then intensively combines dimensions in order to create anew; or rather, there is no act of creation that is not also an act of contamination, corruption, or the awakening and emergence of a dimensional outsider nested within. “Excessive dimensioning,” writes Negarestani, “is the strategy of decay, just as solidity is its fuel. In decay, disintegration is a means for excessive dimensioning and proliferating scales, because disintegration is a terminal tactic to progressively breed more dimensions in the absence of any force of consolidation and utilization of them as a whole” (Negarestani 186). Negarestani adds that decay is absolutely unnatural because its multiplication

of dimensions defies the ‘great formlessness of nature’ that abhors its individuation into parts (Negarestani 186).

Negarestani’s concept of decay helps bring into relief some crucial aspects of Blackwood’s conception of nature in “The Willows.” In Negarestani’s system, even though solid and void are mutually implicated, and cosmic outsides inevitably worm their way into soft insides, it can be argued that nature has an outside, emphasized by the insistence that decay and its associated un-grounding processes are unnatural. Similarly, nature in “The Willows” is more an interaction between a degenerate, incomplete, and open whole—that is, the tortured ground of the *Sümpfe*—and its cosmic outside, which un-grounds and subverts the marsh by decaying its dimensional boundaries, unbinding regions from beyond and unleashing hole-boring entities to facilitate this process. To maintain that nature always has an outside that cannot be assimilated, but nevertheless enters into relations with its ground, is to move toward thinking nature under the sign of a dynamic relationship or process rather than an unproblematic and unbroken whole. Blackwood seems to maintain that thinking nature in this way gives it the full freedom that should be accorded to it—namely, the freedom to violate itself, un-ground itself by breaking its own laws. To say that nature is either natural or supernatural is to go too far, to constrain it in one direction or the other, and in effect rob nature of or enslave it to regularity. In “The Willows,” thinking nature entails the thought of its being fractured and cracked open, in communication with an outside. Similarly, the dialectic of “natural supernaturalism” is too synthetic and wholesome a paradigm by far. It is as if the concept futilely attempts to overleap the cycles of dynamic creation and be able to think the sheer novelty of nature ahead of the real process of its production. Not natural, supernatural, or a sublation of the two, nature is

profoundly artificial insofar as it must be produced. In all its unforeseeable creativity, which cannot be pre-legislated, nature outstrips the concept of “natural supernaturalism.”

In the final part of this chapter, I consider some important philosophical contexts for “The Willows.” In Mike Ashley’s biography of Blackwood, *Starlight Man* (2001), he writes that the German *Naturphilosophie* of Gustav Fechner had a tremendous influence on the young author: “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.”²² In William James’s *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909)—another book that Blackwood cherished—James writes of Fechner’s identity-view metaphysical system, in which thought and matter are different facets of one another and consciousness is to be found everywhere in the universe. In Fechner’s system, lower levels of consciousness contribute to higher ones. James elaborates this theory as follows:

the constitution of the world is identical throughout. In ourselves, visual consciousness goes with our eyes, tactile consciousness with our skin. But although neither skin nor eye knows aught of the sensations of the other, they come together and figure in some sort of relation and combination in the more inclusive consciousness which each of us names his self. Quite similarly, then, says Fechner, we must suppose that my consciousness of myself and yours of yourself . . . are yet known and used together in a higher consciousness, that of the human race, say, into which they enter as constituent parts. Similarly, the whole human and animal kingdoms come together as conditions of a consciousness of still wider scope. This combines in the soul of the earth with the consciousness of the vegetable kingdom, which in turn contributes its share of experience

to that of the whole solar system, and so on from synthesis and synthesis and height to height, till an absolutely universal human consciousness is reached.²³

“The Willows” offers a horrifying take on Fechner’s system. In the story, Blackwood postulates the existence of consciousnesses behind elemental movements. The wind as it blows through the willow bushes becomes, for Blackwood, a sign of life stirring in another dimension. Thus space and matter are not empty or dead phenomena, but occupied by metaphysical beings. The malicious willow bushes reveal that life is a multidimensional phenomenon that transcends its local manifestation in a given spatiotemporal body. Blackwood adds another horrifying twist to Fechner’s thought by suggesting that the cosmos is not intricately organized into a unified whole. In Fechner’s system, each being and level of existence contributes to one giant cosmic consciousness. It is as if each subsequent level of being had its own consciousness in its own respective dimension. In “The Willows,” it is as if Blackwood pits various levels of consciousness and dimensions against each other, shattering the harmony of Fechner’s system, which is essentially monotheistic. Hence the Swede’s relapse into polytheism and the narrator’s references to the Romans, who paid sacrificial homage to an array of gods that held sway in particular local domains. The degradation of the structure of the Fechnerian cosmos is also evident in the physical degradation of the swamp, which is becoming riddled with holes, itself resembling the corpses that litter the *Sümpfe*: a sickening revision of the elaborately ordered body of Fechner’s vitalistic universe.

“The Willows” also works out ideas that Henri Bergson approached in his own process philosophy. In addition to postulating the idea—no doubt very attractive to the anti-materialistic Blackwood—that science could never capture life in its infinitely variegated, flowing reality but could only offer desiccated, lifeless stills of it, Bergson proposed that underlying space was time

itself, a full and heterogeneous reality teeming with difference and the power to create.²⁴ In his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience/Time and Free Will* (1889), Bergson argues that space itself, conceived of as an empty container holding extensive being, is not an objectively-existing phenomenon. It is rather an abstraction that humans use to carve up the unified world into discrete parts that can be processed. Bergson writes that “the higher we rise in the scale of intelligent beings, the more clearly do we meet with the independent idea of a homogenous space. It is therefore doubtful whether animals perceive the external world quite as we do.”²⁵

Bergson goes on to explain that animals have been known to return to their homes in a path that follows a straight line even though they have never pursued that path before. For Bergson, this “amounts to saying that space is not so homogenous for the animal as for us, and that determinations of space, or directions, do not assume for it a purely geometrical form. Each of these directions might appear to it with its own shade, its peculiar quality” (Bergson, 96). Rather than using visual cues to navigate through space, the animal may be relying on sophisticated olfactory cues or the detection of magnetic fields. This idea suggests an interesting interpretation of “The Willows” in which the violations of dimensionality and discrete spaces that occur in the text suggest the unreality of space itself as humans perceive it. As Bergson says, “we have to deal with two different kinds of reality, the one heterogeneous, that of sensible qualities, the other homogenous, namely space. This latter, clearly conceived by the human intellect, enables us to use clean-cut distinctions, to count, abstract, and perhaps also to speak” (Bergson 97). Space would become a kind of perspectival illusion underneath which churns a chaotic and utterly inhuman world that Blackwood uses the story to explore.

The notion of a horrifyingly creative, unstable cosmic space invading Earth's domain explains the many moments of stargazing that happen in "The Willows." It is not so much, however, a depiction of the black emptiness and the stars coming down to earth, but rather the realization that all Earthly space is already cosmic space. Everything that exists is immanent to outer space in the same way that Georges Bataille describes the relationship of the animal to the world in his *Théorie de la Religion/Theory of Religion* (1973): "the animal is in the world like water in water."²⁶ Consequently, Blackwood writes of a nature that bears resemblance to the outer reaches of space:

Contrary to our expectations, the wind did not go down with the sun. It seemed to increase with the darkness, howling overhead and shaking the willows round us like straws. Curious sounds accompanied it sometimes, like the explosion of heavy guns, and it fell upon the water and the island in great flat blows of immense power. It made me think of the sounds a planet must make, could we only hear it, driving along through space. (12)

The same solar winds that howl through the galaxy are those that cross the *Sümpfe*. The narrator's failure to realize this is emphasized in the final sentence, when he says "*could* we only hear it" (my emphasis). There is no "could" about it, of course; the sounds that he hears are precisely those of the planet as it drives along through space. The narrator has erected an arbitrary barrier between himself and the cosmos, and it is the fundamental movement of the story to shatter that barrier, to demonstrate to the humans that have forgotten Earth is not only in but a part of the cosmos, and shot through with it at every point in space. In Blackwood's stories of awe, this realization is exalting; in the stories of outdoor horror, exceedingly terrifying. When

the narrator and the Swede have set up camp on the island the first night, and are lounging under the stars, Blackwood writes:

Untrodden by man, almost unknown to man, it [the island] lay there beneath the moon, remote from human influence, on the frontier of another world, an alien world, a world tenanted by willows only and the souls of willows. And we, in our rashness, had dared to invade it, even to make use of it! Something more than the power of mystery stirred in me as I lay on the sand, feet to the fire, and peered up through the leaves at the stars. (14)

In this quotation, the one-acre island on which the explorers are camping starts to resemble “this island earth.” Here the narrator seems to grasp the otherworldly nature of the willows, which is concomitant with the act of staring up at the stars. The island that they are on, of course, is not a safe refuge from the cosmos. Presumably, as the narrator looks up into space, he gets a profound sense that “here,” the earth, is not an absolute reference point in an infinite cosmos, and that even though he is on earth, he is still “out there,” so to speak, in the dark universe, subject to its forces. To stare into the cosmos profoundly de-realizes the structures of meaning that human beings, in their social systems and language, create. The juxtaposition of the leaves and the stars is suggestive, bringing strange botanical life into the same frame as that of the cosmos, in the way that the outsiders invade and possess the willow bushes. Blackwood repeats this set-piece later in the story: “the flap of the tent was up, and I saw the branches and the stars and the white moonlight” (Blackwood 16-7).

In a personal letter to Penzoldt, Blackwood writes that “all that happens in our universe is *natural* [sic]; under Law [sic]; but an extension of our so limited normal consciousness can reveal new, extra-ordinary powers etc., and the word ‘supernatural’ seems the best word for treating these in fiction. I believe it is possible for our consciousness to change and grow, and

that with this change we may become aware of a new universe” (Penzoldt 229). Blackwood does not believe in the “supernatural” *per se*, as it comes about in the perception of something that is outside of our “so limited normal consciousness,” but this something is nevertheless “*natural*” and “under Law.” The “expansion of consciousness” that allows us to perceive these hidden aspects is not even intrinsically supernatural, as Blackwood says that it is possible for “our consciousness to change and grow.” For Blackwood, the natural and the supernatural already overlap, not so much in a “natural supernaturalism,” but more so in the sense that nature is always already a cosmic “super-nature” that reserves an infinite amount of hidden powers and creativity, which only appears to us as supernatural when nature does something unprecedented. In this quotation, everything devolves on a “new universe,” which demonstrates the way in which Blackwood’s “super-nature” is continuous with the cosmos.

I contend that this letter does not mitigate the un-grounded reading of nature and the cosmos that I have proposed. While Blackwood 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 above. The tales of outdoor horror may also depict dire situations wherein the harmony of the universe was not in the least evident to the protagonists. “The Willows” furnishes a particularly effective moment that dramatizes the insufficiency of humans’ conceptions of nature. When the explorers pass Pressburg and enter into to the territory of the willows, Blackwood writes that “everything changed a little” (Blackwood 5)—a not-so-subtle cue in the weird horror genre that things are about to go catastrophically wrong. Upon landing to set up camp for the night, the narrator takes a survey of the island which gives him a view of the river. Blackwood writes that it disappears “with a huge sweep into the willows, which closed about it like a herd of monstrous

antediluvian creatures crowding down to drink. They made me think of gigantic sponge-like growths that sucked the river up into themselves. They caused it to vanish from sight. They herded there in such overpowering numbers” (Blackwood 7). This passage, with its bizarre teratology, explicitly relates the natural and the supernatural. The narrator cannot shake the feeling that what he is witnessing is not just something sublime but profoundly unnatural: “[t]heir [the willows’] serried ranks, growing everywhere darker about me as the shadows deepened, moving furiously yet softly in the wind, woke in me the curious and unwelcome suggestion that we had trespassed here upon the borders of an alien world” (Blackwood 8). He sees the willows as “monstrous antediluvian creatures” and “gigantic sponge-like growths.” Nature, indeed, has produced creatures of these exact types in the past, implying an identity between the profoundly supernatural and the natural. Where the narrator is mistaken, however, concerns the precise nature of these extra-dimensional creatures that occupy the willows, which are so bizarre as to be the products of an unthinkable and lawless outside.

I close by suggesting another reading of Blackwood’s cosmic consciousness. In his tales of fantasy, this consciousness is, as per the above quotation, an expansion of the mind and an exalting advancement of its evolution that results in harmony with the universe. In his horror tales, however, cosmic consciousness resembles an insanity-inducing identification of thought and being, of mind and cosmos. Throughout “The Willows,” the explorers are terrified by the possibility of being destroyed by the outsiders, a process which the narrator describes as follows: “[a]s the final result of too long a sojourn here, we should be carried over the border and deprived of what we called ‘our lives,’ yet by mental, not physical, processes” (Blackwood 37). Thus the narrator fears literally losing his mind, having it dragged into another region of the cosmos, which resembles a perversely literalized version of the “expansion of consciousness”

that Blackwood describes above. The Swede elaborates on this fate, which is far worse than death: “[d]eath, 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” (40). Thus this expansion of consciousness involves one’s identity and individuality being subsumed in a wash of horrifying changes. The result of this abduction, of course, is not death, but utter cosmic trauma that drives mind out of itself and into the flux of the universe.

Blackwood’s other famous outdoor horror story, “The Wendigo” (1910), extensively explores this weird fate worse than death. In that tale, a wilderness guide by the name of Défago is captured by the Wendigo, a creature that resembles a pure quantum of energy far more so than the sasquatch suggested by Algonquin lore. Défago is spirited away by the Wendigo—literally carried away into the sky at immense velocities—and re-deposited on earth as a worn-out body wiped clean of all its memories and individuality. Défago’s feet, however, are changed to resemble those that made the tracks indicative of the Wendigo. The implication here is that Défago became the Wendigo, and that in this becoming, 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. Here the weird tale emphasizes the existence of speeds, energies, and intensities in nature that are totally incompatible with the human. Critical appreciation is long overdue to Blackwood, who in his outdoor horror stories produced outstanding weird tales of stark cosmic horror that we can relish for the ages in our own cozy little corner of the universe.

¹ H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 95. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

² See Anthony Sciscione, “Symptomatic Horror: Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” *Leper Creativity*, eds. Ed Keller, Nicola Masciandaro, & Eugene Thacker (Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, 2011), 131-46. Sciscione conducts a detailed, theoretical investigation of the nefarious alien incursion and hostile subterranean takeover depicted in this masterpiece of weird fiction, which was published in 1927. See also Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man* (London: Constable Press, 2001). In this biography of Blackwood, Ashley writes that “Lovecraft’s shift to more cosmic horror in the early 1930’s owed much to Blackwood’s work. One of Lovecraft’s most popular stories, ‘The Colour out of Space,’ contains elements redolent of “The Willows” (322).

³ I refer to Blackwood’s cosmicism as “subtle” because, despite this pronounced aspect of his fiction, his stories do not have the science fiction elements that Lovecraft’s later works do, such as the aforementioned “The Color out of Space” (1927) and “The Whisperer in Darkness” (1931). Both of these tales relate explicit infringements of and excursions into cosmic darkness, whereas in Blackwood’s horror stories, the inky tendrils of outer space are always already here, immanent to Earth, and waiting to be discovered by his unfortunate protagonists.

⁴ In his influential study *The Weird Tale* (1990), S. T. Joshi notes that “[s]omehow Blackwood can invest the recreation of appallingly archaic rituals—and this is the core of his greatest tales—with not merely a sense of hypnotic intensity but a dim suggestion that the whole fabric of the universe is involved” (120). In *Horror Literature* (1981), Jack Sullivan identifies Blackwood’s “The Willows” as one of the “masterpieces of cosmic horror” (224), a genre he defines by pointing out that “all supernatural horror involves the occult and the mystical to some extent. In the cosmic tale, however, rarified otherworldly visions are presented as part of an antimaterialist ideology that indicts Victorian scientism and technology and presents mystical experience as an alternative to the grayness and mechanized tedium of modern life” (224).

⁵ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011), 8. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁶ E. F. Bleiler writes that Blackwood’s parents were converts to the ultra-Calvinistic Sandemanian sect, which made life “very uncomfortable for a dreamy, sensitive, individualistic young man who could not accept the fact that he was damned” (*Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood*, v). In a moving essay titled “From a Theosophist’s Diary” (1892), Blackwood writes of the “immeasurable despair that swept over my soul as I felt I could never love such a God, that I could never be frightened into heaven, and that therefore my only alternative lay in the blazing tortures of a localized volcano, where I should live forever in death” (quoted in Ashley, 55). Having dwindled to “three parts a corpse” and racked by “untold misery and despair” (Ashley 55) at the thought of condemnation to Hell, the young Blackwood’s discovery of the *Yoga Aphorisms* by Bhagwan Shree Pantanjali, followed by *The Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, did nothing short of save his life. The influence of these works blossomed into a life-long love of Eastern spiritual traditions, esotericism, and the occult, at one time holding membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

⁷ Peter Penzoldt, *The Supernatural in Fiction* (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), 234. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁸ Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1978), 124. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁹ Lovecraft writes that “here art and restraint in narrative reach their highest development, and an impression of lasting poignancy is produced without a single strained passage or a single false note” (*Supernatural Horror in Literature*, 96). Joshi notes that Lovecraft ranked “The Willows” with Arthur Machen’s “The White People” (1904) as the finest supernatural short stories ever written (*The Weird Tale*, 89).

¹⁰ In his biography of Blackwood, *Starlight Man* (2001), Mike Ashley reports that this classic was inspired by experiences from two boat trips on the Danube, the first of which took place in June 1900 (106). Blackwood and his travel companion, Wilfrid Wilson, intended to follow the river from Donaueschingen in the Black Forest to its tributary with the Black Sea (106). The travelers altogether underestimated the violence of the Danube, and the journey was punctuated by a disastrous wreck outside of Vienna that smashed the bow of the canoe and cost the explorers some valuable provisions; thanks only to the efforts of a local carpenter were the men able to continue their voyage (107).

¹¹ Algernon Blackwood, “The Willows,” *Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood*, ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1973), 1. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹² Blackwood’s second Danube voyage was undertaken in August 1905, in a twenty-foot long flat-bottomed punt, which also held Wilson and Edwyn and Mary Bevan (Ashley, 126). The wilderness between Bratislava and Komárno—the setting of ‘The Willows’—held a grisly surprise. The adventurers found the corpses of three drowned victims of the river, one of which was deposited on a shingle bed by the waters (126).

¹³ Alfred Korzybski, “A non-aristotelian system and its necessity for rigor in mathematics and physics,” *Sanity and Science* (Englewood, NJ: Institute of General Semantics, 1933), 750.

¹⁴ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 454-5. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁵ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 28. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁶ Quoted in Matt Cardin, “Thomas Ligotti’s Career of Nightmares,” *The Thomas Ligotti Reader*, ed. Darrell Schweitzer (Holicong, PA: Wildside Press, 2003), 88. In that essay, see Cardin’s nuanced analysis of liminality in ‘The Shadow at the Bottom of the World’ (1991), a remarkable tale by the contemporary American weird fiction writer, Thomas Ligotti. This story relates events that transpire in a rural town during an accursed autumn season that never ends. One night, the townspeople witness a scarecrow jerk and twitch its way into blasphemous life. After attacking it, they find “something black and twisted into the form of a man, something that seemed to have come up from the earth and grown over the [scarecrow’s] wooden planks like a dark fungus, consuming the structure” (quoted in Cardin, 86). No matter how deep they dig, the townspeople cannot find the end of the fungal stalk. In the morning, they discover that the stalk has retracted into the earth, leaving a yawning hole. Soon after, all of the townspeople are beset by nightmares. One Mr. Marble shows up with a curious ceremonial blade in tow and a plan to release the town from its supernatural woes. This story is strongly reminiscent of “The Willows,” with its interest in a dark vital force (one that is also capable of invading human minds), its fascination with holes, and the Mr. Marble character, whose sacrificial designs and insight into the dark force resemble those of Blackwood’s Swede.

¹⁷ Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010), 13-4. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁸ To speak of objects or the outlandish qualities that they manifest as they “existed across the border in that other region” can also imply continuous existence in both regions, no matter how radically the object or its qualities differ with respect to the prevailing ontological conditions in either respective dimension. This continuity in being suggests that objects consist of a mysterious, enduring substance. Recently, philosopher Graham Harman has proposed a rehabilitation of the concept of Aristotelian substance in his own Object-Oriented philosophy. Building on the insights of Martin Heidegger, Harman proposes that the reality of an object withdraws behind its sensual manifestations, meaning that the real object is never present in any of its particular instantiations. Blackwood’s objects could be read in a similar fashion, with reality of the objects not to be found in a particular dimension, but rather in that strange and necessarily featureless withdrawn substance that makes the object continuous or co-planar with all of the various dimensions in which it exists. The object’s existence in one dimension would merely be the particular sensual qualities it manifests under the given conditions in that dimension. For good reason does Harman refer to his thought—in a phenomenological reading of Lovecraft’s work, no less—as a kind of “weird realism.”

¹⁹ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008) , 98-99. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁰ See H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space” (1927), in which the alien pathogen from the comet makes use of groundwater to spread.

²¹ Their total dematerialization recalls the figure of the demon, of which Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige / The Idea of the Holy* (1917) says that the “most authentic form of the ‘daemon’ may be seen in those strange deities of ancient Arabia, which are properly nothing but wandering demonstrative pronouns, neither ‘given shape and feature by means of myth,’ for there is in the main no mythology attached to them at all, nor ‘evolved out of nature deities,’ nor grown out of ‘souls’ or ‘spirits’ but none the less felt as deities of mighty efficacy, who are the objects of very living veneration” (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 122.

²² Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man* (London: Constable Press, 2001), 24. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²³ William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1909), 155-6. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁴ Suzanne Guerlac, *Thinking in Time* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 64-5. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁵ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will* (Kila, MT: Kessinger Publishing Ltd., 1990), 96. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁶ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 19.

IV. William Hope Hodgson: Vital Dark Matter

Whither Theology?

In this chapter, I make a case for why the “weird” horror fiction of the early twentieth-century British author William Hope Hodgson merits the scholarly attention of ecocritics and philosophers. Often cited as an influence on H.P. Lovecraft,¹ Hodgson produced a large volume of essays, poetry, and fiction, including the classic “weird” horror novels *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and *The Night Land* (1912). Despite his untimely death in World War I, Hodgson managed to publish numerous short stories in popular periodicals such as the *London Magazine* and the *Storyteller* (Bruce 125). Here I outline the dark ecological implications of Hodgson’s maritime short story, “The Voice in the Night,” which first appeared in the November 1907 *Blue Book Magazine* (125). I argue that the grotesque becoming-fungus of human beings recounted in the tale challenges conventional theological accounts of creation. As opposed to treating beings as autonomous, individual substances created with such-and-such a form, I maintain that Hodgson’s tale depicts creative mergers between unrelated organisms that spawn novel hybrid creatures, unclassifiable by the lights of the natural sciences. In doing so, Hodgson supplants an ontology based upon createdness and being with one of creativity and becoming. In the second section, I describe how Hodgson de-familiarizes vitality by conflating it with inorganic materials, decay, and death. In the third part, I argue that the author confounds vitality with death in order to make the concept of life become visible as a philosophical problem rather than an existential given. Thus it is not at all the case that Hodgson is deprecating vitalism. Quite to the contrary, I show how he is re-conceptualizing life as a phenomenon that emerges from networks of ecological relationships. Perhaps most interesting is the manner in which Hodgson’s concept of ecology is eerily prescient; not limited to parasitism, symbiosis, or other

forms of commensalism between organisms, Hodgson's ecology daringly extends into the inorganic world—and accordingly takes life right along with it. Lastly, I demonstrate how depicting the mesh of ecological relations as a crucible for new life wrests productive power away from Darwinian evolution. This move complicates recent critical interpretations of Hodgson's work as expressions of degeneration theory.

Through all of these arguments, I seek to present the often-maligned weird horror genre as a particularly powerful mode—by turns subtle and bold, if not shocking—of speculating about the ecological. As such, I contend that weird horror should not merely be read as an instantiation of the ecological in fiction, but rather an exploration of its outermost possibilities. I close the chapter with a discussion of Hodgson's 1912 short story, "The Derelict." I contend that this tale is many ways a continuation of "The Voice in the Night," and argue that it demonstrates a substantial revision in Hodgson's thinking on the nature of biological life, which he began to think of as a vital force arising from chemical reactions. I show that this change was prompted by his engagement with the "critical" vitalism of Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson, whose philosophies were especially popular during the pre-war period in which Hodgson was producing these stories.

Because Hodgson tends to be known only by aficionados of the weird, I offer a brief biographical sketch of his extraordinary life, which doubtlessly influenced his fiction. Thirteen years old and captivated by the romance of a seafaring life, in 1891 Hodgson ran away from Margaret's Boarding School in Margate in order to set sail, relieving him from becoming an Anglican priest like his father (Bruce 122). Hodgson was apprehended and returned to his family, but he later secured a stint as a cabin boy (122). Here began an adventurous life that saw all manner of high-seas peril, from tropical storms to treacherous shipmates. When the waters

were not threatening, the slightly-built Hodgson practiced judo, boxing, and bodybuilding, and soon cultivated a world-class physique and a reputation for being able to thrash even the largest of sailors (122). He also became a skilled photographer, taking pictures of shark-roiled waters and the maggot-infested food the seamen consumed (122). Around 1899, he used his camera to document a passage through the vortex of a cyclone. He took some of the earliest pictures of stalk lightning, which shoots up from the ocean rather than down from the sky, the black funnel of the storm, seven-story high waves, and the near-capsizing of the vessel (122). Returning to land-life, he opened W. H. Hodgson's School of Physical Culture in Blackburn in 1899 (122). The failure of the school saw Hodgson turn to writing. In his lifetime, he published a multitude of short stories and four novels, among the latter the Weird horror masterpiece *The House on the Borderland*. In 1918, at the age of 40, Hodgson was killed by an artillery shell on the battlefield of Ypres (Bruce 119).

The simple plot of "The Voice in the Night" should not cause us to lose sight of its conceptual subtlety. The narrator, a sailor on a vessel becalmed in the Pacific, is hailed in the night by "a voice curiously throaty and inhuman."² Alarmed, the narrator asks the night-visitor to come alongside the boat, so that he can see who—or *what*—he is dealing with. The voice declines, quizzically responding that "[i]t wouldn't be safe" (Hodgson 15). The narrator and the crew learn that the visitor is in dire need of food for himself and a woman he has left behind on a nearby island. They float some provisions out to the visitor, who remains hidden in darkness. Departing, the voice refuses a rescue vessel and wishes the sailors God's blessings. Hours later, the voice again hails the seamen from under the cover of night, urging them not to "belittle their deed of Christian charity" (Hodgson 18). The visitor relates that six months ago, he and his fiancée were on a ship that dismasted in a storm. They ended up on an island overgrown with a

grey, lichenous fungus composing a jungle of finger-like nodules and hideous simulacra of trees, “[t]he whole quaking vilely at times” (Hodgson 21). After a month, the couple noticed birthmark-like growths of fungus on their bodies, which they attempted to remove with carbolic. The infection progressing, they decided that “it would be unallowable to go among healthy humans” (Hodgson 22). Starvation set in, and the visitor was repulsed to discover that his fiancée had taken to eating the fungus. Worse yet, she “liked it” (Hodgson 23). Appalled, he made her promise to abstain, but soon gave in himself, notably after a close encounter with a creature more mushroom than man, ripping itself from an undulating mass of fungus. Resolving never to eat the fungus again, the couple had been starving for months before they saw the sailors’ vessel. Concluding his chilling account, the voice asks God’s grace for his audience and rows away. As dawn breaks, the sailors finally catch a distant glimpse of the visitor, who resembles a great, grey sponge with a bulbous, featureless head, uncouthly nodding in the mist.

Leslie Shepard notes “the weird pathos . . . [and] allegorical overtones of original sin”³ in “The Voice in the Night.” S.T. Joshi rightly perceives an element of criticism in this allegory that Shepard does not detect, but he never specifies what the critique is, and how Hodgson levels it. Joshi remarks that “[w]hat distinguishes this story, aside from the gradualness and subtlety of its supernatural manifestation, is an element of religious criticism in Hodgson’s work.”⁴ Rather than providing an explanation for the events of the tale, I argue that such allusions highlight the inadequacy of theological narratives to account for the couple’s bewildering transformation. Throughout the story, the voice repeatedly professes his and his fiancée’s faith in divine providence. Before he begins his account, the voice explains why he must share his ordeal with the sailor, claiming that his fiancée “is with me in believing that to-night’s happenings are under a special ruling, and that it is God’s wish that we should tell you all that we have suffered”

(Hodgson 18). When the couple starts to notice birthmark-like fungal growths on their skin, they decide to remain on the island rather than risk a sea voyage. Their rationale is that “God would do with us what was His will” (Hodgson 22). The most prominent biblical parallel takes shape around the scene that depicts the visitor discovering his fiancée eating the fungus. After months on the island, the couple begins to fear starvation even more than the revolting changes visited upon their bodies. Returning from foraging one day, the visitor is shocked to find his fiancée savoring a piece of the forbidden fruit (Hodgson 23). Surprised, she turns “a deadly pale; then a rose red” (23), suggesting how the fall brings death and shame to humanity. Later that day, after making his sweetheart promise never to eat the fungus again, the visitor is attacked by the human-mushroom hybrid. In the scuffle, the visitor inadvertently gets a taste of the fungus, which bears a “sweetish” flavor that kindles “an inhuman desire” to consume the vile substance (23). As he devoured the loathsome meal, the visitor relates that “the remembrance of the morning’s discovery swept into my mazed brain. It was sent by God. I dashed the fragment I held to the ground” (23). Realizing that he had just become Adam to his fiancée’s Eve, the visitor is overwhelmed by “a dreadful guiltiness” (23).

Numerous details in the story cast doubt on the visitor’s religious meta-narrative. The events of his account are inconsistent with the fall because the ghastly metamorphosis, which should be punishment for unlawful consumption, is well underway before the couple even eats the fungus. Thus the visitor’s narrative contradicts the fall myth at precisely the point where it should reiterate the punitive logic of *Genesis* 3, making him look as if he were grasping for theological straws. This discrepancy makes the allusions to the fall and divine providence seem like abortive attempts to comprehend a heretofore unseen and unnamable form of biological life, one so unnatural with respect to its volatile morphology and re-combinatory behavior, that it can

only be thought in theological terms as essentially evil. Eugene Thacker might refer to such an organism as an example of “blasphemous life,”⁵ a life so repugnantly contradictory in its mode of living that it should not be alive at all. The extreme morphological plasticity of the fungus renders it a living paradox, an essentially formless form of life, which recalls Thacker’s description of Lovecraft’s numinous Shoggoths as “the alterity of alterity, the species-of-no-species, the biological empty set” (103).

The queasy amorphousness of mycological being extends to its feeding behaviors as well. Both parasite and saprophyte, the fungus consumes organic and inorganic materials alike, which means that all of extended being is threatened by the corruption of immanent fungal becoming. This calamity is presaged in the warped spatial and temporal dynamics of astronomic fungal growth, which seem to outstrip even the laws of physics. Recalling their efforts to inhabit a ship overrun by the organism, the visitor states that “as a first step, we scraped away the odd patches of growth that studded the floors and walls of the cabins and saloon, yet they returned to their original size within the space of twenty-four hours, which not only discouraged us, but gave us a feeling of vague unease” (Hodgson 20). Realizing that they need to take more drastic measures, the lovers try dousing the areas they scrape with carbolic acid. Not only does the fungus regenerate, but as if in response to these attempts to check its horrid growth, it also expands over a larger area (20). The couple’s “feeling of vague unease” reflects a dim awareness of the impending infestation of their own bodies, as well as the way in which fungal biomass spontaneously generates at impossible speeds, as if its physiological processes were not bound by the space-time constraints that limit the growth and distribution of other organisms. This vigorous addition of biomass, in amounts gruesomely disproportionate to the nutritive substrate available to the fungus, hints at a sacrilegious *ex nihilo* creation taking place. Ben Woodward

writes that “Hodgson’s fungus . . . extends biology beyond such absolute space and introduces the truly horrifying aspect of biology as endlessly spatial and naturally mutated, as growth unbound.”⁶ In its pandemic spreading, the fungus resembles a growing stain on nature, a taint of truly radical depravity that attests to a new fall to even lower depths.

Yet there is another reason why the visitor must explain this creature with reference to *Genesis 3*. Mycological becomings twist heterogeneous organisms into monstrous intimacies, generating novel creaturely life that undermines the religious metaphysics of enduring forms. Throughout Hodgson’s tale, this process of creation is emphasized by the visitor’s inability to account for what he and his fiancée have become: “day by day, with monstrous rapidity, the fungoid growth took hold of our poor bodies. Nothing we could do would check it materially, and so . . . we who had been human became—Well, it matters less each day” (Hodgson 23). There is as much speechless horror in the silence of the dash as there is perplexity over his inability to name the unforeseen living thing that he is, or rather, that he is perpetually becoming. Here we see why “The Voice in the Night” is a particularly disturbing work of weird horror fiction. While the story recounts a degrading transformation into a primordial form of life, there is a way in which Hodgson is forever deferring this very change, in the process allowing something far worse to happen in its place. If the visitor and his fiancée were to become fungus, such a change would be nothing if not merciful, as it would bring the vegetal peace of non-sentience. Indeed, such a change would affect a death-like equilibrium with the environment. Instead of complete alteration and a definite passage from one discrete form of being to another—which would generate nothing new and give the couple the blessing of final rest—the story depicts a creative becoming that asymptotically approaches mycological being, turning existence into a grotesque procession of anonymous, differential forms that gradationally blend

the fungal and the human. It is as if Hodgson defers the conversion from human to fungus by protracting it into an infinitely divisible series of intensive changes, which constitute so many phases of being sloughed off like dead skins. Here Hodgson is attempting to think existence without recourse to the substantial forms and essences of theology, a thought-experiment that replaces a static concept of being with one of becoming. “The Voice in the Night” troubles the metaphysics of substantial forms through time and space. With regard to the former, the gradual nature of fungal becoming dilates the process of change in time, making it apparent that difference does not just enter into the being of a thing, but rather supplants being itself; as for the latter, substantial forms are superimposed to produce new hybrids of interstitial, hence illegitimate, existence. Moreover, to spawn such permutations, substantial forms must submit to a process of chimerization that negates their metaphysical incorruptibility. In this churning brew of forms, the visitor’s life becomes an absurd and cruel accident rather than a divinely-ordained punishment.

It is crucial to realize that the visitor’s becomings generate all-new forms of life. A kind of botanical counterpart to the cephalopod’s tentacles—which have become emblematic of the weird genre due to the mainstream popularity of Lovecraft’s squid-like monster, Cthulhu⁷—fungal filaments infiltrate pervious bodies, initiating a decomposition that is nevertheless a productive molecular reengineering. Rather than reproduce fungus in narcissistic acts of serial filiation, becomings twist unrelated organisms into an intimacy that generates convoluted new entities. In the story, this novelty is registered in the stuttering, stammering speech the voice lapses into whenever he has to account for himself, for *what* he has become: “I am only an old—man,” he declares (15). The dash gives the lie to the word that follows it, suggesting his inhumanity. Here the word “old” offers a glimpse into the bewildering novelty of his becoming.

Ostensibly a lie to ensure the narrator he is harmless, “old” indexes a traumatic distortion of time consequent on his body’s deformation in space. Mere months ago, the visitor was a young man on the cusp of marriage. Since then, his body has seen so many changes pervert it from its original composition, functions, and interests that he deems himself old. Yet he is anything but that, especially given how rapidly his metamorphosis was affected. Thus the speed of his change is totally out of joint with pulsed, chronological time. “Old” reflects an accumulation of changes, but one that has punctually transformed the body into something nightmarishly new rather than gradually aged it. When the voice struggles in vain to define what he and his fiancée have become—“and so—and so—we who had been human became—Well, it matters less each day” (23)—we can read the dashes that riddle the text as silences pregnant with the horror of language’s failure to nominate the new and unnamable living thing. While trying to describe the visitor, the narrator’s speech likewise becomes infested with lacunae, as if the fungus were so contagious that it could infect the incorporeal “material” of language itself: “I thought of a sponge—a great, grey nodding sponge . . . the—the thing went nodding into the mist” (24). Suitably, this irruption of linguistic holes coincides with the moment the spongy body becomes visible. A complex of filaments and pores, pestilential lines of flight and orifices of emergence, the visitor is less a body than a holey space exchanging matter with the ecosystem, reciprocally transforming itself and its surroundings. Or even better yet, this perforated space collapses all distinctions between body and environment.

In “holey” (or rather, unholy) ecological communion with the exterior, the visitor is the *Outsider*. Quoting Lovecraft, Deleuze and Guattari describe the Outsider as “the Thing which arrives and passes at the edge, which is linear yet multiple, ‘teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease, this nameless horror.’”⁸ Hodgson uses modernist

experimental techniques in order to narrate the arrival and passage of this anomaly that skirts the edges of the text as only a voice. When seen, he is in the process of becoming-imperceptible, having grown into the row-boat while delivering his account. This disappearance is underscored by the way the visitor recedes into the horizon while the narrator strains to see him. The nested narrative apparatus of the text also filters the visitor's dialogue through the sailor's narration, adding another layer of distortion to his fungus-choked voice. Yet the visitor, or Outsider, is also very much inside of the text on account of his unstable body, which is disappearing into the text's diegetic world in so many hyperactive processes of becoming. Hence this Outsider is also a subversive *Insider*, a hole-riddled body whose vexed presence in turn fills the textual body with gaps and indirection. These representational disturbances and askance narratological strategies devolve on the visitor's recalcitrance to ontological presence, and the incomprehensibility it engenders. Bereft of a stable form, his substance is engaged in a series of profoundly impure activities of becoming—a sickly-grey smearing of the cosmos.

As if to punctuate the horror of his metamorphosis, the visitor declares that “only we had been man and maid!” (Hodgson 23). After failing to positively express what he and his fiancée have become, in the visitor's outburst of pathos, he stumbles upon a definition by negation: that which is no longer man and maid, or that which lacks the form of man and maid, respectively. These attempts at definition bring into focus the story's central ontological issue and its relationship to theology. Becoming-fungus is an operation of novel creation coincident with the act of deforming—not merely in the sense of making something physically deformed, monstrous, or indefinable—but *de-forming*, as in the elimination of substantial forms. Woodard proposes that while “life in evolution can be construed as merely mutations on . . . a form, fungus only appears as vegetative variations without form” (32). More to the point, in Hodgson's tale, the

fungus revokes the concept of substantial form by staging a graphic demonstration of the inherent corruptibility of things. By infiltrating and re-engineering bodies in a way that utterly violates their integrity, we see that there are no things-in-themselves, no essences or identities, much less things made by God as this-or-that entity. The fungus exudes un-holiness because it appears as a powerful occult agency whose mode of existence is an affront to God's created world and the metaphysical forms behind it. The fungus engages in a satanic sabotage that not only unmakes God's creations, but also creatively perverts them, conscripting them as materials in the construction of chimeras whose unstable, metamorphic anatomies are living monuments to the defiance of divine form. Hodgson's fungus engages in a sinister messing-up of creation that leaves things illegible and indefinable, as their forms are lost in swells of fetid matter. It should come as no surprise, then, that R.T. and F.W. Rolfe note a persistent connection between the demonic and the fungal in folk mythology: "[i]t is only natural that part of the ill-fame, often attaching to the fungi in popular estimation, should be an association with the Devil. Thus the evil-smelling stinkhorn (*Phallus impudicus*) . . . should be known in Yorkshire as 'The Devil's Stinkpot,' and in Norfolk as 'The Devil's Horn'; while a puff-ball in some parts of the country is termed 'The Devil's Snuff-Box.'"⁹

Of course the fungus is anything but a Luciferan supernatural power, and there never were any substantial forms for it to ruin in the first place. What this organism does is vitiate the metaphysics of substantial forms. Fungal depredations evince the immanent agency of things in the world to engage in an ecological de-forming, re-forming, and in-forming of other things, which often prove to be messy affairs that transpire without so much as a thought for design—when, that is, the agents that carry out these processes even possess the capacity to think at all. Here we are far from the vision of a divine creator busying himself in the workshop of nature,

stamping transcendent forms into the passive *hyle* of matter. Thus, by having the visitor repeatedly refer his account to *Genesis*, Hodgson is not just indicating that God has nothing to do with the proceedings of the tale; he is also problematizing theological accounts of creation. The visitor's attempt to marshal religious mythology in order to understand creative processes in the world shores up its failure to account for such processes. In fact, the way that the visitor finds in *Genesis* a kind of untenable metaphysical scaffolding beneath the singular events of the story brings into relief the equally untenable notion, implicit in theological accounts of creation, that there are metaphysical forms of things, or that things are created according to divine designs.

The fungus does resemble the forbidden fruit in one crucial aspect. It holds a kind of cursed wisdom, namely, the potentially humiliating and frightening knowledge of a weird materialism that situates a restless, impersonal, and aleatory creative power within matter itself. As Woodard argues, slime is not particularly disturbing because it appears as “dead matter waiting for potentiation” whereas the fungus “appears as the same kind of matter but that which is active of its own accord” (24). Here we begin to see why it is imperative that the visitor capture this life-form within the familiar Christian narrative of creation. Returning to the visitor's exclamation—“only we had been man and maid!” (Hodgson 23)—we can see that he visitor thinks becoming in negative terms as the loss of humanity, which reifies man- and maid-hood into things that can be lost or taken away: namely, substantial or essential forms. This point illuminates the visitor's understanding of becoming as a divine punishment, wherein God deprives him and his fiancée of form. What is said of life in *Job* 1:21 could be said of form here: “the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away.”¹⁰ By thinking the protean flux of becoming negatively, as nothing more than the privation of form, the visitor denies the positive productivity of becoming, implying that the power to create is reserved for God and his methods

alone. The visitor's thinking attempts to domesticate the novelty and unthinkability of creative becoming by shoehorning it into a theological narrative. By casting becoming as an exceptional punishment rather than the engine of creation, the visitor preserves the religious metaphysics of forms. In fact, the very evidence that revokes the notion of substantial forms, given in the process of becoming-fungus, is turned via the sleight-of-hand of negation into a proof of such forms—and by extension, a proof of God and his influence in worldly affairs. Quoting H.P. Lovecraft, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write that “[m]erging with nothingness is peaceful oblivion; but to be aware of existence and yet to know that one is no longer a definite being distinguished from other beings,’ nor from all of the becomings running through us, ‘that is the nameless summit of agony and dread” (240). The visitor and his fiancée mitigate the existential horror of which Deleuze and Guattari speak by convincing themselves that their “agony and dread” is a divine punishment that, moreover, entails the eventual redemption and salvation of their souls.

Perhaps the most convincing case against the visitor's creationism comes from germ theory. In 1881, the germ theory of disease was codified in medical terms as “the idea that the origin of many diseases lay in the pathogenic actions of certain microorganisms when introduced into the body.”¹¹ Between 1894 and 1906, immediately prior to the publication of “The Voice in the Night,” medical mycologists determined the causative organisms for North American blastomycosis, cryptococcosis, and histoplasmosis, among other fungal diseases.¹² In the wake of these discoveries, the fungal transformation looks like anything but a supernaturally-affected plague like the boils in *Exodus* 9, or a curse of leprosy the likes of which is discussed in *Leviticus* 13-14.¹³ From the vantage point of these scientific breakthroughs, the obscure plans and punitive actions of God, known to the visitor only but indirectly through resemblances to biblical events,

appear in reality to reflect the furtive activities and molecular re-engineering agendas of microorganisms, which play out at scales beyond human ken. It is microbial life at work within the unfathomable dimensions and hidden recesses of matter that effectuates the couple's change, as opposed to a transcendent entity that somehow also reserves the power to affect matter in the physical world. When Hodgson describes the florid growth of the fungus after efforts to check it with acid, he stresses the germinal nature of fungal life: "by the end of the week the growth had returned in full strength, and, in addition, it had spread to other places, as though our touching it had allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere" (Hodgson 20). Following these speculations, the visitor relates the abrupt appearance of fungus on his fiancée's pillow, "close to her face" (20), and on one of her shawls (Hodgson 21), linking their defilement to the dehiscence of germs.

Wither Life?

In the first subdivision of this chapter, I attempted to show how the novelty associated with becoming-fungus upsets theological narratives. We saw that in "The Voice in the Night," Hodgson deposes the concept of divinely-legislated substantial forms. More than just a repulsive transmutation of bodies, the story narrates a shift in fundamental ontology, a passage from a world of substance and being to one of flux and becoming. All of this goes to say that Hodgson's weird horror tale explores the philosophical ramifications of thinking the world as fundamentally *creative* rather than *created*. In this section, I consider how Hodgson's use of germ theory, as well as fungal morphology and physiology, problematizes the concept of life by tying it to inorganic materials, decomposition, and death. We will see that Hodgson's purpose here is not to negate vitality itself, but to challenge conventional conceptions of life—and perhaps even suggest life's unthinkability. In this section, if it seems as if Hodgson is making life itself wither into nothingness, I argue that it is because his intention is to make life look so

strange that we question whether we understood even the most basic things about it at all. By dispelling our customary notions of life, Hodgson encourages us to look at what it means to be alive in a different light, thus clearing the ground for a more comprehensive, ecological paradigm for vitality, which I explain later in the chapter.

After germ theory, the presence of fungal fruiting bodies would have immediately signaled the imperceptible unfolding of a suite of threatening micro-logical processes. One such process is the proliferation of hyphae.¹⁴ P.D. Sharma writes that a hypha “is a microscopic fungus filament, which is usually branched. The hypha is in fact a tube bounded by a rigid cell wall and a cavity (lumen) lined or filled with protoplasm.”¹⁵ In his *Introduction to the History of Mycology* (1976), G.C. Ainsworth notes that K.L. Wildenow introduced the term “hypha” as early as 1810 (65). These ultra-fine filaments compose the vegetative fungal mass known as the mycelium. Hyphae play a role in territorial expansion, growth, and feeding. Sharma reports that hyphae extend rapidly across solid surfaces, in some species exceeding the rate of 1 millimeter per hour (84). Hyphae also form extensive branched networks and produce externally-acting enzymes. A bit ominously, Sharma writes that

the production of branches has two very important effects on the ability of any fungus to colonise a particular substrate. Dense and regular branches endow the fungus with the potential to pervade any substrate thoroughly. The complex branching system and the rigid nature of the wall behind the apex both ensure that the older parts of the hypha are firmly anchored and enable the tip to exert considerable forward mechanical pressure as it extends. Some hyphae can penetrate metal films in this way. This, coupled with the production of substrate-hydrolytic enzymes which erode away, or at least soften, the

substrate, greatly assists penetration and ensures complete permeation of even the hardest and toughest substrate. (86)

Like corpse-worms, the specialized hyphal structures of parasitic species writhe their way into the host's cells. Once inside, they begin a catabolic process of *en vivo* putrefaction that frees up nutrients for digestion. This flow of nourishment in turn fuels further cycles of fungal growth and decomposition. In weird horror fiction, this process becomes a run-away feedback loop that affects somatic meltdown, leaving the host a total mess. Another unsettling micro-process is sporulation, an asexual reproductive strategy wherein desiccated germs of the fungus are encased in hard-walled, spherical cysts and then dispersed by specialized morphological structures, geophysical elements, or animals—especially hungry insects—attracted to the lurid colors and stench of the fungus.¹⁶ Once taken up by a suitable host, the spore waits until conditions are favorable for germination, whence it awakens from its cryptobiotic slumber and makes a good meal out of its host's tissues. Commenting on the unthinkable wayward paths of dispersal and unknowable destinations of spores, weird fiction author and philosopher Reza Negarestani writes that “the spore, or endo-bacterial dust, is a relic with untraceable zones of migration and traversal, a swarm-particle creeping off the radar screen; a speck of dust you never know whether you have inhaled or not . . . Nothing is more vicious and strategic in undermining and attacking normality, hygiene and survival-friendly environments than a spore.”¹⁷

Negarestani's attention to the spore's strategic aptitude highlights a fundamental uncertainty about the nature of fungal life. The spore is the perfect undercover agent for infiltration because its movements are so haphazard as to be untraceable. It utilizes a passive mode of transport in which it gives itself over to random vectors of movement: gusts of wind, flowing streams, and the perambulations of animals. Ironically, its martial prowess is due to the

fact that not even the slightest trace of ratiocination goes into its dispersal and invasion strategies, rendering them totally unpredictable. There is no pattern to be decrypted here, no adversary to be out-thought. It is not at all the case that fungal strategies are totally opaque; rather, there is no agent that is thinking them. It is as if the fungus, by virtue of living but not thinking, accomplishes a liquidation of strategy that is nevertheless a preeminently strategic move in itself. By operating at a level below thought, the fungus bizarrely achieves tactical superiority over humans, recalling how in works of weird fiction, nature always seems to be strangely sentient, to “know” more than the doomed protagonists.¹⁸ And yet, even though the fungus does not think, this life-form can be said to deploy tactics, to make use of randomness to further its own life, as if it were a parasite not only on animals, but on chance itself. Here Hodgson seems to indicate how the fungus possesses *intelligence* but not *thought*. If we take intelligence to mean the capacity for adaptive behaviors, such as a slime-mold’s ability to navigate the twists and turns of a complicated maze (and to *learn* to do so by way of the most efficient path, no less),¹⁹ or a jellyfish’s capability to adjust its vertical positioning in the water column in order to maximize its capture of nutrients and sunlight, an organism can have intelligence without possessing a brain. It is not difficult to imagine why the notion of a mindless, inhuman intelligence emerging from and inhabiting ecological networks would constitute a signal theme in weird horror fiction.²⁰ This theme would be all the more *apropos* to the weird genre because such an intelligence, not predicated on thought, would be so different from our own as to be foreclosed to understanding. Woodard points out an unsettling idea that follows from the phenomenon of inhuman intelligence:

the mindless functioning of life, of organisms moving toward goals without any form of [higher, human] intelligence, of creatures that function in a completely bottom-up

fashion, reasserts not only the accident of thought, but also thought's unimportance for survival. In other words, the very idea that simplistic forms of life can accomplish what seems to us complex behaviors raises the question: to what degree is higher intelligence a significant advantage?" (4)

Hodgson's story answers, quite simply, that it is not.

Stranger yet, in the spore, the tactical passivity of dead matter is placed at the service of a life that seems to be nowhere present. Negarestani emphasizes the paradoxical, viroid nature to sporological "life" when he writes that a "spore condenses and envelopes a virally hibernated relic in a series of composite membranes generally named the sarcophagus . . . the opening of the sarcophagus entails the release of the bacterial relic, in what could be compared to a defiling resurrection" (94-5). Obviously fungi are not viruses, nor are they bacteria, but what Negarestani writes here refers generally to sporological life, and could be applied to both bacteriological and mycological specimens. By using "viroid" to describe the rigid, inert spore, he emphasizes how this structure blurs life and death. A virus consists of little more than some DNA or RNA encased in a crystalline protein capsule. Like a life-form, it is a replicable unit with its own distinct sequence of nucleic acids; aside from this trait, however, it displays none of the other "cookbook" characteristics typically used to define life. Because the virus is so minimal, it must parasitically use a host organism's cellular machinery to reproduce. It has no metabolism, does not consist of cells (nor does it constitute a single proper cell), and does not grow. Citing the bio-philosophy of Daniel Dennett, Keith Ansell Pearson remarks that viroids are 'bits of program or algorithm, bare, minimal, self-reproducing mechanisms.'

Standing as they do at the border between the 'living' and the 'non-living' . . . viruses serve to challenge almost every dogmatic tenet in our thinking about the logic of life,

defying any tidy division of the physical . . . into organisms, the inorganic, and engineered artifacts.²¹

Further complicating the viral undeadness of the spore, the moniker “sarcophagus” emphasizes how fungal and bacterial life must endure a death, a descent into the quiescence of inorganic matter, in order to form a spore. Once ensconced in a hospitable environment, the spore must then undergo a “resurrection” in order to resume metabolic activity and live again. With all of its theological valences and hints of the impossible and miraculous, the term “resurrection” stresses that there is nothing simple or straightforward about the idea of something coming back to life, not to mention how the organic can emerge from the inorganic. Here “resurrection” is blasphemously used to pose the question of the status of the resurrected body, of how it is that the spore lives once again, which is not a glorious mystery as much as an inexplicable horror. This problem of inorganic animation is also reflected in the etymology of “sarcophagus.” Derived from *σάρξ* (flesh) and *φάγος* (eating), “sarcophagus” was coined by the ancient Greeks to refer to a stone that reputedly had “the property of consuming the flesh of dead bodies deposited in it, and consequently used for coffins.”²² That “sarcophagus” can be read as a “stone coffin” (OED def. 2) and literalized as “flesh-eating” (*sarko* + *phagos*) further emphasizes the paradoxical horror of the non-living thing that nevertheless displays vital functions.²³

Returning to “The Voice in the Night,” Hodgson’s fungus poses the problem of the life that defies—or, following Negarestani—defiles the categories of alive and dead. The visitor states that “our touching allowed germs from it to travel elsewhere” (Hodgson 20), and it is through this utterly *passive* mode of spore transport that the fungus seems to manifest an aggressive *intentionality* toward the visitor’s fiancée. By appearing on her clothes and pillow, queasily close to her body and face, the encroachment of the fungus foreshadows the hideous

intimacy to come, and hints at a malicious intelligence to microbial life even as it remains on the very threshold of a deathly passivity. This intelligence, which seems to be even baser than a biological drive, vexingly situates fungal life somewhere between the supposed inertia of inorganic matter and the driven, instinctual nature of comparatively higher zoological life-forms: “the active/passive divide . . . of fungoid horror,” as Woodard puts it (32). While fungal life inhabits a zone of indistinction between biological life and matter, it is crucial to realize that such organisms do not mark a decisive point of emergence of life from inorganic matter, nor can they be thought of as transitional forms proper to a trajectory that plots the evolution of the vital out of the non-vital (termed *abiogenesis* or *biopoiesis*). Quite to the contrary, by collapsing activity and passivity and the organic and the inorganic, fungal life emphasizes the *non-emergence* of life or instinct from the realm of physicochemical materials, and the impossibility of designating some point of rupture wherein life conclusively branches off from non-life. In his thesis *Flatline Constructs* (1995), which responds to Deleuze and Guattari’s work on Wilhelm Worringer’s notion of the Gothic line, Mark Fisher refers to this continuity of life and death as the “anorganic continuum,” and even more suggestively with respect to horror fiction, the “Gothic Flatline,” which vividly, but not *vitally*, names the plane of radical immanence that “cuts across the distinction between living and nonliving, animate and inanimate.”²⁴ This strange state of affairs recalls Friedrich Nietzsche’s conception of life in *The Gay Science* (1882): “Let us beware of saying that death is opposed to life. The living is merely a type of what is dead, and a very rare type.”²⁵

Both conceptually and physically, then, the term “life” marks the site of a complex and problematic entanglement of the living and the dead, one which might aptly be described in the lexicon of horror fiction as a *necrophilic mess*.²⁶ Before I explain why I have followed

Negarestani in the use of the rather provocative term “necrophilic,” a comment is in order to note the importance of mess in the tale. The messiness of life is nowhere more evident than in the visitor’s gross anatomy, which has become a sloppy hodge-podge of fruiting fungal masses irrupting from lesioned flesh. Through the visitor’s repeated claims of lost humanity, Hodgson stresses that this corporeal transmutation cannot be written off as an accident or condition befalling a stable substance, as in the case of an infection afflicting an organism. Unlike the superficial infestation of the skin perpetrated by a parasitic dermatophyte, the filaments of Hodgson’s fungus penetrate down into the very fibers of (human) being, enmeshing with them to bring about a pestilential becoming. The tale, therefore, does not depict sickness undoing a creation—as when an organism falls ill with a terminal disease—as much as the undoing of creation itself, which in conventional thought remains bound to a theological conception of substances as discrete and enduring. Against the autonomy and finality of created beings, the story opposes creative becomings, which demonstrate the openness of a body to morphological transformations, parasitism, and symbiosis. And so it is that a body has no fixed identity, which is why philosophical scholarship, from Baruch Spinoza to Gilles Deleuze and beyond, will never be done with observing that we do not yet know what a body can do.²⁷ In one of his short stories, American weird fiction writer Thomas Ligotti—whom Hodgson has arguably influenced²⁸—puts an even finer point on this matter, and does so in the idiom of horror fiction rather than philosophy. Ligotti’s short story, “The Cocoons” (1991), features a character named Dr. Dublanc, a mad scientist who has the following to say about the metamorphism of bodies: “‘You must understand,’ he explained, ‘that the integrity of material forms is only a prejudice. This is not to mention the substance of those forms, which is an even more dubious state of affairs. That a monstrous insect could burst forth from the anatomy of a human being should be

no cause for consternation.”²⁹ The truly disturbing possibility hinted at by Dr. Dublanc’s unhinged speech is that it does not reflect his own insanity as much as the madness inherent to matter itself, a schizophrenia or paradoxical anti-somatic force within the body that is continually undoing its organs, driving it into unpredictable becomings.

Dr. Dublanc reminds us that “The Cocoons” and “The Voice in the Night” are anything but simple horror tales with nothing more to offer than the titillating spectacle of the human form overrun by vermin, be they giant cockroaches or anthropophagus fungi. Rather, these weird tales present the body itself being turned into pests: a grotesque sorcery beyond the comprehension of science and superstition alike, and which consequently begs explanation all the more urgently (and vainly). Hence S.T. Joshi’s assertion that the “weird tale offers unique opportunities for philosophical speculation—it could be said that the weird tale is an inherently philosophical mode in that it compels us to address directly such fundamental issues as the nature of our universe and our place in it.”³⁰ The provocations of the messy body are therefore spurs to philosophical thought that challenge the customary, overly-neat way in which we think about life-forms as discrete substances separated from their environments and the other flora and fauna with which they share ecosystems. Such thinking is no small part due to the theological residues harbored by our notions of creation. The haphazard recombination of species from vastly divergent evolutionary lineages, staged time and again in weird fiction,³¹ attests to life as an ongoing mess without an overarching principle of design. In this sense, the messiness of life in “The Voice in the Night” is not just gore for the sake of thrills—the lowbrow pleasures to be got from the horror genre, as its critics would have it—but an attempt at an ontological understanding of life as an open-ended, ongoing material process ever in the midst of an untidy unfolding.

I use the term “necrophilic” to stress how vitality irresistibly becomes entangled with death, making a mess of life and the purportedly obvious distinctions between the living and the dead. This confusion is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the process of decomposition, which germinates a biologically diverse range of vermin from corpses. Negarestani writes that “[t]hrough decay, the solid entity is taken over neither by integrated life nor death, but by irresolution . . . In decay, every instance of dynamism or regulation modulated by the equilibrial difference between the horizons of life (as living) and death is incapacitated. One is thrown beyond death and living” (182, 184). I will soon discuss where Hodgson parts ways with Negarestani, but the strange irresolution of decay discussed by the latter seems very much applicable to the former’s “The Voice in the Night.” I refer in particular to how Hodgson couples the vigorous proliferation of fungal filaments with the ever-increasing decomposition of the visitor’s body. Superficially, this coupling would seem to reflect nothing more than the growth of the fungus as it breaks down and then consumes the visitor’s body, one bio-molecule after another: the parasite on one side, and the host on the other (or perhaps predator and prey, considering the unwholesome determination with which the fungus seems to pursue the lovers). This, however, is not at all the case. As I have been at pains to point out, Hodgson’s story forecloses on the possibility of discerning between parasite and host, because the dynamics of becoming mean that the fungus and the human no longer can be considered separate substances. Taken as a novel creature generated in and through an ecological interaction, it is impossible to say whether the visitor is living or decaying, as it seems to be doing both simultaneously. Here we are once again reminded of Thacker’s notion of “blasphemous life”: “what is horrific is not just that such nameless things are still alive, but, more importantly, that in their living they evoke . . . the limits of thought—the limits of thought to think ‘life’ at all. The very terms of human

thought fail to encompass the nameless thing . . . categories of matter and form, actual and potential, origin and finality, growth, decay, and organization—all these categories of thought flounder.”³²

The perplexing status of this organism as a decaying life-form is also inscribed in the comparisons Hodgson makes between it and other animals. By the end of the tale, the visitor is said to resemble “a great, grey nodding sponge” (Hodgson 24). Defying taxonomy, this hybrid has certainly not become a sponge in the literal sense, but the perforated morphology of the phylum *Porifera* best approximates its look. The similarity in appearance between sponges and fungi—which is of course incidental rather than the result of some deep evolutionary relation—is reflected in the etymology of the term “fungus.” Ainsworth remarks that the Oxford English Dictionary “offers a derivation of the Latin *fungus* from the Greek *sphonggis*, a sponge” (2). Later, I will discuss the ecological significance of comparing the visitor to a sponge in greater detail, but for now it suffices to say that the holes of the sponge, called *ostia*, as well as the intricate system of canals and channels which compose most of its form, suggests the way in which the visitor’s body has been hollowed out through the process of decay. The profusion of holes³³ also implies the extensive perforation of the body’s borders affected by decomposition, resulting in an almost total openness to and equilibrium with the environment, which should cause death. Further linking life and death, such radical openness would prove lethal to a human being, but this openness is the very strategy through which the sponge thrives. The network of reconnecting channels curling through the volume of the sponge’s body, referred to as its aquiferous system, functions like a rudimentary, open circulatory system. R.C. and G.J. Brusca note that this system is life-giving, moving large amounts of water through the sponge, and in doing so, supplying the organism with food and fresh water for gas exchange.³⁴ Likening the

visitor to a sponge also suggests the squishy pliability of his body, if not its saturation with liquid. This subtle detail insinuates the tissue softening and deliquescence that results from the deterioration of the body's structures in putrefaction.

The visitor's head bears the most profound evidence of the ravages of decay. It strikes the narrator as an oversized grey ball pendulously swaying in the mist—a description that might suggest to the reader early twentieth-century weird fiction's take on modernism's cubist bodies.³⁵ As the narrator scans the horizon for the visitor, he says that “[i]ndistinctly I saw something nodding between the oars” (24). He then states that “[m]y gaze flashed back to the—head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke . . . the thing went nodding into the mist” (24). Hodgson uses various forms of the verb “nod” three times, disconcerting us with the contrast created by emphasizing a very specific motion that can only be attached to a vague “something”—or worse yet, “the thing,” with the definite article placed before the indefiniteness of the noun in order to convey the horror of a formless, but nevertheless immanently present, entity. This effect is heightened by the use of the adverb “indistinctly,” which opens the description. By repeatedly using “nod,” Hodgson makes the head the zone to which all of this indistinctness attaches. We can then read between the lines to guess the word elided by the dash in the phrase “[m]y gaze flashed back to the—head.” This word is “face,” and the narrator does not use it because the visitor no longer has one.³⁶ Through this skillful indirection, Hodgson implies the unspeakable horror of the visitor's facial features leprously rotted away by decay, or perhaps engulfed by the fungal tendrils of the head. The spectacle of the faceless visitor, who moreover has become fused to his rowboat, suggests that his human form has all but decomposed, leaving behind an ambiguously vitalized framework of residues stuck to the vessel.

Life and death become explicitly linked in fungal matter, as it is at once *rotting matter* and *matter that rots*. Fungi appear as the former due to the extreme friability and perishability of their forms, as well as the autophagic physiological processes that they display. In a chapter dealing with the “curious phenomena” exhibited by fungi, R.T. and F.W. Rolfe set out to scientifically explain mycological “characters which, to the layman, appear strange and inexplicable, and . . . have doubtless assisted in maintaining these plants in the invidious position which they hold in popular estimation” (246). Prominent among these bizarre characteristics to be elucidated is the rapidity of fungal decay. They note that fungal fruiting bodies, in contrast to the reproductive structures of flowering plants, often undergo an accelerated process of dissolution once they have accomplished their physiological functions. “Thus, in the space of some forty-eight hours,” write Rolfe and Rolfe, “many species of *Coprinus* will erect their caps, fructify, and deliquesce into a collapsed, black and semi-liquid mass, popularly regarded as ‘a horrible putrescence’ . . . [t]he change in the appearance of the fungus during this process is often phenomenal” (258-9). The authors also mention that this rapidity of decay is “naturally intimately related to that of rapidity of growth” (258), referring to the fact that most of the fungus’s mass is due to water rather than tissue weight. With regard to the former, namely fungi as matter that rots, such organisms play an important and lively role in the ecosystem as saprophytes, or decomposers of dead matter. In *Mushrooms Demystified* (1979)—a title suggesting that the project to disenchant Kingdom Fungi is still very much ongoing, some fifty-four years after R.T and F.W. Rolfe’s attempts—David Arora elaborates the mushroom’s role in the ecosystem, all the while knitting together life and death:

[i]t is the “role” of fungi to break things down, to give things back. One of the more obvious laws of nature is that existing life must die if new life is to flourish . . . If there

were no vehicle for the disposal of dead matter, there would soon be no need for one—we would all be buried under a blanket of dead, inert matter. Fungi (along with bacteria) are that vehicle . . . In feeding on dead (or occasionally living) matter, fungi and bacteria reduce complex organic compounds to raw materials, thereby enabling plants to re-use them. Thus, in a very profound sense, fungi are life-givers as well as destroyers. To associate them only with death and decay is to do them (as well as your own ability to perceive) an injustice.³⁷

Woodard takes a contrary stance on the issue, emphasizing the prevalence of the attitude that Arora is trying to dispel: “the intertwining of life and death has long been a mark of fungoid existence, with the death and darkneses of forests being populated by fungus which thrives in the hollow remnants of more majestic vegetative growth. In this sense, fungus is representative of death and not another form of life” (29). Taking a cue from Negarestani’s rot-ontology, Woodard writes that the “fungal, as the spatial extension of unified production and decay, is ultimately troublesome as it appears as a corrupting production” (36). In Hodgson’s tale, this problem of unified generation and putrefaction is displaced onto the environment, which we know is hardly just a passive background. When the visitor and his fiancée are driven from the ship by the encroaching creep of the fungus, they survey the rest of the island from a lone, winding bank of sand where the organism does not grow. The visitor says that “everywhere else, save where the sand-like earth wanders oddly, path-wise, amid the grey desolation of the lichen, there is nothing but that loathsome greyness” (Hodgson 21). At the same time a sprawling expanse of wild growth and an utterly desolate wasteland, for as far as the eye can see, the fungus marks the horizon—the place where death and life meet.

Vitality Rising?

In the previous section, I demonstrated how Hodgson collapsed the distinctions between the inert and the passive, the mindless and the intelligent, and vitality and death, facilitating life's emergence as a philosophical problem—if not one insuperable for philosophy. As such, life appears in the form of a limit or horizon for thought: recall Thacker's idea of "blasphemous life." On the face of things, it might seem as if Hodgson is attempting to make the daring intellectual move of dissolving the concept of life altogether. In doing so, Hodgson would fall into line with Nietzsche, who we have seen believes that life is no different in kind from death, and who accordingly savages vitalism in *The Gay Science* (1882). Although vitalism has a long philosophical history, and includes both metaphysical and scientific "critical" branches,³⁸ for the moment I will call "vitalist" any philosophy that treats life as a substance or a force imbuing the cosmos. In this section, I propose that Hodgson parts company with the ilk of anti-vitalists like Nietzsche and Negarestani, and that he is able to do so by forming a conception of vitality that issues from ecological relatedness. This move should make some sense; after struggling to prize life away from the divine central control agency of theology, to jettison vitality would on Hodgson's part seem like a case of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. I first revisit the notion of becoming to make a case for Hodgson's ecological view of biological life. This done, I return to some of the scenes of decomposition detailed above, in order to get them to register some strange, but unequivocally vital, signs.

In both the first and second sections, I stress that "The Voice in the Night" depicts the visitor as a novel, unnamable form of hybridized life that effectively combines both the fungal and the human, rather than a close association of two distinct substances: a bona-fide chimera created through the process of becoming, rather than merely a human being with a disfiguring fungal skin condition. Here it merits noting that "The Voice in the Night" was likely inspired by

Hodgson seeing, or hearing about, an individual infected with *Chromoblastomycosis* or *Mucormycosis*. These conditions are known to produce large necrotic lesions, termed “exuberant,” from which hyphae and fungating bodies can visibly protrude (Wilson & Plunkett, 181, 192). Severe *Chromoblastomycosis* can even induce elephantiasis due to lymphatic fluid build-up or bacterial inflammation (181), recalling the visitor’s unwieldy head. Even if the visitor were an infected individual, however, the fungus and the human would still form a kind of unit of life, with the parasitic fungus only able to survive by extracting nutrients from its host’s tissues. If in principle the fungus could somehow be removed from the visitor by surgery or a chemical treatment, etc., this would in no way diminish the fact that together they form something new: a unique association, even if it is predicated on parasitism, decay, and eventual death. “Becoming,” Deleuze and Guattari remind us, “is involutory, involution is creative . . . to involve is to form a block [of becoming] that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations” (239). What I call a “unit of life” above very much resembles what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a “block,” an association of multiple, ecologically-involved entities that combine to form something new. From this perspective, new units of life emerge through the ecological associations forged in becomings. According to this reading, the curious yoking of the vital to decay would not be meant to efface life but to demonstrate its persistent emergence even within ecological relationships that prove deleterious to some of the parties that enter them. Here we find ourselves very much in the territory of horror fiction rather than “feel-good vitalism” because life is utterly impersonal and totally indifferent to the nature of the ecological relationships out of which it is constituted. Like a whirlwind force, it will sweep anything up into a becoming. It will cross a human with a fungus, a cockroach, a sponge, a cephalopod . . . even a *boat*.

As the engine of life, ecological relations cannot be reduced to predetermined functions of physiology and behavior, much less to incidental events in the life history of an organism. The visitor's theological meta-narrative suggests his inability to think the novel and unpredictable life that is the outcome of an ecological encounter. By casting his change as another fall, the visitor uses biblical typology in order to reduce the novel life of which he is a part to the repetition of an event. Granted, this is repetition with a crucial fungal difference, but the visitor emphasizes the re-emergence of the biblical type through time, as if he were attempting to discipline the eruption of difference and in so doing deny the ecological mesh its creative powers. Similarly, the visitor's faith in divine providence attempts to neutralize the unpredictability of his becoming, to assimilate the mesh's chaotic productivity and non-linear dynamics of creation into the master plan of the Almighty. I argue that Hodgson's story does not divinize ecology so much as ecologize divinity. In other words, the tale does not simply propose that ecology is divine, but instead re-conceptualizes divinity by thinking it as nothing other than the creative, life-bestowing powers immanent to ecological relations. Thus Hodgson successfully dissociates vitality from religion, but one could still in theory argue that his take on vitality is still too close to vitalism, which relapses into the religious by privileging life as a "special something," a mysterious force.

Following naturally from the idea that life is ecological, life must also be multiple. This idea further entails the thought that there can be no independent, homogenous substances. In *Dangerous Emotions* (2000), Alphonso Lingis writes that the "form and the substance of our bodies are not clay shaped by Jehovah and then driven by his breath; they are coral reefs full of polyps, sponges, gorgonians, and free-swimming macrophages continually stirred by monsoon climates of moist air, blood, and biles."³⁹ Lingis's menagerie of sea creatures, nested inside one

another and bathed in humors, reminds us that thought can “cut out” organisms from their surroundings and their associations with other life-forms, but existentially or ontologically speaking, such separations make no sense. Swimming around Lingis’s coral reef, one can pick out individual sponges, jellyfish, and eels, but they are also a part of a larger ecological “life” that is the whole coral reef itself, which importantly includes the inorganic materials and minerals out of which the sponges deposit their own skeletons, and the corals their forms. You can *think* that your gut fauna are actually separate organisms, but there is no way that you could *live* without your gut fauna, nor they without you. It is these associations with other organisms and material things that push life beyond itself into participations that increase its scope.

Lingis’s reef, which illustrates the inherent multiplicity of bodies, suggests an alternate reading of the visitor’s becoming-sponge. Rather than interpreting it as a decayed body, its holes suggest new potentials for ecological relationships, and therefore new forms and styles of living. R.C. and G.J. Brusca write that “[c]ommensalism is common among sponges of all kinds. It would be difficult to find a sponge that is not utilized by at least some smaller invertebrates and often by fishes (e.g., gobies and blennies) as refuge. The porous nature of sponges makes them ideally suited for habitation by opportunistic crustaceans, ophiuroids, and various worms” (202). Given that Hodgson spent years on the high seas, and that he was intensely interested in marine life, it seems likely that he would have seen such organisms and their commensals. The Bruscas go on to report that a “single specimen of *Sphaciospongia vesparia* from Florida was found to have over 16,000 alpheid shrimps living in it, and a study from the Gulf of California found nearly 100 different species of plants and animals in a 15 x 15-cm piece of *Geodia mesotriana*” (202). Here the ecological veers toward the horrific, as *too many* symbiotic associations make life excessive, in a way that recalls the visitor’s profusion of becomings.

The most prominent example of the generative powers of ecology—which also bespeaks how Hodgson sees life and ecology extend into the inorganic world—is found at the end of the tale. When the sailor finally sees the visitor, his unstable anatomy has melded with the rowboat: “[i]ndistinctly I saw something nodding between the oars . . . They were grey—as was the boat—and my eyes searched a moment vainly for the conjunction of hand and oar. My gaze flashed back to the—head. It nodded forward as the oars went backward for the stroke . . . the thing went nodding into the mist” (24). Deploying modernist techniques, Hodgson uses dashes to intersperse descriptions of the boat with that of the visitor’s body, reflecting how both have been swept up into a singular re-combinatory becoming that has shuffled their respective substances. The amoeba-like mycological body engulfs the boat and oars, turning them into a kind of skeleton that affects a weird biomechanics wherein the uncouth nodding of the head syncs up with the motion of the oars to generate forward momentum. Here Hodgson is depicting the emergence of a new organism through an ecological association with the inorganic materials of the boat. This monstrosity is no organism in the conventional sense, however, but a functional assemblage, which Jane Bennett defines as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.”⁴⁰ The manner in which the assemblage haphazardly recombines heterogeneous organisms and foreign inorganic materials indicates the total unnaturalness of ecological relations.

Furthermore, this process of assembly has no intrinsic connection to the purportedly natural means by which creatures are produced—namely, the hereditary mechanisms of Darwinian evolution. If assemblages have anything to do with filiation, it is only because they can conscript evolved organisms as materials in the construction of their anomalous forms. Thus

“The Voice in the Night” should not be read as a simple expression of early twentieth century anxieties over genetic degeneration. After all, fungal becoming blocks the marriage plot and sexual reproduction. Moreover, Hodgson’s depiction of the novelty of becomings negates the movement of regression described by degeneration theory. As Deleuze and Guattari write, “involution is in no way confused with regression. Becoming is involutory, involution is creative. To regress is to move in the direction of something less differentiated” (238-9). Elsewhere in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the authors write of fearsome involutions that “are not regressions, although fragments of regression, sequences of regression may enter in” (240). As opposed to degeneration, this notion of involutions containing fragments of regression is what I contend that “The Voice in the Night” is ultimately concerned with. By understanding ecology, we can see how Hodgson’s fiction is, as Kelly Hurley puts it, “post-Darwinian,”⁴¹ not just in the literal sense of coming after Darwin, but in trying to think through an upsetting of the concepts of individual and species. Hodgson’s fiction makes apparent the infiltration of filiation by a subversive outside—that of ecological relations—which frees evolution from the monotony of reproducing self-enclosed individuals by drafting it into engineering assemblages swarming with multiplicities. All of this goes to say that Hodgson’s concern is with ecological relationships that affect transverse becomings and exchanges of matter, rather than the vertical transmission of hereditary traits in evolution.

The end of the tale sees the narrator horrified and fascinated with the visitor’s becoming-boat. Hodgson aims for a weird affect that mixes horror and wonderment over the assemblage human-fungus-oars-boat, and that awe reflects the sheer creative force of life, which can generate new creatures out of any conjunction of materials. Assemblages de-center human thought, suggesting the unthinkable exteriority of life that is also the very stuff of horror, the

black ichor in its veins. The ecological dynamics of “The Voice in the Night” disconcertingly remind us that the cosmos is never really through with whatever individuated beings it happens to create. One final thought: consider the grey, featureless head of the visitor. It is terrifying enough in its deterritorialization, but we must think back and remember that the narrator has been listening to the visitor’s voice, a thought that opens onto a stupefying horror: buried underneath the mass of fungus, or lost somewhere within it like a labyrinth, there is a mouth.

Critical Vitalism

“The Voice in the Night” concludes with the visitor rowing off into the distance, back in the direction of the fog banks and the cursed island from whence he came. In addition to implying that he is resigned to his inevitable and inhuman fate, this scene also makes use of two optical “special effects,” namely the vanishing-point perspective of the “receding boat” (24) and the obscuring clouds of mist. Given the associations between visibility and knowledge in western cultures, the difficulties the narrator encounters in attempting to see the visitor suggest the epistemological problems occasioned by human attempts to understand non-human life-forms, as well as the ontological mechanisms that underlie processes of change. Yet the visitor’s obscured visibility does not just highlight these problems, nor are the fog and the distance merely gloomy, atmospheric details that heighten the grimness of his fate. Such details crucially indicate *what* that fate is. The visitor is doomed to endure a gradual disappearance, and his fading away on the horizon and into the fog banks gestures toward his intensive diminution, and the moment when the last remainder of his humanity is swallowed up by the fungus. His dwindling visibility on the seascape, in the mist, and in the boat suggests nothing short of his total consumption by various features of the ecosystem. A reader could therefore be excused for

thinking that this final, dramatic scene is the last time that this extraordinary creature would appear in the pages of Hodgson's fiction. This is not quite the case, however.

Five years after the 1907 publication of "The Voice in the Night," Hodgson's short tale "The Derelict" (1912) appeared in *The Red Magazine*. Like the former story, the latter makes ingenious use of frame narration, in this case to deliver an account of an exploratory expedition gone horribly wrong. The tale begins where so many other great nautical yarns do: in the smoke-room of a ship, the *Sand-a-lea*, which is crossing the Atlantic. The ship's doctor is regaling a fellow sailor—the narrator of the frame story—with his speculative and rather controversial theory of biological life, which hypothesizes that vitality is the result of chemical reactions rather than some higher spiritual phenomenon. When pressed for evidence by the sailor, the doctor claims that his theory was born of a singular event from his youth, and then launches into the inset story. Burned out after passing his medical examinations, the doctor sought refreshment in a sea-adventure. He secured employment as the physician of the *Bheoptte*, a clipper bound for China. After leaving Madagascar for Australia, the *Bheoptte* ran into a storm that stripped its sails, cracked its masts, and tore its pigsty free of its hull. After the weather calmed, the second mate of the ship caught sight of an old packet rotting on the waves. Ancient and encrusted with sea-salt (or so it appeared to the second mate), this derelict was even weirder for the fact that its extreme decrepitude signaled that it should have sunk ages ago. The crew resolved to explore this curiosity, and later in the day the captain, second mate, doctor, and a few sailors ventured off in one of the *Bheoptte*'s gigs. As they approached the derelict through a great puddle of viscous scum ringing the vessel, they realized that what the second mate took for a crust of sea-salt was actually a whitish *mold*: "[t]here were . . . great clumpings of strange-looking sea-fungi under the bows and the short counter astern. From the stump of her jibboom and her cutwater, great beards

of rime and marine-growths hung downward . . . [h]er blank starboard side was presented to us, all a dead, dirtyish white, streaked and mottled vaguely with dull masses of heavier color” (Hodgson 89). As they boarded the vessel, the sailors realized that the entire ship was sheathed in the foul substance. They had yet to discover, however, that the derelict’s unspecified chemical cargo—which was left to the influences of the elements for over a century—had catalyzed the transformation of the vessel into a repulsive, carnivorous life-form. Perturbed by the crew’s explorations, the organism attacked the sailors with its amorphous body, which sprouted an array of appendages that included mouthed pseudopodia ravenous for flesh.

The similarities between the hideous derelict and the visitor at the conclusion of “The Voice in the Night” are fairly obvious. It is almost as if Hodgson reached into the foggy depths that the visitor sailed into and pulled back the fearsome derelict. From a certain perspective, the derelict resembles nothing so much as the visitor further along in the process of becoming fungus and boat, but at an “advanced” stage of the transformation wherein the human mind is so far gone as to be totally supplanted by the primordial appetites and instincts of the fungus. I argue, however, that interpreting “The Derelict” is not at all so straightforward a matter. Hodgson’s re-visitation of the motif of the living boat-thing reflects more than just a desire to resurrect one of weird fiction’s most memorable and compellingly strange monstrosities. It seems to me that Hodgson returned to this motif because he felt that he had not exhaustively explored the concept of life, or likelier still, that his philosophical speculations on life had changed so profoundly between the period of 1907 and 1912 that they merited another, more in-depth encounter with the vitalized boat-creature. Thus considered, we can see behind the crew’s exploration of the derelict—which is often prosecuted at a level of excruciating naturalistic detail—the author’s own intense exploration of the dynamics of biological life. Accordingly, “The Derelict” reverses

the approach of “The Voice in the Night,” which is by comparison short on revolting physical description and long on horrifying suggestion. In the latter story, the details of the visitor’s repugnant bodily metamorphosis must be inferred from his account, and only at the end of the tale are they glimpsed from afar by the narrator. In contrast, the former tale is full of close-range, sickeningly vivid descriptions of the odious corporeal life of the boat-creature: its undulating fungal flesh, pulsating arteries and veins, the noxious purple blood pumping through them, and the ecosystem of sea lice and aquatic arthropods that thrive by nesting in the fetid nooks and crannies of the derelict’s body. Additionally, by scaling up the visitor’s rowboat into the hulking derelict—which looms every bit as large as the ship of doom in S.T. Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798)—Hodgson devised a way for his characters to literally be able to step onto and into life, to turn it into a site that could be physically explored up-close like a wondrous archaeological ruin or undiscovered territory that nevertheless holds inexplicable, unheard of terrors.

In this final section of the chapter, I analyze “The Derelict” in order to detail the aforementioned major shifts in Hodgson’s philosophical outlook on biological life. In the previous section, I showed that “The Voice in the Night” proposes the centrality of ecological relationships to life—not just that such associations are bound to happen in the course of an organism’s life, but that life itself is composed out of them. While “The Voice in the Night” proposes an ecological conception of *vitality*, “The Derelict” opts for a full-blooded *vitalism*. In other words, the former tale’s investigation of life focalizes its ecological character, while the latter story, as we will soon see, conceptualizes life as a force that exerts itself through the various materials of the cosmos. Moreover, the vitalism of “The Derelict” is the kind that Jane Bennett refers to as “critical” or “modern,” as opposed to “naïve” or what philosophers call

“dogmatic” (Bennett 63). The vitalism sketched out by the ship’s doctor is one in which life is a force arising from physico-chemical materials and is explicable, at least partially, by reference to scientific disciplines such as biology, physics, and chemistry. To the contrary, “naïve” or “dogmatic” vitalism conjectures that life is a metaphysical or spiritual force that accordingly cannot be explained by scientific discourses or proved through physical evidence (63).

Bennett finds robust forms of critical vitalism in the early twentieth-century scientific and philosophical work of Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson. The former was a German biologist whose turn-of-the-century laboratory experiments on sea urchin embryos informed his investigations into the life-force, which he called “entelechy” (Bennett 71). By borrowing this term from Aristotle,⁴² Driesch conceives of entelechy as the driving force underlying the various developmental processes of an organism (71). More than just controlling physical changes in an organism’s size and mass over the course of its life, entelechy propels morphogenesis, which refers to changes in levels of biological complexity (71), such as when a group of cells becomes a tissue, when tissues associate with one another to form an organ, and when organs coordinate their functions into unified systems. Most importantly, for Driesch, entelechy does not mechanistically follow a predetermined course of morphogenic development, but acts with creative agency by unfurling certain developmental pathways with respect to the various physico-chemical cues and environmental stimuli affecting the organism. Bennett writes that this force is a “directing power inside the organism” with a “gatekeeping function: entelechy decides which of the many formative possibilities inside the emergent organism become actual” (72). Thus entelechy is not totally open-ended, nor is it a mechanical, deterministic force.⁴³ It is always in some degree indefinite, as well as free, but not radically so. To stress the critical dimension to Driesch’s vitalism, he emphasizes that entelechy is not composed of energy (or

matter) such that it could be quantified, yet this does not in the least bit mean that entelechy is some kind of disembodied, spiritual entity: it “*is order of relation* and absolutely *nothing* else,” he writes.⁴⁴

Like Driesch’s entelechy, French philosopher Bergson’s vital force—known as *élan vital*—is not metaphysical. Rather, *élan vital* describes the internal, explosive push of life that drives it out into radiations of new organisms. As Bennett points out, Driesch’s entelechy strives to preserve the wholeness of an individual organism, whereas Bergson’s *élan vital* describes a creative, evolutionary movement of fracturing or splitting off, wherein an organism breaks apart into novel life-forms. For Bergson, life can be modeled as a kind of sheaf that is constantly adding diverse sets to its collective manifold. Thus *élan vital* can be thought of as the degree of instability to matter that generates new biological life. Although somewhat less constrained in its productivity than entelechy, *élan vital* is still partially reliant on physical materials, just as is the former. Bergson uses the metaphor of an exploding artillery shell to explain the countervailing forces at work in the creative outbursts of *élan vital*:

[w]hen a shell bursts, the particular way it breaks is explained both by the explosive force of the powder it contains and by the resistance of the metal. So of the way life breaks into individuals and species. It depends, we think, on two series of causes: the resistance life meets from inert matter, and the explosive force—due to an unstable balance of tendencies—which life bears within itself.⁴⁵

Crucially, Bergson uses *élan vital* to describe the emergence of novelty in general, across a variety of fields that include Darwinian evolution, psychology, and art. Although Bergson and Driesch fall short of the desired “vital materialism” that Bennett strives to articulate in her book—these thinkers, she argues, fail to realize that activity and agency are intrinsic to matter

itself, and therefore posit immaterial vital forces acting upon inert matter—she nevertheless writes that they “opposed the mechanistic model of nature assumed by the ‘materialists’ of their day. Nature was not, for Bergson and Driesch, a machine, and matter was not in principle calculable: something always escaped quantification, prediction, and control . . . Their efforts to remain *scientific* while acknowledging some *incalculability* to things is for me exemplary” (Bennett 63).

Bennett’s previous comment indicates why early-twentieth century weird horror writers such as Blackwood and Hodgson would have found vitalistic theories to be fertile subject matter for their craft. Vitalism rejects reductive materialism in favor of a cosmos animated by an obscure, but nevertheless real, life-force. Consequently, vitalism formed a powerful critique of naturalistic science, a critique that could be adopted by weird writers who were eager to contest reductive views of nature and the universe. Moreover, this critique seems especially acute because it incorporates materials from scientific discourses such as embryology and evolutionary theory. Thus the weird writers’ philosophical speculations could not idly be dismissed as reactionary anti-science. Vitalism lent an air of chilling scientific realism to the wild innovations of weird horror fiction. This was a much-needed development after landmark scientific discoveries, such as evolutionary and germ theory, made the fears of yesterday look like idle superstitions. The scientific cast of vitalism therefore helped to situate weird horror within the infinitely more unsettling realms of the probable and the speculative, as opposed to the unreal and the supernatural. Finally, the philosophies of thinkers such as Driesch and Bergson suggested novel possibilities and directions for a distinctly vitalist strain of weird horror fiction. Such horror is thoroughly weird because it breaks with the familiar necrocratic, or death-driven, tendencies of the genre as a whole. Generally speaking, most horror—from its origins in

mythology and folklore, to the Gothic, down to the present day—proclaims the iron rule of death. Omnipresent and omnipotent, death also strangely holds all of the anxieties and terrors of the unknown. Once transfused from philosophy into the body of horror fiction, the vitalistic forces begin their tainted circulation, usurping death’s place as that intimate yet unknowable force from which so much human anxiety springs. The introduction of vital forces into the weird horror genre makes possible the invigoratingly disturbing question: What if it was life rather than death that was most worthy of our fears? What would it mean for life instead of death to win out in the horror tale? This urgent question hints at uncharted depths to pessimism and absurdity, for what is the status of a living being if life proved to be every bit as malignant as death?

There may be no better place in weird horror literature to explore these questions than Hodgson’s astounding short story, “The Derelict.” I quote the remarkable opening passage of the tale at length not only because it outlines the doctor’s vitalistic theory in considerable technical detail, but also because it exemplifies the bravura of the weird horror genre’s philosophical speculations:

“It’s the *Material*,” said the old ship’s doctor. . . . “The *Material*, plus the Conditions; and, maybe,” he added slowly, ‘a third factor—yes, a third factor; but there, there. . . .’ He broke off his half-meditative sentence, and began to change his pipe . . .

“The *Material*,” he said with conviction, “is inevitably the medium of expression of the Life-Force—the fulcrum, as it were; lacking which, it is unable to exert itself, or, indeed, to express itself in any form or fashion that would be intelligible or evident to us.

“So potent is the share of the *Material* in the production of that thing which we name Life, and so eager the Life-Force to express itself, that I am convinced it would, if given the right Conditions, make itself manifest even through so hopeless-seeming a medium as

a simple block of sawn wood; for I tell you, gentlemen, the Life-Force is both as fiercely urgent and as indiscriminate as Fire—the Destructor; yet which some are now growing to consider the very essence of Life rampant There is a quaint seeming paradox there,” he concluded, nodding his old grey head.⁴⁶

That the first significant word in the story is “*Material*”—which is both capitalized and italicized—plainly stresses the importance of matter in the theory of biological life to follow. This emphasis recalls the “critical” or “modern” nature of Driesch’s and Bergson’s vitalisms, in which life is contingent upon the physico-chemical components out of which it is constructed, rather than being a metaphysical force independent of material existence. And yet, complicating this issue, the doctor refers to material as a “medium of expression” and a “fulcrum,” without which the life-force would be “unable to exert . . . or . . . express itself in any form or fashion that would be intelligent to us” (86). These remarks beg the question of whether the life-force can be said to exist in any meaningful way anterior to the materials that it uses to express or exert itself. To put things differently, if the vital force seizes upon materials as a mode of expression or exertion, then there must be *something* that is doing the seizing, something that exists prior to its expression and that wants to exert itself before it encounters a suitable material substratum to do so. The sense of the word “force” oscillates between meanings: that of physical force on the one hand, and an agency or entity on the other hand. Here the doctor points toward the precincts of a “naïve” or “dogmatic” vitalism predicated on metaphysics and transcendence. The final paragraph of the above quotation very much gives such an impression, for behind material reality there is an omnipresent vital force on the lam, which pushes its way into physical existence where conditions and a ready material medium conspire with it, enabling it into overcome the inertial resistance of inorganic matter so that it can animate “a simple block of sawn wood” (86).

Such an idea might lead us to guess that the dubious “third factor” that the doctor mentions above, which waylays him in his thoughts and briefly derails his virtuoso speculations, is a metaphysical or spiritual “element” to life.

Hodgson and his doctor, however, have hardly decided in favor of metaphysical over “critical” vitalism. The doctor’s comment about the element of fire as both life-giving and destructive—“[t]here is a quaint seeming paradox there”—also reads very much like a meta-fictional gloss on the nature of his own speculations about life that he is in the process of unfolding in the passage. Just when we thought that we were getting ever closer to uncovering the secret of life by closing in on a mysterious vital force transcending material existence, the doctor jerks his audience (and the reader) back into the domain of the physico-chemical: “there may be a third factor. But, in my heart, I believe that it is a matter of chemistry; Conditions and a suitable medium” (86). These remarks halt the ascending approach to the metaphysical force and plunge life down into the solid reality of materials. Even more than that, the doctor’s proposal that life is a matter of chemistry suggests the reducibility of vitality to a knowable chemical reaction, or a chain of diverse reactions, that could be expressed as a formula or worked out like a metabolic pathway. When the reader is expecting the doctor to elaborate on his chemical paradigm for life—or perhaps even furnish the aforementioned chemical formula—Hodgson surprises the reader with the following passage, which is full of allusions to supernatural powers:

But given the Conditions, the brute is so almighty that it will seize upon anything through which to manifest itself. It 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. Am I clear? (86-7)

Life as an almighty brute, a cosmic “Outer Force,” and one of the “Monsters of the Void”—it appears as if the doctor, who started to bring some hard science to the table with his reference to chemistry, has suddenly relapsed into superstition. What is more, the passage does not just stage an intrusion of the supernatural into what was heading towards a scientifically informed discussion, but it also suggests a supernatural aspect to science itself. By claiming that life, fire, and electricity are “Monsters of the Void” that can neither be explained nor created by science, but only “made manifest to our physical senses” through its experimental methods, Hodgson likens science and technology to the ritual summoning of demons—the sort of unholy dabbling in black magic and alchemy that Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus perpetrated.⁴⁷

At this point in the doctor’s lecture, we must ask why the terms of his discourse continually fluctuate between the scientific and the supernatural. I argue that the allusions to monstrous, otherworldly powers are wonderful rhetorical figures that do not herald a new dark age, but crucially add to our knowledge by pointing out that something will always remain inexplicable about “natural” phenomena like life, fire, and electricity. Some substantial remainder will always be left out of the scientific purview. Hodgson’s use of supernatural rhetoric hyperbolizes this uncertainty, encouraging us to re-imagine life as a fantastic phenomenon that invites further investigation, rather than uncritical acceptance as a sheer biological fact. Thus Hodgson has no interest in pinning down life as an objective chemical event so radically knowable, it could be expressed in the form of an equation. Likewise, given the doctor’s repeated insistence that life is a question of chemistry, to attempt to posit a

supernatural spiritual force would not satisfactorily account for vitality either. I contend that the above passage alternates between the supernatural and the scientific because the mutual antagonism between the two results in their reciprocal un-grounding, leaving them both insufficient to explain life by themselves. The mutual negation of science and supernaturalism in turn opens up a space for philosophical speculation on the nature of life. This does not mean, however, that “The Derelict” re-grounds life by proposing some new, systematic theory that completely accounts for it. Quite to the contrary, because the philosophical *modus operandi* of “The Derelict” is speculative, it does not proceed in the typical fashion associated with disciplinary philosophy; rather than rationally construct a system subject to logical verification, “The Derelict” instead holds life, matter, and conditions as perennially open-ended philosophical problems that prompt increasingly unhinged speculations from both the doctor and the reader. Hence the doctor says the following:

I’ve a yarn to tell you in support of my impression that Life is no more a mystery or miracle than Fire or Electricity. But, please do remember, gentlemen, that because we’ve succeeded in naming and making good use of these two forces, they’re just as much mysteries, fundamentally, as ever. And, anyway, the thing I’m going to tell you, won’t explain the mystery of Life; but only give you one of my pegs on which I hang my feeling that Life is, as I have said, a Force made manifest through Conditions (that is to say, natural Chemistry), and that it can take for its purpose and Need, the most incredible and unlikely matter. (87)

All of this goes to say that “The Derelict” is less interested in proposing logically air-tight answers and explanations than in posing insoluble philosophical problems and speculations—as should be the case for weird horror fiction, which would do poorly to mitigate our paranoia and

existential dread by offering us the reassurance of answers. Moreover, by using words such as “mystery,” “impression,” and “feeling,” the above passage questions the human capacity ever to escape the ambit of speculation and arrive at an absolute understanding of biological life. Such limitations on comprehension could be inherent to human thought, or possibly due to the nature of life in itself, which need not be amenable to rationality in the final analysis. From this perspective, we can see that the question in the second-to-last long quotation, “Am I clear?” (87), is another somewhat humorous meta-fictional gloss. The doctor is anything but that, because the issue of biological life is not in the least bit clear itself. The ghastly spectacle of the derelict tells us much the same thing. Ringed by a murky brown scum that may or may not be a living part of its body, the horrible vessel is the very incarnation of the unsavory fact that when it comes to matters of biological life, it proves difficult, if not impossible, to separate the wretched filth of the organic from that of the inorganic.

If the purpose of the doctor’s dialogue is to un-ground, question, and speculate, then we might ask what it is that the passages actually permit us to *know* about life. Once life comes unmoored from its explanatory grounds in science and supernaturalism, what sorts of theories does “The Derelict” float about vitality? Such theories have as much to say about the limits of human knowledge as they do about life itself. In keeping with the critical vitalisms of Bergson and Driesch, life is, as we have seen, to some degree unknowable and incalculable, even though it is contingent on matter. Among all the striking theories that the doctor proclaims, I argue that the most stunning, and perhaps most significant, of these theories is not directly stated. The manner in which the above passages pile up the ingredients of life, be they metaphysical, chemical, or elemental, indicates that vitality is an irreducibly complex phenomenon. Life is complex because it is composed of multiple factors—materials, conditions, and perhaps an

unknown third element—and irreducible because it cannot be boiled down its factors, let alone a single factor. Put differently, the doctor suggests that life is an *emergent* phenomenon. Manuel De Landa writes that the “origin of the modern concept of emergence can be traced to the middle of the nineteenth century when realist philosophers first began pondering the deep dissimilarities between causality in the fields of physics and chemistry.”⁴⁸ In emergence, the whole that is created from its various parts has unique powers and properties that do not belong to the individual parts by themselves. Emergent phenomena, then, produce effects in excess of their causes. De Landa illustrates the concept of emergence by contrasting causality in classical physics with that of chemistry. In Newtonian mechanical physics, a collision between rigid bodies produces an overall effect that can be quantified through

simple addition . . . [i]f, for example, one molecule is hit by a second one in one direction and by a third one in a different direction the composite effect will be the same as the sum of the two separate effects: the first molecule will end up in the same final position if the other two hit it simultaneously or if one collision happens before the other. In short, in these causal interactions there are no surprises, nothing is produced over and above what is already there. But when two molecules interact chemically an entirely new entity may emerge, as when hydrogen and oxygen interact to form water. Water has properties that are not possessed by its component parts: oxygen and hydrogen are gasses at room temperature while water is liquid. And water has capacities distinct from those of its parts: adding oxygen or hydrogen to a fire fuels it while adding water extinguishes it. (1)

Emergent life, therefore, cannot be understood by chopping it up into its component parts and then summing them up, as in the chemical formula $\text{Materials} + \text{Conditions} = \text{Life}$. We might say

that the equal sign (=) should be a one-way arrow pointing right (=>) because the chemical reaction it describes is not reversible or transitive. Life is greater than the sum of its parts because it is more complex and richer in its properties and capacities than its disassociated constituents. Consequently, the doctor insists that his speculative formula does not dispel the mystery of life, and disclaims that his formula may contain an “X,” a variable that represents an unknown metaphysical vital force.

De Landa’s discussion of emergence brings into relief the importance of “natural Chemistry” (87) to the tale, and suggests why this scientific discipline looms at the forefront of “The Derelict” instead of biology or physics, from which one might expect a story about a hypothetical *life-force* to draw its technical source materials from. Emergence presents itself as a leap in complexity that challenges, if not defies, comprehension. In “The Derelict,” Hodgson recruits emergence as a concept for weird horror because its eruptions of novelty elude understanding and inject life with the unknown, turning it into something alien and independent of our conscious selves, but nevertheless odiously intimate with us at the same time. This state of affairs, we will see, is reflected in the crew’s exploration of “The Derelict,” which puts them in all-too-close contact with a monster that is both intimately familiar and utterly foreign at the same time. Emergence is also an ideal concept for weird horror because it relates life’s capacity to explode forth from the least likely of places, in this case the inorganic materials that compose a boat. One could say that 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. This compatibility with science makes emergence an even more frightening prospect in “The Derelict.”

Before I examine some passages from the doctor’s inset narrative of the exploration of the derelict, I briefly want to address how the notion of emergence relates to the strands of “critical” vitalism running through Hodgson’s tale. Bergson found himself at pains to stress that life cannot be understood by attempting to fix, freeze, or otherwise reduce it down⁴⁹ for the purposes of analysis. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reports that “analysis” is derived from the ancient Greek “ἀνάλυσις,” meaning the “action of loosing or releasing, [the] fact of dissolving, [or] resolution of a problem,” and in post-classical Latin, “analysis” refers to the “act of resolving (something) into its elements.”⁵⁰ The etymology of “analysis” suggests why life in “The Derelict” is so curiously resistant to being understood. Analysis decomposes emergent wholes in order to account for them, and in so doing, it reduces complexity and diminishes the total amount of information. Analysis, then, does not consist in understanding complexity; analysis makes the elimination of complexity the very precondition for understanding. If life is a matter of relative levels of complexity, we can expect analysis to fare poorly in explaining it. Recalling Driesch’s embryological work and his notion of “entelechy,” the life-force is nothing but the *structure* of a highly organized network. The development of the sea urchin embryo relies upon proteins, chemical signals, and developmental factors to form complex gradients along which the formation of organs and other morphological features unfolds. Through chemical signaling, cells influence neighboring cells, stimulating their division and differentiation. As the cells multiply and morph into diverse functional types, tissues, and organ primordia, the embryo grows and develops, and this process becomes exponentially more complicated, necessitating even more spatial and temporal coordination. Considering how much

communication and organization this most delicate of processes demands, we can see that the incalculability of Driesch's "entelechy" stems from the inability to analyze the entire manifold of signaling pathways, interactions, and influences involved in development. As we will soon see, "The Derelict" registers the centrality of complexity to life through the tale's fascination with the creature's organ systems and physiological functions.

The last point that I want to make about vitalism in "The Derelict" relates to metaphysics. Toward the beginning of this chapter, I distinguished between the "critical" or "modern" variants of vitalism and its "naïve" or "dogmatic" counterparts. One could argue that the doctor's references to a metaphysical, third ingredient to life disqualify his vitalism from being considered "critical." Perhaps so, but it should be recalled that the doctor is not dogmatically asserting—that is, insisting upon, without having physical evidence of—the existence of a metaphysical life-force. He is merely pointing out that it is *possible* that such a force exists. 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. It is likely that Hodgson was exposed to "critical" vitalism during its massive "outbreak," as Bennett calls it, which took place prior to World War I, when Bergson published *Creative Evolution* (1907; trans. English 1910) and Driesch held his popular Gifford Lectures, titled *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism* (1907-8) (Bennett 63). So popular was Bergson, Bennett notes that his 1913 lecture at Columbia University caused one of New York City's first traffic jams (64). While being impressed by these rigorous and imaginative systems of thought, Hodgson probably thought them too dismissive of metaphysics,⁵¹ hence the potentially transcendent nature of the life-force in "The Derelict." Nevertheless, the story foregrounds the

possibility that such a metaphysical force does not exist, thereby inviting a strong “critical” vitalist interpretation. If we leave the metaphysical force out of the equation, so to speak, we see that life becomes a brute “Force generated by Conditions” (86). Like a tropical hurricane bred out of temperature and pressure differentials (a phenomenon that Hodgson knew firsthand, and all too well), life emerges from conditions as a minute, ambient perturbation in an oozing, semi-fluid substance. Fed by positive feedback loops, it begins to self-organize, building its body out of available materials and, in time, steadily increasing its magnitude and complexity. These gains are accompanied by the ability to subdue and digest larger prey, giving it upward mobility in the food chain. Its appearance, which resembles a vessel, promotes repeated encounters with seamen, and thereby drives the evolution of morphological adaptations and behavioral strategies for trapping and killing humans—easy prey, and delicious, too.

The vitalism of “The Derelict” is unequivocally critical, however, of a religious or spiritual metaphysical life-force. The nameless first-person narrator of the frame story is significant for three reasons. The first is that he performs an essential narratological function by reporting the doctor’s speculations and his inset story. The narrator is thus a perfunctory character that provides the reader with the occasion to “overhear” what the doctor has to say. The narrator also paraphrases the doctor’s speculations, as if to emphasize for his fellow seamen (and the reader) the most salient points of his interlocutor’s discourse. Secondly, the frame narrative establishes the stakes riding on the doctor’s anecdote. In the frame, the narrator and seamen demand proof for the doctor’s theory, and the inset account delivers just that, closing the tale with an impact that could not have been achieved if the doctor had simply recited the tale from the first-person point-of-view. Lastly, the narrator functions as an ideological foil for the doctor, with whom he occasionally disagrees. This device keeps the doctor’s speculations

flowing, and allows him to elaborate on his thoughts. More important, the contention between the men turns on whether life is a spiritual phenomenon, allowing Hodgson to insert some religious critique into the tale and to prognosticate on the putative metaphysical dimension to life. For instance, the narrator exclaims: “[l]ife is an abstract something—a kind of all-permeating Wakefulness. Oh, I can’t explain it; who could! But it’s spiritual; not just a thing bred out of a Condition . . . It’s a horrible thought of yours. Life’s a kind of spiritual mystery” (87). The doctor’s retort is as hilarious as it is decisive: “‘Easy, my boy!’ said the old Doctor, laughing gently to himself; ‘or else I may be asking you to demonstrate the spiritual mystery of the life of the limpet, or the crab’” (87). As the doctor’s lecture wears on, the narrator becomes agitated, eventually cutting him off: “‘I don’t agree with you, Doctor,’ I interrupted. ‘Your theory would destroy all belief in life after death’” (87). The doctor responds by grinning “with ineffable perverseness” (87). This disagreement raises the stakes on the inset story even more, for if the doctor’s speculations are supported by his account, then he deals a grievous wound to human narcissism by invalidating the Christian narratives of creation and salvation. Here “The Derelict” launches a religious critique much like that of “The Voice in the Night.” Furthermore, the doctor’s barbed rejoinders—aimed at the cipher of a narrator who is but a mouthpiece for Christian beliefs—add a “critical” dimension to the conjectural metaphysics of the life-force. The doctor’s quips suggest that, rather than being a beneficent universal spirit that ennobles and saves humankind by imparting its divine sparks as eternal souls, the vital force is an impersonal and inhuman agency, dubiously related to nature if it exists at all. This force could be indifferent, or not in the least bit sentient, like some cold mechanism of the cosmos persisting in mindless operation for untold eons, or an immaterial feature of space-time fabric. If the derelict is any indicator of its nature, however, the metaphysical force could very well have a tendency

toward malign manifestations when it invades matter. Or worse yet, this force could be pure evil, incarnating our worst nightmares by whipping matter into a killing and feeding frenzy, and then deriving unimaginable pleasure from this spectacle, which it relishes from beyond the outermost regions of existence. To explore these possibilities, we must look into the inset narrative and examine the horrid ship up-close, in gross anatomical detail.

The men who undertake this task with the Doctor include the Captain of the *Bheoptte*, Mr. Gannington; the Second Mate, Mr. Selvern; and several anonymous sailors. The Doctor tells his audience that Gannington possessed considerable physical strength and an unshakeable mind, whereas Selvern was much his opposite: “he was, perhaps, by birth and upbringing, the most socially cultured of the three; but he lacked the stamina and indomitable pluck of the two others [Gannington and First Mate Berlies]. He was more of a sensitive; and emotionally and even mentally, the most alert man of the three” (87). Hodgson stresses the innate perceptiveness and observational powers of Selvern, which seem to surpass even those of the Doctor, whose profession requires that he be an extremely acute reader of the body and the underlying signs and symptoms of disease. These character details set the narrative up to be full of gruesomely exacting descriptions of the derelict’s monstrous body and its bizarre morphology—as well it should, befitting an inquiry into the nature of biological life, its material composition, and the vast array of forms it can take. The men’s abilities to read subtle vital signs and interpret morphological details proves important in saving (at least some of) their lives, although arguably less important than Captain Gannington’s muscles and nerves.

After rowing, with much effort, through the brown scum (in which the *Bheoptte*’s lost pigsty and three dead pigs are forebodingly mired), the gig touches the side of the derelict, which is plastered with a layer of slimy white mold. As soon as Gannington climbs on deck, he

exclaims, “[m]ould, by gum! Mould. . . . Tons of it! . . . Good Lord!” (92). Even though he intends it as such, the word “tons” turns out not to be a hyperbole. The doctor relates, “[a]s I heard him shout that, I scrambled the more eagerly after him, and in a moment or two, I was able to see what he meant—Everywhere that the light from the two lamps struck, there was nothing but smooth great masses and surfaces of a dirty-white mould” (92). The entire deck, including its furniture, is covered with swaths of mold, which the Doctor claims are both “extraordinary” and “abominable,” (92) and redolent with a slight, strangely familiar scent. This scene recalls the fungus-choked island from “The Voice in the Night,” as well as the contaminated ship the lovers attempt to inhabit. The Doctor relates that the foul growth felt so thick, “[t]here might have been no planking beneath the mould, for all that our feet could feel. It gave under our tread, with a spongy, puddingy feel” (92). Next to “spongy,” “puddingy” at first seems redundant, but the word demonstrates Hodgson’s knack for diction perfectly suited to weird horror writing. This term associates the mold with food, and consequently makes for a nauseating supplement to “spongy.” At a glance, the word also appears as if it could be a portmanteau of “pudding” and “dingy,” conveying a feeling of squishy, tactile repulsiveness and shabby un-cleanliness. The mold becomes even more bewildering on closer inspection. The doctor reports that it is “all dirty-white, and blotched and veined with irregular, dull purplish markings” (92). The party soon realizes that, unlike mold, the substance does not smash underfoot into pieces. In fact, their boots do not even break its surface—they merely indent it, which is followed by the queasy, elastic rebound of the mold to its former size and shape. This recalls the way in which, during the arrival of the expeditionary team, an oar from the gig sunk into the soft side of the derelict. In an ill-advised move that is later repeated with utterly disastrous consequences, Gannington stamps his boot heel into a nodule of mold. Failing to break its surface, he exclaims, “[b]lest, if

it ain't a reg'lar skin to it!" (92). Meanwhile, Selvern and the Doctor clinically prod and palpate the mold like a tumor of uncertain origin, liken its texture to dough (further associating the repugnant matter with alimentation), and notice that it exudes a heavy, animal stench that makes the latter man anxious about the prospect of a swarm of hungry rats nesting below deck in the cargo (92). If the expedition were not already going awry, it is about to get even worse.

Hodgson's description of the fungoid derelict suggests all manner of ways that the party has underestimated the object of their investigation. As expected, it is the preternaturally sensitive Selvern who first detects the derelict from afar, through his spyglass. Noting its white color, he thinks that it is caked with sea salts (88). As the explorers approach the ancient packet and begin to investigate it, they speculate that the white substance is some kind of sea fungus. Yet, as they interact with it more and more, it displays a different set of morphological traits and physical properties than a fungus. As mentioned, the "mold" seems too thick and too durable—a subtle indicator of the power and resilience of the life-form that they are dealing with. Whereas a fungus would be friable and tend to disintegrate underfoot, the "mold" on the derelict has pliability and elasticity that closely resembles mammalian flesh—and the substance bears its tell-tale stink as well. In keeping with this bizarre fungoid flesh, the adventurers gradually discover that the organism they have encountered is considerably more sophisticated than they at first imagined. As the expedition proceeds, the organism accordingly gains in complexity. It is originally thought to be an accretion of lifeless, inert minerals, then a mold, followed by *something else* entirely. Gannington announces that the "mold" has a "skin," which is a sophisticated organ associated with comparatively higher forms of animal life. This startling announcement prompts the reader to reconsider the earlier description of the fungus as "all dirty-white, and blotched and veined with irregular, dull purplish markings" (92). While Hodgson's

use of the term “veined” initially seems figurative—a more colorful way of saying “marbled” or “streaked”—Gannington’s discovery indicates that the creature does indeed have veins; and as the dull, purple blotches suggest, blood. And the blood suggests . . . and so forth. The organization entailed by a complicated morphological structure like a vein insinuates that the party is in the midst of a higher form of life than they suspect.

The knowledge that the organism has sophisticated respiratory and vascular systems comes at a very high price for the crew of the *Bheotpte*. As the Doctor’s mind starts to turn over the terrifying possibility of being eaten alive by a horde of starving rats, Gannington pushes on to inspect the ship’s aft. The Doctor’s fear, of course, is not misplaced. Although there are no rats onboard the derelict—they were presumably consumed by the organism as rodent *hors d’oeuvres* before a main course of human meat—the Doctor’s not so irrational fear reflects his dim comprehension that he is in the presence of a massive, hungry life-form that wants to devour him. As the party walks across the main deck of the derelict, Gannington points out a row of fungus-corroded antique cannons, indicating that the derelict was a privateer or pirate vessel, and that it is (impossibly) over three centuries old (93). Hence Selvern’s previous exclamation that “[s]he’s as old as the hills, as you might say, and ought to have gone down to Davy Jones a long time ago” (88). The Doctor then realizes that the air has become heavy with a warm vapor. Recollecting this event, he says that “[a]s we went, I became aware that there was a feeling of moisture in the air, and I remembered the slight mist, or smoke, above the hulk, which had made Captain Gannington suggest spontaneous combustion, in explanation . . . [a]nd always, as we went, there was that vague, animal smell” (93). The Captain’s suggestion of spontaneous combustion recalls the exploded scientific theory of spontaneous generation. The lesson learned from the latter theory was that life cannot be created *ex nihilo*, which implies the same for the

combustive phenomenon that the crew witnesses onboard the derelict. This combustion is of course the byproduct of the creature's metabolic activities, for which it needs to breathe in oxygen to burn up its food, and then exhale the heated carbon dioxide waste from this process. By the time the party reaches the ship's half-poop deck, this vile emanation has become noxiously concentrated. Says the doctor:

It was perceptible now, intermittently, as a sort of thin, moist, fog-like vapour, that came and went oddly, and seemed to make the decks a little indistinct to the view, this time and that. Once, an odd puff of it beat up suddenly from somewhere, and caught me in the face, carrying a queer, sickly, heavy odour with it, that somehow frightened me strangely, with a suggestion of a waiting and half-comprehended danger. (93)

Here, Hodgson makes it evident—as much so as a blast of bad breath—that the mist is the result of the derelict's exhalation, made visible by the chilly night air. Yet it hardly takes a genius doctor to diagnose a case of halitosis. The men's slowness to realize that they are in the presence of a living, breathing monster is not only a side-effect of building suspense through gradual revelations, but it also reflects the sheer un-believability that life could ever take such an outrageously improbable form. The expeditionary party, which includes a trained medical doctor, only but dimly recognizes the signs of life because it is unthinkable that a rotten old ship could be alive. This situation foregrounds "critical" vitalism of "The Derelict" because the life-force animates materials that are not only inorganic, but also deteriorating from centuries' worth of violent storms and the constant corrosion of the elements.

The party will soon face undeniable evidence of the blasphemous vitality of the derelict in the form of its flowing blood and beating heart. Before this climactic revelation, however, Hodgson treats the reader to an especially unnerving passage that describes the ecosystem of

parasites that live in intimacy with the putrid derelict. As Captain Gannington passes the mizzen mast, he realizes that the “mold” growing around it has increased the mast’s diameter to four feet. Amazed, he shines his lantern on the mast to get a better look. Hodgson writes, “‘Good Lord!’ he said, ‘look at the sea-lice on it!’ I [the Doctor] stepped up; and it was as he said; the sea lice were thick upon it, some of them huge, not less than the size of large beetles, and all a clear, colorless shade, like water, except where there were little spots of grey in them, evidently their internal organisms” (94). This episode reminds us of Hodgson’s attentiveness to the ecological character of life, for the marine sea-lice are external parasites that live, much like their terrestrial counterparts, by sucking the blood of their host, as well as presumably eating its skin and mucous. Because the sea-lice sustain themselves on higher animals that have features like blood, skin, and mucus, we can infer that the derelict is not a mycological specimen—or at least not one that resembles any known species of fungi. The freakish size of the lice also recalls the Doctor’s formula that life is a product of materials and conditions. The parasites are able to thrive and achieve such large sizes because the derelict provides the conditions—namely, a surfeit of nutrients from massive amounts of skin, blood, and mucus secretions—that allow them to do so. As voracious insectoid blood-suckers, these giant arthropods are unnerving, but they pose a question that is more distressing by far: If the *parasites* are so large, then what does that say about the size of their *host*?

The most important detail in the passage, however, concerns the visibility of the sea-lice’s “internal organisms,” which are viewed through their translucent carapaces when Gannington shines his lamp on the swarm. We would do well to ask why Hodgson uses the term “organisms” when he clearly means that the sea-lice’s *organs* are visible. *The Oxford English Dictionary* reports that the word “organism” comes from the post-classical Latin *organismus*,

meaning “polyphony (of voices).”⁵² In 1706, the term acquired the meaning “organic structure,” and could be used to refer to a life-form’s overall morphological arrangement, as well as individual organs and anatomical features (OED, “organism”). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the first recorded usage of the term in its present-day sense, as in an individual life-form, was in 1834 (OED, “organism”). I argue that Hodgson uses the 1706 form⁵³ because, in addition to evidently referring to organs, it denotes the totality of complex organization associated with them. Such organization refers not only to the complexity of the individual organ, but also to its relationships with other organs in a system, and in turn, the higher-level relationships between various organ systems. Thus Hodgson suggests that one gets a full appreciation of the total structural intricacy of their internal beings (read: “organisms”) on account of their see-through exoskeletons. In this moment of gazing into the translucent sea-lice, Hodgson’s interest in organization—how it forms organs, how these structures in turn create organ systems, and how these systems constitute organisms—becomes transparent itself. Put simply, the story is fascinated by organs and their interrelations and functions because these structures literally produce life. Here, Hodgson is thinking of organization as a trait central to life, or better yet, like Driesch and his concept of “entelechy,” the very force of life itself. This focus on organs resounds with the Doctor’s insistence that life is a matter of chemistry, for organs can be understood as specialized loci for particular biochemical reactions. Organs not only furnish the necessary mechanical structures for carrying out these reactions, but they also compartmentalize them and release their products as need be in order to regulate the organism’s overall body chemistry. Thus organs are *in-situ* chemistry laboratories, and the greater life of the organism nothing but their delicate coordination.

Hodgson, however, is not done disturbing his reader with the spectacle of the marine lice. As if witnessing this terrible scene had piqued a desire to see even worse, Captain Gannington shines his lamp on the rest of the deck, and Hodgson writes the following:

‘Lord bless me, Doctor!’ he called out, in a low voice, ‘did ye ever see the like of that? Why, it’s a foot long, if it’s a hinch!’

I stooped over his shoulder, and saw what he meant; it was a clear, colourless creature, about a foot long, and about eight inches high, with a curved back that was extraordinarily narrow. As we stared, all in a group, it gave a queer little flick, and was gone.

‘Jumped!’ said the Captain. ‘Well, if that ain’t a giant of all the sea-lice that ever I’ve seen! I guess it’s jumped twenty foot clear . . . Wot are *they* doin’ aboard ‘ere!’ he said. ‘You’ll see ‘em (little things) on fat cod, an’ such-like . . . I’m blowed, Doctor, if I understand.’ (94)

By now, the reader can likely guess why the lice are onboard. Other than to make our skin crawl at the thought of a gigantic flea, Hodgson inserts this episode after the description of the sea-lice for a special reason: it associates the morphological complexity of organs and systems with the capacity for extreme growth and explosive physical capabilities. In regard to the former, the development of organs releases simple life-forms from upper limits on their growth. Specialized respiratory and digestive structures mean that an organism can grow larger because it can take in more nutrients and gases than it could if it lacked these systems, and was reliant upon diffusion across its semi-permeable membranes. With respect to the latter, morphological complexity is associated with specialized locomotive structures and tissues, such as hind-limbs evolved for leaping and muscle tissue, which are prominently on display in Hodgson’s monstrous sea-flea.

The flea reminds us that life, when placed under the right conditions, can evolve complex features and powers that exceed those of human beings. For instance, the flea's twenty-foot leap: with just one "queer little flick," it "was gone." This not-so-little creature is a far more powerful athlete than any of the men. The organic complexity and raw strength the men witness in the sea-lice foreshadow the horrifying realization of these dormant capacities in the derelict.

Captain Gannington inadvertently causes (or perhaps just speeds) the eruption of these capacities. Eager to get below deck to see if the derelict's cargo holds any pirate treasure, he finds the scuttle and kicks at the "mold" so as to be able to open it. The kick produces a deep indentation in the substance, followed by "a little gush of purplish fluid, accompanied by a peculiar smell, that was, and was not, half-familiar" (94). Gannington goes for another kick, which is protested by Selvern. With a bewildered and frightened expression, the Second Mate urges the party to listen to a soft sound that only he is evidently capable of hearing. Gannington figures that the high-strung Selvern has lost his wits, and proceeds to take a second kick at the ugly heap over the scuttle. Hodgson writes that the "result of his kick was startling, for the whole thing wobbled sloppily, like a mound of unhealthy-looking jelly" (95). Frightened by the way in which the "mold" suddenly goes flaccid, the men step back, and Selvern once again commands the party to listen. This time, they hear a steady, dull thud emanating from the cargo, and increasing in intensity. At same time, from the two holes that Gannington kicked open, "purple fluid was jetting out in a queerly regular fashion, almost as if it were being forced out by a pump" (96). Here, Hodgson is implicating what only becomes completely apparent to the Doctor once he escapes the ship: that the derelict is alive, and not only that, but it possesses complex tissues and organs like blood and a heart, respectively.

Hodgson conveys this information in the following evocative passage, which describes the derelict's final attempt to consume its escaping prey:

As the light of the match burned up fully, I saw that the mass of living matter, coming towards us, was streaked and veined with purple, the veins standing out, enormously distended. The whole thing quivered continuously to each ponderous Thud! Thud! Thud! Of that gargantuan organ that pulsed within the huge, grey-white bulk. (101)

By making the creature's heart beat louder and faster as it becomes more active in the pursuit and killing of its prey, Hodgson not only demonstrates a careful eye for realistic physiological detail, but also ties the derelict's impressive physicality and vigorous activity to its organ systems. It is hardly a coincidence that the entire story builds up to the realization of the derelict's heart, as that organ is most strongly associated with vitality—as if it were life's very seat. This emphasis in “The Derelict” on organ systems conveys that Hodgson is theorizing biological life in a very different way than he did in “The Voice in the Night.” In that story, if anything, the visitor's tissues and organ systems were *disappearing*, having been eaten away by the fungus, and replaced with de-differentiated, less complex fungal matter. Inhuman mycological life in that story moves very slowly—in fact, it creeps—and affects a gradual process of bodily transformation. Moreover, the fungus is not a particularly complex form of life. Complexity comes into play in “The Voice in the Night” only when the fungus forges ecological relations with higher animals. Quite to the contrary, the derelict's animal movements are extremely fast, it has undergone the processes of tissue differentiation and organogenesis, and its power to morph is almost instantaneous. The derelict is seemingly a hitherto unseen life-form—the result of a chemical accident—that evolved traits similar to both fungi and mammals, hence its simultaneous familiarity and foreignness. For example, as seen in many quotations

above, the smell its body exudes is always uncannily half-recognizable to the men, as is the stench of its blood. This partial recognition is not only due to the fact that it is alive, but it is also curiously mammalian in terms of its tissues and organs. Its muscles, purplish blood, and veins graphically convey this partial relatedness. Its blood is close to the familiar red, but not quite—and that “not quite,” evidently, makes a huge amount of difference.

In *The Gothic Body*, Kelly Hurley writes that “The Derelict” is “an attempt to realize the horrific potentialities of an utterly material universe, to theorize such concepts as life, volition, and consciousness in materialist terms” (37). Putting aside the fact that, as my prior arguments point out, the story does not foreclose on metaphysics, it should be emphasized that Hodgson’s concept of matter (and hence his materialism) is a lot *weirder* than Hurley’s comments indicate. Hodgson’s “materialism” is stranger not only because matter is potentially un-grounded by a metaphysical life force, but also because matter produces emergent phenomena that conventional materialisms are hard-pressed, if not powerless, to explain. Additionally, if matter can be thought in materialist terms, as Hurley contends, then this would imply that life is reducible to matter. As I have been at pains to point out, the story’s Doctor problematizes this very viewpoint, as does his inset narrative. Hurley’s comment makes Hodgson out to be too much of a straightforward materialist when he is very much a *weird* materialist, who is conversant with the empirical sciences and materialist philosophy, but believes that matter can only be “known” speculatively. Hurley’s reading of “The Derelict” proposes that the tale is, at bottom, about the “revenge of matter,” (38) but the strange life-form in the tale cannot simply be reduced to matter. Consequently, what impresses the Doctor the most about the derelict has less to do with *matter* and more to do with (vital) *force*. As it is attempting to capture and kill the Doctor, the derelict shapes a portion of its body into a pseudopodia-like appendage, which is described as follows:

“[t]here were ugly, purple veinings on it, and as it swelled, it seemed to me that the veinings and mottlings on it, were becoming plainer—rising, as though embossed upon it, like you will see the veins stand out on the body of a powerful, full-blooded horse. It was most extraordinary” (99). What is most prominent in the passage is the derelict’s sheer vital force, which seems to be straining at the very matter that holds it, as if it were somehow at odds with, or in excess of, that very matter. This passage also emphasizes the muscularity of the derelict, and calls to mind Hodgson’s own world-class bodybuilder’s physique. Gannington, Selvern, and the Doctor prove lucky to be able to escape from the beast, although some of their fellow sailors do not.

Concluding his tale, the Doctor expresses regret that he was not able to ascertain what materials were stowed in the Derelict’s cargo. If he would have been able to do so, he could have determined the chemical formula for biological life, but “not necessarily its origin,” he claims (104). These comments remind us that the life of derelict arose from the substances stowed in its hull, which when left to the actions of the elements for centuries, underwent a slow process of fermentation to generate a self-organizing, evolving life-form. The fact that this creature arose from the chance conjunction of raw chemical materials, the boat, and the influences of the sun and the sea—the elements that provided the proper temperature and saline conditions for life—emphasizes that vitality is not only a matter of chemistry, but also the product of a geophysical *accident*. Thus the Doctor emphasizes the accidental character of all biological life, and the fact that organic complexity does not entail divine design or final teleological causation. If life is an accident, then it is disposable, and the derelict (like its name suggests) is a form of throw-away life: a living junk heap, much like the visitor at the end of “The Voice in the Night.” Sighing and nodding, the Doctor says, “[i]f only I could have had her bill of lading” (104). Hodgson adds that he delivers this line with “his eyes full of regret” (104).

His final words are: “I s’pose we humans are an ungrateful lot of beggars, at the best! . . . But . . . but what a chance! What a chance—eh?” (104). Thus Hodgson ends the story on a note of unexpected horror: the *ethical* horror suggested by humans harnessing, and inevitably abusing, the creative power of life. But, given the nature of his speculations, it should hardly come as a surprise that there is a bit of the mad doctor in the good Doctor.

¹ Samuel W. Bruce, “William Hope Hodgson” *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Fantasy and Science Fiction Writers Before World War I*, ed. Darren Harris-Fain, v. 178 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1997), 121. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

² William Hope Hodgson, “The Voice in the Night,” *Adrift on the Haunted Seas*, ed. Douglas A. Anderson (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Press, 2005), 15. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³ Leslie Shepard, *The Dracula Book of Great Horror Stories* (New York, NY: Carol Publishing Group, 1991), 12.

⁴ S.T. Joshi, “Things in the Weeds: The Supernatural in Hodgson’s Short Stories,” *Weird Fiction Review*, vol. 2 (2011), 122.

⁵ Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2011), 102-4. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁶ Ben Woodard, *Slime Dynamics* (Washington, USA: Zero Books, 2012), 33. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁷ See weird fiction writer China Miéville’s article, “M.R. James and the Quantum Vampire,” *Collapse* v. 4, ed. Robin Mackay (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2008). Miéville historicizes the weird through its teratology, arguing that the profusion of cephalopodic menaces in fiction announces the arrival of the genre, as well as a more widespread cultural shift: “[t]aking for granted, as we do, its ubiquitous cultural debris, it is easy to forget just how radical the weird was at the time of its convulsive birth. Its break with previous fantastics is vividly clear in its teratology, which renounces all folkloric or traditional antecedents. The monsters of high Weird are indescribable and formless, [and yet they are also] . . . described with an excess of specificity, an accursed share of impossible somatic precision; and their constituent bodyparts are disproportionately insectile/cephalopodic, without mythic resonance. The spread of the tentacle—a limb-type with no Gothic or traditional precedents (in ‘Western’ aesthetics)—from a situation of near total absence in Euro-American teratoculture up to the nineteenth century, to one of being the default monstrous appendage of today, signals the epochal shift to a Weird culture. The ‘Lovecraft Event,’ as Ben Noys invaluabley understands it, is unquestionably the center of gravity of this revolutionary moment; its defining text, Lovecraft’s ‘The Call of Cthulhu,’ published in 1928 in *Weird Tales*” (105-6). Hodgson’s work, which often features maliciously intelligent squid and octopi, deserves far more consideration in this article than it receives. Miéville, however, writes that “Lovecraft’s is certainly not the only *haute* Weird. A good case can be made, for example, that William Hope Hodgson, though considerably less influential than Lovecraft, is as, or even

more, remarkable a Weird visionary; and that . . . Cthulhu [was] first born to our sight squatting malevolently on a wreck in Hodgson's *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig,'* in 1907" (106).

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 245. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁹ R.T. and F.W. Rolfe, *The Romance of the Fungus World* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1974), 15. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible*, King James Version (Grand Rapids, MI: World Publishing) p. 443.

¹¹ Quoted in Michael Worboys, *Spreading Germs* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

¹² J. Walter Wilson, M.D. & Orda A. Plunkett, Ph.D., *The Fungous Diseases of Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 2. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹³ Today scholars argue that the leprosy of *Leviticus* probably included diseases fungal in origin. See Frank Matthews Dugan, *Fungi in the Ancient World* (St. Paul, MN: The American Phytopathological Society, 2008), 69-71. Dugan writes that it "is highly probable that some ancient skin diseases translated from myths or the Bible as 'leprosy' were not that condition (Hansen's disease, caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*) but rather were caused by fungal agents of ringworm such as *Microsporum* or *Trichophyton*. Fungal skin diseases often subjected their hosts to radical social stigma, especially so when confused with true leprosy" (71). J. Kane writes that "from Biblical times through the Middle Ages, many people were incorrectly sequestered as lepers due to the confusion between favus and leprosy" (quoted in Dugan, 73). Dugan adds that "favus is the condition in which hair becomes encrusted with follicular pus in dermatophyte infection" (73). Elsewhere, Dugan cites the studies of H.A. Koch, who suggests *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, and *Chaetomium* as the likely fungal candidates for so-called leprosy in *Leviticus* (70). Interestingly, Dugan refers to a study by R.M. Heller *et al.* that contends the word *tsara'at* in *Leviticus* 13, usually translated as "leprosy," in fact has nothing to do with that disease. Although *tsara'at* may refer to a scaly skin disorder, it is also used in reference to rotting garments and the deteriorating walls of houses, and is better translated as simply "mold" (70).

¹⁴ See G.C. Ainsworth, *Introduction to the History of Mycology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 64-5. Ainsworth writes that Robert Hooke was the first scientist to give an account of the internal structure of mushrooms (64). Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665) includes a stunningly detailed description of fungal filaments, which were later observed by Marchant père in 1678 and Tournefort in 1707 (Ainsworth 65). Marsigli in 1714 and N.J. Necker in 1783 observed "mycelial cords," which they took for "the transitional stage in the development of fungi from decaying plant tissue" (Ainsworth 65).

¹⁵ P.D. Sharma, *Fungi and Allied Organisms* (Oxford, U.K.: Alpha Science International Ltd., 2005), 78. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁶ Ainsworth reports that Giambattista della Porta, in his *Phytognomonica* (1588), was the first to observe fungal spores (13-14). These, however, he took for seeds. In 1788, Hedwig first used the term "spore" (*spora*), but did so only to denote a seed that developed in a specialized conceptacle structure he called the "sporangium" (Ainsworth 62). It was not until 1808 that L.C.M. Richard definitively realized the difference between a seed and a spore (62).

¹⁷ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), 94. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

¹⁸ The notion of a thinking nature can entail many different philosophical, and indeed spiritual, perspectives: animism, idealism, panpsychism, etc. Although I would argue that “The Voice in the Night” does not ultimately seem concerned with definitively resolving this issue, its attitudes toward religion and transcendence make animistic, panpsychic, and idealist readings highly unlikely. In Hodgson’s mycological horror, the aboriginal, preternatural intelligence of fungi more than anything else marks the absence of thought and the driven, rather than deliberative, nature of fungal life. Having no central nervous system, or even neural cells for that matter, the fungus does not think. What it does is the highly contingent result of a particular configuration of matter. Accordingly, fungal intelligence suggests the specificity and materiality of thought, the way in which it must be generated rather than assumed to be everywhere in the universe, as in panpsychism and idealism.

¹⁹ See Steven Johnson, *Emergence* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

²⁰ See Algernon Blackwood’s outdoor horror stories, “The Willows” (1907) and “The Wendigo” (1910). In his influential critical essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1925), Lovecraft counts these tales as masterpieces of weird fiction, as do many other critics.

²¹ Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 133.

²² “Sarcophagus, *n.*” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press: 29 March 2013). <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/170991?rkey=vks8s7&result=1&isAdvanced=false>>.

²³ Negarestani’s use of “sarcophagus” also gestures toward Necrotizing fasciitis, more commonly known as “flesh-eating bacteria disease.” The term “relic,” which figures so heavily into the “bacterial archaeology” theorized in *Cyclonopedia*, suggests a blasphemous inversion not unlike the one performed by “resurrection,” in this case pertaining to saints’ relics. As parts of the saint’s corpse, or objects that contacted the saintly body and/or its secretions, these remains bear vivid traces of life through their curious resistance to death and decay and their everlasting potency, which allows them to work the same miracles the saint worked in life. The hard-walled membranes of the sarcophagus that encase the bacterial relic during the spore’s travels recall the holy reliquary, the protective “receptacle, often made of precious metal and richly decorated, in which a religious relic or relics are kept, as a small box, casket, or shrine.” “Reliquary, *n.*” *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press: 4 April 2013). <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/161971?rkey=SzggC0&result=1>>.

²⁴ Mark Fisher, *Flatline Constructs* (1995), introduction, web, n.p. <<http://www.cinestatic.com/transmat/Fisher/FCcontents.htm>>.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 168. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

²⁶ *Cyclonopedia* is notable here for its staunchly anti-vitalistic treatment of life as a mess (de)composed of dust and wetness: “the carnal diagrams of flesh are imbued with dust-soups (the ultimate mess); they are mapped by syntheses of dust with xenochemical hydro-currents and cosmic wetness, and mobilized by the intelligence and vigor of epidemics. This is neither to glorify the flesh in the context of monotheism and its creationist basins (God made you out of dust), nor to pay tribute to the flesh and its carnal politics; it is to declare that the flesh is already a

reeking catacomb of dust compositions, drenched by deluges” (94). To thoroughly discuss the diverse applications of mess in *Cyclonopedia* would exceed the scope of a footnote. Briefly, “messing up” is synonymous with “exhumation,” which describes a method of textual interaction more akin to commentary and creative writing than the literary-critical methods of analysis such as close-reading, exegesis, and hermeneutics, etc. (61-2). Mess could also be applied to the work’s ontology, which proposes that all solids are infected with voids, and voids can only occur in the substrate media of solids. From this premise follows a nightmarish ontology (and a nightmare for ontology) in which being and nothingness, and life and death, become mixed beyond resolution. Mess also connotes the status of *Cyclonopedia* as an assemblage of heterogeneous materials and genres that inculcates an antagonistic but productive relationship between theory and fiction. Finally, mess seems to aptly refer, from an anthropocentric perspective, to the way the universal inhuman Outside involves itself with and complicates everything local, human, and interior, albeit remaining unthinkable in itself.

²⁷ “No one has yet determined *what the body can do* . . . For no one has yet come to know the *structure* of the body,” writes Baruch Spinoza, in the third part of his *Ethics* (1677). Quoted in Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 383. Deleuze was particularly fond of this line, as he quoted and re-interpreted it repeatedly throughout his career.

²⁸ In an interview, Ligotti describes the essential ingredient of a great supernatural horror story as follows: “[i]t’s the pretense that there really is some hidden truth in the world, and it’s the truth that behind the scenes of life, there are machinations at work that make a horror of our lives. [M.R.] James’s ghosts, [Arthur] Machen’s cults, [H.P.] Lovecraft’s ‘gods,’ Ambrose Bierce’s ‘damned things,’ William Hope Hodgson’s various monstrosities, T.E.D. Klein’s ‘dark gods,’ Ramsey Campbell’s whole world of other-worldly bogeys, Blackwood’s menacing natural forces, etc. For the great supernatural horror writers, this truth in principle has nothing to do with good versus evil, which are concepts that we feel have some reality to them, but really do not.” Interview by Venger Satanis, “Devotees of Decay and Desolation” [2008], *Cult of Cthulhu*, 6 March 2010, web, accessed 23 May 2013 <<http://www.cultofcthulhu.net/2010/03/devotees-of-decay-and-desolation/>>.

²⁹ Thomas Ligotti, “The Cocoons,” *Grimscribe* (Burton, MI: Subterranean Press, 2011), 151-2. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³⁰ S.T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 10.

³¹ A powerful illustration of this motif is to be found in H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Statement of Randolph Carter” (1920). This story is of special interest to Deleuze and Guattari, who quote it at length to elaborate their concept of becoming in the “Becoming-Animal” plateau: “[w]e do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity. A fascination for the outside? Or is the multiplicity that fascinates us already related to a multiplicity dwelling within us? In one of his masterpieces, H.P. Lovecraft recounts the story of Randolph Carter, who feels his ‘self’ reel and who experiences a fear worse than that of annihilation: ‘Carters of forms both human and non-human, vertebrate and invertebrate, conscious and mindless, animal and vegetable. And more, there were Carters having nothing in common with earthly life, but moving outrageously amidst backgrounds of other planets and systems and galaxies and cosmic continua’” (239-40).

³² Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

³³ See China Miéville, “Afterweird,” *The Weird*, eds. Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2011). Miéville’s afterword to this path-breaking anthology of weird tales considers the importance of the hole as a motif in weird fiction, among others. Miéville writes that the “Weird is neither holy nor whole-y. It is hole-y . . . Weird travels with us, each reader a Typhoid Mary in every library. It passes from us into pages, infects healthy fiction (pretend for a moment there might be any such thing). A virus of holes, a burrowing infestation, an infestation of burrowingness itself, that births its own pestilential hole-dweller” (1115). It should be noted that the theory of decay outlined in *Cyclonopedia*, which is a hybrid of philosophy and weird fiction (a chapter is included in the aforementioned anthology), is called “()hole complex” and based upon the writings of Lovecraft (43-4). I argue that holes are insistently associated with the weird because they exemplify its philosophical mode of operation, which consists of un-grounding and problematizing rather than grounding and explaining. To put matters in the idiom of horror fiction, weird writing exhumes messy philosophical problems that were perhaps better left buried. And just like the numinous monsters in the weird, whose presences can often only be inferred through side-effects and symptoms, we can bear witness to the hole, but not the worm itself. I would also contend that holes predominate in weird horror fiction because the genre’s vision of matter is that of an inherently unstable substance—a proposition amply evinced by “The Voice in the Night.”

³⁴ R.C. Brusca & G.J. Brusca, *Invertebrates*, 2nd ed., (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, 2003), 182. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

³⁵ See Graham Harman’s *Weird Realism* (Winchester, U.K.: Zero Books, 2012) for a philosophically-informed discussion of how the weird fiction of H.P. Lovecraft deploys aesthetic techniques reminiscent of the high modernism of the cubists: “[i]ndeed, there are times when Lovecraft echoes cubist painting in a manner amounting almost to a parody of Hume. While Hume thinks that objects are a simple amassing of familiar qualities, Lovecraft resembles Braque, Picasso, and the philosopher Edmund Husserl by slicing an object into vast cross-sections of qualities, planes, or adumbrations, which even when added up do not exhaust the reality of the object they compose. For Lovecraft, the cubists, and Husserl, objects are *anything but* bundles of qualities” (3). The link between the modernist *avant-garde* and twentieth-century pulp horror writers seems counterintuitive, but makes more sense when considered as a shared use of aesthetic techniques geared toward extracting hidden qualities and potentials from bodies which in turn abstracts them.

³⁶ See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2002). Deleuze’s remarks on the significance of the head versus that of the face in Bacon’s work suggests a weird modernist aesthetic common to Hodgson’s horror fiction and the former’s painting, which resonates with the prior footnote regarding cubism. Deleuze writes that “the Figure, being a body, is not the face, and does not even have a face. It does have a head, because the head is an integral part of the body. It can even be reduced to the head. As a portraitist, Bacon is a painter of heads, not faces, and there is a great difference between the two. For the face is a structured, spatial organization that conceals the head, whereas the head is dependent on the body, even if it is the point of the body, its culmination. It is not that the head lacks spirit; but it is a spirit in bodily form, a corporeal and vital breath, an animal spirit. It is the animal spirit of man . . . Bacon thus pursues a very peculiar project as a portrait painter: to

dismantle the face, to rediscover the head or make it emerge from beneath the face. The deformations the body undergoes are also the animal traits of the head” (19).

³⁷ David Arora, *Mushrooms Demystified* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1979), 6-7.

³⁸ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Bennett’s work is especially strong on the history of critical vitalism, and the contributions made to it by Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch.

³⁹ Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 28. What Lingis writes here about Jehovah, form, and substance very much agrees with my analysis in the first section.

⁴⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 23-24.

⁴¹ Kelly Hurley, “The Modernist Abominations of William Hope Hodgson” *Gothic Modernisms* eds. Andrew Smith & Jeff Wallace (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 130.

⁴² Bennett notes that Driesch does not straightforwardly explain how his notion of entelechy differs from that of Aristotle. See *Vibrant Matter*, p. 142.

⁴³ For more on entelechy, as well as a thorough historical survey of vitalism in philosophy and biology, see Driesch’s masterwork *The History and Theory of Vitalism*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914).

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bennett, p. 74.

⁴⁵ *Creative Evolution* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc., 1998), 98. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁴⁶ William Hope Hodgson, “The Derelict,” *Adrift on the Haunted Seas*, ed. Douglas A. Anderson (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Press, 2005), 86. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁴⁷ This distinctly weird combination of the scientific and the supernatural is reminiscent of Hodgson’s paranormal detective, Thomas Carnacki. Based on Algernon Blackwood’s extremely popular psychic detective, Dr. John Silence, Carnacki faces off with otherworldly creatures, formless extra-dimensional menaces, and demons that could very well be described as “Outer Forces” and “Monsters of the Void.” In addition to using all of the trademark detective tools familiar from Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories—namely, magnifying glass and pipe—Carnacki also uses cameras, ancient tomes of magic, and most famously, his “Electric Pentacle.” This device consists of a series of vacuum tubes in the shape of a traditional magical pentacle. When an electrical current is run through the tubes, they radiate a neon glow and activate the occult powers of the pentacle, which can be used for protective purposes or to open portals to other universes. Hodgson’s tales of the occult detective were recently collected in *Carnacki: The Ghost Finder*, ed. David Stuart Davies (Hertfordshire, U.K.: Wordsworth Editions, 2006). Also see Eugene Thacker’s interpretation of Carnacki’s “Electric Pentacle” in *In the Dust of this Planet*, 69-73.

⁴⁸ Manuel De Landa, *Philosophy and Simulation* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

⁴⁹ This idea forms the cornerstone of his critique of the “cinematographical” nature of the understanding. Thought, Bergson contends, analyzes and operates on stills of life that miss the fluid, continuous nature of becoming that is characteristic of life. The understanding then attempts to insert movement back into these stills by superimposing

them, one after another, but this is insufficient to capture the flowing reality of life. See *Creative Evolution*, 304-15. Also see Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁵⁰ "Analysis, n." *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press: 18 July 2013) <<http://oed.com/view/Entry/7046?redirectedFrom=analysis>>.

⁵¹ Hodgson's novels *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and *The Ghost Pirates* (1909), as well as a substantial number of his short stories, explore the possibility of metaphysical realities.

⁵² "Organism, n." *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press: 21 July 2013) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132441?redirectedFrom=organism&>>.

⁵³ That Hodgson would use the 1706 meaning is unsurprising, given that his first published novel, *The Boats of the "Glen Carrig"* (1907) was written in antiquated eighteenth-century English. It is the account of a shipwreck "told by John Winterstraw, Gent., to his son James Winterstraw, in the year 1757, and by him committed very properly and legibly to manuscript" (quoted in Bruce, 125).

Coda: One More Night in the Witch House

In this coda, I follow the trajectory of late nineteenth and early twentieth century British weird horror—as well as Lovecraft’s innovations on this genre—into the present day. In doing so, I demonstrate the profound impact this body of fiction has on the contemporary horror genre, which has infiltrated all forms of media: literature, television, film, music, and videogames, among others. Before I gesture toward the afterlife of weird horror in today’s cultural landscape, I return to Lovecraft’s tale, “The Dreams in the Witch House,” which I examined in the introduction as a quintessential example of the genre. I revisit this unforgettable story because it helps to conclude the present study’s investigation of matter in weird fiction. As I have argued, the fate of matter in weird fiction is also the story of the genre’s evolution, as weird horror dynamically takes shape in relation to scientific and philosophical accounts of matter, and the theories of biological life and the cosmos contingent upon such accounts. As a fictional record of Lovecraft’s personal reckoning with the unholy trinity of Quantum Physics, Non-Euclidean Geometry, and Post-Einsteinian Relativity theory, “The Dreams in the Witch House” is especially sensitive to the epistemological status of matter in the wake of the aforementioned scientific fields. As a way back into the witch house, we might consider what becomes of poor Walter Gilman. Brown Jenkin, Keziah Mason, and Nyarlathotep force him to participate in a witches’ sabbath that includes the sacrifice of an infant. Gilman tries in vain to rescue the ritual offering, but still manages to valiantly fight off his captors. He subdues Keziah with a crucifix and is able to kick the spiteful Brown Jenkin into a yawning dimensional abyss. Using his knowledge of Non-Euclidean geometry, he navigates through cosmic chaos to arrive back home at Arkham—but he should have known better than to spend another night in the witch house. There, Brown Jenkin pays Gilman a visit. A lodger in the house, Elwood, detects the sound of

rats scurrying, and hears Gilman's screams pierce the night. Entering Gilman's room, Elwood sees the young man "writhing under the bedclothes," while "a great red stain was beginning to appear on the blankets" (Lovecraft 885).

Describing the recovery of Gilman's mortal remains, Lovecraft writes: "[i]t would be barbarous to do more than suggest what had killed Gilman. There had been virtually a tunnel through his body—something had eaten his heart out" (885). Lovecraft hardly includes this grisly description just for shock value. While this butchery conveys the remorselessness of the evil Brown Jenkin, I also argue that the gore-clotted passage drilled through Gilman's body recalls how the universe itself has been rendered porous—full of wormholes, looping passages, and extra-dimensional spaces—in the wake of Quantum Mechanics, Non-Euclidean geometry, and Relativistic theory. Recalling the prior discussions of weird writer-theorist Reza Negarestani's "()hole complex," the matter of Gilman's body and the solid foundations of the cosmos are both un-grounded. Laid open to outer space, matter loses its ability to withstand intrusions from (and of) the outside. These holes in matter render it susceptible to invasion by "great Outer Horrors," as Blackwood might put it.¹ Moreover, the ubiquity of holes in all the matter that the universe contains insinuates invasions that have already taken place. No matter how reassuringly solid that it appears, a body of matter is nevertheless always already compromised, infected with dormant interior horrors (read: subversive outsiders) that will one day awaken, and worm their way to the surface.

The witch house is never rented again. City officials declare it condemned, and years later, workers arrive to demolish the building. What they find as they wreck the building attracts the coroner and a cadre of professors from Arkham University. The workers exhume massive piles of bones, most of them from rats and small children, from the spaces between the walls.

Among these bones is one skeleton belonging to “a rather undersized, bent female of advanced years” and a “huge, diseased rat” (886-7). Lovecraft writes that the “workmen crossed themselves in fright when they came upon this blasphemy, but later burned candles of gratitude in St. Stanislaus’ Church because of the shrill, ghostly tittering they felt they would never hear again” (888). The crucial word is “felt,” because after all of the dimensional disturbances in the witch house, travels to alternate planes of existence, and anomalous un-groundings of matter, what reassurance can *physical* remains offer that Brown Jenkin and Keziah Mason have indeed been annihilated? At the conclusion of this tale, mortal remains—and matter, more generally speaking—can no longer so easily represent eternal rest and inertia. Put simply, the end of the tale insinuates that matter has lost its finality and reliability. The massive ossuary in the witch house therefore hints at potential fates much worse than death. Perhaps Walter Gilman may still be roaming the strange nether regions of the cosmos, with Keziah Mason and Brown Jenkin still on his heels.

Comparing the end of “The Dreams in the Witch House” to that of “The Shunned House”—which was written by Lovecraft in 1924 but did not appear in the pages of *Weird Tales* until 1937²—bring the former tale’s speculations about matter into relief. The victorious protagonist of “The Shunned House” rids an ancestral manor of a centuries-long curse of horrors by digging up a giant corpse entombed in its basement, and then dissolving the putrid body with vat after vat of sulfuric acid. The last line of the tale reads: “[t]he barren old trees in the yard have begun to bear small, sweet apples, and last year the birds nested in their gnarled boughs” (Lovecraft 313). Because the matter of the corpse was destroyed, the malignant happenings cease, and the garden once again bears fruit. We are certainly not treated to a “happy ending” in “The Dreams in the Witch House.” In fact, we cannot even rest assured that Keziah and Brown

Jenkin perished, for the horrific phenomena in the tale can no longer definitively be localized to, or grounded in, matter. If the ending of “The Dreams in the Witch House” seems uncertain at best, it is because close to a decade’s worth of shocking discoveries in physics had made Lovecraft more skeptical of matter than he was when he wrote “The Shunned House.”

The weird horror fiction of Lovecraft and the British “Modern Masters” enjoys a vivid afterlife in contemporary literature. The work of American cult author Thomas Ligotti, who is often ranked alongside of Edgar Allan Poe and Lovecraft, distinctly bears the traces of their respective influences. Ligotti’s second collection of short stories, *Grimmscribe* (1991; revised 2011), contains a tale dedicated to the memory of Lovecraft, titled “The Last Feast of Harlequin.” This story pays homage to Lovecraft’s “The Festival” (1925), but Ligotti is not content to merely rehash the master’s work. Lovecraft’s weird horror fiction espouses a realist and materialistic outlook (complicated by quantum physics in the mid-twenties onward), but Ligotti’s work is broadly conceived along cosmically nihilistic and anti-realist lines. If matter has an underlying reality in Lovecraft’s corpus, even if it thwarts understanding, then it is totally evacuated of all reality in Ligotti’s fictions. Moreover, Ligotti’s characters are trapped in the phantasmic unreality of their own minds, while Lovecraft’s are stuck in an all-too-real inhuman cosmos. Ligotti’s approach to fiction therefore suggests similarities with Machen’s idealist, Symbolist-influenced tales.

Other notable contemporary authors whom Lovecraft influences include Clive Barker, Ramsey Campbell, Brian Lumley, Matt Cardin, W.H. Pugmire, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Laird Barron, and China Miéville. The “Modern Masters” have also left their mark on contemporary weird fiction. For instance, Machen inspires the work of Mark Samuels, while Richard Gavin’s recent collection of short tales, *At Fear’s Altar* (2012), channels the numinous horrors of Blackwood’s

outdoor horror fiction. Lumley's "Fruiting Bodies" (1989), a fungal horror tale that won a British Fantasy Award, was influenced by Hodgson's short maritime tales, as is Jeff VanderMeer's work in the "steam punk" genre. These recent works are not only a testament to the longevity of British and Lovecraftian horror fiction, but they are also evidence of how such fiction has been actively reinterpreted by today's writers.

Classic television shows such as *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and *The Outer Limits* (1963-1965) bear traces of the weird. The show most influenced by weird horror fiction is undoubtedly *The Night Gallery* (1970-1973), a successor to *The Twilight Zone* that favored tales of suspense and the supernatural, and like the latter program, was also hosted by Rod Serling. During its three-year run, *The Night Gallery* featured adaptations of Blackwood's short story "The Doll" (1946) and Lovecraft's tales "Pickman's Model" (1927) and "Cool Air" (1928). The teratology of the alien life-forms in numerous episodes of the popular science fiction program, *Lost in Space* (1965-1968), is unmistakably weird, and recalls the creatures that inhabit the lunar landscapes of Hodgson's classic novel, *The Night Land* (1912).

The cult horror films of director John Carpenter are influenced by Lovecraft's work. His excellent "Apocalypse Trilogy" of films, which includes *The Thing* (1982), *Prince of Darkness* (1987), and *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), transpire in a Lovecraftian cosmos on the verge of total destruction and disorder. Ridley Scott's classic science-fictional horror film *Alien* (1979), as well as its recent prequel, *Prometheus* (2012), also traffic in themes that Lovecraft worked with in his stories. Stuart Gordon is the director of numerous adaptations of Lovecraft's work, including *Re-Animator* (1985), *From Beyond* (1986), and *Dagon* (2001). An associate of Gordon's, Brian Yuzna, directed multiple sequels to *Re-Animator*, and his film *Society* (1989) contains distinct elements of the sexually-charged weird horror that Machen practiced. Another

worthwhile weird film that skillfully blends Gothic horror with cosmic terror is Mariano Baino's moody *Dark Waters* (1993), which deserves to be much better known than it currently is.

Many recent video games also refer to Lovecraft's mythos, in particular the *Alone in the Dark* (1992; 2001) series. The popular "survival horror" game, *The Last of Us* (2013), features fungal mutants called "clickers" that are reminiscent of Hodgson's mycological monstrosities. And Cthulhu is very much in the mainstream. The tentacled visage of the weird horror genre has inspired countless viral internet memes, role-playing games, and every conceivable type of apparel—even, ironically, plush toys. A better understanding of the "Modern Masters," as well as their influence on Lovecraft, would not only help us to better appreciate where these media and popular culture objects come from; the manner in which these objects interpret their source materials also reveals how the work of Lovecraft and the "Modern Masters" has been received in the popular imagination.

Of course, the impact of weird horror fiction on popular culture is by no means limited to the influences that I list above. These influences do, however, indicate the extent to which weird horror fiction, while often considered a "niche" genre, has pervaded mainstream culture. The ubiquity of the genre indicates the value of further research into its origins, especially in the works of the too often neglected British weird horror writers. Among these writers, Lord Dunsany and M.R. James, who were not covered in the present study, are due more critical attention. This dissertation is by no means an exhaustive survey of weird writing, let alone weird horror literature. Nevertheless, I hope that it will still prove useful in provoking further investigations of a genre that, much like the numinous life-forms it features, has surreptitiously seeped into the very substance of our daily lives.

¹ Algernon Blackwood, “The Wendigo,” *Best Ghost Stories of Algernon Blackwood*, ed. E.F. Bleiler (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1973), 181.

² H.P. Lovecraft, “The Shunned House,” *The Complete Fiction* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2008), 293. All subsequent references to this work appear in the text.

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